Defining family: essays and poems

Cassandra Lynne Miller
Iowa State University

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Defining Family
Essays and Poems
by
Cassandra Lynne Miller

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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Debra Marquart (Major Professor)
Jane Davis
Marcia Michaels

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Cassandra Lynne Miller

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
This work is a collection of poems and essays that are based on my memory of the events of my childhood and adolescence. I have consulted none of my family members and have done no research in hopes of maintaining the limited perspective I have grown up with that has made things such as divorce, abuse, and loss so difficult to comprehend.
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Missing Parts

“When someone you love dies; and you’re not expecting it, you don’t lose them all at once...”

— John Irving

I met my Gramma Tucker two days after she died. Well, she’d always been a part of my life. My mother was very close to her and we visited her a lot—when I was very young. When my parents separated for the final time, I was in second grade. I only recall a handful of visits after that. Most of those visits were in the Intensive Care Unit at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh. Gram was very sick with cancer that the doctors had found only a week before. When she died, I was asked to write her eulogy. I hardly knew her.

Mom told me that Gram had Pancreatic Cancer. It was late May of ’03. My Aunt Shirlee and her daughter Michelle packed Gram into their family car and drove the three hours south from St. Marys, over and around the mountains of Western Pennsylvania to Allegheny General to see a specialist in Pittsburgh. Mom and I met them at the hospital. I knew I didn’t belong with them for this type of thing. I was there by default because my mom was afraid of driving in the city. She needed me to get her there.

It was a reunion for a few moments, at least where I was concerned. I used small talk to reacquaint myself with them. My aunt asked me some questions. I answered her
trying to sound as accomplished and impressive as I could because Michelle was a few years younger than I was and she had already started grad school. Even worse, she was studying English Literature. She had an office and students and everything else academia brings. She put quite a shadow over the Creative Writing aspirations I had.

“So, Case, how's school? You almost done?”

“I graduated last December,” I said proudly.

“Now what’re you gonna do? Shell’s working on her Master’s at Duquesne. Teachin’ classes and everything. She thinks they’re gonna hire her on.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s great. I plan on going to grad school, too but I’m...uhh...,” I started to say but I could tell that no one was really interested so I spared them the details.

We wheeled Gramma Tucker into the corridor that led to the specialist’s office. My mom, Aunt Shirlee, Michelle, and I continued to talk while Gramma Tucker sat quiet in the wheel chair. They were calling her Mom, Ma, and Grammie. I decided that maybe if I stopped thinking of her as Gramma Tucker I would feel like I should be included such an intimate situation. I played with different terms of endearment in my mind and decided that Gram worked best for me. It wasn’t too affectionate but it had more of a personal sense than the slightly more formal Gramma Tucker I was used to.

...
St. Marys, Pennsylvania is a tired old mining town that is isolated and protected from outside influences by the northern Appalachian Mountains. Throughout my life, I heard my mom describe it to others as the kind of town that you can get stuck in if you don’t get out while you’re still young. It was founded by a group of German Catholics sometime in the late 1800’s. Because of the untouched forest that surrounded the settlement, St. Marys’ first entrepreneurs had hopes of the town becoming a powerhouse in the lumber industry, but the lack of a major waterway made transportation difficult and the steepness of the isolated mountains did not cooperate with workers.

The town was on the verge of dying out when the discovery of carbon drew others to the area in search of work. There were jobs to be had in the mines and with the excavation companies and in the factories that processed the carbon that came from the mines. St. Marys was hailed the “Carbon Capital of the World” at one time when up was the only way things could go for the blue collar community. But, as mines tend to do, they began producing less carbon and St. Marys stopped growing. That’s not to say that people don’t still earn a good living in the factories because they do. It’s easy to get stuck there. Most kids go to the public high school because tuition for the Catholic one is too expensive. St. Mary’s Area High School didn’t do much in the way of preparing kids for college. I should know; it’s my alma mater. Even in the early nineties, when I went
there, most girls got pregnant before graduation and the boys took jobs in the factories or with trucking or building companies.

In her day, my grandmother was said to be the prettiest girl for miles. I remember my mom and her sisters telling me that men fell at her feet, but she married Thomas Leroy Tucker; a handsome, not so tall, dark haired man. He was a Korean War veteran and after that he was a miner. Together they had two boys and four girls that they raised on the meager earnings from Tom's mining job and Dorothy's factory job. My mom was the second oldest. Tom and Dorothy eventually divorced, before the kids were raised. My mom was still in high school. I assume the alcoholism that plagues my family had more than a little to do with their separation. Mom's father struggled with it in his early years and at least two of her siblings are struggling with it today. My generation is the only one in the family tree that has managed to escape the label. So far, anyway. I have some cousins that are still pretty young.

The details of the lives my own parents lived before they met are hard for me put on a timeline. They have both told me heavily edited stories about themselves and, during and after their own divorce, probably exaggerated stories about the other.

My dad was voted the Class Clown of his graduating class. He had been kicked out of Elk County Christian High School and had to transfer to the public high school, but I have never been told why. Dad told me that once he threw his school books into Elk Creek and got into a lot of trouble but that's surely not grounds for expulsion.
My mom told me that Dad spent some time in jail. He broke into the family safe. His parents were pretty well off. My grandfather owned a lot of land and a few businesses. He had one bar called The Wayside Inn and he also owned a Firestone dealership and supplied all the hardware and tires and engine parts to the whole town until the late seventies when department stores started opening up. Grampa kept the family safe hidden inside of one of the cabinet-like end tables in the good living room. One night Dad broke into this safe and stole money, jewelry, and other things that Depression-generation people didn’t trust banks with. The police figured out that my dad was the thief and my Grampa had him arrested and held. Dad even went to trial. Nothing major came of it, though, because Grampa was such an important person in a tiny town like St. Marys. Older people still ask me if I’m Red Miller’s granddaughter when I tell them my last name.

