The latest in a series of small things

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The latest in a series of small things

by

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You will make many changes before settling satisfactorily.

--fortune cookie, 1999
Introduction

Once, while we moved from Colorado to Kansas, on those stretches of I-70 in western Kansas that go on forever, my father noticed my downcast mood. He turned down the radio and tapped me on the arm.

“Hey,” he said. “Let’s see if we can get this thing up to one hundred.”

His foot pressed the gas pedal of the family’s Honda down to the floor, and the car picked up speed, the needle steadily crawling higher and higher, inching towards the 100 mark. I pressed my hand to the window and looked out, the flatness blurring into indistinct lines and colors, the homes we were going to and leaving losing their sharpness for just a few minutes, until finally, both of us laughing over the car’s shaking, my father eased off the pedal, and we dropped back down to the speed limit, back to reality of the fields around us.

Long distance shaped my childhood. For just over twenty-five years, my father worked for the company that eventually, through a number of mergers and acquisitions, became Sprint, and as long distance rates steadily dropped through the 70s and 80s, we moved, continuously, at the company’s behest, across America, circling around Kansas City, the company’s home base and the city where I was born. By the time I was twelve, I’d lived in one of the country’s most conservative towns (Warsaw, Indiana) and one of its most liberal (Boulder, Colorado). I’d watched our houses and neighbors steadily change with the view from my bedroom window. I’d started and stopped three different musical instruments because the new school didn’t offer a music program, or we couldn’t find a piano teacher, or the money just wasn’t there after yet another payment to a shipping company. I’d stood under the teacher’s hand in front of another new class and heard myself welcomed to another
new school, another thirty-some friends to make and lose by this time next year. And I’d envied my friends and relatives whose addresses never changed, who always lived in the same house, in the same room, with the same friends, their whole childhoods.

Just as the previous generation had produced the mobile child called the army brat, I was the creation of a growing business culture: the corporate nomad. Indirectly, boardrooms and stockholders determined the other children I played with, the schools I attended, and the fields and summers I remember as my vacations. Who needed God when you had William T. Esrey, CEO of Sprint and my own fate?

I had met army brats; they seemed hardened, tougher, products of a system devoted to fighting and defense. They guarded themselves, covered up in a blanket of punches and recklessness. They were the ones who built ramps out of plywood and bent nails and sailed off them on their bikes, invariably crashing into the pavement, only to jump up, bleeding and yelling “Dude! You’ve got to try this!”

But the other corporate children I met were, like myself, quiet and withdrawn. We didn’t have the nobility of defending the country to justify our constant packing and unpacking; we understood that our wanderings were the result of the pursuit of the bottom line. We had no more reason than profits that pushed us across the country, like pieces on a chessboard wielded by grandmasters in power ties and suspenders, and when my father, in my final year of high school, was finally laid off, I realized that he had never been in control, that he had been just as reluctant to take the family to another town as I had been to go there. It was out of his hands.

These essays chronicle my attempt to join, discover, and create community both as a child and as an adult. In my youth, I sought belonging in a number of places, from the
Catholic Church to Hollywood game shows, from a parochial school classroom to a firetrap punk rock club. And each time, I felt close to belonging to something bigger than myself, only to see it broken up for a multitude of reasons, sometimes of my own doing. As an adult, I threw myself feverishly into my romantic relationships, believing that I might find in a community of two the stability that larger groups lacked. And when those relationships fell apart, I found myself more alone that I had ever imagined I might.

When I found myself an adult, and able to put myself in one place if I so desired, I ended up moving more frequently, from time zone to time zone, from Midwest to Pacific Northwest and back again. Rootlessness, rather than harming me permanently, forged my identity, made me more reliant on myself, more willing to adapt to any situation, more eager to learn about the land I call home for the time I’m there.

In the summer of 2001, I flew down to Sacramento, California for four days for a fencing tournament. As a friend and I walked the streets near our hotel, a couple stopped me, asking if I knew the location of a restaurant. This happens to me with an alarming frequency, on vacations and at home, and I’ve come to accept this as one of the signs that I’ve accepted my rootlessness— even embraced it, especially since I knew where the restaurant they wanted was.

What I hope to accomplish with these essays is to suggest a direction for those who find themselves in the same situation, to prove that a person can come out of that culture and not find themselves trapped within it, to show how home and family and community are all adaptable and changeable things, capable of surviving any stock drop, expansion period, or round of downsizings, capable of being the green shoot asserting its existence on the broad stretch of concrete.
In the first essays, I recount my own childhood, showing how I reacted to that constant newness, of repeatedly leaving and arriving, and of how I survived through an unlikely duo of humor and trivia. From that background, I explore my own adult relationships in later essays. Movement is a constant theme within these essays, whether the movement of a job transfer, the movement of a fencer on the strip, or the movement of a tornado across the plains, and I have tried to bring a sense of restlessness, of constant motion, to these essays.

What I have lived through is nothing special, but I write about it precisely because of its commonality. As corporations lose the last vestiges of their sight towards families, more and more of the corporate nomads will come to the fore. And as our numbers grow, our ability to resist the lives and careers we have been handed will only increase. Jackson Pollock once said that “the pictures I contemplate painting would constitute a halfway state and an attempt to point out the direction of the future--without arriving there completely.” These essays are my attempt at the same.
Excused Absence

We were living in the Holiday Inn again, which was nice, I supposed. Usually, we didn’t have a pool, or a hot tub, or a game room where we lived, so I tried to enjoy these weeks while we waited for whatever house we were moving into to be ready for us. True, I didn’t like doing my homework at the hotel bar, or buying prepackaged cheese sandwiches for lunch from the Quik Trip across the street, but I couldn’t do anything about that. At least I was back in a familiar town.

My family had moved around so much that by the age of twelve, I had started returning to schools I had attended a few years earlier. On a December morning (and for some reason, we always moved in the middle of the school year), my father dropped me off outside St. Agnes’ School in Kansas City for my second first day of sixth grade.

“You mother will pick you up at three, right here,” he said. “Have a good day.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I said. I was angry with him, partially because his company had transferred him for the third time in four years, but mostly because the town we’d just left had been so great.

I had loved Boulder; loved the mountains and the snow, the downtown pedestrian mall with its giant bookstore, but most of all I had loved how normal I was there. They didn’t stick me in any program for gifted children there and bus me across town to play Oregon Trail on an Apple IIe. None of my classmates called me “Einstein” or “Brainiac” or anything else off the short list of names for smart kids, because I wasn’t anything special there. Most of the kids at Bear Creek Elementary were just smart.
But that was gone now. Thanks to test scores and teachers’ recommendations, I shuffled back into the school district’s program for what they called “gifted” children. I was back at St. Agnes, back to being the smart kid, back to being beyond the other students. The district had placed me so far ahead that the other kids left me behind.

I walked into the multi-purpose room, where everyone waited to go up to their classrooms. Conrad Coopersmith, my old neighbor from the previous stay in Kansas City, was sitting at a table with a few other people.

“Hey, Conrad,” I said. “How’s it going?”

“Colin!” he said. “How’s it going?”

“OK,” I said, and sat down.

“You’re in Sister Celine’s class, right?”

“Right.”

“Me too! Oh, man, you can fuckin’ get away with so fuckin’ much there. She can’t hear anything.” Despite having learned cuss words a few years earlier, Conrad still didn’t really know how to work them into a conversation.

“She’s totally deaf,” said another boy at the table, who I vaguely remembered was named Brian. “You can cuss her out, throw stuff at her, she’ll never notice. She’s Sister Senile.”

“Really?” I said.

“Really,” said Mark, a skinny boy who I hadn’t liked when I’d first met him in third grade. He was cocky and mean. “She’s an idiot.”
Brian piped up with, “except Conrad won’t do any of that because he loves her. Right, Conrad?”

Conrad threw a penny at him.

“Shut up, you fuckin’ dildo!”

Dildo? Dildo? What on Earth did that mean? I may have been smarter than them in general, but these guys had obviously moved on to the Advanced Cussing textbook while I was away.

I was about to ask Conrad what he meant, but the bell rang, and we all went up the stairs to class.

Introductions were quick, not like the drawn-out “we have a new student” speech I usually heard on days like today. Most everyone knew me already; I’d only left the school 17 months prior.

Sister Celine was old, really old, and Brian might have been right when he told me that she’d taught Jesus. She shuffled when she walked, and turned around slowly, and had a quiet little voice.

She wasn’t one of those scary nuns in the giant black-and-white habits that everyone always thought of when I told them I went to Catholic school. Instead, she wore the conservative skirt and blouse of one of the post-Vatican II hip-and-groovy religious orders, although it was hard to see anything hip or groovy about Sister Celine.

When we went outside for recess at noon, I stayed a little longer and turned to the D section of the dictionary. “Dilapidate,” “dilate,” then “dilemma.” No “dildo.” I was going
to have to get to the unabridged dictionary in the main library to figure this one out, but that would have to wait until later.

We returned to the classroom and started math. They'd had a test a few days ago, and Sister Celine roamed the aisles, handing them back. She'd make little comments to each student as she returned the sheet.

“Good job, Shelia.”

“Nice try, Noah. You’re improving.”

“Excellent work, Janet.”

She moved up the aisle next to me, and turned to the right to hand a test back to Mark.

“Not such a good test, Mark,” she said.

Mark waited for her to move away a few desks, and then said, much too loudly:

“Suck my dick, Sister.”

The clock on the wall stopped. Every head, mine included, turned towards Mark, then towards Sister Celine, who had frozen where she stood. Suddenly, with a speed that would have been impressive coming from a twenty-five year old, much less a sixty-five old, she spun around, and with her test-free hand, grabbed a handful of Mark’s hair.

He screamed, a high-pitched involuntary yelp, as she pulled him out of his desk and dragged him along the floor. As she turned to pull him out the door, I could see one of her eyes, wild and furious.

We listened as long as we could, until Mark’s screams died out. The class didn’t do anything. I jumped a little when Conrad tapped me on the shoulder.
“Welcome back,” he said.

Mark came back to class the next day, accompanied by the principal. With Mr. Dalton’s hand on his shoulder, he apologized to all of us, especially me, since it was my only my second day back. I dropped my head and muttered, “It’s OK,” wishing I hadn’t been singled out.

A few months passed. Dad settled into his new job, and dropped me off every morning. My earlier frostiness hadn’t sustained itself; any anger I had in those days tended to burn itself out quickly and without effect, like flash paper. In the afternoon, Mom picked me and my little sister up, her bounding away from her new friends, waving and shouting, while I slipped quietly into the back seat. In between leaving and returning to the car, I kept to myself.

Despite my eventual discovery of what a dildo was, the earlier friendliness that Conrad and everyone else had shown me on that first day faded away slowly, like a instant photo in reverse. I sat with a few different people at lunch. When we ran cross country in gym class, I was quickly outstripped, left to run around the soccer field by myself.

Maybe I imposed my solitude upon myself, as a protective measure. Within a few months, all my friends from Boulder had stopped writing me, which wasn’t surprising, considering that twelve-year old boys aren’t the best pen pals. However, the shedding of these friends felt too familiar. I resisted making new friends because I assumed that I’d have to leave them soon enough, that a call would come from Sprint soon enough sending my dad somewhere else, that if I made friends now, then a few months from now they would forget
me, just as surely as my friends from Boulder had. I resigned myself to being alone, and the other kids I knew in Kansas City were glad to oblige.

What they were doing to me wasn’t a willful exclusion; they still said hello to me and made a joke with me now and then, but I certainly didn’t feel like I was their friend. When the school district returned me to their program for gifted students, I left class every Tuesday and Thursday to take a bus to the public school, where for three hours I played chess with oversized pieces and dissected frogs with other supposed child geniuses. Each time I left St. Agnes, I could feel my classmates’ eyes bore into my back when I stood up in class to leave, hear their unspoken comments as the door closed behind me. Every time I excused myself from class was like moving away again, and during each absence, we grew a little farther apart from each other.

As an adult, I’ve read about people tagged as “gifted” when they’re young; how they often have difficulty in their jobs, growing bored quickly with tasks they master in a few hours, how they often get disillusioned with their lack of success in the adult world. Wait a minute, they think. I was supposed to be special. Already, at the age of twelve, I felt that disappointment with how I’d turned out.

My parents told me years later that they thought the program saved me, that above-average children who aren’t challenged tend to slip into delinquency and eventually crime, showing off how well they can work the system to their advantage. And for the most part, I agreed with them—those six hours a week made me feel like there was a world beyond the basic fractions and pre-teen novels the other kids worked with. But at the same time, when I heard people refer to me as “gifted,” I felt marked, separated, and pressured to excel at something.
Each Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, the bus brought me back to St. Agnes during recess, and I'd walk to the curb, sit down, and watch my classmates play soccer until it was time to go back to school.

I tried to keep distracted. I read a lot, and occasionally hung out with other kids from the program, but not as much as I wanted. I volunteered to be an altar boy at the church connected to the school; I'd started serving in Boulder, and liked it enough that I thought maybe I'd enjoy it here. A lot of the other boys in the class did it, although I found my motivation both in hanging out with them and with scoring points with God; if my classmates didn't like me, maybe He would.

Serving is a lot like having a backstage pass to the Mass, which is itself a spectacle of pageantry and wonder, like a magic show: Here's the wine--now it's blood! And like the best magic shows, costumes and props were of the utmost importance. During my altar boy orientation, the deacon showed us the quiet flash and thunder of the church: monstrances, huge golden sunbursts in which the consecrated host was displayed and venerated; the chalices, gold and silver cups with ornate detailing; the cross we carried into the church to start the Mass, with a silver Christ hanging on it. We lifted up the cloth covering the altar and saw the inset stone block underneath which a relic of a saint, a bit of bone or cloth, was hidden, radiating holiness throughout the building.

I suppose that I liked serving Mass for the same reason some people like reenacting Civil War battles, or working at Renaissance Fairs: it let me escape the real world for a little while. Saint Agnes' School might have been in shambles, with lead pipes in the water fountains and asbestos in the ceiling, but Saint Agnes' Church exemplified the Midwestern limestone church: huge vaulted ceiling, marble baptismal font, old Irish priest with a twinkle
in his eye. An agonized Christ on the cross hung above the tabernacle, eyes pleading for relief (years later, when they replaced it with a happier-looking resurrected Christ floating off the suggestion of a cross, several people complained).

I liked serving because in the church, things were more clear-cut than they were in the school, more black-and-white. The good were rewarded, the bad were punished. Salvation and forgiveness were available at any time, like a vending machine. The Mass ran smoothly, regularly; you could follow along in the missal, every word already prepared, every action already choreographed. My favorite sacrament was reconciliation, the post-reform version of confession. Reconciliation was a new beginning, starting over in the best way possible. If moving felt like a tearing away, then reconciliation felt like the healing of that tear, smoothing the separation over like nothing had happened.

But I may have been alone in my adoration of the Mass; the other altar boys, while frequently the more popular boys, maintained a casual air. Investing too much feeling in something, caring too much, was high on the list of uncool, the opposite of Nikes and rolling the cuffs of your jeans. Detachment ruled; although all the altar boys were invited to a seminar on vocations in the priesthood, the rectory canceled it due to a lack of interest. I was the only one who had signed up for it.

The majority of the Masses the altar boys served took place on Sundays (or, if you were lucky, Saturday night, which meant you could sleep in the next morning). But occasionally, we were called out of school to serve a Mass, and if we got the call, we knew that most likely we would serve at a funeral Mass.

One weekend, I got a phone call from the rectory’s secretary.

“Colin, can you serve on Monday?”
I paused. I wasn’t sure why she was asking me; usually, they just assumed that we wanted to get out of class, and they had never been wrong so far.

“Sure,” I said, and the next day, I stood up in the middle of science to leave.

I could see the hearse waiting in the driveway as I walked out of school. A cool wind blew a few leaves across our playground, which, since it doubled as the church’s parking lot on the weekends, was just a blacktop surface painted with a few stripes that suggested playing. We’d invented some games involving these stripes when we were younger, but several years of Sunday parking had worn the paint almost entirely away.

The hearse was a newer model, freshly washed. A few people walked up to the door of the church, tugged on the heavy oak doors, and vanished inside. Either they had arrived early, or I’d left class late.

I avoided the front doors and walked to the side entrance, starting to ascend the stairs when a voice called from the direction of the school.

“Colin! Wait!”

Matt Mann, my across-the-street neighbor, broke into a trot across the parking lot, running parallel to the grid faintly visible on the blacktop. Puberty had left him with feet that his body hadn’t caught up to yet, and his Air Jordans slapped the pavement hard. He was a jock, but he also wore glasses, so we had something in common. For this reason, he tended to be nice to me when he was by himself.

“Good day for this, huh? I got out of math with Mrs. Perry,” he said.

I nodded my head.

“Science for me,” I said. “I think we were only doing a review today anyway.”
I pulled open the door and we went inside the church, empty except for the three people I'd seen earlier, who milled around the vestibule. I couldn't tell if they were ushers. The usual ushers were elderly men, one of whom wore a seafoam green sportcoat every Sunday.

Matt and I ducked behind the curtain into the back rooms, and headed for the closet where the altar boys' robes were kept. Tossing my coat onto a chair, I grabbed a cassock and pulled it over my head. I paused while reaching for a rope to bind it around my waist.

"I can never remember: do we use the red ones for funerals?" I asked.

"Nope, white. Red's just for days like Christmas or Easter," Matt said.

I tied the white rope around me and turned to look in the mirror, flipping up the hood of the cassock. I liked the way I looked and felt in these; sort of mysterious, sort of Obi-Wan. Certainly not myself. I could hide in the robe, turn myself from who I actually was into someone else, someone with a divine assignment, a holy order, a purpose above those of ordinary people. I'd thought for the previous Halloween that I'd buy one from the Catholic supply store in Kansas City and dye it brown, go as a friar or something.

"Ready?" Matt said. I tugged the hood back down and turned around, nodding.

"Let's go, then."

Serving at a funeral Mass was a different sort of thing from the usual Sunday Masses. We dealt with a lot fewer people, which was nice, and they were usually too distracted to notice if we did something wrong.

One of the altar boys would get to carry the censer down the aisle as we entered, wafting acrid smoke that was supposed to purify across the pews. Being pre-teen boys, we
were excited for anything that involved fire, so Matt and I flipped a coin to see who'd carry the censer. I won, so I set to work lighting the incense while Matt did other, less flammable things.

All the altar boys agree that by far the best part of serving a funeral Mass was the possibility of getting paid. Sometimes, afterwards, someone from the family would come up to you, whisper, "thank you so much" with a tear in his or her eye, and press a bill into your hand--usually a five, but Conrad had once gotten a ten. We longed for when we were older and got to serve wedding Masses; we'd heard that twenties were the standard there.

Still trying to get the incense to light, I heard a crunching sound behind me. I turned and saw Matt munching thoughtfully on a Communion wafer, the half-empty pack in his hand. He held it out to me.

"You want some?"

"Uh, no thanks."

"It's OK, they're not consecrated or anything."

"I'm fine."

Consecrated or not, the wafers still didn't taste like anything except pasty flour. Matt put the package back where he'd found it, and opened the wine cupboard. He grabbed the giant bottle--the church bought in bulk--unscrewed the top, and took a swig. He wiped the rim of the bottle off on his hand, and looked at it blankly for a moment; then, realizing he had nowhere else to wipe it, rubbed his hand on his cassock. It was a good thing we were a white church and not a red.

Matt walked over to the kneeler by the priest's wardrobe and plopped down onto it, dropping his head and folding his hands.
“Dear God, please forgive me for stealing Your bread and drinking Your wine. I am truly sorry. Amen.” His eyes rolled upwards quickly.

I cocked my head at him. I wanted to say something about his easy contriteness, his lack of any remorse, to chastise him a little for what he’d done, but, worried about what he might do if I did, I focused instead on getting the incense to catch fire. I knew that if I wanted to have Matt as a friend, or even someone close to a friend, I couldn’t say anything. To say something would mark me as someone who cared too much about little things like unconsecrated hosts.

I find it odd, now in my agnosticism, that I could be so concerned about the Church, about religion. But then, to me, the Church offered a level of stability that I didn’t find anywhere else. I stopped trusting my parents’ assurances that we wouldn’t move again anytime soon, and instead started waiting for them to begin remodeling the kitchen, which, in the prior two cases, preceded the announcement. My friends were no more stable, their allegiances turning on the slightest breeze, the smallest wrong move I didn’t know I made. But in the Church, that heavy, immovable limestone building, I found that the homily always followed the Gospel, that the Glorious Mysteries always followed the Sorrowful Mysteries. Ritual, unchanging. Of course I would defend it, at least mentally.

I blew gently on the flame and set the top down on the burner, ready to go. Picking up the chain, I carefully carried the censer outside, walking around the perimeter of the church to the front door, where we would start the Mass.

As the great oak doors closed behind us, Father Finnerty acknowledged our arrival with a smile. He was old and spoke quietly, so he was adjusting the lapel microphone on his robe when we came in.
“Hello, boys,” he said. “Doing well today?”

Matt and I murmured our general well-being. I looked up the aisle at the casket waiting up front. The first few rows were full, but no more than twenty people. The church was empty enough that I could hear someone’s “Hail Mary” echoing down from the rafters.

Father Finnerty shook out the sleeves of his cassock.

“Ready, boys?”

We nodded.

“Go to, then.”

We started up the aisle, in front of Father. I swung the censer softly. As we approached the casket, I turned my eyes to the right, not wanting to look at a box with a dead person inside. A teenage girl, a little older than me, sat at the edge of the pew, right next to the casket. She was distraught, and had been crying. I looked at her face, her red-rimmed eyes, and from her pinched features and roundish features, could see that she was slightly retarded. An older female companion sat next to her, a reassuring arm on her.

I frowned slightly. Retarded people made me uncomfortable. When I was younger, a developmentally disabled woman who lived with my aunt had suddenly attacked me, wrapping her suprisingly strong hands around my throat while our families waited at a restaurant. Although the attack had only taken a few seconds, my uncle quickly pulling her hands off me, it left me nervous and wary around the retarded, even when they sat quietly in a pew while I served a Mass.

I handed Father the censer when we reached the altar, and Matt and I took our seats. Father walked around the casket several times, swinging the censer, a loud clank every time
the chain connected with the incense holder. He returned the censer to me; I took it to the back room and carefully set it down to burn out.

When I got back to the altar, the lector was reading something from the standard list of readings for funerals—something about how Christ died so we can all have eternal life, and awaits us in heaven, with Mary and all the saints, all our friends surrounding us. They all said that. Friends never left, never disappeared in the readings. They never stopped writing you, or made you worry that you might care too much about the wrong things, the unpopular things. And they never moved, never went away.

I sat down next to Father again. His eyes were closed, concentrating. Matt’s eyes were slightly glazed over; I could see his shoe tapping softly under his cassock while the lector kept reading. Some of the people in the pews watched the lector and others followed along in the program, but the retarded girl stared at the casket. Her arm reached out towards it very slowly, but before she could reach it, her companion noticed and pulled her back, shaking her head and whispering Don’t do that while the girl looked downwards.

The reading finished, Father stood up and proceeded to the lectern to read the Gospel. His soft voice, magnified by the microphone, went out over the first few rows and died away quietly in the back. The girl sat completely still in her seat, staring directly at Father.

Her head moved slowly, imperceptibly, but soon enough she was looking at the casket again. For the first time, I looked directly at the body in the casket, an older woman, hands folded upon her chest, eyes shut, face made up to look like she had simply fallen asleep.

The girl’s hand raised up, stealing slowly towards the casket, but she stopped. Her mother? I wondered. Aunt? Friend?
Hand frozen in midair, the retarded girl’s mouth opened slowly, and soon a wail began to build out of it, gaining volume rapidly, a continuous *aaaaaa* sound, heavy with agony and loss and a terrible realization that whoever that woman was in the casket, she was gone, never coming back, leaving her alone, forever.

I looked over at Father, who was still quietly reading. Matt betrayed no expression at all. Most of the congregation kept their heads pointed down, but the wail grew louder still when the girl finally placed her hand on the casket, breaking only for a sharp, sobbing intake of breath. Looking to the back, I could see the ushers, hands behind their backs, standing watch over the entrance. Apart from me, the only person who seemed even to notice that this was happening was the girl’s companion, who was stroking the girl’s short brown hair and simultaneously trying very hard to restrain her without making any more of a scene.

I felt my initial discomfort with her slip away, sympathy welling up, but that soon disappeared too, and something deeper, a connection between us that transcended my wariness, our differences. In her cry, I heard an echo of everything I’d felt in the last move, in her scream the expression of all the anger I hadn’t allowed myself to feel, that I’d buried deep inside myself, in her sobs an articulation of the grief of another loss, another tearing away, another person gone. I hadn’t lost anyone to death, only distance, but in a way that felt worse. People who died had no choice in the matter; people who stopped being your friends abandoned you.

Didn’t anyone else see this? Didn’t anyone else hear her? I sat, feet nailed down, unable to do anything, unable even to tell anyone to do something. I wanted to stand up and yell at her companion to help her, to make her feel better. Couldn’t she make her feel better? Couldn’t she make me feel better?
With a final heaving sob, the girl sat back in her seat, snuffling. Father kept reading, never losing his place in the ceremony. I felt alone and voiceless, any stability I might have known in the building suddenly gone, like stone shaken into sand.

As soon as the Mass was over, I went back to the dressing room, and pulled my cassock off, hanging it up in the closet. I was putting on my jacket when Matt walked in.

“Hey, they gave us some money,” he said, holding out a five dollar bill. “Here’s yours.”

I grabbed the bill out of his hand and stuffed it in my pocket, muttering “I’ll meet you outside” while pushing on the door.

I sat on the stairs and waited. Gray clouds moved against each other, their lines barely visible. I couldn’t see anything else, not even a bird in the sky.

I hadn’t done anything. I hadn’t done anything, and I’d been paid for it. I couldn’t have done anything, I couldn’t even help myself, much less that girl. We were both alone, both losing what we loved, and no one helped us. The only difference between her and me was that she had said something. Nobody listened.

The first few kids came out the door of the school for recess. I heard the door open behind me.

“Ready?” Matt said.

“I guess,” I said, and walked back to school, first graders running around me, yelling.
I Was a Teenage Trivia King

I cannot recall a time when my head was not full of trivia. At the tender age of ten, I informed the staff of a historical documents retailer that the engraved plaque on an Abraham Lincoln letter mistakenly referred to him as the seventeenth president.

"Andrew Johnson was the seventeenth," I piped up. "Lincoln was sixteenth. Look it up."

After a bit more insisting on my part, the clerk reluctantly took a reference guide off the shelf and flipped through the pages. He stopped at the listing of presidents. I thought about peering over the top of the book, but decided that I didn’t need to.

He looked at me, then back at the book. His head swayed gently as he exhaled through his lips. "Well, I’ll be," was all he said.

My parents found me just then. "Colin, what are you doing?" my mother said, giving the clerk a look that was equal parts concern and chagrin.

"Well, actually," the clerk said, "he’s just pointed out an error on this Lincoln piece over here."

I chimed in: "Lincoln was the sixteenth president, and they put seventeenth on the plaque."

My parents looked at each other, then at the clerk, nodding their heads. This had happened before; this would happen again.
The amount of things I remembered grew exponentially with each year. I knew state capitols, atomic weights, Pulitzer Prize winners, German composers, French novelists, quadratic equations, state birds, war victors, chemical reactions, art techniques, genus names, famous inventors, and presidential pets (FDR had a dog named Fala). Something about trivia clicked with me the way playing a piano or throwing a football clicks with other people. I found that I could remember things without even having to try, the answer coming to me effortlessly, the way I heard Bach partitas flowing out of Glenn Gould’s fingers on the radio, the way I saw George Brett of the Kansas City Royals effortlessly field a ground ball and snap it to first base, the ball an extension of himself, as much a part of him as his eyes or hands.

When my parents played the board game Trivial Pursuit with friends of theirs, I would sneak down from my bedroom and press my ear against the door, whispering answers to myself. On rare occasions, my parents would invite me to play, their friends astounded that a child born in the Ford administration knew their generation better than they did, that the Watergate tapes had an eighteen and a half minute gap, or that Michael Collins waited in the capsule while Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon. They looked at me with a mixture of awe and pity, my eyes narrowed in concentration as I labored to remember that Pat Patton had replaced Chief O’Hara in the Dick Tracy comic strip.

I didn’t know how I could remember so much, whether physical or psychological, but I loved the attention. The other kids at school treated me like a freak, calling me “brain” and “nerd” and trying to cheat off me when we took tests, but adults praised me for what I could do. Striving for more of their approval, I would dig out the Trivial Pursuit box from the
closet when no one was playing it and sit on the couch, reading card after card of questions and answers.

In the spring that I turned thirteen, my junior high school carnival featured a trivia booth. The contest was set up so that you answered questions until you missed one; whoever answered the most by day’s end won the gold medal. I plunked down my dollar, and ran through fourteen questions in a row, stopping only when I couldn’t remember the slogan of Trailways buses (actually, it wasn’t that I couldn’t remember it, but rather that I’d never heard it in the first place. If I’d heard it before, I would have remembered it; I’m sure of that). The contest organizers gave me the silver medal, and added, “Nice job. The guy who got third? He was on ‘Jeopardy!’”

That idea—that I’d beaten someone who’d been on television—hovered in the background of my mind for a long time. I thought about trying out for the show’s Teen Tournament once I started high school, but never did.

“Send in a postcard!” my parents urged. “What do you have to lose?”

Plenty, I thought. I’d read somewhere that thirty-five million people watched the show, more than any other game show on television. I liked being the trivia king of my high school, a comfortable, managable kingdom. Going on the show would have meant that I might find someone my age better than me, and I didn’t relish the idea of that.

But I sent in a postcard anyway, since I knew that the show’s producers only picked one out of every ten cards to invite to tryouts. Ten percent: an acceptable risk.

Three months later, my father and I stood outside Knucklehead’s Comedy Club in Minneapolis in the middle of a large group of parent-sibling duos, all of whom were involved in question-and-answer drills. One teenager had a copy of The Official Jeopardy! Book
tucked under his arm, a bookmark sticking out right around the chapter titled “How to Get on the Show.” I had read that chapter, too, about a week earlier, before we’d made the drive up to the Mall of America, the weekend before Thanksgiving, for tryouts.

Behind me, I could hear a father and son running through a series of questions about South American rivers. I turned and saw the father gingerly balancing a massive stack of flash cards on top of the stack of books he cradled in his arms, including an atlas, an almanac, and a pocket dictionary. Each time he pulled another card from the stack, the books wobbled precariously.

I gave my father a look. Check out these guys. I had all of that in my head. I felt vastly superior to him, and gave him a smug look as his father corrected his pronunciation of “Orinoco.”

Before he could return the look, the people at the front of the line began to murmur and shuffle. A woman appeared at the entrance to the club.

“Hello, I’m Suzanne Warner and welcome to Jeopardy! tryouts,” she said. “At this time, I’d like the teens only to come inside the club. Parents, we’ll be done in about forty-five minutes.”

My dad patted me on the back and said, “good luck.”

I shrugged.

Content to sit alone and wait for the written test to begin, I didn’t recognize the girl sitting next to me until she mentioned that she was from a town not far from where I lived. I looked a little more closely at her and realized that she and I had been on competing teams in
the previous year’s Hi-Q tournament, a team trivia competition in Topeka that pitted various high schools against each other.

“Are you nervous about this? I’m nervous,” she said, tapping her pencil on the table.

I wasn’t. I had kept myself detached from what I was doing, probably to keep myself from caring about the outcome, trying to keep myself from getting disappointed if I didn’t even make it past the first stage that required more skill than luck, something more difficult to accomplish than a postcard randomly pulled out of a barrel.

Suzanne came out, a stack of tests in her hand. She explained the format of the test: fifty questions read out loud, thirty seconds between questions. She passed out the blank tests, dimmed the lights, and read the first question.

Time shot by—only twenty-five minutes, each one of us trying to scribble our answers on the line provided. I left a space for an answer about the Dutch dish whose name literally meant “cabbage salad.” As the final seconds wore down, I scribbled in “sauerkraut,” shaking my head, knowing something about that answer was off.

I found that I loved the pressure, the exertion it took for me to call up these answers, the speed with which I rifled through the file cabinets in my head. I hated sports at my school, possessed of a jock culture beyond compare, but now I recognize that I fed off the competition, both internal and external, as much as the linebackers who tried to copy off my tests in class did.

Once Suzanne and her assistants whisked away the tests to the back, the room buzzed with anticipation, a strange sensation for all eighty of us, trivia buffs one and all, to not know the answer to the question of who would pass the test and move forward in the tryouts. I
compared answers with the girl from Kansas (Coleslaw! Of course!) until Suzanne came back out, the room quieting instantly.

"Out of the eighty of you who took the test, only three answered enough questions to pass onto the next round." The crowd murmured excitedly.

"First: Colin Rafferty." I straightened up with surprise. The nice thing about low expectations is that when you do succeed, you sincerely enjoy the feeling. Suzanne called off two more names, and thanked the other seventy-seven for coming to the tryouts.

The girl from Kansas shook my hand as she got up to leave.

"Congratulations," she said, "and good luck. Write me if you make it on the show."

She pushed an envelope with her address written on into my hand, and walked out the door.

"Thanks," I said, folding the envelope in half and pushing in my pocket, completely oblivious to her flirtation. She and the rest of the contestants took a while to file out of the club. As the crowd thinned, I looked around to see who else was still there. A blond girl sat on the other side of the club, and a boy with black hair was in the first row of seats. I didn’t see Almanac Boy anywhere.

Suzanne, the coordinator, called us down to the front, and gave us some forms to fill out.

"What you’ll do now is play a mock round so we can get an idea of your television presence. Don’t worry about score or anything; just be relaxed."

We lined up behind makeshift podiums, holding highlighters as buzzers. Suzanne’s assistants aimed videocameras at the three of us, and shuffling through a big stack of notecards, she read the first question.

"Lincoln’s Vice-President, this man was the first president to be impeached."
I quickly slipped into my old habits, smiling broadly as each answer came out of me, but nevertheless a little nervous. Trivia I could handle, but progressing past this point required something I wasn’t good at: charm. I had only recently come out of the social cocoon I’d wrapped myself in for protection since early grade school, and trying to impress people still felt like a new language on my thick and clumsy tongue.

“OK, everyone, thanks a lot,” Suzanne said as we handed our highlighter buzzers back to her assistant. “We’ll take these tapes back to L.A. and watch them again with the rest of the staff. We’ll make our decisions early next week, and send you an Overnight letter if you’re on the show. If you don’t get a letter, thanks for trying out.”

The three of us shook hands, wishing each other luck, although we knew that we were competing for the same spots. I grabbed my coat and left the club.

Walking outside, I saw my father. He raised his head in recognition and gave a questioning look: Well?

I shrugged, but inside, a small seed of hope, mingled with excitement and confidence, took root. And when the letter arrived three days later, as I always believed it would, as I practically willed it to, that seed bloomed into full-grown wonder.

On the flight out to Los Angeles for the taping, I thought about the prize: $25,000 guaranteed to the winner. That much money would let me go to college anywhere I could get in, let me work and mingle with the best, and most importantly, let me turn this talent for memory into a real skill, finally carrying it to its most distant point. I let myself believe every fantasy I could concoct about winning the tournament and left the idea of acceptable risks on the runway in Kansas City.
My father and I checked into our complimentary room at the Beverly Hilton, owned, appropriately enough by Merv Griffin, the creator of Jeopardy! and went out to see Los Angeles. We visited the standard tourist spots: the Chinese Theater, the La Brea tar pits, the Hollywood sign, shining in the spotlights like a religious icon. I fell asleep with difficulty that night, too excited to sleep deeply, almost shivering in the L. A. heat from the excitement.

The next morning, I took the elevator sixteen floors down from my room to the lobby, nervously adjusting the new tie I'd bought a few weeks earlier. The sun shone through the glass walls of the elevator and made me sweat a little.

Hot for January, I thought, but that's California for you. I hopped a little as the elevator came to a stop, the silver doors sliding open onto the palm trees in the lobby.

I looked around, trying to find the other contestants. A few bellboys milled around the front desk; two men in suits stood just by the elevators. A group of kids sat in chairs by the doors. The girls were wearing dresses; the boys had on ties and dress shirt, just like me, except for one tall boy with glasses who wore an oxford shirt open at the collar. If these weren't the other contestants, then it was a hell of a coincidence.

I walked up to them, and tentatively asked, "Jeopardy?"

They all smiled enthusiastically.

"That's us," said the open-collared boy. "I'm Mit Robertson, from Tupelo, Mississippi." His accent ran the words together.

"Colin Rafferty, Kansas City," I said, shaking his hand. A round of introductions followed: Jesse from South Carolina, Brent from Kentucky, Anne from Maryland.
We started talking about school, and where we wanted to go to college. I mentioned wanting to study literature, and Jesse said, “Hey, have you read that e e cummings poem that compares driving a car to having sex? That’s a great poem.”

Had I? Had I? This was incredible! At my high school, my classmates talked about straining rubbing alcohol through coffee filters to make it drinkable, and here I was now, talking about modern poetry with kids my age as easily as if we were talking about last Friday’s football game.

I didn’t want to compete against these people; I wanted to be their friend. I wanted to take them back with me to my school and tell everyone there Look, I’m not the only one who knows all this stuff!

A pair of vans pulled up to the hotel. A blond woman got out of the first, and Suzanne, the coordinator, got out of the second. She looked much more comfortable here than she had at tryouts in Minneapolis two months ago. A boy from Florida, Chris, craned his neck.

“Hey, that’s Valerie from tryouts,” he said. “Must be time to go.”

We stood up as a group, bursting with anticipation and ready to get moving. Valerie read our names off a clipboard, and we got into our assigned vans. The doors swung shut, we buckled ourselves in, and the vans pulled off into the Los Angeles traffic, headed towards the studio.

“It’s a lot smaller than I thought it’d be,” someone behind me said as we walked onto the set.
It was; on television, the *Jeopardy!* set looks like it soars sixty feet high, the letters spelling out the show’s name towering over the contestants. Now that I stood right next to them, I could stretch out my hand and reach the top of the O.

Valerie and Suzanne pulled us away from the set into the green room. A few large trays of doughnuts and pastries sat on the table; a cooler full of ice and soda sat on the floor nearby.

Valerie looked at her clipboard. “Well, here’s where you’ll be until it’s your turn to play,” she said. “You’ll get a chance to get a feel for the set and the buzzers when it’s your turn out there. You all know the format; we’ll play five games, and the five winners will automatically advance to the next round. Because we need nine of you for that round, we’ll also take the four highest non-winning scores as wild cards. We’ll play three games with those nine, and the three winners will go to the final. Any questions?”

Becky, a girl from Missouri, raised her hand.

“What was the lowest wild card score last year?”

Several voices from around the room, contestants and staff alike: “$5400.”

“That’s right,” Valerie said. “Now, makeup will be here soon to see if any of you are too shiny for TV; otherwise, I’ll see you when we’re ready for you to be on. Good luck.”

She turned around and left. The room was quiet for a moment.

“Hey, they’ve got Jolt in here! I thought they didn’t make this anymore!”

Chris was on the floor, arms in the cooler up to his elbows, pulling out can after can of hyper-caffeinated cola.

“What time is it?” he asked.

I looked up at the clock on the wall.
"9:30."

"Sounds like time for a Jolt," he said.

I stared at him. His arms were red from the ice in the cooler.

"Yeah, it is," I said. "Give me one."

He tossed the red can to me. I popped the top and took a drink. As the wait began, we all bounced around the room, bustling with nervous energy. One boy sat in the corner and began reading *Tom Jones*, but his wildly swinging foot gave his anticipation away. The room heated up a few degrees from our restlessness.

A few hours later, I was too bored to be nervous. Most of the interesting people had already been taken, three at a time, to play their games, and now Jesse and I were watching bad videos on the television in the green room, reduced to mocking it to kill time.

"I don't know," I said. "I think Kathy Ireland's portrayal of the place kicker in *Necessary Roughness* is infinitely more nuanced than her role in *Alien From L.A.*"

"I disagree," said Jesse. "*Alien From L.A.* not only requires her to react to finding herself in a dystopian post-war, *Blade Runner*-esque alternate Earth, but also to wear a lot of bikinis."

We were still arguing the point when Suzanne came in the room. The remaining contestants looked up expectantly.

"OK, Jesse, Becky, and Colin, let's go."

I tossed my unfinished peach danish in the trash and left the room. We walked down the hall and back onto the set, now full with a studio audience. I scanned them, looking for my father, but couldn't see him in the bright lights.

Suzanne pointed to the podiums.
"Colin, you’re in the middle."