Dad was married to a girl when all of this happened. His parents didn’t approve of his new bride and they didn’t speak for a few years. Dad had a son, Ricky, from his first marriage and I can only guess that he needed money to take care of his wife and baby, but I don’t really know if that fits in with the truth or not. The marriage ended as quickly as it began. Mom said that Dad’s parents stopped talking to him because he married that first girl. Mom says after Dad divorced his first wife and married her that she was able to mend the rift in the relationship between Dad and his parents.
My mother was pregnant and married when she was seventeen. She had to lie to
the judge about her age. Her first husband grew marijuana in her flower boxes. She said
the police used to sit in their patrol cars across the street from their apartment. My
mother says she had no idea what kind of plants they were. Right. I've heard lots of
stories about her. Dad says she used to be pretty wild. I don't really believe any of the
stories that come directly from her but I hang onto them because it's hard for me to
admit that I don't know her, especially because she has a very different perspective on
our relationship.

Mom divorced her first husband and dated some guy for a while. I guess he
wanted to marry her and be a father to my sister, Yvonne, but Mom must not have been
too interested because she began dating my dad before she broke it off with the other
guy. Dad was seeing someone else, too, and this is something I found out at a time in my
life when my mother and I were struggling to be close to each other. I guess she told me
because she didn't like that Dad and I were so close and she needed to present him to me
in a different way.

"Gradually, you accumulate the parts... that are gone..."

I remember visiting Gramma Tucker in a gray shingled house on East Kaul Avenue. The
same house where she raised her kids and supported her own mother with monthly
wages that wouldn't feed a present-day family for a week. After that, I remember the older adult community that she moved into in a nearby town. The building was very tall, not like any of the buildings in St. Marys. It had an elevator and I was afraid of it. Mom usually took the stairs with me while my sisters rode in the elevator.

I hated going to visit Gramma Tucker. We had to ride in the car all the way to Johnsonburg, about a thirty minute drive which is twenty-five minutes too long for two toddlers that weren't yet required by law to be restrained in child safety seats. My little sister and I not so affectionately called Johnsonburg "Stinky Town." There were paper mills in Johnsonburg and they smelled. So bad that sometimes, when the wind was blowing right, the smell would even carry over the peaks of the mountains into St. Marys.

Gramma Tucker had pictures of her kids and of all the grandkids. She had pictures we had drawn and popsicle stick ornaments. She also had this neighbor that had an endless supply of white tablet paper. I have no idea where all this paper came from. He probably had some connection to the mills. Most likely, he had retired from a lifetime of running presses or loading the furnaces that powered the presses and was therefore entitled to as much paper as he could handle. He gave me and my little sister a tablet every time we visited. We spent the whole visit drawing while Mom talked to Gramma Tucker.
Soon after, Mom left my dad. She had packed up her things and her kids and left him several times already. Once, at the beginning of my second grade year, she even rented a house. It was blue and we started moving into it. Before we unpacked, she decided to go back to Dad, but it wasn't for long. I ended up finishing second grade in another school in another town. But this time, she really left. Carina and I were in the front seat of the station wagon as Mom backed it out of the driveway. Dad stood on the porch and watched us leave. Ricky sat on the cement porch steps and cried because he couldn't come with us. Dad would soon put Ricky in foster care and then Ricky, with his increasingly bad and sometimes borderline criminal behavior, would force the state to place him in Adelphi Village; a home for troubled children. Mom took us to live with her father and step mother one town over.

Mom started dating. Dad didn't. I didn't really understand the mechanics of all of these new relationships. I really liked Mom's new boyfriend because he brought me presents and he had a nice house. It was two stories. I had always dreamed of living in a house with stairs in it. He had one of those refrigerators with the freezer on the bottom and cable TV and a VCR. He must have spent all of his free time recording movies from all those different channels because he had shelves and shelves of VHS tapes labels and arranged in alphabetical order. He eventually began recording movies that he thought my sisters and I would like and we would get to stay up late watching them.
As impressed as I was with Mom's new boyfriend I still believed that Mom and Dad would get back together. I was also confused why Dad wasn't dating anyone.

"Don't you want a girlfriend, Daddy?" I remember asking him.

"I still love Mommy too much. Make sure you tell her that."

"Oh, I will, Daddy. Then we'll come home." And I truly believed we would.

One perfect summer day I heard Mom talking to her step mother. They didn't know I was nearby. I had just learned the art of sneaking up on unsuspecting victims and scaring the living daylights out of them.

As I was tip toeing closer and closer Mom said, "Thank god the divorce is final." I was the one taken by surprise. I jumped out and confronted her.

"You lied! You lied! You said that you and Daddy needed some time apart that you still loved each other, that we would go home. Don't you know that you're not supposed to lie!" I ran away. No one came after me.

Soon, my mom met another man in a bar. He was a hunter and it was deer season. His name was David and he lived in Southwestern Pennsylvania. A modest city called Greensburg, just outside Pittsburgh. We ended up moving in with him that summer and I started third grade in a new school.