I walked around to my spot, a masking tape X marking where I was supposed to stand. My buzzer, a real one this time, no highlighter, sat in a holster to my right. Picking it up, I felt its weight, the foam grip slightly warm from the previous game. I put it back into the holster and looked across at the game board, each screen filled with the Jeopardy! logo.

A light pen sat on top of my podium, on a screen. I picked it up and wrote my name on the screen, but just as I reached the “n,” my hand slipped, streaking a white stripe across it. I walked back around to look at the screen; the error was magnified even further, visible from across the studio.

I waved down Suzanne.

“Umm, can we erase this? I messed up,” I said, pointing at the screen.

She sighed.

“Give me a second,” she said, walking off towards the control booth.

I stood in front of my podium, looking at my mistaken name. After a minute, my name winked out of existence.

I went back to the screen and carefully printed out my name again.

Trebek came onto the stage and shook our hands, wishing us luck; then we all stepped off stage and waited to make our entrances. With a countdown from the stage manager, the camera lights blinked on and the show started, with the announcer intoning “This...is...the ‘Jeopardy!’ $25,000 Teen Tournament!”

I could feel a drop of sweat roll down the inside of my arm as I watched Becky walk to her podium. After a beat, I heard the stage manager whisper “Go!” and I strode onto stage, the studio resonating with my name on the speakers. As Trebek walked to his podium,
I looked into the lights, which kept me from seeing into the audience. I felt excited, and ready.

Trebek introduced the categories. Becky chose “Holidays and Observances” for $100.

“A Mrs. Dodd of Spokane, Washington started this holiday, the first of which took place in June, 1867.”

As I snapped the buzzer, I could see my opponents’ hands move as well, each of us knowing the correct answer. But my podium lights came to life, and Trebek called on me. As I spoke for the first time on the air, any tension I had vanished, like I’d cast a spell, and the words “What is Father’s Day?” completed the incantation.

Jesse and I quickly left Becky in the dust. Each time one of us would take a lead, the other would respond with a quick salvo of answers. At one point, we swung $2000 on a question about who invented the steam engine; Jesse beat me to the buzzer, but answered “Fulton,” leaving me to chime in with “Watt,” the correct answer.

I slipped at a few points, confusing cotton with tobacco when presented with a question about Kentucky’s primary crop, but quickly jumped back thanks to the “Modern Authors” category. Becky answered a question about Queen Elizabeth wrong and effectively dropped out, her score too low to make an impact in the final minutes. Jesse and I proceeded to run the board, trading back and forth.

I answered a question about London’s original name (Londinium), and moved on to the astronomy category.

“Areology is the study of this planet, named after the god of war,” Trebek read.
I pressed my buzzer, but Jesse had beaten me to Mars, the right answer. The next question came up, and he beat me again, his buzzer clicking a split second ahead of mine. No matter how fast I pressed the button, no matter how well I tried to time it, he kept beating me to the draw, never missing a single question, never slipping in his sprint towards the end. I began to feel myself sweating again under the lights of the set, and inside me, I felt panic and frustration building as I watched Jesse’s score grow. When the round ended, he was ahead of me by two thousand dollars.

I breathed deeply, trying to calm myself down as Trebek introduced the final question’s category: In the News. The panic washed over me again, bigger this time; I began to recite a litany of former Soviet republics, which were still in the news after their formation a year ago. Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazahkstan…there were more stans than those, but they lingered just out of my memory’s reach.

Alright, I thought. You’ve got $7100, so don’t bet too much. That way, if you get it wrong, you’ll still have enough for a wild card spot.

We each bent over our screens, writing the amount we were willing to bet we knew the answer. I wagered $1900, which would give me an even $9000 if I got it right, and keep me above $5000 if I got it wrong. Acceptable risk.

We came back from break; Trebek, with showman’s timing, revealed the final question.

“Tennessee governor Ned McWhirter named Harlan Matthews to fill this man’s Senate seat until 1994.”
I groaned. Not because I didn’t know the answer—Al Gore was just about to take office as Vice President—but because I knew Jesse knew the answer, too, and when the final scores were revealed, he had won, becoming an automatic semi-finalist. Becky and I congratulated him, and we walked over to shake Trebek’s hand. On the tape, while the credits are rolling over us, I’m visibly pulling Trebek closer, asking him something: *What are the high wild card scores?*

“There’s one other guy with $9000,” he said. “You’re in good shape.”

I relaxed just a little. There were still two games to wait for, four more scores to beat.

Scott and I stood on the set, just out of range of the cameras. He shuffled slowly back and forth. I shut my eyes tightly and whispered, “please, please” as the contestants on stage wrote down their responses to the final question.

We were waiting for the final scores to see if we’d go to the next round. Two of the wild card spots had been filled in the previous game; Scott and I had both scored $9000 and were candidates for the last two.

The number 5400 kept flashing in my mind, over and over, like a telethon pledge board. We were sure to make it to the second round. Sure to. Without a doubt.

I opened my eyes. Trebek was walking down the row of podiums, revealing each contestant’s answer and their final score. Scott and I leaned forward to make out the numbers written in a teenager’s scrawl.

The lowest score was $10,500.
Around us, the winners of the previous games and the other two wild cards walked on stage as Trebek introduced the semi-finalists. Scott turned around and gave me a look: *Oh, well.*

Outwardly, I shrugged, but inside, I felt myself melting with disappointment. My shoulders dropped downward as the contestants on stage, all smiles, were covered in applause by the audience. I turned around, walking towards the green room to wait for the rest of the other losers to show their faces, to wait for the long van ride back to the hotel.

And that was it. Jesse won second place in the entire tournament with $14,000, and I ended up with the computer version of the home game, despite not having a computer.

I went home and had to explain to all my friends that I’d lost, and eventually developed a story that I told over and over, explaining that I had tried to bet the right amount so that I would still have a chance of advancing if I’d answered the question wrong, always ending with me saying, “well, I should have bet more.”

After the airing, a few people recognized me on the street: a waiter, a kid in an ice cream shop. I was a local celebrity for a few weeks, and then everything died down. I got a letter from Jesse; he mentioned that his hometown had proclaimed a “Jesse Roach Day,” complete with parade.

A year later, another kid from Kansas City got on the show. He called me for advice; I told him what I knew, and he scored even lower than I did.

When I went to college and found myself around people who didn’t know I’d been on the show, I found that mentioning the show resulted in two questions, always the same two:

1. You were on *Jeopardy?*
2. Did you win?

I got tired of explaining why I hadn't bet everything, and tired of reminding myself of how much I could have won. I got tired of people asking what Alex Trebek was really like, and tired of telling people about my parting gifts. But most of all, I got tired of rehashing it over in my head, of telling myself what I should have done, of wondering where the prize money would have let me go to school.

After a while, I just stopped mentioning it. People who knew me didn't seem to understand what I was talking about when I explained why I'd bet so low; how could I have not known the answer? To them, I was an inexhaustible source of facts and figures, able to recall anything. I'd lost not because I hadn't pressed the buzzer quickly enough, or because at a crucial moment I'd forgotten the answer, but because I hadn't trusted myself, hadn't believed that I could remember anything the show's staff could throw at me. I'd stopped trusting my ability, and as soon as I had, I'd resigned myself to losing.

Trivia doesn't run my life anymore, although I could probably still make it through a list of Best Supporting Actress winners if pressured, and most people won't play any quiz games against me. I didn't watch the show for a while; even to this day, the theme is still uncomfortably familiar.

I still have the tape of my appearance on the show, and about once a year I'll watch it. Slowly, it's becoming less of a disaster, less of an embarrassment, less of a big secret to hide from people I meet. As time has passed, being on the show has turned from a failure in front of millions of people to something neat I did a long time ago.

Still, though, if you come to my door while I'm watching the tape, and press your ear to the door, you'll be able to hear the present-day me talking to the seventeen-year-old me.
"You’ll know the answer, trust me. Bet more! BET MORE!"

He never listens, but then, what teenager does?
The Lord King of Suburbia

The whine of the lawnmower overpowering any other noise, Terry Mann worked his front lawn, a corner lot with plenty of zoysia grass that, much to his chagrin, turned brown when the frosts came towards the end of fall. He worked the lawnmower across width swaths of grass, cutting it as short and as even as he wanted, his red headband dark with the sweat of a hot early September Saturday. He did this twice every week, without fail, right up until the snow fell.

At times when Terry wasn't using the lawn mower--which didn't seem that often--his son Matthew, my age and nominally my friend, would push it down the street. Matthew had a lucrative lawnmowing operation himself, and in the summers, I would constantly pass him on the street, me coming back from the library and him rolling his mower up 53rd Street, headphones on. Matthew never mowed the family's lawn, though; as far as I could tell, that was Terry's job.

I could see their lawn from my bedroom window, on the second floor of our house in Fairway, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City named for the golf courses on the eastern edge. I worked on school assignments on the weekend at my desk, writing out theorems for my modern analysis math class and propping up my calculator with a copy of e e cummings' collected poems that my girlfriend had given me for my birthday the spring before. Whenever the lawnmower started up, I could look out the window and see Terry begin his beloved work, his constant battle to keep the grass under control. Terry defined our neighborhood, his nonstop mowing as essential to the character of our stretch of houses as it
was to his psyche. In Fairway, we kept everything reined in, from the snow-shoveling codes to the tree trimming company to the annual Fourth of July parade.

The suburbs are control. They’re a chance for people who don’t like the change of the city, its disorganization and one-way streets and crime, to escape to an area where they’re in charge, where they can regulate what goes on around them. When we painted our house green not long after we moved into it (a dark, sage/forest green, very respectable), my parents had to get it approved by the neighborhood commission. My father dealt with telemarketers selling aluminum siding by describing the various tortures that the neighbors would inflict on him, should he install such an aesthetic travesty in our town.

But Fairway was an old suburb, dating back to the original white flight of the fifties, and Kansas City had pushed further south more and more over the years. Although we were still in the bounds of Johnson County, one of the richest counties in America, we were on the northern edge of it. The high school I attended, three blocks from our house, was predominantly white, but with a sizable Latino population. Crime made an occasional appearance, mostly in the form of two men who stole cars for a summer.

If someone wanted to find the stereotypical whitewashed suburban experience, the kind put down by sociologists and punk rockers alike, a twenty minute drive south into Overland Park and Blue Valley could provide that more soulless kind of neighborhood, with brand-new schools and homes, with colossal shopping malls and chain restaurants. Fairway had been around long enough that people could respect it in that odd way that Americans have of respecting something only one generation old. Fairway occupied the liminal space, the transition point between suburbia and city, the weather front, the moment when the
magician produces your card with a flourish. It was the point of change that looked completely normal, a kingdom of regularity.

While things kept building to the south, Fairway went along with its daily routine, thinking everything was under control, everything could be maintained, from the zoysia that was still green on Terry Mann’s lawn to the belief that we all got along with each other just fine, in school and work. I was a senior in high school, and as my pencil scratched the quadratic equation onto a sheet of looseleaf paper, I had no way of knowing how it all could turn out.

In the freshman composition classes I teach now at Iowa State University, my students who grew up on farms remain deeply proud of that background in the strangely humble way that Midwesterners have. And my students from large cities—usually Chicago—wear that urbanity on their sleeves, as a way of separating themselves from the endless rows of corn and soybeans that surround them in Iowa. Even my students from small towns take a certain kind of pleasure in the fact that they graduated from a class of less than 20, or that they literally know everyone in their hometown.

My suburban students, though—the ones from West Des Moines, or Eden Prairie, Minnesota, or Lake Forest, Illinois—stay quiet, never talking about where they’re from unless it’s to put it down for its homogeneity or dullness. But if it means something to be from a farm, or a city, or a small town, then it must mean something to be from the suburbs as well. No matter how much it might like to present itself as neutral and unaffected, suburbia carries with it as much hidden meaning as any other place; it’s just harder to hear it over the whine of lawnmowers in summer, or the hum of a Christmas light display.
Perhaps what suburbia gives to its inhabitants is a constancy, an idea that things have always been the way they are and would never change drastically. Every Sunday in Fairway, without fail, the senior citizens would drive their giant American land yachts to Leona Yarborough's restaurant. My high school, Bishop Miege, would win the same set of state championships every year: boys' and girls' cross country and girls' basketball. The Fall Festival, held two blocks from my house, would have the same candle-dipping booth, the same homemade jam sellers, the same square dancing competition. And my father would work for the same company he'd worked at for the last two and a half decades, I would finish my senior year at the top of my class, and I would go off to the small liberal arts college I'd had my eye on since junior year, thanks to my SAT scores and my wide array of extracurricular activities, from drama to the Environmental Awareness Club to the student council presidency. But not long after my senior year began, the expectations I held onto about the life I lived and would live began to slip out of my reach, as the student council, that bastion of normalcy, started going sour.

I had fallen into the job. The girl who played the Friar in "Much Ado About Nothing" with me in the fall, had nominated me for student council treasurer, and winning the election was as easy as making a funny speech in front of the school. I gave the speech—a hastily scribbled routine with jokes about the cafeteria food that even the worst hacks in clubs wouldn't touch—and come summer, I was wearing a name tag and participating in the giant hormone festival that is Student Council Camp.

One year of treasury duties later—basically, I wrote some numbers down in a ledger every month, without knowing what they referred to—I gave another funny speech and won
the presidency, along with all the power and glory that comes with control over a student population of 700. I strode the halls with a confident, self-assured walk, managed the biweekly meetings with a velvet fist, and generally executed my duties with grace and style.

Except for the fact that I couldn't exactly figure out what my duties were. The rest of the executive council did specific things—the vice president made the morning announcements, the secretary made the afternoon announcements, the treasurer wrote down numbers—but I didn't seem to have anything to do beyond drawing up an agenda for the meetings and calling them to order. The gestures of Student Council didn't carry with them the importance for me that other people seemed to ascribe to them. Sure, it looked good on a college application, but at the same time I didn't feel the pressure to make the annual Stag Strut Walk-a-thon or the spring magazine sale the best ever.

This is what got me in trouble with Kate, the vice-president. She was a go-getter, already taking classes at night so she could apply early to the nursing program she wanted to join. She was on the tennis team, had dated the quarterback the year before, and was the object of lust for a great many boys. Even though I could occasionally be counted among their ranks, something about Kate bothered me in the way she would talk at the student council meetings, calling on people just to take them to task over what they had and had not done. She was vice-president, but I got the feeling from her that she'd run for that office only because she knew she couldn't beat me in the presidential race. In her eyes, I could see a hunger for weakness in others.

One morning, I was talking with Matt, a friend of mine who played guitar in a local band, about an upcoming show of theirs. The cafeteria was empty, our voices bouncing off
the high ceiling. We’d just finished talking about the release concert plans when Kate stormed into the room, her uniform skirt flying out in her wake.

“Colin, did you take care of submitting those forms to the main office for the StuCo mixer next month?”

I hadn’t, but not without reason.

“I gave them to Adam”—the senior class vice-president—“since the mixer is their responsibility anyway. He should have done it by now.”

Kate’s eyes narrowed. “I know you did.”

“So, why did you ask me if you already knew?” I said, shaking my head a little in slight disbelief.

Ignoring my question—quite possibly because the answer would have revealed her desire to set me up—Kate leaned into my face and hissed, “you know, you may be good at delegating things, but as a leader, you suck.”

Spinning on her sneakers, she stomped out of the cafeteria. I turned to Matt, gave him a what was with that? look, which he responded to with a shrug of his shoulders. We resumed our conversation.

I didn’t care much about student council, I think, because I realized just how much of a figurehead I was. Apart from picking out the design that went on the school mug, and coming up with the school slogan for the year (“Dare to Excel”), I did nothing as president. I ran meetings that went through the motions. I carefully followed the choreography that had been set out for me by the council’s advisors and every previous president.

The suburbs present to its teenage inhabitants a life of relative comfort, a picture of a future without many troubles, and ask: is this enough for you? And most of us were
answering yes, preparing to go to college for four or maybe five years, get married, move back, and work a job not dissimilar to the jobs that our fathers and mothers worked. Student council meetings were a preview of that, a preview of every endless meeting that we would attend for the forty-five years between graduation and retirement, meetings where in two hours nothing was accomplished by the group that couldn’t be done in two minutes by a single person. High school was a training ground for college, and college was a training ground for the rest of our lives. About 85% of my graduating class went to either Johnson County Community College or the University of Kansas, both schools less than an hour from Bishop Miege. The siren call of the suburbs kept them from going too far away, the promise of a life of relative comfort for going through the motions echoing in their ears.

Like Odysseus, though, some of us had wax jammed in our ears, often literally. We used swimmer’s wax, about two dollars at a drugstore, as earplugs when we went to the Rhumba Box, an all-ages punk rock club that had opened up in downtown Kansas City that fall, across the street from a transient hotel. The Box, as we called it, drew me and my friends from high school in, as well as most every other disaffected youth from the suburbs, to hear local and touring acts that put out their own records, booked their own shows, and drove from concert to concert in a series of used vans held together by duct tape and luck.

At the concerts, small affairs that rarely cost more than five dollars, we would jam up against the rail in front of the stage and let ourselves go in the rhythm of the music, not dancing so much as simply running around, bouncing off of each other like molecules of water in a kernel of corn, waiting to pop. When, right at the beginning of a show, the lead singer of a local band threw himself off the stage and landed directly on my friend John,
knocking him to the floor, we congratulated John--might even have been a little jealous of him.

We all needed an escape in those days of entrance exams and college applications. A lot of kids from my school drank every weekend, passing out on the downstairs rec room pool table of whoever’s parents were out of town that weekend. Some of my friends from school got into the Grateful Dead and pot, and spent afternoons playing frisbee high in metropolitan parks. And the rest of us, wax in ears, watched men pull feedback out of guitars, and lost ourselves in the swirl of youth running around on the floor of the club, closing our eyes to feel the bass drum kick at our hearts clear and pure, angry at everything and nothing, hating ourselves and the world, and loving it at the same time.

Kate--who was a drinker, like most of my classmates--remained frosty for the rest of the year. She tried to seize as much power from me as she could, and I countered her at every move while exaggerating my own apathy about the council. By far, it was and is still the bitterest rivalry I’ve been party to, but I think I only stopped Kate from becoming president because I didn’t like her, and not because I wanted to stay in the job. Jobs didn’t seem that important anymore.

In November of that year, the rumors and whispers that circled around my father’s work finally took shape, and Sprint announced a round of layoffs. Dad was one of them. He had worked for the company, in its various incarnations, since before I was born, followed them across the country in a number of moves that pulled us away from towns we’d just gotten used to, and now they were handing him his walking papers after all that time.
I don’t want to exaggerate our despair. Although the downsizing was a blow to us, it’s not as though we suddenly found ourselves collecting bottles by the side of the road to make the mortgage payment. We lived in the suburbs, after all; disaster was less here. Dad received a severance package from Sprint that kept us in the clear until he was able to find another job months later.

But I’d seen enough, and the simple fact of the downsizing—not to mention the way that some of my father’s old co-workers who still worked at Sprint now treated him, as though he was infected with failure—set off alarms in me. Worrying about money, I accepted a full-ride scholarship to Kansas State University, just in case the money wasn’t there for the small liberal arts school I wanted to attend. *I can always back out of it*, I told myself, but I didn’t tell any of my friends that I’d taken the scholarship, as though saying so would lock me into going there.

I don’t have many photos from those days, but I’ve kept one that a friend of mine took of Matt when his band played at Gee Coffee, a tiny little café in Olathe, one of those southern suburbs that we tried to avoid. Matt stares impassively at the camera, nonchalantly holding a chord while the band erupts at the edges of the photo. Secular Theme was a noise band, and every one of their shows ended with the band steadily disassembling their instruments, wide swaths of feedback cutting through the air, the drummer throwing his cymbals onto the floor while the singer howled. Seconds after the photo was taken, Matt spun around and jammed the pickups of his guitar up against his amplifier, making it squeal and shriek loud enough to still ring in my ears the next morning, despite the wax.
In stark contrast to this chaos, though, were the suits that Secular Theme wore to every gig: black suits, with white shirts and thin black ties, to which Matt often added a hat. The band looked like a group of young office workers on their lunch break, smoking cigarettes and complaining about their bosses, up until the moment that the first beat hit. Then they changed into a storm of noise, fueled by an overwhelming desire not to change the world, but just to drive it away for a few minutes through sheer sound.