Although we still saw Dad on weekends, visits to Mom's side of the family stopped altogether because Mom didn't have a car, and even when she borrowed David's she would only drive half way to St. Marys and made my dad meet her in Punxsutawney to
trade custody for the weekends. She only went to see her family when David went hunting.

Mom didn’t marry David right away. Actually, I think he wouldn’t marry her. She bounced us back and forth between Greensburg and St. Marys a bunch of times.

Third grade started for me in Greensburg but the next summer my mom had us staying with her sister while she looked for a place for us to live back in St. Marys. She found a two-bedroom apartment above a shoe store. Carina and I shared a bed in one room and she and Yvonne shared a bed in the other. She was still seeing David and he would come to visit us a lot. Yvonne had to sleep on the couch when he stayed with us and she said she could hear them “doing it” in her bed. I didn’t know exactly what they were doing but I could tell that Yvonne thought it was gross so I did, too.

I found red roses in the kitchen cupboard one day and I turned around to ask why and David put his finger to his lips to shush me.

“Hey, Deb, can you make me a cup of tea?” he said as he winked at me. Mom went to the cupboard and found the roses. David proposed and I pretended to be happy.

I liked our little shoe store apartment. I liked being able to walk to Dad’s house but we moved back in with David the week before fourth grade started.

Moving back and forth between St. Marys and Greensburg became a recurring pattern. My sisters and I became more and more detached from both sides of our family.

We switched schools so many times, often in the middle of the school year, that it
became difficult to maintain friendships, as well. I reverted even more into my already shy self.

I started sixth grade in St. Marys. Mom was still seeing David even though her reasons for having left him this time were based largely on a fight that became physical and left my mother bruised and bleeding with nowhere to live. David eventually convinced Mom to move us back to Greensburg before Halloween.

The night before we planned to move, Mom's younger sister Judy sort of freaked out and disappeared. No one could find her but as we tried to track her down, we found out that she was wandering around town carrying a piggy bank full of coins. The piggy bank belonged to her two children that she was no longer allowed to see unsupervised. Aunt Judy was approaching people and asking them if they had seen her kids. She even grabbed a little girl about her daughter's age and tried to pull the girl away from her mother. The police got involved at this point and Judy was taken into custody.

We had to stay in St. Marys for a few more days for my mom and her family to get control of the situation that Judy had created. My older sister Yvonne went with my mom and Aunt Shirlee to get some things from Judy's apartment. We didn't know what was wrong with her but it was obvious that she wasn't well. The door of Judy's apartment had been left wide open. They went in and were so frightened by what they
had found that they had returned home and called the Police Department asking for a police escort and for permission to search her apartment.

After their request was granted, we all walked over to Judy’s apartment to wait for the police. Although my little sister and I were not allowed to go inside the apartment, I have been told what they found. The apartment was filthy. Garbage was everywhere. All of Judy’s plants were wilted and dying of thirst. What had spurred everyone’s discomfort were the notes that were taped to the no longer running refrigerator, the walls, the mirrors. The notes didn’t seem to be in Judy’s handwriting. They read like warnings and reminders to be careful of what you do because “they” are always watching. Judy was soon institutionalized and diagnosed as a manic depressive, paranoid schizophrenic with violent tendencies. All else seemed to be in order for the time being so Mom felt is was alright to go ahead with the move back to Greensburg. Mom and David finally got married a year and a half later. I stayed in Greensburg through my middle school years.

People said Mom and I were too much alike to get along. I hated that I could have anything in common with her, the woman that left my father, who took us to the other half of the state. One time, I was in the backseat of the car. Mom was driving and her friend was in the passenger seat. We were on our way to the grocery store. They were talking about how much I looked like my mother.
"Just like a little Debbi," her friend had said. They were both discussing how amazing the similarities were. All the while I was secretly growing more and more angry. When we arrived at the store I opted to wait in car while they went in to shop. Once I was alone, I angled the rearview mirror to look at myself and try to disprove their opinions. I remember staring at myself, feeling ugly and distorted, on the verge of tears because I hated that people could think we were alike.

Eventually, the contempt I felt for my mother was more than I could contain and I claimed my independence from her by moving from her home in Greensburg to my father’s home back in St. Marys. I now lived within walking distance of the High Rise where my grandmother now lived. Not once did I walk down to see her.

In 1995, after I had graduated from high school, Mom was furious with me because I had decided not to go to college. Even though I was a high school graduate, I was still only seventeen. She made me believe that since I was still a minor I had to listen to her. She forced me to move back to Greensburg and attend the community college. After this last relocation, I visited Gramma Tucker twice because I was given no other choice and once when my little sister had her baby shower in her building’s recreation room. The last time I saw her before she got sick was Christmas 2001. We were at my Aunt Shirlee’s house. Shirlee was the one that took care of her. Bought her milk, got her mail, things like that. Most of the grandchildren were together for the first time in years. Shirlee went to get Gramma Tucker and to bring her to the house. Gramma Tucker
didn't know we were all there. We wanted to surprise her and we did. She was happy.
So happy she got sick after about an hour. She was too excited and she couldn't breathe.
I remember thinking how like a child she was. The words she used, the way she held her
head, and the way she smiled as if she didn't understand what was going on but she was
glad to be a part of it.