As if the suits weren’t enough, the band had also rigged up a phone to use as a mic. The singer would twist himself up in the cord, spin out of it, his tie flying out, and do a back flip, all while shouting barely intelligible lyrics into the earpiece. When they would play, their fans, myself included, would arrive dressed in suits of our own.

If what the suburbs showed to us was a quiet life if we worked hard for someone else, then what Secular Theme did was to co-opt the costume and tools of that life to create its exact opposite, a noisy life, improvised and messy, but belonging to and coming from us. School was quiet, my neighborhood was quiet, tragedy and failure and even death were all quiet, and the only thing I wanted was to hear something loud.

That winter, everything froze. My father made up some business cards with our address and phone number on them, and did some freelance PR work for some agencies around town, but jobs were still hard to find. Matt and the band still played around town and made plans to release a single with another local band sometime in spring, although they couldn’t be sure quite when. Terry Mann dutifully shoveled his sidewalk and driveway every time snow fell, but to me, he never seemed quite as satisfied with that sort of work as
he did with mowing the lawn, as though snow was a poor substitute because there was no regularity to it.

And I kept watch from my window on the second floor, feeling worried about the future. Kansas State seemed more and more like a necessity, and Cornell, that liberal arts college, less and less like a probability, despite the half scholarship they’d given me based on my application and test scores. If I didn’t want to take out a great amount of student loans, then Cornell was out of reach.

So we all waited, stuck in place, on the edge of decisions that would change the directions of our lives, but still feeling like we had little control over those decisions, that somewhere there was a lord king of suburbia that made our choices for us, that pushed us towards one school or another, that forced us to wait to release a single we’d recorded months before, that gave us employment in slow drips, like an IV that kept us alive while the snow fell on a thousand freshly shoveled sidewalks.

The familiar sound of the lawnmower started up again sometime in March, when the snows finally melted away to expose blades of grass to blades of steel. The heat was barely enough to justify Terry’s headband, but he could mow, and that was the point.

I mowed the lawn, too, on occasion, but I hated the chore, and only did it when my father would bribe me with compact discs. As I pushed our mower around the trees on our lawn, my shins bleeding from the splinters of wood that shot out when, mind elsewhere, I ran over twigs and chunks of bark, I would mull over the options left to me. The amount of aid that Cornell offered topped out at about $7,000, which still fell short of the amount I actually
needed to enroll there that fall. Kansas State still dangled its full-ride carrot in front of me, and it began to look like a better choice, if not a better meal, all the time.

I said before that the suburbs are control; however, the natural tendency of the universe, both the suburban and non-suburban parts of it, is towards chaos, towards things going out of control. Watching both me and Terry pushing our lawn mowers up and down, cutting criss-cross patterns in the grass, an observer might have thought that both of us believed in the permanence of what we were doing; after all, the looks on our faces were so serious. I don't know about Terry, but I was only trying to get the chore done. The grass would grow again. The grass would always grow again, no matter how much we sweated, no matter how much it snowed during the winter, no matter how many times we pushed the mower in long stripes. We always knew this and understood that that we were fighting a losing battle with physics, but in the suburbs, we only wanted the feeling of control, instead of actual control. A mowed lawn grew back, but for a few days, the mower was his own lord king, holding dominion over all the plants in his lot.

A few weeks later, during a journalism class, the reporter in charge of putting together the list of colleges the graduating seniors were heading off to that fall asked me where I was going. I hemmed and hawed for a little bit, then told her K-State.

Kansas State University, I later found out, sits in the middle of the largest stand of original grassland left in the United States.

Matt and the rest of Secular Theme put out their single, a split with another band, in April, and played a number of shows around town to celebrate, including a concert in the cafeteria of the Kansas City Art Institute. My friends and I put on the suits and ties we
usually wore to their concerts and drove down to the cafeteria, and while the band set up, the
students of the Art Institute regarded us with odd expressions, and I felt like an ambassador
from the developing country of Suburbia. The students were painfully cool; everything, from
the way they dressed to the work they did to the way they ate that evening’s featured
vegetable, came off with coolness calculated to seem completely off the cuff. By contrast,
those of us in suits drew attention to ourselves through our sheer un-coolness.

Then the music started, Matt letting loose howls from his guitar while we did our
small, head-bobbing, foot-shuffling dance. A few students wandered over from their tables
to watch the spectacle of boys in suits making noise while another set of boys in suits felt that
noise, and soon enough, they began to bob their heads as well, murmuring appreciatively as
the bass guitar wandered in and out of the drum beat.

It’s popular in punk music, or any other art form that seems to attract youth, to
disdain the suburbs as an origin, or to imply that reality can be found on the streets, or among
the downtrodden, as though reality had an address or an income level. But those of us who
have come from the suburbs to these forms of art have made a choice because of our origins.
We’ve seen the rewards for a life lived through the motions, the big house, the corner lawn,
the neighborhood associations. We’ve met the neighbors with the backyard pools and the
giant trampolines, the ones who take their kids and nine of their friends to the amusement
park for a birthday party; sometimes we’ve been those kids. Like Christ, we’ve been to the
top of the mountain and been shown riches, and we’ve turned and said no, not this.

Searching for something else was what took me to a school in the middle of a
prairie, and later, to the Pacific Northwest, where I lived for three years until I began to feel
like the job I worked was pushing me towards forty years of desk life. So I quit, and returned
to the Midwest, and started working on a graduate degree in writing. What I then took for slacking was instead an understanding of what was really important to me; I was, and still am, far more interested in that squall of noise, that shout, than the orderly lethargy of a business meeting.

And it will happen, every once in a while, that one of the students I teach will come to class wearing the t-shirt of a band I love. And I will want to tell him—and it’s pretty much always a boy—that I saw Jawbox play Liberty Hall in Lawrence, or that I missed the only time Nirvana played Kansas City because the friend I was going to go with didn’t want to spend an evening in a smoky auditorium, or that I once drove two hours through a Kansas snowstorm to see Henry Rollins perform.

Sometimes, even, a student will show up wearing a t-shirt of a band called the Get Up Kids, and they usually know all the words to all the songs from all five albums, or have read the article about them that appeared in *Rolling Stone* last year. Sometimes they even know that the original name of the band was the Suburban Get Up Kids, but that the band dropped the first word because the lead singer/guitarist’s three previous bands had all started with S, and all three had failed. But they never know that I watched the man they sing along with wreak havoc on a guitar in the middle of a cafeteria as I, a handful of suit-wearing fans, and a hundred art students watched.

When people ask me where I’m from, I usually say Kansas City, since it’s a lot easier than explaining the precise location of Fairway. But Kansas City generally implies Missouri, and I am from the suburbs on the Kansas side, from the one ragged corner of an otherwise perfectly rectangular state. This irregularity, this grass that continues to come out of the ground, regardless of blade or snow, has made me; just as surely as the noise of traffic has
made kids from cities or the hum of a combine has made kids from farms. And even though I might never return to living in the suburbs, I have known it as my home, have felt joy and sadness and failure and triumph there, and I have seen the lines drawn on a map that everyone insisted was blank.
The Middle Oldest Child

The Great Salt Lake stretched off into the horizon, vanishing under the reflection of sky as Mom and I took the exit towards Logan, Utah, off the main interstate. I shifted in the passenger seat, bending forward to grab the bag of hard candies we’d bought the night before at the K-Mart in Ogden. I poured a few into my hand.

“Do you want one?” I asked my mom.

She turned her head towards me, shaking it, and opened her mouth in an odd smile, holding a candy, the round disk of the peppermint like a pink sun shrinking between her teeth. Tossing the extra candy back in the bag, I unwrapped one and started thoughtfully sucking on it. Anything to give me a reason not to talk.

For years and for numerous reasons, ever since Mom and Dad had told me and my sister about the child they gave up for adoption before they were married, I hadn’t been comfortable asking my mother about the time she spent down in Houston at the home for unwed mothers, no matter how many quiet invitations she gave me and no matter how open she said she was to talking about it. Even when Jennifer came to visit us, I still couldn’t ask Mom about it. And although she knew I was interested, Mom understood my reluctance to talk about it. After a while, she began to stop bringing the subject up, although the invitation stood. I think she knew that I needed to come to it in my own time.

But I knew that if I waited that long, I’d never come to it. My own propensity for avoiding the uncomfortable guaranteed that I’d always switch the subject. So I decided to press the issue with myself, and, inspired by a friend’s stories of traveling with her mother, I asked Mom to go on this vacation with me. We decided to head out west from Colorado,
where she and my dad live, and drive up to Salt Lake City and then swing up towards
Yellowstone National Park. She jumped at the chance to spend a week with her “baby boy”
easily her most cringe-inducing nickname for me), and in early August, we loaded up the car
with luggage and snacks and drove out West.

A few days in, leaving Salt Lake, I realized I still hadn’t done what I’d set out to do.
With the Great Salt Lake gone from our rear view mirror and a fresh bag of mints, we headed
towards Logan, Utah. The town spilled out of the Cache Valley as we approached it from the
south, along Highway 89. My mother slowed down the car as we crossed the city limit sign
and the speed limit dropped.

“Where are we eating lunch again?” she asked.

“The Bluebird Cafe,” I said. “The guidebook says that the highway turns into the
main street, so we should just stay on this.” I looked out the windows at the foothills, so
close to the town, and thought about the miles we had to cover before we reached Idaho, that
night’s stopping point. So many miles, so many opportunities, and I wondered if I could
bring up the subject of Houston with my mother.

_Probably not_, I thought. Even though my mother and I were driving through Utah,
Idaho, and Wyoming, big Western states that afforded us plenty of time to talk about
everything, even though I asked her to go on this vacation with the unspoken idea that I
would ask her about the whole story of her pregnancy and exile in Texas, even though my
mother had said several times that she was willing to talk about her experience, I couldn’t
bring myself to ask.
We parked in front of the town’s Mormon Tabernacle, across the street from the Bluebird. Mom noticed a boutique near the cafe at the same time I saw a bookstore. We agreed to meet at the cafe in ten minutes’ time, and parted.

The bookstore was in the process of moving from one location to another, and so most of the books were stacked on the floor or on tables in haphazard arrangements. I killed ten minutes browsing, then headed back outside. Passing the boutique, I poked my head in to see if Mom had left yet. A green-haired, multi-pierced clerk looked back at me quizzically.

In the cafe, Mom waited, standing as I came in.

“How was the bookstore?” she asked.


“I got new earrings,” Mom said, pulling her gray hair back to show off a pair of small blue loops. “And get this--the rack was right next to a big dildo display case. They sold butt plugs in that store, too. I think the staff was watching me to see how I’d react to them.”

“You should have picked up the largest one and asked if they carried anything bigger,” I said. We both laughed, but I thought *I can’t believe I can talk to her about butt plugs, but can’t ask her about Texas.*

Perhaps I found it easier to discuss sex toys with her because we could joke about it. Our family is a joking one, with dinners frequently dissolving into attempts to top each other and milk coming out of someone’s nose. As open as we seem to be with each other, I’ve always wondered if we’ve used that humor as a shield, as a chance to escape whatever we don’t want to talk about.

Maybe what she had been through--the pregnancy, the home, two decades of not even knowing if the child she gave up was a boy or a girl--maybe it was all beyond my knowing, a
trauma greater than anything I could understand. I’m not part of the adoption triangle, not a
direct participant, and even though the existence of my older sister changed the way I thought
about my family and my role in it, it’s not what defines those things for me, unlike my
mother, whose life is deeply shaped by the child she gave up. I didn’t even have a title: birth
family sibling? birth mother’s son? the not-given-up?

The time I’ve spent combing through the shelves of books on adoption have set up a
distinct boundary between my mother and me, and I’m nervous about crossing it. The books
are almost exclusively female written and targeted, and there’s nothing I’ve found that
includes anyone who’s not a mother--birth or adopted--or a child--adopted only. The
literature today has set up walls separating those three from anyone else--my father, my
grandparents, my little sister, and me. We, quite simply, don’t exist in the world of adoption
books, despite our reality in the actual world.

I couldn’t ask my mom about this until I figured out my own role in it. I supposed,
then, I should ask the other birth family sibling, someone I didn’t have a problem asking
about the situation because she was just as nameless as I was: my little sister, Mollie.

Mollie is three and a half years younger than me, and so was thirteen years old when
our parents told us about Jennifer. Our reactions were remarkably different. While I sat,
stunned at our parents’ revelation, Mollie was, by her own admission, deeply excited. Even
now, years later, she remembers immediately thinking about all the things she and her new
sister would be able to do, like shopping and talking. The only time Jennifer came to visit us
at our home while I still lived there, I met her and then zipped out the door to escape the
awkwardness of the situation. I didn’t want to meet my parents’ new oldest child. I didn’t
want to treat someone like family who had missed every holiday and trauma that had ever happened to us, who hadn’t, in my eyes, earned the right to join us. And ultimately, I didn’t want to be replaced.

Mollie, on the other hand, spent that weekend with her, and since then, has traveled down to Houston several times, and talks to her four or five times a week, far more than she and I talk. For Mollie, Jennifer was the older sibling she’d always wanted, the opposite of me, a big sister instead of a big brother. Through the years since the revelation, Mollie’s developed a relationship with Jennifer and her children, and the same week that Mom and I were driving around the West, Mollie was down in Houston, spending the week with her sister.

Mollie has always had a connection to the lost of our family, the vanished and invisible. Despite the numerous arguments she and Mom have both told me about, and both of their sometimes strained relationship with Mom’s mother, our grandmother, there is a line, a connection, that runs through the females of our family, from mother to daughter that holds them all closer together. Perhaps because of the smaller numbers of males on that side of the family, or the absence of my grandfather, who died when I was four, or the simple fact of my Y chromosome, I lack this connection to the rest of the family.

Once, while visiting the grave of my great-aunt Jan in a Kansas City cemetery, my mom happened to mention that the stillborn child her parents had given birth to was buried somewhere in the cemetery. Mollie was immediately taken with this idea, and asked Mom a flurry of questions about our aunt. Mom answered them to the best of her ability, but finally had to admit she didn’t know much about the child, and in fact, didn’t even know exactly where in the cemetery she was buried.
Mollie seemed to accept this, but when we drove through the cemetery on our way out, she spoke up from the back seat: “Stop the car.”

Mom braked, and Mollie got out of the car, walked about fifty feet away, and stopped, right in front of our lost aunt’s stone.

My own relationship with Mollie was contentious and brawling until I myself joined the ranks of the vanished and lost. We lived our childhood in binaries: I was the bookish one, she was the athletic one; I was the quiet one, she was the noisy one; I kept to myself, she had dozens of friends. We argued famously, in screaming matches that neighbors across the street could hear. Once--and I only know this because my parents tell me it happened, for I seem to have blocked it out of my memory--I pulled the bathroom door off its hinges when she wouldn’t let me into the room. We pushed each other’s buttons in the way that only siblings can. When I graduated from college and moved to Seattle at the age of 22, the first time I’d ever lived more than a day’s drive away from my family, Mollie suddenly started calling me more, sending more letters, even flying out to visit me on her own money. Although we still have our share of arguments and disagreements, the time we spend together now is less warlike and more cordial, as if all our years fighting had fostered a battlefield respect for each other. And though I’d like to think that it’s because I took steps to improve our relationship, the truth is that Mollie was the one to reach out and try to bridge the gap between us.

Perhaps it’s only natural that Mollie takes to Jennifer much more easily than I do. Jennifer, in a way, is another version of Mollie; they are a pair of sisters with the same parents, while I am fundamentally different from her because of my gender, despite our
shared genes. For years, I thought that Mollie and I looked exactly alike, that she was a shorter version of me, with long blonde hair. But we’re still boy and girl. When I first saw Jennifer, I realized that she and Mollie look alike in ways that Mollie and I never could, because of their shared gender. My short hair, flat chest, and complete lack of hips kept me from resembling Mollie too closely, but the two girls matched physically, another way for me to feel like Jennifer had invaded my space and started doing my job as sibling better than me.

I’ve often wondered what would have happened if our parents had revealed that the child they gave up so long ago had been a son. Mom told me once that she had always thought that she’d given up a boy, because the last four generations of Raffertys had been exclusively male. Would I have accepted a sudden brother with less protest than a sister? Or would I still have found this new relation a threat, a disturbance in the order of my life?

Of course, if the child my parents gave up had been a boy, the chances of him taking the initiative to find his birth parents would have been much smaller. A quick scan of the available resources for adoptees reveals that the majority of adopted children seeking their birth parents are female. The adoption sections of bookstores are filled with the stories of daughters seeking their mothers, or mothers writing about the child they gave up years earlier (and it’s strange how often this child turns out female), but a boy is hard to find in the triangle.

Perhaps it’s because boys, generally, aren’t encouraged to form bonds with other people that extend as deep as those that females form. Tim Green, in his book A Man and His Mother, says that until the age of 21, “I never consciously considered the mother who gave me away. Thinking beyond the parents who raised me was something I’d never allowed myself to do,” and, in fact, he searches for his biological mother not because he feels
an emotional loss that so many adopted daughters describe, but rather because he wondered about “how much of who I was came from my upbringing and how much from the genetic code that was randomly paired in my mother’s womb twenty-two years before.” Males tend to separate themselves from their families as they grow older, and if an adopted son finds it easy to move away—both physically and emotionally—from the people he grew up with, that he’s always known as his family, then why should he search out a family that he’s only connected to by blood?

The blood connection, I think, is why I’m so apathetic about getting to know my older sister and her children. I didn’t grow up with her. She’s a stranger to me, and the fact that I’m related to her and her children via blood and DNA doesn’t really change that. Mollie keeps a photo of Sebastian, Jennifer’s youngest child of the three, on the dashboard of her car, and the first time I saw the picture, I didn’t recognize the boy by sight, only through knowing that she had recently seen him down in Texas.

“Is that, um, Jennifer’s son?” I asked, trying to recall the name from a conversation with my mother. Mollie looked at me with a slight expression of scorn.

“His name’s Sebastian,” she said in a reprimanding tone. “And he’s your nephew. Don’t you want to get to know him?”

Mumbling a vague excuse, I thought, Well, no more than I want to know anyone who might happen to walk in front of us at this crosswalk. But Mollie’s question still bothered me. Why don’t I want to know him? Why, if Mollie can connect to him so easily, can’t I find the drive even to have the most superficial of relationships with this child?
My first memory is of Mollie. A few days after she was born, in late 1979, my father took me to the county hospital to see my mother and her. However, when we got there, hospital regulations kept me from going to my mother’s room--too young. So my father and I walked around the outside of the building--I can distinctly remember the crunch the November snow made under our boots--to the window of my mother’s room, where Dad lifted me up to see my mother holding Mollie, wrapped in a blanket and looking for all the world like a pink meatloaf.

Between those layers of glass, from the cold world to the warm hospital room, I saw the first thing that my four year old brain deemed important enough to consign to the caverns of memory, to write down permanently on the walls of my thought: my sister. Mollie is my Lascaux cave paintings, the beginning of my own civilization, entry number one in the card catalog of my head. I realized that day that I was now someone else, a brother, an older brother, the oldest child, and I believed that for fourteen more years, despite all the sibling rivalry, until Jennifer arrived.

Mollie can relate to Jennifer in ways that I cannot because Mollie’s role in the family never changed because of her. Despite Jennifer’s appearance, Mollie stayed the youngest. I, however, suddenly went from being the oldest child to the middle child; in fact, I told the news to a friend of mine, a middle child herself, by saying “I’m a middle child, too.”

And with that change in my status came a change in what I perceived as my responsibilities and duties as the oldest. Jennifer’s children turned my parents into grandparents and my sister into an aunt, acts that my theoretical children were going to accomplish. Those children stole my thunder, my right as the first-born, and no matter how much my parents may assure me that they don’t regard Jennifer’s children as their
grandchildren, I can’t help but react the same way Mollie does when I’m reticent about the children: *well, yeah, but they still technically are*. The photos in Mollie’s car, then, are a reminder for me of getting bumped down the ladder, of what’s taken away from me. And it’s possible, I admit, that I resent those kids, as much as a person can resent someone under the age of ten, for trumping my own theoretical children and being the first. Maybe I resent Jennifer for being the first herself.

I still act like I’m the oldest, though, in all the stereotypical ways: more responsible, more self-denying, more astounded by what Mollie seems to get away with. I’m torn between feeling like I’m the oldest while knowing that I’m really not. On a certain level, the question is metaphysical: is my older sister real? If she’s not, then I am the oldest, and the way I feel about my role and responsibilities in the family is right. If she is real, though, then there’s a gap between the way I perceive my reality and the way the world actually is. Not talking to her, not having a relationship with her or her children is my way of denying her reality and reaffirming my own. If I don’t do those things, then the gap between perception and experience is closed: I am what I believe myself to be. But if Jennifer is real—and I know that she is—then part of my identity is in flux, constantly.

Mollie doesn’t seem to have this problem, and because Jennifer’s appearance only rewrote her role in the family slightly, from younger of two to youngest of three, she can more readily accept Jennifer and her kids. She can put the photo of Sebastian on her dashboard, while I make myself erase his name from memory each time I hear it. She can fly down to Houston and spend a week with her niece and nephews and her sister, and I can spend a week with my mother and not ask her about the defining experience of her life once.
Are the reasons Mollie is able to deal with Jennifer so much more effectively than I do the ones I’ve thought of: gender, birth order? Or is there something deeper, something beyond those elemental things, something ingrained in our personalities that causes us to react differently to our sister? Mollie may feel the blood bond far more strongly than I do, and for her, that supersedes anything else. For her, family is family, no matter what. She once told me in conversation that “I want to get to know these kids that are part of my blood.” She actively works to be a part of Jennifer and her children’s lives the way our aunts did when we were growing up--Sebastian only knows her by the name MoMo, her aunt name. She’s present for them, real as the blood that flows through all their veins. I, on the other hand, am the distant one, the absent one, the one who considers family not so much to be blood but something else, a nonphysical bond, the product of experience and proximity and not genetics.

Even more interesting is Mollie’s admission that “too much time was lost” for her ever to consider Jennifer her full sister. Despite this lost time, she still strives to connect, still tries to bridge the gap of the years we spent without her, still tries to get something from a sister that she can’t get from a brother, while I have written Jennifer off as not part of my family.

What I consider to be my family may turn out to fall under the definition Robert Frost gives in his poem “The Death of the Hired Man:” they’re the people who have to take you in. And while I know that my parents and Mollie would both do that for me, I don’t think that Jennifer would.

And I’m not sure I would do it for her.
The sun was setting on the main strip through Driggs, Idaho while I waited for Mom to exit the Mexican restaurant where we’d eaten dinner. Soon enough, we’d return to the Super 8 Motel where we were staying, on the edge of this small town of 946 people. To the east, I could see the backs of the Grand Teton mountains poking over the foothills, illuminated by the sun at my back.

*I should be so lucky as to live here,* I thought, *and see this every night.* If nothing else, that day’s trip had taken me through some of the most beautiful territory I’d ever seen: the Snake River Valley, the Teton range, a hundred quiet little towns in northern Utah and southern Idaho. But I was still frustrated with my inability to talk to my mother about her past and her daughter, still confused with my reticence. Earlier that day, driving through the Snake River Valley, Mom told me a little about her recent trip to Texas to see her brother and sister-in-law, and how Jennifer came up with the kids from Houston to see her. I listened, nodding, as Mom described Sebastian’s rambunctious nature, which bordered on the destructive. Mom told me about Jennifer’s new job, and how she’d really improved her life in the last few years, and I had just sat there, taking it in without protest, acceptance, or question. It was the perfect entry into the subject, a clear window, and I passed it up. As beautiful and astounding as the day had been, I still felt like I’d wasted it. Mom and I may have traveled over a thousand miles on this trip, with plenty more to go, but I couldn’t help but think that I still had a great number of miles between me and her when it came Jennifer.

Mollie had figured out a way to fit herself into the triangle of adoption that I still hadn’t discovered, and I was jealous of it. This night, looking at the mountains, I wondered if I’d ever find my way into it, into understanding my mother and my father and, eventually, both of my sisters.
The bell on the door rang behind her as Mom came out of the restaurant. She looked up at the Tetons.

"Wow, that's really pretty," she said.

"I know," I said. "I could live here someday."

"Your father would love that. We'd be up here to visit all the time."

She turned to look at the sun behind us.

"Let's get back to the motel. We've got a big day tomorrow. I thought we might start in Jackson, and then head up to Yellowstone about noon or so."

"OK," I said, then headed towards the car.

"Remind me to call your father and your sister when we get back to the room," she said, and I didn't have to ask her which one she meant.
The Bottom and How I Got There

The television station was the first job I ever had that didn't require a name tag; instead, I had a plastic sign at the entrance to my cubicle, and a security access card, and a bus pass that the station subsidized. And the pay was incredible; unlike the other Client Service Representatives, who, I found out later, had taken pay cuts in exchange for the opportunity for advancement that the job promised, I'd managed to double what I'd been making at the bookstore, which also meant that I'd finally have enough money to use the health insurance I had.

After Sandy, the general sales manager with the beard and the big booming voice offered me the job, I called Bryn at our apartment to tell her the news. She sounded excited—her being a grad student and me being a retail worker meant that money was usually tight for us, and this was a chance for us not to have to survive for a week on pasta. But her voice also carried with it a note of strain; we'd argued the night before, the latest in a series of little things.

We'd lived together for over a year by this point, having met in Kansas, where I finished a bachelor's at the same time as she completed her master's in English literature. We'd met in a summer class--Studies in Modernism--when she'd sat down next to me on the first day, tossed her shoulder-length brown hair back, and introduced herself, her large brown eyes full of vitality. I was immediately taken with her, and a little overwhelmed. My then girlfriend was something of a wallflower, full of self-doubt, and to meet a woman like Bryn, who burst at the seams with confidence, who was social and gregarious, who was loved by
half the department and hated by the other, and, not to mention, who was incredibly good-looking--to meet a woman like her, a tempest in a D-cup, triggered something in me. Within four months, we'd left our other relationships and started dating, practically living together by the end of the year.

The University of Washington accepted her into their PhD program, and I didn't have any plans after graduation, so in August of 1998, we loaded everything into a U-Haul and moved to Seattle. We never even considered any of the alternates: splitting up, living separately. Never crossed my mind, at least.

And I felt grown-up. We had a great apartment in the Capitol Hill district and a white cat that we'd rescued and named Olive. We were friends with other couples and had them over for dinner. At Christmas, we got a tree and set it up in the living room, a few presents underneath. We owned couple-type kitchen utensils, like a rotary parmesan grater and matching mixing bowls.

I'd always wanted to feel like this, stable and settled. After moving so much as a child, and after a series of conflicts between roommates in college, I'd finally found someone and someplace I could see myself with for a long time. The security intoxicated me.

When its dark side rotates around, rootlessness is a progressive malady. What starts as a desire to go turns into an overwhelming need to stop, to drop your bags somewhere, anywhere. Maybe the pressure came from the media; television shows run for years and no one ever gets transferred--the show was "Little House on the Prairie," not "A Series of Smallish Dwellings in Various Climates." Darrin's boss on "Bewitched" never sent him to the Indiana office for five years, probably because the ad agency never got bought out by a larger ad conglomerate.
Maybe it came from my parents, who, two years earlier, had finally returned to Boulder, their honeymoon town, the target they’d aimed for for almost three decades. The first time I visited them there, the winter before I met Bryn, a sense of stability permeated the house, like my parents knew and took comfort in the fact that they would grow old in these rooms. I wanted, if not that same feeling, a smaller version of it, the knowledge that I would see a few summers go by in the same place, with the same person.

And maybe it came from my own selfishness, my own laziness, my own wanting to find stability and comfort without having to look inside myself. Rather than address my own issues, I focused on my address, the apartment behind it, and Bryn.

Now I had a job augmenting the apartment and the partner, an actual eight-to-five, Monday through Friday job. Through the static on the phone, I told Bryn I’d see her soon, after my shift at the bookstore. I hung up the phone and went to a cafe, ordering a spinach-tofu scramble and feeling like an adult, more so than ever before in my life.

I turned in my two weeks’ notice at the bookstore and added an extra week between leaving there and starting at the station to go on a vacation with my parents. My mother, after many years, had finally conquered her fear of flying and now her and my father traveled overseas each year. Having taken my sister to Europe in 1998, they offered to take me to Beijing.

I’d never left the country before, except for a trip up to Canada a few months earlier. China seemed like a chance to experience something completely new. And why not? I felt settled and stable enough to fly off to the other side of the globe. When I returned home, I had an apartment, a job, a cat, and a woman I loved there for me.
We arrived in Beijing in late September, the usually polluted air cleaned up because the government had ordered the top polluters to shut down before the October 1st holiday. Immediately, I wished Bryn had been able to come along on the trip; I bicycled around the city, taking pictures and thinking about being with her, about traveling with her, about building a life with her.

On a crisp day, the beginning of autumn in China, my parents and I went to Silk Alley, in the embassy district, where we and a thousand other Anglo tourists shopped for souvenirs. My mother sought out fake Kate Spade and Prada purses she had promised friends in the States, and my father bought cashmere scarves for his brothers for Christmas. I went through the stalls, ducking past the CD pirates who always seemed to target me, until I found a blue silk jacket for Bryn. I negotiated a price with the vendor, doubtlessly overpaying but still excited about the gift I’d found for her.

That night, I folded the jacket carefully and packed it into my suitcase, then wrote Bryn a postcard. Bryn, I wrote, *China is great but I wish you were here with me*, about as eloquent as a I could get on a four-by-six rectangle. I crammed as much as I could onto the space I had, telling her about the things I’d seen and the photos I’d taken, the Ming Tombs and the Great Wall. I told her about the duck I’d eaten and the cat I spotted in a neighborhood that looked just like Olive.

After finishing the postcard, I sat on the bed. I had spent a week in Beijing, and the time away from Bryn had only made me miss her more, no matter how stressful things had been between us. I knew that I wanted to be with her and get past our problems, and the job I would start upon my return would make things a lot easier. Gamblers and I must share this feeling of proximity, this feeling--hope, maybe--that stability, the next big win, is close
enough to grasp. The same feeling, I imagine, that Tantalus, punished in the Greek underworld, must have experienced: *this time, the fruit will not move out of my reach, and I will finally answer my hunger.*

Thanks to the International Date Line, I returned to Seattle on a Saturday morning a few hours before I left Beijing. I hadn’t even unpacked before Bryn had told me that during the week I’d been away, she’d cheated on me, twice, with different men. She hadn’t so much told me as I’d uncovered it within two hours of returning; a strange hug at the airport, an odd conversation on the drive back, culminating in me jokingly asking her if she’d found a substitute boy for the week.

“What do you mean?” she asked, quickly, voice humorless.

“Oh, you know, just someone to kiss you and keep the bed warm,” I responded, laughing. I had thought that *my blood ran cold* was only a cliché until I saw the look on her face.

By Saturday afternoon, I had added a few dress shirts, pants, and ties into my suitcase and driven to some friends’ apartment; Josh and Tamiko had an extra bedroom and, understanding what had happened from the tone of my voice, had offered to let me stay there as long as I needed. I spent the rest of the weekend going through the motions, trying to make myself eat, but even though Josh and Tamiko were the best cooks among our couple friends, everything tasted gray.

Monday, I started the job. I listened to the Human Resources Director outline the benefits of the job as through a screen, her words muffled and distant. I thought about telling her that I didn’t want the job anymore, that I wasn’t really interested in television or sales,
much less television sales, that I’d lied in my interview when I had said that I could use Microsoft Office. I wanted to go home.

The director’s voice suddenly came into focus. “There’s also this counseling hotline, the Employee Assistance Program,” she said, making me sit up in my chair.

“It’s an anonymous phone line; if necessary, they can refer you to a counselor, but hopefully you’ll never have to use it.”

I sleepwalked through the rest of week as best I could, meeting everyone from the news department to the traffic department and mumbling answers to the standard getting to know you questions: where I was from, what I did before this, where I went to school. Thinking about my past, any aspect of it, just reminded me of my present, and what had happened to me.

The peculiar thing about rootlessness is that you never really get accustomed to being cast adrift; every move, every transfer, every change is as keenly painful as the first. Separating it from wanderlust or roaming tendencies is the feeling of helplessness, of being toyed with by powers greater than you, or at least other people. At the television station, I would disappear into the bathroom and sit in a stall, head in hands, not crying but rather quietly pleading with whatever cosmic bully was doing this to me to just stop it.

I kept falling asleep at work, too. Once my jet lag from China wore off, I couldn’t sleep at night. Staring at the ceiling, I tossed and turned in the guest bed, the late October chill seeping in through the window. At work, I taught myself both Microsoft Office and how to make it look to the passing observer as though I was working; my cubicle entrance, fortunately, faced the back of my chair, so if I dozed off, my new co-workers only saw the back of my head.
But this little trick worked only so much, and I still had a job to do. One Thursday, about a week after I’d started there, I found myself slipping again. After my head nodded sharply a few times while trying to put together a spreadsheet, I decided to get up for a walk to stretch my legs and get my blood flowing again.

I went down the hall, past Master Control and its blinking lights and many monitors, and into the break room. Two soda machines flanked an older hot beverage machine, the kind that dropped a cup under a dispenser before filling it with the purchaser’s choice. I fumbled in my pockets and found a dime and a quarter, just enough for a cup of hot chocolate.

Years of rootlessness had taught me to find comfort wherever I could, another defense mechanism in what had turned out to be a large arsenal. At its best, this mechanism manifests itself as a resourcefulness, a carrying of your home with your self, like a tortoise. At its worst, it comes off reeking of desperation and clinginess. I wanted the hot chocolate not just to warm me up and keep me awake; I wanted it to be a comfort food for me, to heal me a little bit, to take away not just the fatigue but also the sadness I felt.

I dropped my coins into the slots and pressed the “Hot Cocoa” button. The machine whirred and clanked to life; I heard a *ka-chunk* and looked expectantly at the opening where the cup would drop.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, with a hiss, a thin stream of hot chocolate flowed out of the machine, through the air where the cup should have been, and finally, inevitably, into the white plastic grate where the cup should have sat.

I had found myself at moments that felt like the bottom before, always understanding that an upward swing always followed any downward slope. Before, when I had thought
“well, it can’t get any worse than this,” I’d always felt a little better; it really couldn’t get any worse than that, and so it would have to get better. But this minor tragedy, this little thing, this felt like the absolute bottom, like the doors had shut, the locks locked, like I’d woken to find myself at the bottom of a well that sees the sun only once a day at high noon. And in Seattle in October, where the sun does not shine even on the happy people, I sat in a break room and felt the gray begin to push in on me harder than it had ever pushed before.

A few days later, I met Bryn for dinner at an Indian restaurant at the top of Queen Anne Hill--neutral ground. We had talked a few times on the phone, short conversations, but I hadn’t seen her since I’d returned, and whatever anger I’d felt towards her had vanished into a giant need to be home again, to have the stability that I loved and needed so much back, no matter what had happened. Forgive her? Absolutely, if it got us back together.

She came into the restaurant and hugged me--good sign, I thought--and we sat down. I told her about my job, she told me how the new school year was going, a regular conversation between regular friends to any passing waiter.

“I got your postcard today,” she said. “Thank you.”

“I’m glad it made it,” I replied. “You would have loved that temple.”

But inside I thought how?, both How could she do this to me? and How can I get back together with her? She seemed so calm, so in control as she ate her saag paneer, while I felt like I was barely hanging on. In some respects, it felt like nothing had happened with us; I was still trying to catch up with her, trying to be as sure as she was of what was happening. Inside, though, I could feel myself slipping, feel my mental fingernails scrabbling at the cliff’s edge, trying to keep myself from falling into the dark.
“Why did you do this?” I spat out quietly. Bryn’s fork paused, an inch over her plate. She looked at me, her lids narrowing, and I sat there, praying for the bill to come, the water to be refilled, anything, as she carefully took me to pieces, castigating me and turning any guilt onto me. I was to blame, she said, for failing as a partner. I was the one who sent her into the arms of other men, because I’d held onto her too closely. I was clingy, she said. Needy.

As if to confirm everything she said about me, I agreed with her, trying to make her stop hurting me. I needed her, yes, but I didn’t think I was needy. I held on to her, but that was only because I was worried she’d go if I didn’t. Was that clingy? Was I the cover of a self-help book: *Men Who Try To Cling To Women Who Push Them Away* or *Women Who Cheat and the Men Who Still Love Them* or *Codependent Forever*?

I went back to Josh and Tamiko’s that night and tried to sleep, but could only watch the clouds over Lake Union move slowly from west to east in a blanket. In each town I lived in, I’d learned a new phrase, something unique to the geographical area. In Seattle, I learned about sunbreaks, the moments when the ubiquitous cloud cover would part, and the sun would come though for a brief moment, a cameo in the day’s play. Through the window, I watched the sky, and wondered during which act the next light would appear.

A thousand scenarios ran through my head those days: Bryn apologizing, realizing the mistakes she’d made, tearful reunions in the rain, a return to the old days. In the conversations we had in my head, I could always say just the right thing to set everything straight. Now, it seems odd to me that I tried to rewrite our story so many times when I
should have simply walked away. But as my defense, I offer this simple fact: I loved her, and I wanted to stay in love with her, because I had never really loved anyone else.

Sometimes, I see young couples on the street, walking hand in hand and looking for all the world like they’ve figured out how to find happiness together, forever. Part of me wants to laugh at them for their naivety, for thinking that their new love will stay the same forever, but at the same I wonder if maybe it could, that maybe there’s a moment when a young couple, in love for the first time ever, might actually connect and be happy for the rest of their lives, and never know heartbreak and pain, know what it’s like to pack up everything into empty boxes from the liquor store, or what it’s like to leave a place you thought you’d stay at for a long time.

Usually, I watch these couples through the lens of my own failures and disappointments, remembering what happened to me. Every so often, though, I remember what that love feels like for them, that unworried happiness. Then I want desperately nothing more than to be in that apartment again, to love like they do and I once did, to go back to that time when my heart beat cleanly in my chest.

Nervously, I slid my key into the lock, and peered around the door as I opened it. Olive trotted up to me and sniffed me, recognizing my scent.

“Hey, girl,” I whispered. “Is she here?”

I knew she wasn’t--Tuesday night was a class night. I looked around the apartment, unfamiliar despite not having changed in the two weeks I’d been staying elsewhere. The couch still stood in the middle of the room, a spot of white hair where Olive slept during the day. Our tiny television still hid in one of the remote corners of the apartment. And, I
noticed with some satisfaction, the photo of the two of us, taken by a friend at the Thanksgiving Day parade the year before, still sat on the bookshelf.

I went into the closet, and gathered up some clean clothes and some more ties, replacing the ones I’d had to wear to work ever since starting. Packing them in a bag, I couldn’t help but be struck by how foreign the whole apartment felt, and how odd it was to be there, like I was a tourist again, back in China, trying to speak a foreign language, pointing to the guidebook while trying to direct a taxi driver. I felt like I stood in front of a historical marker; something had happened here, a long time ago, and I could still feel traces of it.

Already, I’d felt like I’d moved away, and again, like I’d moved away without wanting to. The stability that I’d felt when we lived together vanished, and once again, I found myself lost, no compass, no map, no idea of where I was or what I could do to find myself. For the thousandth time that day, I wished I was home. I envisioned myself coming home to Bryn, her smiling up at me from the couch where she read; I thought of dinners and movies watched, of cold nights together under flannel sheets.

I sat down on the floor, by the phone, and took the card the human resources director had given me out of my wallet. Soon, I was talking to an operator.

“Well, I think we can get you in to see someone soon,” she said. “Where are you?”

I don’t know, I wanted to tell her. I’m moving again, and I just want to stop.

“I’m near downtown.”

“Well, there’s a few we work with down there.” She ran through a list of doctors, but I couldn’t figure out how to pick one. Then:

“There’s Dr. Ulysses, he’s in Pioneer Square.”
“Him. He’ll work,” I said, in love already with him. Who better to tell me where I was, to stop my moving, to get me home, than the man who’d wandered the seas for ten years? Who’d understand my need for home better than Ulysses?

We set up an appointment for the next Thursday, at four, and I hung up the phone, feeling better than I’d felt in a long time. I scratched Olive under the chin, and left the apartment, the dead bolt sliding into place with a satisfying click.

The situation improved after that, and I began to climb out of the bottom. My appetite returned, and I began to gain back the pounds I’d lost in the days when I felt like I was vanishing. At work, I could stay awake through meetings, and if I still caught an occasional catnap in my chair, it was because I’d stayed up late the night before watching a movie with Josh and Tamiko, not worrying about my future. I felt like I’d returned to a plan, like I’d found the script I’d lost when I came back from China, and now I just needed to put the last few bits in place.