"Just when the day comes—when there's a specifically missing part that
overwhelms you with the feeling that they're gone forever"

A nurse called for Dorothy Tucker and we all went in. The doctor had already reviewed
her records. We all crowded into the examination room. Mom and Shirlee helped Gram
waddle her way onto the padded vinyl table.

Gram was a little woman. Not even five feet tall. Her tiny feet dangled from the
lowest height of the examination table as she sat there, still quiet. I thought proudly that
that was where my little size 4's came from.

"So, Dorothy, you're feeling sick in your belly, huh?" the doctor said as he came
through the door.

"Yeah, Doc. My belly's been real sick." The doctor continued to ask her simple
questions. Then, knowing that most people don't know what a pancreas does or that
they even have a duodenum, he drew a human digestive track on a sheet of paper and
explained to us what was growing inside of her and what we needed to do to fix it. He
told us that he'd done this type of surgery several times and felt very confident. Gram didn't seem to listen to any of this. She just sat there looking at her little feet.

"You look a little scared there, Dorothy" he said.

"Yeah, Doc. I'm real scared."

"Well, don't you worry. We'll get ya fixed up in no time. And it looks like you got all the family you need to get you through this."

"Yeah, Doc. I do."

The doctor scheduled Gram for surgery a week from that day and sent her home because she wasn't sick enough yet to get a bed in Allegheny General.

Mom and her sister Shirlee had been trying to get in touch with Aunt Judy to let her know how sick their mother was. Judy was not doing well herself. She was a full blown alcoholic and she refused to take the medicine that would stabilize the imbalances in her brain. Judy thought that she was healthy and that everyone around her was sick.

Judy finally turned up. She had become quite a problem for the State of Pennsylvania. A few years earlier, she had been extradited from Kentucky for assaulting a woman that wouldn't believe that all of Dwight Yoakum's songs were inspired by her. This time, Judy was in jail awaiting sentencing. She was homeless, drunk, and mentally ill. She had broken into someone's home and confronted the owners. She accused them of being in her house. The police were called and the wheels of justice began to turn.

I'm not sure who my mom and Shirlee had to speak to but it was not thought to be a good
idea that Judy be released to visit with her sick mother. Judy would eventually be committed to a hospital. After her mandatory stay there, her probation will require her to live in a dry town while remaining on her medication.

Gram never had her surgery. Two days after that first trip to Pittsburgh, Shirlee tried calling her in the morning just like she did every morning and didn’t get an answer. Shirlee went to Gram’s apartment and opened the door with her copy of the key. Gram was in her recliner. The same place where she was the evening before when Shirlee had last checked on her. Gram hadn’t moved all night. By morning, she was sitting in a puddle of sticky, black blood. But she was awake. She said she felt too sick to move to her bed. An ambulance came for her. It turned out she was sick enough for a bed in AGH. She was life flighted to Pittsburgh where she stayed for another week until she died.

The waiting room outside of the Intensive Care Unit was not like a regular waiting room. It wasn’t even called a waiting room. It was called a “Gathering Room.” It even had cushioned chairs that reclined and stools for the ones that didn’t. It was broken into six sections with permanent walls. One section in each corner and two in the middle. It even had a phone that connected directly to the main desk in the ICU and you could request information and even a doctor to come and talk to you if you wanted. My aunts and uncles, sisters and cousins drifted in and out when they could get away from work
and travel the three hours from St. Marys to the hospital. We sat there, ate there, slept there. I still felt out of place, but even after several trips to the hospital, my mom wouldn’t drive there herself. Mom had recently divorced and had no one else who could drop everything to be with her. And since Greensburg was only thirty minutes away, I became part of things. Part of Gram’s death even though I wasn’t part of her life.

The morning of Father’s Day, I was getting ready to go to work. I was a server at Red Lobster. My oldest sister and I worked there together and had the same early shift on Sunday’s. Mom knew where to find us. My manager came and said that our mom was on the phone and needed to talk to one of us. Mom tried not to cry so she sounded worse than if she had just let go with it. She said she was going to drive into the city to the hospital by herself. That they had decided to turn off Gram’s respirator. That someone needed to be there just in case. So Gram wouldn’t die alone.

I went to my manager and told him I was leaving. I told him my mother’s mother was going to die today and that Mom was going to go through it alone and I couldn’t let that happen. He objected slightly then reconsidered. I drove to my mom as fast as I could.

...
Me and Mom were the only ones there for a while. We sat in Gram's room. Mom sat at Gram's side while I stood back to give them the space that extreme emotion always seems to require.

"It's ok, Mom. I'm here. Casey's here," she said over and over. I didn't want her to keep reminding all of us that I was there. I knew I didn't belong with them for this sort of thing, and I was afraid that Gram knew it, too.

After a while, the door burst open. My aunts, uncles, and Michelle came in, all at once it seemed. Aunt Judy wasn't there. Shirlee had spoken with someone that did not believe that Judy would even understand what was happening, let alone be able to conduct herself. She was too sick.

They were pushing against each other to get close to their mother, to touch her. Someone had turned off the easy listening music that had been constant all the hours we had spent in the hospital. All I could hear was Gram's infected breathing and the beeping machines that were keeping her alive.

Uncle Jack kept yelling in his gruff voice that scared me as a child, "How ya doin' old girl?" and he'd rub her leg playfully. Gram would look around quickly, her machines would work faster and louder. She knew that he was there, that we were all there.

"Are you all ready?" the nurse asked.