Somewhere, in the back of my head, though, I knew Bryn and I had crossed a line, that our relationship, if it started again, would forever split into Before China and After China. I told myself I didn’t care, that we could still love each other the way I’d always thought we had. Nevertheless, something changed, no matter how much I tried to push forward to the past, to what we had before.

As October changed into November with no perceptible change in the weather, I sat in Ulysses’ overstuffed arm chair for another session, our fourth. He sat across from me, his glasses perched close to the end of his nose, while he took notes.

“You’re sure this is what you want to do?” he asked.
"I'm paying for half that apartment still," I said. "I deserve to live there. Anyway, if I'm there, she can't treat me like a non-person, like an idea. She can't put it off any more--she'll have to decide one way or another."

In the intervening month, Bryn and I had made overtures towards getting back together, overtures that excited me each time a single note of them rang out. We'd gone out a few times together, events that felt like dates, like a possibility not only of getting back together, but of starting over, of ignoring what had happened while I'd been in China.

Ulysses turned and faced me. "Look, it's your decision, ultimately. But remember what we've talked about: you can't do anything to change her. The only person you can take care of is yourself," he said, looking at me over the tops of his glasses.

"I know," I said, "and this is what I want to do."

"OK, then. Good luck."

This Thursday was the last of our four sessions that the operator had scheduled for me, and I felt like I'd made progress. Ulysses' advice—that I could only take care of myself—seemed initially cold and callous to me, isolating in its focus, but over the month, I'd realized that he'd simply put into words what I'd been doing my whole life. Every little trick I learned to survive in a new place, every little thing I found comfort in, every mechanism that I had in place, weren't ways of distracting myself from the problem at hand—always an impossibility—but rather ways of taking care of myself, of keeping myself from sliding to the bottom, of digging into the walls and holding fast.

I stepped out of his office into the brisk fall air, a breeze coming in off the bay. Things felt good, the worry at the back of my head silenced. I wrapped my coat around me, caught the bus back to Josh and Tamiko's, and packed my things. I was going home.
We were back together by Thanksgiving. I slept on the couch for a week before Bryn invited me to read next to her in the bed for a night, and reading there turned into sleeping there a few days later. From that, things progressed gradually to the point where we were a couple again; no tearful apology, no swelling trumpets, no grand celebration of love and lives lived together. More like we'd simply fallen back into comfortable habits.

I find it odd that I don't remember the moment when we agreed to get back together, since that was the only thing I'd thought about for a long time. But I'd ignored a lot of things in that time, as focused as I was on reunion. I remember Bryn saying once that she didn't want "an ending like this" to our relationship—something I took as positive at the time, but now understand differently. And once, alone at the apartment, I answered the phone, and told a man's voice that Bryn was at class. He declined to leave a message, and never called back. I ignored everything these things told me because I only wanted to hear Bryn saying she wanted me back.

And despite our Thanksgiving together and every one of my best efforts, we did fall apart again, not much later, and permanently that time. But in the apartment that November, with our address and our cat and our matching mixing bowls, I felt stable enough to try again with Bryn, to believe that the love I had for her could keep me from the bottom. No matter how much I knew that I was heading into the arms of an uneasy truce that might fall apart at any time, I bought a few more months of stability, a few more weeks of keeping the dark away. Until I learned how to stay out of the bottom, the cost of those months would almost be more than I could pay.
The Mind of Love and Worry

The Man Who Punches Through Walls has another fresh bandage on his hand, the very edge of a scab visible underneath it. He flexes his hands unconsciously; worried about being caught staring, I shift my gaze out the window of the fourth floor room. I can see across the street, past the buildings, to a thin strip of blue. Every fifteen minutes, which means six times during each session, I can see one of the ferry boats go by on the water of Elliott Bay, carrying tourists and residents over to Bainbridge Island.

“Well, my daughter’s mother isn’t letting me see her like we’d agreed,” says the Man Who Has a Baby. He’s 20, four years younger than me, and the youngest one in our group.

“Have you talked to a lawyer about this?” asks Mark, the coordinator. He wears sweaters and is very earnest. The Man Who Has a Baby grabs the bill of his cap with both hands and squeezes it into a sharp upside-down U.

“I don’t really want to,” he says. “I was hoping we could do this without bringing in lawyers.”

“I think you should,” says the Man Who Is Angry at the Government. He works in downtown Seattle, same as me, and sometimes I’ll see him walking on 2nd Avenue. We’re not supposed to acknowledge each other outside of the group, but we usually give each other a nod.

The Man Who Punches Through Walls grunts softly and leans back in his chair. The Man Who Is Angry at the Government gave him advice once, unrequested advice, and he’s never forgiven him for it. That session set off a long discussion of how men tend to try to solve every problem set before them, rather than just let the problem be.
Well, of course we all want to solve problems, I think. That's why we're here.

"Here" is "Redefining Maleness," which is a terrible title for a therapy group. Each Thursday, I leave my office at 3:30 ("Doctor's visit," I say, which is technically true, since Mark's a PhD) and walk through downtown to a Victorian brownstone in the oldest neighborhood in Seattle. About six of us show up on any given week to discuss the various goings-on in our lives. We're all in our twenties, and we've all got problems to solve--some more serious than others. Mine's pretty simple, really--I love a woman who loves someone else. I suppose that I'm the Man Who Runs in the Wrong Direction.

"OK, everyone, good session," Mark says, opening the door into the hallway. "I'll see you all next week."

We all put on our coats and step outside into the dark of 5 o'clock. It's Seattle in winter, and the short days are part of the reason that most of the city is on some sort of antidepressant, whether it's prescription, herbal, homeopathic, regular, or decaf. I can handle the rain just fine--it's the long dark that gets to me.

Tonight's not bad, though, because in addition to the group, Thursday's my day to go to Bud's Jazz Records, just two blocks away. Bud's is a record geek's record store--haphazardly arranged, cardboard section dividers, and an obsessive staff who argue over the redeeming virtues of various Dizzy Gillespie sidemen.

"Yes, Kenny Barron was fine," one of them is saying as I enter from the stairwell (a shop like this has to be in the basement). "But listen to Ray Bryant on 'Con Alma' and you'll take it all back, forever and ever."
He gives me a nod, and I can't tell if he recognizes me or not. I suppose I'm in here enough to qualify as a regular, but I'm probably indistinguishable from every other jazz-loving 20-something Caucasian male that shows up here.

I duck under a ceiling beam and head towards the racks, towards the D section. Columbia has just reissued a bunch of Miles Davis records from the late 50s and early 60s, and each CD wears a bright yellow sticker advertising bonus tracks and digital remastering. They're all brilliant playing, and at about twelve dollars each, dangerously affordable.

I narrow my choices down to two CDs and walk up to the counter, holding one up in each hand—*Relaxin'* in my left, *Someday My Prince Will Come* in my right.

"Which one of these would you suggest?" I say.

The clerk behind the counter frowns a little. I suppose I'm asking an unfair question. He looks at each CD, then points silently to my right hand. I return *Relaxin'* to the racks, pay for the other, and slip out the door, leaving them to argue over which of the Jones brothers--Thad, Hank, or Elvin--was better.

I want to stick around. Not only because I have an opinion on the matter (Elvin), but also because sticking around would keep me from going home.

I climb up the stairs, into the night, and walk towards the bus stop.

The clerk's suggestion was right on, and the album is making its second spin in the CD player while I'm cooking dinner at home. The noodles are boiling in the pot I've had since college, a little dented but still usable, which is all I can ask for right now.
I look for a wooden spoon to stir them with, but can't find one. Making a mental note to buy some wooden spoons, I grab a chopstick and stir them with that. I'm chopping vegetables with my one sharp knife when, over Hank Mobley's solo, I hear the door unlock.

I poke my head around the corner and look into the living room.

"Hey, how are you?"

"Fine," she says, not looking at me, tossing her hat on the couch and shrugging off her coat. "You?"

Don't go, I think. Don't go.

"OK," I say. "I'm making noodles and vegetables for dinner. You want some?"

"No," she says, heading into the bedroom (her bedroom, technically, since I now sleep on the pullout couch). "I'm going out tonight."

Those among you who are jealous types will understand the gravity of "going out." Once, she used to go (and frequently, we used to go) to movies, plays, dinner with friends, poetry readings, cups of coffee with other people in her graduate program. Now, she goes out. And "out," I can only assume, is out with him, to some plush hotel room where they will have sweaty, athletic sex for hours on end, driving each other to the edge of ecstasy and over again and again until they collapse with sheer exhaustion.

I can only assume, but if the sex they're actually having is half as good as the sex they're having in my head, then she's got it made.

I grip my stirring chopstick a little more tightly in my hand.

"You sure you don't want any?" Don't go.

She comes back out of her bedroom, wearing a different shirt.
“No, I’m late already.” And with that, she puts her hat and coat back on, and disappears out the door. I drain the noodles, toss them with the vegetables, pour a glass of water, and, after moving some of her boxes of kitchen supplies off the table (her table), I eat quickly and quietly, the CD silent in the player.

I’m looking at furniture websites a few days later when one of my bosses approaches me.

“Would you mind doing a ratings report for KFC for the third quarter? They say we’re underdelivering, but I think once we skew it for the demographic, we should come out ahead.”

This is the beauty of working in a television station’s sales department; for the two hours that it will take me to copy the invoices, transfer the times the commercials ran into a computer spreadsheet, and coordinate the ratings for the shows during which the commercials ran, I don’t have to think about anything—about how she’s leaving me, about how she’s already moved on. I don’t have to think about love, or the end of love, or even what I’m going to eat for lunch. All I have to do is punch numbers into a computer.

The numbers are pretty small, too; my station is ranked third out of five in the Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan area, and the sales meeting every Tuesday morning is filled with exhortations to bring the sales numbers up, to increase share, to synergize, and a lot of other buzzwords. I’m glad that I’m just an assistant and don’t actually have to do any of those things; instead, I just punch numbers, write letters, and pick up the advertisements from ad agencies and production companies.

I make a lot of money doing this; more than I deserve to make, anyway.
Once, Mark asked the group what we thought would happen if one of us cried during the session. Everyone shifted in his seat, and looked around the room, waiting for someone else to answer. Finally, tired of the silence, I spoke.

"I like to think I’d be ok with it," I said. "If it happens, it happens, and we’d probably be a little uncomfortable, but I don’t think we’d shun that person, or even alienate him."

It was easy for me to say this because I know that I will never cry here, or anywhere, really. I haven’t cried in about ten years, since my grandfather died unexpectedly. I don’t know why I don’t cry; I just don’t.

Am I capable of feeling sad? Sure. Do I get depressed? You bet. Is her moving out the worst thing that’s happened to me in my adult life? Absolutely. And yet not a single tear has fallen from my eyes this whole time, and not by choice. Believe me, I could use the release.

That night, I sit on the couch, reading the classified ads. Although my job makes it possible for me to keep the apartment, staying here feels like living in Pompeii, like archeologists will someday open the door, look at me, and say, “Look, you can see how unexpected this was. He was sitting there, reading the paper, and his heart just broke in half.”

So maybe I should get a new place before that happens.

I’m looking at an ad for a one bedroom in the Ballard neighborhood when she comes in from the other room with a stack of papers. She drops them next to me and says, “Toss these in recycling, will you?”
She turns around and heads back into the other room to continue packing. I put down my paper and pick up the top sheet off a stack of what look to be student essays from her teaching job at the university. She teaches freshman composition at the University of Washington, where she’s working on her PhD in literature. It’s also where she met him. Not that I think that every time I see the UW logo or anything.

The essay doesn’t make any sense at first; it’s full of odd shifts in verb tense and misspellings. Soon enough, though, I’m able to piece out what looks to be an international (Korean, guessing from the name) student’s essay on community.

“Positively, the belief of superstitions has been weakened,” he writes. “However, the mind of love and worry about each other is thought as a beautiful thing.”

His paper’s actually pretty good, but he’s talking mostly about the wrong things; well, not so much the wrong things as not talking about the right things. He’s leaving it up to me to figure out, and I hate him for that. I loved her, I worried about her, and she’s still leaving me. I wish I could think of that as a beautiful thing, but it’s not working today.

When I go into work the next morning, everyone’s standing in front of the bank of televisions; all the stations are showing shots of downtown. Large groups of people are running around: some carry posters, others wear bandannas, and I catch a glimpse of a person in what looks like a turtle costume.

“What’s going on?” I ask, to no one in particular.

“WTO got ugly really fast,” says one of the managers. “Protesters are smashing windows, cops are tear gassing. It looks pretty nasty.”

One of the account executives comes in and looks at the screens.
“Goddammit, not again,” she yells. “I hate breaking news! None of my spots run. Do you know how much money I lost when those kids shot up their high school?”

I look over at her, then back to the televisions. All day long, the news cameras run around Seattle, filming the same confrontations over and over.

The next morning is a repeat of the first, right down to me walking in and everyone standing around the televisions.

“Again?” I ask.

“Yep,” says the manager. We all go to our desks and try to ignore what’s going on ten blocks from us, calling advertisers and assuring them that their commercials will run as soon as the World Trade Organization’s meeting ends and the anti-globalism protesters go home. Bonuses are promised, patience pleaded for.

After lunch, I get a call from the Traffic Department.

“Can you go down to Piranha Productions and pick up a tape?”

“Uh, sure,” I say. “Are they even open?” Piranha is on the edge of downtown, close to the Starbucks that was looted yesterday.

“I just called them, and they’ll be there until 2:30.”

“I should probably go now then,” I say, and hang up the phone. I grab my coat off my hanger.

“I’m going to go pick up a video,” I announce to the office, and push out the doors.

From behind sunglasses that he doesn’t need for the cloudy December day, the policeman looks at me. I point down Fifth Avenue and hold up a business card.
“I need to reach Piranha Productions, and it’s two blocks that way,” I say. He flips over my card, looks at the back—there’s nothing on it—and turns it over again.

He steps out of the way, the bundle of plastic riot cuffs swinging on his belt. “Go ahead,” he says, and I push past the wooden barrier, into the restricted zone.

My heart’s pounding; I feel like I’ve gotten away with something, even if I have a legitimate reason for going to Piranha Productions. After the protesters managed to shut down the World Trade Organization meetings yesterday, the mayor has taken a couple of steps, most of which are probably illegal, to insure that today’s meetings run smoothly. He’s called in the National Guard, banned gas masks in the city limits, and declared most of downtown Seattle a Protest-Free Zone.

I walk the two blocks to Piranha; once I squeeze past the barely-open metal grating outside the door, the front desk receptionist nervously hands me the videotape I’ve been sent to pick up.

“What’s it been like today?” I ask.

“Weird,” she says. “I’ll see police moving around, then a few protesters. Luckily we’re on the edge of where anything’s happening, so it’s been pretty quiet. I’ll be glad when it’s over.”

She glances nervously out the door. “How’s it going at the station?”

“We changed to Breaking News until 9 last night and went right back to it at 8 this morning. None of the commercials are running and the account executives are freaking out about it.”

She nods her head. Social protest was good for the news department, but murder on sales.
I leave Piranha and stand for a bit outside the doors, looking down Fifth. I can hear vague crowd noises off in the distance.

I try to remember what time it is. If I’d left the station ten minutes ago, then I can probably explore downtown a little before I have to return.

What the hell, I think. I’m only a few blocks away from where it went down yesterday; if I don’t go check it out, I’ll kick myself for the rest of my life.

I turn left and head into downtown.

The streets are littered with debris: signs, bits of paper, rubber shot. A shoe sits upside down in the gutter of Third Avenue; its mate sits on the sidewalk across the street, pinning down a “No WTO” flier that flaps in the breeze.

Someone the day before had apparently climbed up a light pole and spray painted “Free Mumia” on the front of the Gap; a little further down the block, I can see a pile of newspaper boxes and dumpsters that had been set on fire; a bit of smoke curls up from it.

I can only see three people from where I am. Two protesters run south across Pine to catch up with their group. A young boy, maybe in high school, busies himself picking up black cylinders off the street.

“Hey,” I say. “What are those?” He throws one to me, and I turn it over, reading the side.

“No. 28A ‘Stinger’ 37/38 MM (1.5 In.) Caliber,” it reads. “To be used only by law enforcement and corrections personnel trained in riot control tactics.” I hold it to my nose; it smells like fireworks.

I look at the kid. “Can I keep this?” I ask.
"Sure," he says, and gestures at the street, where maybe two dozen are rolling around.

I leave the kid, pocket my shell, and keep walking around downtown. I don't know where the anti-WTO protesters are, and I haven't seen a single cop since I passed the blockade several streets behind me. I turn down Second Avenue and see a large group of people where it intersects with Pike Street.

When I first moved here with her, over a year ago, both of us fresh out of school, we walked down here one night, passing all the strip clubs and drunks, protected by our naivety, down Pike, the street I stand on now, until we reached the farmer's market. Threading our way through the empty day stalls, we found our way to the waterfront, to Elliott Bay, where we held each other and kissed and laughed in amazement at the great adventure we'd started together.

At the north edge of the intersection I stop to look around. To the east stand fifteen or so cops in full riot gear, aiming rifles and large-barrelled weapons at something across the street from them. I look to the west and about forty protesters stand, many with bandanas over their mouths, a few flashing the peace sign, a few holding up posters. I look straight ahead, and have just enough time to think hey, I'm near the symphony hall when the police fire six shots in rapid succession into the crowd, trails of tear gas arcing over the intersection.

The protesters try to stand their ground, but the clouds grow over them, and they begin to run away. I watch them scatter, until the only thing left in the middle of the street is a pair of people on their knees, holding each other like lovers, clutching each other to their chest, waiting for the smoke to pass.

A breeze blows in from the bay and pushes the gas towards me. I try to clap my hands over my face, but I can smell fireworks. I turn to get away and almost bump into a
policeman; for a moment I can see his eyes through the plastic of his mask, but then my own eyes blur and I can’t see anything anymore.

I turn and run. About a block, maybe two, from the scene, I realize that I’m crying, that tears are pouring out of my eyes like a stopper’s been pulled from a sink. I stop running and sit down in a doorway. Burying my face in my hands, I cry, letting go, finally and totally, for a long time, the sounds of the riot muffled by my own sobs.
Ariel and the Crow

Crows, great black birds, surround me these days. I walk down the street and they swoop past me, fast enough to feel their wake on the back of my neck. Beaks clip my ears, feet draw blood from my shoulder. At night I wake up and they sit on my chest, black eyes regarding me while my cat sleeps feet away. I did not choose this; they chose me.

Monday morning, Memorial Day. It’s not raining, but the clouds say it will in an hour. After a late night of packing and few hours of sleep, we’re loading up a U-Haul truck to move Ariel’s things to her new place in North Seattle. It’s tiring work; we’re both fatigued, and running on empty, so when she sits her small body on the windowsill and suggests that we pause for breakfast, I quickly agree.

About her: she’s amazing, honestly. I’d spent the previous year fumbling around the dating world, unsure of myself and everything else around me. I had been out with a few other women, but those dates were uncomfortable exercises, going through the motions. But on my first date with Ariel, we each recognized something in each other--maybe a quality of kindness that hadn’t been affected by the irony that seemed to permeate all actions those days. She is the first woman I’ve felt normal around for a long time; I’m in my own skin with her. We have not been together long--maybe two weeks--and we will not be together much longer, since I’m leaving the state for school in two months. But we’re together now, in the car, on the way to breakfast.
She’s hungrier than me, but as we pull into the International House of Pancake’s parking lot, her head turns slowly, blue eyes fixing on a point. She’s seen something. As we get out of the car, her eyes meet mine, and I can see concern in them.

“There’s a crow back there,” she says. “I think it’s hurt.”

I turn around and there is a crow, a squat black bird, hobbling around the lot. She approaches it slowly, kneels down next to it, and the bird still just sits there. She looks over her shoulder at me.

“It is hurt. Umm...we have to help.” Standing, turning, heading inside, she offers an apology: “I’m sorry. I have to do this.”

And then we’re in the restaurant.

“Two?” the waiter says, reaching for menus.

“Well, in a little bit,” she says, smiling. “There’s a hurt bird in your parking lot. Do you have a box and some rubber gloves?”

The waiter gives her an odd look; Ariel smiles again, adding a “please,” and the waiter disappears into the kitchen. Marveling at her ability to charm, I put my hand on her back, and she looks at me. She’s about to say something--I think it’s another apology--when the waiter returns with the box and some gloves.

She gives me instructions as she pulls on the gloves: “I’ll pick him up and put him in the box, and hold him down. All you have to do is close the box.”

I nod.

The crow has shuffled over to the edge of the lot, but as we get next to him, he hops into the street. A car approaches, about 300 feet away. Ariel turns, grabs me with both arms,
and buries her face into my chest. I shut my eyes and wait for the crunch. I hear the car pass; nothing.

We try again, but the crow hops a little further into the street, and another car is coming. Same thing happens: she turns and grabs, I shut and wait, and once again, the crow is still standing there, unruffled.

The road is clear, so we move towards the crow.

“Look at its eyes,” Ariel says. “They’re bloody; he probably got clipped by a car or something.”

I put the box on the asphalt, next to the bird. Ariel readies herself.

“OK,” she says, to herself and to me. She pauses, almost imperceptibly, then closes her hands around the bird’s body; it doesn’t struggle. She carefully places it in the box, and as she pulls her hands away, I close the lid, sealing the crow in the darkness.

American Crows (*corvus brachyrhynchos*) practice a habit that ornithologists refer to as “anting,” in which they scoop up ants with their beaks and insert the insects into their wings, or, alternately, simply let the ants crawl into their feathers as they lie on the ground. While they have given the custom a name, ornithologists are still divided on the ultimate purpose of anting. Some argue it acts as a relief for skin irritation; others claim that it serves to control feather mites.

Whatever its purpose is, anting by wild American Crows is a rarely seen phenomenon; Lawrence Kilham, in his book *The American Crow and the Common Raven*, finds only one other observation in the field in addition to his own, which occurred one early September morning:
I saw two crows watching a third writhing on the ground as if injured. The latter, with tail and body flat on the grass, was constantly moving as if trying to get close to the ground. It then stood up to poke items too small for me to see into the underfeathers of its wings. The crow performed four or five rounds of alternately flattening against the earth and standing up in the next three minutes. It then walked away as if nothing had happened.

The things we do for relief, to make things easier on ourselves, usually involve gyrations and maneuvers of incredible complexity, as though we were all trapeze artists trying to return to the stability of the platform. Crows flop and wriggle on the ground possibly to relieve the pain they feel, to bring in someone else to take away the irritation, but they have to do it constantly to experience any regular relief.

Like the crows, I’d tried in the previous year to relieve my loneliness by involving others, but the itch always returned, without fail, even worse than before them. Not until I stopped itching, stopped writhing on the ground, did I even begin to stop hurting. Not until I let my pain, like an illness, run its course through my body, did I ever begin to understand it.

The box on Ariel’s lap doesn’t shake more than once on the way to the shelter, although she does ask me to take the corners easy. We don’t talk much; I fill some space with a crow story, but it trails off into the air. The first few drops, small ones, hit the windshield.

Not too far from the shelter, at a stoplight, she shifts in her seat, the box still on her lap. I turn to meet her. There’s a pause; her face is set, lips pressed together in a thin line.

“Are you this good?” she says. Pause. “Are you playing boy games?”
I want to blink. I want to shut my eyes, turn my head, stop time so I can think of something to say that says everything. I want to tell her that I am good, that I'm not messing around with her, that even after ten days with her I can already tell that I’m falling for her.

But that answer won’t work now. Because I have done bad things in the past. Because she’s the first woman I’ve wanted to be with in a year. Because the last time ended so badly, and it took months before I even felt like I could walk again. I just can’t be sure of how to do this. I don’t know if I am good; only that I want to be.

Taking a breath, I give her the truth.

"I think so. I’d do this whether I’d just met you or I’d known you seven years."

She turns her head, nodding slightly.

"OK," she says. The light goes green. The bird in the box doesn’t move as we round the corner.

While most American Crows tend to migrate south for the winter, Bernd Heinrich has observed that crows remaining in the north tend to be pairs, adult birds “who are better able to feed themselves here than the younger birds that are forced to migrate."

Before we’d met each other, both Ariel and I had experienced that first great love that youth knows, that love that feels like the new discovery of every young couple. And we’d each been left by that person who loved us, and each of us had taken a long time to climb out of the depths that we’d fallen into. Then, finally, out of the dark lands, we’d understood that we could be alone, and we’d learned to survive--maybe even thrive--that way.

I had forced myself to go out to restaurants and ask for a table for one, not matter how awkward it sounded to my ears, and eventually I took pleasure in announcing that yes, I
would like to see the dessert cart. I'd started taking long walks through my neighborhood, up to the top of Queen Anne Hill and the coffeeshops up there, and back down to my apartment, stopping to watch boats moving across Elliott Bay and the sun dipping behind the Olympic Mountains. I'd found joy in going to movies alone, leg thrown over the seat in front of me, not sharing my box of Dots with anyone.

Then I'd found Ariel, and like the crows that stay behind in winter, we'd discovered that we did well together. But unlike those crows, we knew that one of us would fly off one day. We always understood that our relationship was simply what it was: a short flight, not a cross-country migration. We never discussed her moving with me, or maintaining a long distance relationship, and perhaps partially because of that, we had the freedom to be together. No pressure to "make it work," just to be together.

A sign on the wall informs me that "Diseases Spread Easily Between Cats and Humans--Please No Petting," but the cats ask me to anyway. Each and every one of them yowls plaintively for contact; some even reach out from their cage, tiny paws slowly waving through the air as though conjuring keys for their locks.

And I can't help a one of them, only watch, hands in pockets, rocking back and forth, floating in a sea of meows.

At least I'm here; technically, I shouldn't even be in the shelter today, but as one of the head volunteers, Ariel's got access. I still can't go to the dying room, though; some things must remain a mystery to the outside.

So while I stand, still hungry, still slowly falling in love, unaware of death but moving towards it even more slowly, surrounded by one hundred cats who aren't long for
this world either, a veterinary technician fills a needle with a blue liquid and injects a single bloody-eyed black bird. The bird will die in under half an hour. The cats have somewhat longer; I will outlast them all, but my time will run out, too.

The door to the back swings open and Ariel walks out, eyes focused and clear.

“The poor crow,” she says. I opened the box and it just fell out, wings spread. It barely moved.”

She looks over to the cats, then back to me. Sighing, she says, “I don’t know why these animals pick me.”

“Because they know you’ll take care of them?” I ask. It’s more a guess than a compliment.

“Yeah. I suppose.” She takes my hand, and we leave the cats to each other.

Silently, we exit the building and cross the parking lot. The rain is still holding off, but the clouds have grown larger. In the car, Ariel stares straight ahead; I’m about to put the keys in the ignition, but stop just short. I look at her, anticipating something, a monumental statement on the nature of life and death, an aphorism, a tenet, a universal truth about the place of birds and humans and everything that lives and dies, starts and ends on this planet.

Poised on the edge of epiphany, Ariel burps. She turns and says, “Let’s get some breakfast.”

In 1923, C. W. Townsend observed a crow caught in a piece of string from which it could not extricate itself. Another crow flew close to it, cawing loudly. When Townsend returned an hour later, he found the crow still tangled in the string and a second crow dead at the base of the tree. A necropsy revealed no injuries, external or internal.
Crows just die. And relationships just die as well, from neglect or abuse, from malnutrition or overfeeding, and sometimes they just end for reasons beyond control. From the moment Ariel and I met, we always knew that I was leaving, that we’d never spend the holidays together, that we’d never have an anniversary. But we went ahead anyway, just because love--and knowing that we could still love--was worth the dying that we knew would come, as inevitable as the rain that poured down, finally, while we ate breakfast.
The Point

A cool breeze--maybe the last of the day--follows me in through the open doors of the State Gymnasium on the Iowa State University campus. A pickup game of basketball battles at the far end of the gym, and I can barely make out the squeak of their shoes. State Gym is an unloved building, unused except by casual schoolyard heroes who prefer the solitude of an older building to the bustle of the Lied Recreation Center on the other side of campus. Walk into State Gym, and the only things you'll stand a decent chance of spotting are a few friends playing a pickup game, a lone shooter working on his jump shot, or a member of the ISU women's team giving lessons to some local girls.

But the long bag I carry in on a hot Wednesday morning in June doesn't have any room for orange basketballs, and it's been a long time since my jump shot could be helped by instruction or practice. Instead, I carry a wardrobe in my bag: pants, socks, jacket, glove, undershirt, and, to cap it off, a pair of size 10 1/2 Adidas, at $160 the most expensive shoes I've ever bought in my life, asymmetrical shoes that provide speed for my left foot and power for my right. I love these shoes.

Underneath this costuming lie the tools of my sport; a blue cord that will snake from my left wrist up my sleeve, down my side, and out the bottom of my jacket, connecting to a box. The end that dangles out my wrist will connect to a piece of metal about a meter long at a grip covered by a metal guard, out from which extends a triangular blade ending in a metal plunger tip. When both I and my opponent are hooked up, through our body cords, to the right machine, and I touch the tip of my blade to anywhere on his body with at least 750 grams of pressure, I will score a point.
Some people may prefer the other weapons of fencing—the grace and classicism of foil, the speed and brutality of saber—but I have chosen the épée for my battling. The other weapons have limited target areas, usually restricting attacks to above the waist, or just the trunk of the body. Spectators new to watching fencing find themselves confused about the right-of-way laws of foil and saber; trying to determine which fencer started his or her attack first can be a maddening proposition, especially at the advanced levels. But épée lacks such arbitration; a hit is a hit, no matter where it lands or who starts first, and if both fencers hit within 1/20 of a second of each other, both score. For me, épée is the simplest, purest form of fencing: two weapons, fourteen meters of space, my opponent, and me. Everything else is incidental.

Even at 8:30 in the morning, State Gym already feels hot. A slow breeze blows in from the door as Randy, my training partner and the only other épéeist of any experience in the ISU Fencing Club, walks in, and drops his bag, even more bulging and full of equipment than mine. He takes off his cap and wipes his brow as I greet him.

“I’m going to run a few laps,” I say.

The track at State Gym banks on the curves, like a racetrack, and in my slow jog, I pick up only enough speed to rise up a little. I look down into the gym, and can see Randy stretching on the radiator pipes.

I sigh as my feet slap against the track’s surface, wishing that I felt more confident about the upcoming Iowa Games tournament, the event determining the best fencers in Iowa. While I know that I’m one of the best épéeists in the state thanks to the small number of them, I’ve taken the opportunity that this training has provided to disassemble my entire
game and retune it, everything, from the way I lunge at an opponent, to the position of my feet, to the way I hold the weapon in my hand. I’m reminded of a time in college when my friend Trey and I found a television set in an alley; we took it back to his apartment and went at it with screwdriver and pliers, until we had a pile of parts on his floor. The difference this time is that I have to put it all back together, and I have to put it back together soon, since the Iowa Games are only a few days away.

As I come back down the stairs, past the now-shut locker room door, Randy looks up at me and says only, “Footwork?”

“Definitely,” I reply. Randy & I believe in footwork--exercises designed to improve the way the fencer moves along the fourteen-meter strip--the way other athletes believe in pre-game rituals or creatine supplements. The more I do, the better I feel, and Randy and I do ungodly amounts of it on these training days.

The basic stance in fencing depends on which hand you fence with; I’m left-handed, so my left foot points straight ahead, while my right foot sits back at a ninety degree angle, as I squat slightly. To move forward, I lift my left foot and push forward with my right, the feet never touching, never crossing. To go backwards, I reverse the foot movements: back foot lifts, front foot pushes.

We start our footwork with these basic movements, up and down the entire length of the gym, a regulation basketball court with some extra space at each end. We follow these with series of steps designed to change speed on our opponents, or to stop their momentum, or to make the distance between their bodies and our weapons vanish suddenly. We strive to make these perfect; when we reach the strip, we hope these movements will come instinctually, as natural as breathing.
We finish with footwork we call “Russians,” taught to us by our teammate Cosmo. One advance forward; squat all the way down to the floor, keeping the body straight; return to the stance. One is fairly easy; at two, you feel a slight burn in your quadriceps. By the third, the water fountain at the other end of the gym looks like it might be on Mars. When we finally reach the end of the gym, I mop my forehead with my already-soaked t-shirt.

I sweat so freely during these training sessions that when my shirt dries out at home, several white streaks of salt are visible. Greedily, I drink water while my thighs burn. Sometimes I wonder why I do this, but I know the answer: I enjoy the pain.

I started fencing three years ago, while living in Seattle in an apartment that I shared with a woman who at one point had been my girlfriend, but had recently informed me that she needed some time to figure things out, that she needed to consider the future of us. I took a spot on the couch to sleep, and each night, when she closed the door to the bedroom, I hated what had happened to me, hated the powerlessness I felt, hated the ineffectuality of the love I had for her. I felt my name on some endangered list, waiting for the wrecking ball to swing through my life at any moment.

One day, waiting for the bus, a flier caught my eye, reading “Learn to Fence!” Entertaining childhood fantasies of swashbucklers, I copied the phone number onto the back of a business card. One phone call later, I stood with a group of beginners while a jovial bearded man taught us how to stand correctly.

Most problem gamblers share a common first bet, that first taste of winning that drives them to go for more. My left-handedness gave me a natural advantage, and soon enough I was decimating my classmates. I loved the skills I picked up quickly: parrying,
counterattacking, even the awkward jump lunge. But most of all, I loved the control I felt over my body; for four hours a week, I could affect the way I felt, push myself as hard as I wanted, give myself as much pain as I could handle, and gladly come back for more of it, muscles screaming as I used them in ways they had never felt before. The pain was never so masochistic as it was exploratory, a discovery that I could do something with what I had always believed to be my clumsy self. In my childhood, I'd always been the weakling, beat up in the locker room, unable to run a lap before wheezing. There, I felt my mind and my body working together, completely in control, if only for a short time.

Randy pulls on his mask, his glasses disappearing behind the metal mesh. “What do you want to work on?” he asks, voice muffled slightly.

“Wrist hits,” I say, putting on my own mask, the padding already moist. “Inside, then outside. Disengaging around the blade.”

He nods, and drops into an en garde pose. He reveals the inside of his wrist, previously hidden behind the blade’s guard. I extend my arm, turning my wrist slightly, and hear the point press into his glove with a satisfying pock. He swings his weapon back to the inside; I drop my point in a small U-shape around his blade, and as my blade comes back up, the outside of his wrist meets the point. Pock.

We move up and down the gymnasium in this fashion, tweaking the game I’m putting back together, screwing bits back in, tossing worn-out pieces. We adjust my arm, dropping my wrist to hide target area. We adjust the way I stand, keeping just within the vulnerable range, realizing that we have to risk being hit if we want to hit. The mental pile of parts I saw earlier grows smaller and smaller.
But it's easy to fall into a routine, and I begin to realize that I'm reacting more to Randy's rhythm—step, step, swing, *pock*, step, step, swing, *pock*—than to his attack. A rut is the last thing I want to get into while fencing, because once an opponent figures out my pattern, I'm hit. Randy's realized this as well, and he changes up his speed, slowing down his attack. My point bounces off the guard of his weapon with an echoing *clang*.

"Wait for it," he says from behind his mask. I can't see his face, but his voice is calm, clear, steady. He rarely gets upset or frustrated during these training sessions, no matter how many times he might miss the target, or how weak his arm might feel after a half hour of elbow hits. For Randy, there's little in the State Gym but him, me, and our games. And those things can always be improved, can always be worked on in the rising heat of the gym, hours and hours spent pushing harder, until we're blinded by the sweat running into our eyes and our hands can't hold the weapons any longer.

In the most recent James Bond movie, Bond and the main villain spar in a London fencing salle in what starts as a friendly match, but quickly degenerates into a full-fledged swashbuckling swordfight, up and down stairs, smashing furniture and windows. In the theater, I had perked up in my seat when the scene changed to the fencing salle, but any enthusiasm I had for the movie drained away when Madonna made a cameo appearance as a fencing instructor, and proceeded to violate every safety rule in fencing, starting with (and especially) "Never point a weapon at someone not wearing a mask."

Bond and the villain pick up *épées* and drop into fairly decent *en garde* positions; then, at the director's "fence," they attack each other. Watching the movie, I became so embarrassed for the inaccuracy of what I saw that I slumped down in my chair, hoping that
no one in the theater might recognize me as a fencer and yell at me. “Hey, you know how this is supposed to be! Why didn’t you stop this?”

Between my fingers, which I held over my eyes as though I was six years old again and watching a horror movie in the basement, I watched as Bond lunges forward awkwardly and plants the point directly in his opponent’s chest. And I thought, no, no, always the wrist or the arm, never the heart. You never go right for the heart.

In some ways, I think épée is the perfect weapon for the emotionally distant; foil and saber are both given to dramatic flourishes, weapons parrying off each other, lightning-fast slashes that leave the other fencer demoralized. But the best épée touches aren’t even felt by the recipient. Several times, I’ve scored a touch from what seems an impossible distance, and watched my opponent look down at his sleeve, as though the touch might be marked in red to confirm its existence. Épée’s not a weapon that needs to yell, or make itself known to everyone. It’s the one that sits in the back of its class and keeps a low profile, but ends up acing every pop quiz.

Given the choice, any skilled épéeist will go for the wrist, or the arm, or the knee, or the foot, or even the head. But the heart? The heart’s so far away from the point that they might as well try to hit their foe on the back. Both are possible, but both are last resorts for my game, hard to attempt and even harder to land.

If I try to score a touch on the heart directly, all my opponent has to do is simply parry my blade away, and respond with a riposte on me. One of my own favorite moves is to hang just outside of my opponent’s reach, and lure him or her into attacking. Once he or she does, missing me by a inch (and in fencing, an inch is a mile), the arm floats out in front of me like a buffet line, waiting for me to grab a plate and start choosing.
I go for the heart, though, only when the other attacks have failed, or when I've feigned an attack on another part in order to expose the heart. I avoid it. Going for the heart is clumsy, awkward, a beginner's mistake, a movie error.

This applies as much in life as in fencing.

A basketball rolls over to me while I'm waiting for Randy to finish at the water fountain, and picking it up with my gloved hand, I toss it back to the man in a Vince Carter jersey, who gives me an odd look as he goes back to practicing his free throws.

We get these looks a lot whenever other people are in the gym. For them, fencing exists only in James Bond movies and swashbuckler epics, and two sweaty guys in soaked-through t-shirts and disproportionately sized masks don't match their conceptions. Randy is always able to ignore their looks, but I'm more sensitive to them; part of being picked on in school, I suppose.

Randy moves away from the fountain and I drink my fill, greedily replacing the water I have lost in these hours. Walking back to our gear, I can feel the sun hitting the windows of the gym at a more oppressive angle, and the temperature seems to rise with every step I take, as though I released the heat from the wood floor simply by stepping on it.

We're done for the day--soon the heat will be too much for anyone to hang around in the State Gym--and as we pack up, tucking our laces into our shoes and wiping the sweat from our weapons so they don't rust, we run down the competition at the Iowa Games, only two weeks away.
“Des Moines will be there,” Randy says, referring to the Des Moines Fencing Club, the biggest club in the state. “So that means Steve, and Mike, and Jim. But you’ve beaten Steve and Jim before, and I know you’re good enough to beat Mike."

I wish I shared his confidence in me. At my first Iowa tournament, a month after I moved away from Seattle, the relationship that drove me to fencing long over, Mike destroyed me and left me flailing around like a first-year fencer. I haven’t fenced him since, but the memory of his attacks are what drove me to start training as seriously as I am now.

“Sioux City will be there, but Sioux City is just Doug. Doug might be something to worry about,” Randy says, “but you can beat him, too. Gold and silver.”

“Gold and silver,” I repeat. This is our goal for the Iowa Games--the first and second places. We never talk about who’s getting which one, but we both want to win badly.

Hoisting our bags to our shoulders, we walk out to the parking lot. Up to the moment he drops me off at my building, Randy and I talk about fencing. I never mention anything else I’m doing--summer school, writing, getting ready to move--and he never says what he does when he’s not fencing. In fact, I’m not sure that Randy does anything but fence, and it’s possible that he thinks the same about me. We exist to each other as fencers only; you could call us friends, but there’s little to no emotional reliance, unless we’re at a tournament. I wouldn’t call Randy to talk about relationship troubles or plans for the future, but if I was on the strip, down by two points, and on the verge of being eliminated from the brackets, I wouldn’t want anyone else by my side.

Although the last recorded fatality in regulated fencing occurred in 1982, when the broken blade of an opponent speared through a fencer’s mask and into his brain, killing him
on the spot, fencing still has its share of everyday pain. Despite the heavy white jackets, I’ve come home from many tournaments, peeled off my clothes, and watched a series of tiny round bruises raise up on my chest like some connect-the-dots of what I did wrong in my matches. I have a scar on my left bicep, a small white triangle, that an old teammate gave me while practicing one day; it’s a handy reminder to extend my arm before I attack.