Shirlee answered, "I think so...".

The nurse began doing something but no one was watching her.
“Come on, Case, get in here,” my mom said and I found myself standing where I didn’t belong, between a dying woman and her children. My uncles stood back a ways and the daughters all crowded around her. We all told her we loved her and I wondered if I really did. If she knew how confused and scared I was because I didn’t know how I felt about her.

The sounds from the machines stopped one by one until all I could hear was the infection rattle inside her lungs and the beeping that let us know her heart was still beating. Mom pulled me again, made me put my hand on Gram’s belly that was so bloated and taut with cancer that it felt like a water balloon.

It seemed to take forever for her to die but it was only about thirty seconds or so. The last three breaths came further and further apart. All the while, with my hand on her belly, I could feel how hard it was for her to pull air into lungs. It seemed like something else was pulling it out of her. Then she stopped breathing. The machine beeped a couple more times. Then it flat lined for only a moment before the nurse kindly shut it off.

I was still touching her. I wanted her belly to struggle outward with another breath but it never did. Aunt Mary threw herself on top of Gram. Jack and Tom left the room. Shirlee sat down. Mom held Gram’s right hand, Michelle held her left. I backed away and acted busy. I picked up sweatshirts and purses. I rubbed backs and squeezed hands. I cried. I cried for my family and the pain they must have felt, for the part of my
life that I had missed out on. I cried because I wanted to call her Grammy like Michelle
did. Mostly I cried out of shame.

I was sitting in the warm late morning sun of Father's Day. We were still at the hospital
in the open air courtyard off of the cafeteria we had been frequenting for days. I was
with Mom, two of my aunts, and both of my uncles. Michelle was the only other cousin
there. She and I made most of the phone calls to pass on the news while Gram's children
tried to remain composed. They began talking about the church service. Gram was very
faithful to her Catholic upbringing and so were most of her children, though somewhere
along the line the tradition was lost on me and my sisters. Michelle would read because
Shirlee felt she could not hold up. My uncles would be ushers, so would three of my
cousins. They were one short and someone suggested my father. He was always well
liked even though he hadn't been part of their family for almost twenty years. My aunts
and uncles were sure he would accept, if only because it is difficult to decline such
requests. I would soon learn this very lesson. I sat in the background while all of this
was happening. I had just seen four children watch their mother die and I still felt out of
place.

As we left, having done all we could so far, my mom and I were trailing the
others. I told her that I could write a poem if she would like me to. She yelled to her
sister, "Shirlee, Case can write a poem for the service." I had only meant something she
could keep for herself, something I would never publish, something private, but I was now part of Gram's dying and part of her death. The private poem I had intended for my mother gradually became referred to as the eulogy.

I had been reading John Irving to pass the days in the gathering room. *A Prayer for Owen Meany.* I was immersed in the theme of not fully appreciating someone during the span of their lifetime. I read many parts of the book several times trying to assuage my guilt for not being present when I should have been. When I should have earned the right to the privileges I now was taking ownership of. I was so far removed from the weight of the situation that I could only start writing with someone else's words.

I knew nothing of my grandmother. I had nothing to write about except the experience of watching her die and that was not yet appropriate to describe. I followed family members around for the next two days. I followed their conversations and stories trying to find my words in theirs.

I learned that my gram's friends called her Butchie and no one remembered why. I learned that she walked with her children to church every Sunday pulling the babies in a wagon behind her. I learned she played hide and go seek. That she had polio and couldn't walk until she was seventeen. I learned that her children taught her to ride a bike when she was almost forty years old. I learned that I had missed out on a part of my life that was now irretrievable.
No one in my family had a computer, so I wrote the eulogy at the St. Marys Public Library. I had to convince them that I had been a member years ago. I told them why I needed their computer, their paper and printer, their quiet, and they gave me all I needed.

I filled in the stories I had heard over the last few days with conjunctions and colorful adjectives to make them flow as spoken material. All the while I wanted to hide deeper and deeper inside myself. I felt like a criminal. I had stolen their memories of my grandmother because I had none of my own.

"there comes another day and another specifically missing part."

The church was cold that morning. It's one of those old Catholic churches that are beautiful even to people who aren't Catholic. I hadn't been inside it for over a decade, not since my parents were still married to each other. There weren't many people in it aside from our family. Maybe twenty or so. I hardly knew anyone. Just the immediate family and I had to pretend to remember most of them. I didn't really listen to the service. I was waiting for my cue to approach the podium. I was supposed to stand after Michelle finished reading a passage from the Bible.

Michelle read smoothly and clearly. She was used to it. She read every Sunday in that very church. As she returned to the pew reserved for immediate family, I stood and
began walking toward the front of the church. My high heeled shoes clicked sharply on the slick marble floor.

I organized my papers and felt like I was taking too long to begin. I looked at the people in the church. My family was in the very front pews and there were a few other people scattered throughout the back of the church. As I read, I could feel the weight of what I was doing bearing down on me. I tried to read the eulogy as I would have read anything else I had ever written, confidently and proudly, but my voice was quivering and I couldn't stop it. I was not deserving of this honor.

I closed with a quote from John Irving. I had no comfort or thoughts of my own to offer the people that knew her and loved her. I was ashamed for crying among so many people that truly loved my grandmother, people that believed me as lying through my teeth in the front of a church. I assured them all that they would find evidence of her in all parts of their lives and secretly hoped that one day I would, too.