I actually have a photo of the worst bruise I ever received in fencing, a bruise so atrociously awful that it made my friend Liza gag, and then run upstairs to fetch her camera. In the photo, I am pulling my shirt sleeve up to reveal the bruise; a boat passes behind me on its way to Lake Washington. The bruise is four, maybe five square inches big, about halfway between my elbow and my shoulder. It’s so deep that it’s almost black; only around the very edges is there any sign of the yellowing that precedes healing. At points, the bruise is oddly crosshatched, as though the impact of the épée was so incredible that it implanted the weave of my fencing jacket into my skin, the way victims of the atomic bomb in Japan had the patterns of the clothes they wore burned onto them.

For the time it took to heal and vanish—a lengthy time, thanks to its size—I was inordinately proud of this bruise, showing it off to almost all my friends, stripping down at work to make my co-workers squirm and scream in shock. Something else, though, beyond a childish desire to gross out people, made me look at the bruise at home in the mirror, when I was by myself. I’d look at it, and marvel that I’d taken a hit that hard without faltering.

It was spring, and I’d made it through the winter, a dark winter even by Seattle standards and the first winter I’d spent without the girl I’d moved to Seattle to be with. I had moved into a studio apartment in another neighborhood, with concrete walls that grew
mildew when it rained. I'd sprawl out on my bed, staring at the black stain creeping across the ceiling, and go out only to work and to fence.

And I'd made it. I'd walked through the darkest time I'd known and come out into the springtime. I wore that bruise for as long as I could, like a badge upon my arm that announced to the world just how much pain I could take and still keep going. I was a survivor, I was resilient--hell, with that bruise, I was well-nigh indestructible.

A week after our last training day, on the first Saturday in July, I find myself trading in the ancient creakiness of State Gym for the lush facilities of the Lied Recreation Center, the site of the Iowa Games. A recent thunderstorm has cooled the temperature away from the nightmare of heat and humidity that it usually is in the summer months, and a cool breeze blows across the floor of the rec from the open doors that I can see through my mask.

I have waded through the muck of pain all day long and fought it. I have beaten every opponent I have faced, but not without taking my share: a scratch on the arm from a girl who slid the tip of her blade up my jacket sleeve as I stepped forward, a little too close; a mark on my thigh from a a boy flailing around as I chased him down the strip; an ache in my shoulder where an older man hit the top of my collarbone. Tomorrow morning, I'll find brilliant reds, rich purples, and sickly deep yellows on my body; today, I push aside the pain. It's nothing, in comparision, I think, the image of the girl coming up in front of me for just long enough to make my heart sink an inch.

However, I need to focus on the opponent in front of me, because right now, I'm two points away from getting eliminated from the tournament. This is the semifinal match, to determine who'll move on to the gold medal bout, and the score is tied at 13-13.
I could really use Randy at my side at this point; the trouble is that Randy is the other fencer on the strip.

We both fenced well in the earlier matches, but the peculiarities of the brackets for the direct elimination bouts have resulted in us fencing in the bronze medal round instead of the gold medal round. Only one of us will get to go for the gold medal, the thing we’d dreamed after during a dozen mornings in the State Gym, the thing we’d breathed in along with the humid air. And we’re both two points away from going for it.

I want this badly, enough that I can push past the ache in my hand and the burn in my legs to keep fencing four hours after the tournament started, but Randy is able to find a spot on my arm sticking out just enough. The score advances for him, and suddenly he is one point away from winning, and I am one point away from packing up my things.

Not that I would be dissatisfied with a bronze. I have had a remarkable day today, marveling behind the mask at my retooled game operating at full strength. I have beaten every fencer who has come my way up to this point, including my old worry Mike Aron, who simply pulled off his mask and nodded at me after I’d beaten him in an early match.

But I want this gold medal, can picture it hanging around my neck, can feel the ribbon on my skin. I buckle down, center myself, push everything outside, and focus only on Randy in front of me. The referee says “fence,” and we advance towards each other, two tired training partners trying to keep it together for just a few more points.

The tips of our weapons clang loudly off each other’s bells as we pick around the wrists, trying to find an open spot. I try for his inside wrist, then circle around to the outside, but Randy recognizes what I’m aiming for, and my point brushes harmlessly again metal. Backing up from each other, we regroup our thoughts, and come back forward.
After a few exploratory prods, Randy breaks forward in a running charge called a fleche. Anticipating this, I drop back, parry his blade, and plant the point of my weapon in his shoulder. All of this takes place in about half a second, and I raise my arm in celebration at my tying the score.

Then I see the scoring box. The wrong light is on for me to have scored. In the millisecond before I parried his blade, Randy has managed to catch the very edge of my jacket with just enough pressure to score.

Sometimes you can’t even feel heartbreak when it happens to you.

Still, though, no hard feelings, and when Randy, realizing his victory, grabs me in an odd embrace with his free arm, I slap his back hard and loud enough for only him to hear over the spectators’ applause, say “It’s all yours now. Win it.”

And win it he does, easily defeating Jim from the Des Moines club. As we stand on the side of the strip, waiting for the tournament organizers to bring over the coaster-sized medals we’ve won, Randy leans over to me and says, “Really, our match was the gold medal one. Toughest bout I had all day.”

I smile broadly. A few minutes later, as the tournament director slips the gold medal over Randy’s head, I turn the abnormally large bronze disk over in my hand, looking at the slight reflection in its shine. Soon enough, it will join the other medals I’ve won fencing, another testament to my ability to take pain, another badge proving my ability to last, the latest reminder I have of who I am and what I’ve survived.
Waiting for It

I’ve got a few minutes before I need to head over to Hannah’s apartment, so I press the large button on the remote, and the television makes a pop sound as it comes to life. The soft music of the Weather Channel plays; it’s eight minutes after the hour and time for the local forecast.

The red band at the bottom of the television tells me that the National Weather Service has issued a tornado watch for Story County, the region of Iowa in which I live, so I do what most Midwesterners do upon hearing such an announcement: go to a window to look at the sky. Since the grey-suited host on the Weather Channel has only announced a watch and not a warning, I know that I won’t see a funnel cloud raging across Ames, making lazy zig-zag patterns through the east side of town as it approaches my apartment building.

The sky’s all wrong for it, anyway. Although the treetops sway only a little bit, the clouds in the sky lack the unity to drop a finger of wind onto my map; between the puffy cumulus, I can see a pale blue background to the sky. As a child in Kansas, I learned that the true sign of a tornado was not high winds and black clouds, but rather an eerie calm framed by a muted green sky, a sky the color of cloudy emeralds, of Easter eggs dipped in the solution only once. The wind does not blow in that weather, like lesser magicians ceding the stage for Houdini, about to make everything disappear.

Rarely did the teachers at school allow us to see this sky; at the first squawk of a tornado warning, they lined us up and took us into the basement, where we sat against the wall. If the storm drew too close, we tucked our heads under our arms, as though they might provide protection from debris thrown by winds of over 100 miles an hour.
Only once did I ever see a funnel cloud, at my grandmother’s house in Iowa. My father and I climbed up on the roof, and to the south, we saw a slender tube, drawn like the downward stroke of a cursive J, dropping from the clouds on the horizon. After snapping a few photos, we shimmied back down the ladder, and, taking a radio, found our way into the basement. The funnel never touched the ground.

For only having 26 years to my name, I’ve experienced a disproportionately large number of disasters: a house fire when I was young, violent thunderstorms anytime I lived in the Midwest, a 6.8 magnitude earthquake when I lived in Seattle, even a riot, tear gas and all, a few blocks away from where I worked at my first real job. But tornadoes are the only disaster I’ve lived through where you get a little bit of time to think about it, to consider what Nature’s about to drop on you. Earthquakes just start from out of nothing, riots are only standoffs until someone blinks, and there’s a good reason we say something bursts into flames rather than oozes. Tornados, though, are usually preceded by very grim weather anchors intoning “go to the basement now” while color Doppler maps, looking all for the world like a CAT scan of God’s own aneurysm, pulse behind them with red, yellow, and white blotches of havoc. For the duration of the time you spend in your basement, sitting around a radio among stacks of National Geographics and baby clothes in boxes, you wonder if you’ll walk up the stairs to a normal house, or if this is the time the lights go out, the windows shatter, and you learn what a house collapsing around you sounds like.

The anchor on the Weather Channel—a different one this time, wearing a dark suit with a pink tie, announces an echo hook cloud at the Iowa-Nebraska border, adding “these are the clouds we associate with tornado-producing storms.” The storm is moving at about
20 miles an hour, he says, which means that, unless it picks up speed, I've got all night to watch the sword hanging over my head.

I click the channel ahead four spaces and land on CNN, where pundits eagerly discuss the recent arrest of a supposed terrorist. According to the Justice Department—and the news is big enough to warrant the Attorney General holding a press conference while he visits Russia—the suspect in custody planned to detonate a dirty bomb somewhere in America.

The dirty bomb, a conventional bomb laced with nuclear material and designed to contaminate several city blocks with radioactivity, just took over the top spot on the hit parade of general American fears of the last nine months—number one with a bullet, I guess. In the last few weeks, the government has called for citizens to look out for dirty bombs, scuba divers, attacks on bridges, something in the Puget Sound region, and agricultural attacks. In February, right around Valentine’s Day, rumors flew around about exploding teddy bears.

Since last September, the entire nation has sat in the basement, listening for signs of a storm that might not ever get here. We press our ears to the radio, trying to imagine the cloud’s path towards from us, trying to see a map in our heads, trying to will the funnel cloud away from us, onto another path, giving us a chance to breath before the government issues the next warning.

On CNN, an expert on dirty bombs, quickly dug up by the talent bookers, discusses what a dirty bomb would do to a metropolitan area.

“It’s actually the least destructive of all nuclear weapons,” he says, while the host nods gravely. “Decontamination would occupy the majority of our efforts in dealing with the
aftereffects of such an attack." He looks uncomfortable in front of the camera; I wonder if he’s making his television debut.

He reminds me of my childhood. For a few years in Reagan’s 1980s, my family lived in Boulder, Colorado which, despite being a mecca for aging hippies and outdoorsy liberals, also bordered the Rocky Flats installation.

Just a few miles over the county line, Rocky Flats gleefully cranked out plutonium triggers for nuclear weapons, playing Hephaistos to the U.S. Army’s Zeus. The plant sat back a few miles from the highway between Boulder and Golden, the water tower the most conspicuous thing about it, not even visible from my house, eight miles away.

It held me in fear nevertheless. On a family vacation to New Mexico, on the way between Sante Fe and Taos, we stopped at the national labs in Los Alamos, where forty years earlier, the Manhattan Project had developed and detonated the world’s first nuclear bomb. In the museum, I watched shaky films of tests, houses blown over by a dark god so easily I thought I could see the three of spades holding up the east wall. An invisible wind on grainy black-and-white film uprooted trees, bending them over until the force pulled them out of the ground, the leaves stripped off the branches. When we returned to Boulder, I combed my school’s library for books on Los Alamos, as well as Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I lingered, uncomfortably, over photographs of shadows burned into walls, the outline of a man on a ladder, caught without warning on an August morning. I began to learn exactly what the scientists outside of Boulder made and what it did, why the tavern across the street from the turnoff was called “The Isotope Bar.” And I began to get nervous.

Loud sounds happen in every town. A tire blows, a hydrant goes, one car hits another. A common sound. But then, in Boulder, I would hear a *bam*—sometimes as little as
a pop--and my eyes would dart north, expecting to see a green cloud rising, forming a death's head like they did in the cartoons.

But you don't see plutonium. You just wait for it, for its effects. You wait for the sickness, the nausea, for your hair to start falling out. And maybe it does, and maybe you spend days and weeks and months waiting and worrying and wondering and even if nothing happens, you still can't help but think that something still might, some seed planted in you, waiting to take root months and years and decades from now.

It can't be healthy even if you don't get sick. All that stress, all that worrying, has to have an effect. In Boulder, in the 1980s, I became a nervous and jumpy child wondering if I'd die because of a leak eight miles away. And maybe right now, nine months after that September, with all these warnings and watches for scuba divers, suicide bombers, exploding bears, and other, more ominous unnamed threats, maybe we're making ourselves sick waiting for it.

On May 15, 1968, the residents of Oelwein, Iowa, a town of about 8,000 in the northeast part of the state, only got about 15 seconds of warning before two funnel clouds crashed into the power station, disabling the Civil Defense siren. An employee of the radio station, broadcasting a tornado warning to the region, had only enough time to say "God help me" before the station's tower fell onto the building. Jack Black, a writer for the Oelwein Daily Register, described the yellow light of the sky, and how he latched onto a nearby bush and "watched it go by and hit my house."

In just fifteen miles, the tornado did almost $20 million worth of damage, injuring 156, and leaving almost 1,000 families with damaged or destroyed homes. However, only
five people died in the storm, mostly thanks to resourceful warnings, like the Amish man who evacuated the customers in a blacksmith's shop a few minutes before the tornado broke it into pieces, or the priest who took his congregation downstairs and kept them praying while the storm above ripped apart the church.

In a photo taken as the storm approached, the gray finger of the storm seems barely enough to rustle the leaves of the tree on the left side of the photo. The funnel cloud dips down, barely brushing the ground. An uneven fence of white pickets seems more threatening. It has not yet become the storm that will bury a woman and her four children in their basement just fifteen minutes later, leaving her to dig her family's way out from the rubble.

But perhaps that's the secret power of threats, of the threat of the Oelwein tornado, or the tornado watch here in Ames, or the dirty bombs, or the quieter, smaller things that thunder silently into our lives. We look at them and, despite their presence, don't actually expect them to arrive. We wait for it, but we never realize how bad it could be until we're breaking our fingernails pulling ourselves out of our basements.

And maybe what's happening now, what's been happening ever since we watched the storm hit harder than we ever might have thought, live on CNN, is a realization of the severity of the situation. Now that something like that has entered the realm of reality, a whole host of worries and fears have entered the realm of possibility, and we sit in the audience, waiting to see the next horrible act of the play, hoping for the curtain to fall.

The puffy cumulus clouds, evolved into darker nimbus clouds, have closed over the majority of blue sky, leaving just a few patches in the east as I step out the front door of my
apartment building. The temperature has dropped by at least ten degrees, and to the west, I can see an angry front moving towards us. We are still under watch.

An hour remains before my night class begins, but I’ve left early so I can water the plants at my best friend Hannah’s apartment. She’s in Mexico right now, teaching English for two months in Queretaro, a town a few hours north of Mexico City. I’m grateful for the temperature drop as I open the door to her apartment, the last few days have been hot and humid, and she’s shut off the air conditioning in order to keep the electricity bill low while she’s gone.

The plants, though, have loved it. With the apartment turned into a sub-tropical climate and the absence of Hannah’s plant-eating cat Sammy, her plants have flourished. Without a feline lawnmower, the shamrock next to the sink has sent out long shoots, the leaves broad and flat, searching for the sun. Each time I’m over, I turn it just a little bit to make the stems spiral around, slowly curving in circles. I pour a little water into the soil, still moist from my last visit a few days ago, and watch it soak down into the black dirt.

Another plant, one that Hannah calls a “peace lily,” almost fills its side of the window in the living room. New leaves have burst forth, unfurling like magician’s hands opening up to reveal the vanished coin. The stems of these new growths are a few shades of green lighter than the older parts of the plant, fashionable newcomers showing off their clothes. Hannah will have to trim this plant down just to fit it in the moving van.

*The move*, I think, and sit down on the couch. In May, Hannah graduated from the creative writing program at the same school I’m currently in. She applied for a lecturer position at the school, but also sent out a few applications to Colorado, where her on-again, off-again (and currently on) boyfriend of six years lives.
She and Zack have circled around each other for ages, constantly in each other’s lives even during the times when they weren’t dating. They met in college, fell in love like only college kids can, hit a rough patch, got back together, hit a rougher patch, spent a year apart, and then, last December, got back together. Hannah tells me that both swear that this time is the last time they get together—either it works now, or it never will.

I look at the clock on the wall; time to leave for class. Getting up, I can’t imagine that it will work out; their relationship seems like one of those classic cases where, despite the love the two have for each other, it just isn’t going to work. Too much history, too much past, too much mistrust to make a relationship possible. Anyway, I’m for them splitting up just because Zack doesn’t like me—he’s nervous about Hannah having a male best friend. An earlier male friend fell in love with her and muddled things up about three years ago. Zack wants her to move to Colorado and live with him, the understanding being that I’ll move out of the picture then, and Zack can stop worrying about what I might do.

Checking the keys in my hand to make sure I don’t lock myself out of the apartment, I shut the door, and test the doorknob. Hannah’s apartment is a quiet graduate student oasis in a nonstop undergraduate party building, and I notice on my way down the stairs that someone’s carved “Slayer” into the wall. Many nights, we found ourselves turning up the volume on whatever romantic comedy we’ve rented so we can hear it over the relentless thump of techno from the apartment beneath her.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I remember how once, helping Hannah carry groceries into her apartment, she paused at this stair, and leaned back slightly, her head tilted to the right to expose her neck. I pressed my lips to it, hearing her sigh. We quickly ascended the rest of the stairs, entered the apartment, and, not even bothering to put her milk
in the fridge, went to the bedroom, peeled off our clothes, and made love in the afternoon light.

Hannah and Zack have been back together for a little over six months. Hannah and I have slept together once for each of those months.

Zack has good reason to be worried. I’m his girlfriend’s best friend, and I’ve fallen in love with her. And while she’s in Mexico, both he and I wait, patiently or impatiently, for her to choose.

“All the crew were really worried when he (Kuboyama) died,” said Oishi Matashichi, one of the members of the Fukuryu Maru, a Japanese fishing trawler. “We all started to wonder whether we’d be the next to go.”

Six months earlier, on March 1, 1954, Oishi, Kuboyama, and the rest of the boat’s crew had started to pull in the nets when the sky to the west lit up. 100 miles away, the United States exploded a hydrogen bomb at Bikini Atoll—far enough away that it took about eight minutes for the shock waves to reach the boat, but close enough to toss the small ship around on the waters. The crew worked for six hours to pull in the nets; two hours after the explosion, white ash fell, coating the ship, blinding and choking the crew. Many of them had their faces burned black by the radiation; all of them entered the hospital within two weeks of returning to Japan.

Kuboyama was the only crew member to die while in hospital; however, although doctors found the men healthy enough to discharge from the hospital over a year later, all of the crew have suffered from liver problems. Indeed, with the exception of one man who died
in a car accident, all *Fukuryu Maru* crewmen who have passed away have died of liver
diseases—usually cancer.

Now Oishi waits for the fate he assumes will be his. "I have had to take twice as
much care of my health as anyone else," he said in an interview in the late 1980s. "I know
I'll never be rid of the radiation." The fear, the knowing is inescapable for him.

We all know the idea of our death—the fact that we’ll die someday—but very rarely do
we find ourselves confronted with the very fact of it, the truth of our demise, presented to us
by a tornado hitting a house, or white ash falling on a boat, or a plane crashing into a
skyscraper. And even more rarely do we confront the smaller deaths of our lives, not our
actual death but the deaths of things we believe in—honor, maybe, when we see the
inhumanity of man, or hard work, when we see the greed and unfairness of the corporate
world. Or even love, when we love someone and they leave us behind.

This is the little death I'm thinking about as I pass by the fountain in front of the
Memorial Union on the way to class, the surface of the water blown into ripples by the wind,
slowly increasing in speed. Sometimes I believe that if I could love Hannah enough, then I
could draw her back here just through the attraction of that love, that I could pull her away
from that relationship, like a wind blowing a fishing boat out of the white ash cloud. But
most of the time, I realize that I can't do anything, that the love I have for her lacks the power
to do anything, much less draw her away from him, away from the radiation cloud that makes
her heartsick and conflicted.

Zack wants her to move to the town in Colorado where he lives; appropriately, he
lives in Boulder. The town of my childhood fears has changed into the town of my adult
fears, the once and future metropolis of what might go wrong. Whereas once I looked to the
north when I thought the end might be on the way, now I look to the south, towards Mexico,
where Hannah stays, like an absent god, about to choose.

And all I can do, as I duck into a building, the first drops of the storm making flat
circles on the sidewalk behind me, is wait for it, like I’ve waited for the tornado to blow out
my windows, like I’ve waited for the radiation to settle into my bones, like I’ve waited for
everything to fall apart, slowly or all at once.