Suddenly, as I was offering Irving's words of comfort, I felt that part. That specific missing part. And I began to grieve. Only my missing part was not just my Gramma Tucker. I had realized that parts of my entire life were missing. I also realized, for the first time, that my life and family was not disjointed because of anything I had done. I had never been given certain parts of my life though I was expected to claim them. I remember looking out at my family and feeling angry because I was still playing the part
they had assigned me. I was trying to spare them the reality that, through no fault of my own, I had become something that none of us recognized.

*All italicized parts are taken from John Irving's novel "A Prayer for Owen Meany"*
Watching

Music played during visiting hours
but now only atonal beeps of heart
rate and blood pressure with constant
whispers of breath from tubes
connected through her open mouth
that leaks blood and spit and mucus.
No music playing but It's ok Mom.
We're all here. Don't be scared.
We all are. Men stay back
for most of it. Women push
into each other to be closer.
Someone crying because the tubes
are gone. Won't be long now, Mom.
Infection rattles her chest
and makes her torso jerk up
in two slight movements as she
breathes...Hahah...then out
with the rattling. Constant
then pausing then stopping.
Now the sudden beauty of not
breathing. We love you, Mom
and one of them has to sit down
while another half lays down
to hold on to her. My hand on her
belly is waiting for something.
She feels like she always did.
I imagine she grows instantly cold.
We are crying. Even the nurse.
I back away not sure of my role.
I rub backs and squeeze hands
holding clean and snotty tissues.
I gather purses and sweatshirts
to keep things together.
Something I'm waiting for
never comes. I go to the waiting
room happy her cancer is dead.
Confluence

Pittsburgh’s Flood ’04

Rain started and the rivers
abandoned their banks
in search of the Great Steel City.
The Allegheny poured over the grass
of the Point and into the streets
into the shops and homes.
The Mon closed the Parkway
East and West and threatened
to flow over intricate webbing
of overpasses and bridges
as the Ohio bathed the North Shore.
The rivers wanted their city back.

Water infected with sewer, staph,
and city filth touched the glittering
skyline and the new stadiums,
most of the schools, all of the people.
This urban lake with its asphalt bottom
kept bleeding. Boats let loose from their docks
to sail through Oakland’s universities.
Cars floated through intersections,
ignoring traffic signals because
they were under water.

It stopped raining. The rivers
stayed in the streets, drinking
in city life. Finally, thirst
quenched, they eased back
to their banks leaving
their warning on everything
they had touched.

Reminding Pittsburghers
of what the rivers had given
and of what they could take.
My Brother

Maybe it snowed the day or night he was born. My father probably drove Pam, his first wife, to the hospital. He held her hand and gave her crushed ice because women in labor can't eat or drink. Maybe he even passed out "It's a boy!" cigars when it was all over. Maybe no one was there to pass cigars out to. They were young parents. The new grandparents may not have approved. Because they got married only for the sake of the unborn baby. Or everyone was there and everyone cheered at the announcement because the two young people were really in love. They chose my father's middle name for the baby's first. Richard Michael.

For Ricky's first birthday there were probably balloons and toys and family all around. Or, on second thought, times were hard. Pam and my dad were poor and couldn't afford nice things for their son. They would have lived in a little apartment. Over a store or a laundro-mat or something. I always imagine it down on Erie Avenue. The front windows look out over the railroad tracks that split the town in half. When the trains pass the windows would rattle and the floors would vibrate and the baby would wake up and cry. I bet they fought about money and about the same thing that would ruin his next marriage. Dad was probably never around. That's why they divorced. That's why most people divorce. Money and time. I guess there's never enough of either of them.
They fought about money and time for a few years while their son sat on a dirty carpet in a dirty living room with no toys scattered around him listening to them go around and around about not having enough of anything. So, by 1977, when I was born, Dad wasn’t married to Pam anymore.

I didn’t understand that I had a brother because he didn’t live with us. It just didn’t make sense to me. I think I was about four. I don’t have a first memory of him. Just flashes. Like a photo album. We took long trips in the car to pick up this boy that called my mom and dad Mom and Dad. Or Mum. I remember that Ricky called her mum and I hated it. She was mom. M-O-M. He didn’t see the difference. I did, even if I didn’t understand it. But the long trips were fun. I remember I liked them. Mom let us take toys and we would put the back seat of the station wagon down so it was flat and me and my little sister would roll around and play while my mom drove.

We would pick him up from an old lady’s house every time. His real mom’s Mom. Pam was never there. My mom hated Pam. Said she was a bad mother. Probably because Pam wore a lot of makeup and she drank and smoked and she did these things with men in bars. My mom smoked too but not in bars. She smoked at home. At the table, one cigarette after another, with her legs curled up under her. Mom said Ricky deserved more. I didn’t know what more he deserved. I didn’t know what he had to begin with. Maybe he didn’t have enough toys or friends.
Shortly after all of that, Ricky came to live with us. Pam had disappeared one day. Someone called my mom and told her that Pam was gone. Mom went to get Ricky and she brought him to live with us. Pam had joined the carnival that had been passing through and left her son behind in an empty apartment. Ricky was only nine. When my mom got to him he was all dirty and he had very few clothes and no toys. His fingernails were painted. It turned out that Pam had been in an accident before she married my dad and her mental capacity was similar to that of a fifteen year old child. Ricky was like a toy to her. She played with him but she couldn’t take care of him. That’s probably why joining the carnival with all the games and rides seemed like a good idea.

There really wasn’t anywhere for Ricky to sleep at our house. We lived in a three bedroom apartment in a house that my Dad bought from his father for a dollar. It was a big old farm house, over a hundred years old. It was the only house on the block that still had wooden siding. Before my family came to own it, the house had been separated into two apartments. We were living in the first floor apartment and leasing the second floor out to an older woman.

Yvonne was the only person in our family to have a bedroom all to her self.

Carina and I shared the front bedroom and Mom and Dad shared the back bedroom.

Mom said that it wouldn’t be right for Yvonne and Ricky to share a room because they were getting too old. It wouldn’t have been appropriate. Ricky ended up in the
basement of our hundred year old retired farm house. Between the laundry room and Dad’s scary workshop was the only place he fit.

So, it was Mom and her daughter Yvonne, Dad and his son, Ricky, me and my little sister Carina. Mom was only twenty-three and raising four children, Ricky wasn’t even hers. Carina was always sick, Ricky was always in trouble at school—he had been fighting with other kids and starting fires—and I was still in diapers and not eating—because I was jealous of my sick little sister. Mom had her hands full. Dad was around less and less. At least Yvonne was old enough to be helpful. Mom would yell from the kitchen to my Dad, “You’re losing them, Chuck. You don’t even know it.”

Ricky wasn’t always so bad, though. Mom told me about a letter that came for him after he had been living with us for a while. It was from Pam. It was the first contact she had tried to make with Ricky since she left him to fend for himself. Mom kept the letter a secret for several days while she struggled with the decision to give it to him or not. She didn’t open it. Eventually, she decided to lay it on his pillow so he would find it when he came home from school. After she was sure he had read the letter, she went looking for it to see what it said. Ricky’s mom said she was going to come get him and they would move to the beach and eat ice cream and have fun all day long. She said they would swim with dolphins in the morning and watch the sunset over the ocean at night. She
said they would be so happy together. Ricky believed her. That’s when he started acting up. After he read the letter.

Mom still says, “Boy, that Ricky... he was a handful”. She’ll slowly shake her head from side to side and look away from whomever she is talking to.

Ricky began fighting with other boys. After school where the busses lined up. Boys would meet there and fight over the things that boys fight over. He would come home with black eyes and fat lips because he was a bad fighter. Or he was a good fighter and he would come home and we never know that he beat some boy up until the phone call came later that night. I remember that he had these pencils with his name on them. I was really jealous because my name wasn’t common enough to be printed on anything and since it was the early eighties, it was super cool to have your name on things. He took me down to his underground bedroom and showed me these blue sparkly number two pencils that served as both a form of identification and a status symbol. He told me not to tell Mom that he had them because I guess he stole them. Mom eventually found them. Since my parents didn’t make much money none of us kids got an allowance so Mom knew that Ricky didn’t have any money to buy them. She took them from him and they were yelling at each other. After times like this, I would want to go down to his room and play Star Wars but I wasn’t allowed. Ricky had to stay in his basement bedroom alone.
Despite his bad behavior, I loved having Ricky for a brother. I wanted to marry him. I was just little. I didn’t understand things like that yet. He always let me play with him. Matchbox cars, G.I. Joe, Star Wars. And it was always just me and Ricky. He said that Carina played with dolls too much to play boy games with us and since he and Yvonne were in the same grade, they simply couldn’t be friendly with each other in school or at home. Once, someone laughed at me when I told them that Ricky and I were going to get married one day and Ricky defended me. He said that I was allowed to think that if I wanted to. I think, now, that he just needed to feel loved by someone as much as I needed to love him.

Not too much longer after Ricky came to live with us my mom decided that she wanted to leave my dad. She said it was because he was never around and he wasn’t being a good father. She couldn’t take Ricky. She hadn’t adopted him so he wasn’t really hers. She has told me that she wanted to take him. To keep him away from Pam. To take care of him so he would have a good life. But he was a bad kid and he wasn’t hers to take so she left him with my dad.

The day she left, Ricky sat on the porch steps hugging his knees while Mom backed the station wagon packed with her kids, clothes, and toys down the driveway. My dad didn’t know how or maybe didn’t want to take care of Ricky so gave him to someone else because Dad hadn’t learned how to be a father, yet. After that, Ricky was in foster homes all over the state because no one wanted him. Maybe he was happier
with these new families than he was with ours. He seemed like he was. A couple of
times, I went along with my dad to pick him up and the foster families always had really
nice houses and he had a bedroom that wasn’t in the basement. I bet he had dinner at
the dinner table and everyone talked about how great their day was. Maybe he hated
these other families and he sat in his room. All by himself. But he was still doing bad
things like fighting and stealing. I think he was starting fires again, too. So the State of
Pennsylvania put him in a group home for kids that had broken the law. Sometimes my
dad would drive halfway across Pennsylvania to see him. Sometimes Ricky wouldn’t be
there when my Dad showed up.

I don’t know much about Ricky’s adult life. He probably doesn’t like to be called
Ricky anymore. Maybe he’s just Rick now. Or maybe he likes Rich better. But I don’t
know him by those names.

Ricky dropped out of high school. He said he was going to join the National Guard but
you need a high school diploma to enlist so it must have been an excuse. He had a
daughter then he didn’t have a daughter because some girl he was dating cheated on him.
She told Ricky that he was the father when she knew he wasn’t. But we don’t talk about
that.
Ricky was in two accidents. One with a pellet gun when he lost his eye. And one with a four wheeler when he fractured his skull and went into a coma. When he woke up a few days later, he had forgotten how to tie his shoes and how to say certain words.

I bet he had lots of girlfriends when he was in his twenties. I hope he had a lot of girlfriends. I remember the girls liked him when he lived with us. Mom yelled at him one day when school pictures had been handed out. I remember it as the same day our elementary school held a mock presidential election. I voted for Reagan because I thought the other guy looked old like my grampa. Ricky had cut a picture from the sheet of wallet sized photos and given it to the prettiest girl in the class because she had asked him for it. I remember that she was the prettiest girl in his class because her little sister was the prettiest girl in my class. Mom was real mad. She said that she needed to pass those pictures out to family before he could give any to his friends. She probably sent him to the basement for that one.

I want there to be good times for him. Good times with other people. I want him to have gone to movies and dinners with girls that made his hands sweat and his belly fill up with butterflies. I want people to have loved him. But I have an ache in my stomach because I don’t think many people did. Most of the things I know I only know because my dad told me what other people told him. Maybe he is a good man because my father is a good man. Maybe he is a bad man because my father wasn’t always a good father.
I've heard he is a lot like my dad and my dad has lots of friends. Ricky probably drinks beer on the weekends and bums cigarettes off of his friends. But I'm not even sure if he drinks and smokes or not. I can see him at a fire pit. In the woods somewhere in Pennsylvania. I don't know exactly where I picture him because I don't know where he lives. It used to be Holidaysburg but it might be DuBois now. His friends are there at the fire with him or maybe they're not. Maybe he's always alone. Drinking or not drinking, smoking or not smoking.

Ricky finally got married when he was thirty-three. I'm only guessing that he was thirty-three because I know that he was born just more than a year before than my oldest sister and she was thirty one at the time of the wedding. We were all invited. Even my mom and she hadn't seen Ricky for twenty years or more. Ricky even called her Mum when she arrived at the church. She held her tears until after he went on to greet someone else. None of us except my dad had ever met the girl. None of us even knew what kind of girl Ricky likes so we couldn't even imagine her. But my sisters and I traveled back into the mountains to attend his wedding.

It was a strange day, their wedding day. After all it had been a few years since I'd even seen him. He looked good, as they say. He wore a tailored jacket and black jeans. His white shirt had roses embroidered on the shoulders and arms. A stiff black cowboy hat covered his just trimmed hair. I did and said everything that I was expected to do and
say. I hugged my brother when I saw him and it felt unnatural. Like spontaneously hugging the person beside you in the grocery line must feel.

There were lots of people that were happy to see me but I didn’t really know them so I had to pretend that I was glad to see them too after so much time. I have fortunately had a lot of practice pretending so everyone seemed pretty well convinced. We had only been there for about twenty minutes when my sisters and I were shuffled to the basement of the church to have our pictures taken with Ricky and then with his bride whom we still hadn’t met. We were arranged around Ricky and we had to put our hands on his shoulders and our arms around him. I remember wondering if the distance between us could still be seen even though I had my hand on his shoulder. The pictures with his bride were harder. She kept saying that she always wanted sisters and she was so excited to finally have so many of them. I don’t think she realized what kind of family she was getting into. That my sisters and I stuck together and though we can make anyone feel welcome, no one else belongs with us.

The reception was fun. The different parts of the family kept to themselves. Dad’s sisters and their kids, Dad’s girlfriend and her kids and grandkids, all the people from Ricky’s mom’s side, the bride’s family. My mom, sisters, and I sat with our respective dates at a table toward the back. It was a big deal for us to be together. I had driven about nine hundred miles from Iowa to be at this wedding. It was the first time I’d seen my sisters in about seven months. I also just met my mom’s new boyfriend and
they were all meeting my new boyfriend. And my oldest sister, after my urging, finally brought her girlfriend. They weren’t out to very many people, my parents included, and Yvonne introduced her girlfriend as “my friend Ashliegh”. It was a big step for them.

My dad was the Best Man. He wore a tie and the same black jeans that Ricky had on. He looked very handsome. He even shaved and got his hair cut. Two events that seldom happen at all let alone at the same time. He gave a nice speech. I was very proud of him. I liked seeing him and my brother together. It was like seeing someone at two different times in their life. The slope of their shoulders and the stride of their walk. So many things were the same. They sat at the bridal table side by side and they ate and ate and ate.

I danced with my brother. It was still weird to be close to him but it was beginning to feel real rather than forced. I think because Ricky was happy. While we swayed back and forth to a country song that I would normally ignore, I felt that he really was glad that I was there. While that twangy horrible song played, I didn’t have to pretend to be a part of things. I felt hopeful and reassured because it has been hard growing up for all of the Miller kids. For lots of different reasons. Ricky figured out how to be part of family even if he had to make one from scratch. But the song ended like they always do and I haven’t seen Ricky since.
Solo

I was the only one
of my siblings allowed
to go and I was afraid.
I remember the room
as empty but I know
that it wasn't. I could see
her right arm through
the bed's railing,
tiny as I was but limp
and wrinkled with age.
Mom's hands under
my arms lifted me up.
'Go ahead, honey'
and I started to sing.
'A little louder. She's old.
It's hard for her to hear.'

This was the first and only
time I'd see her, as she rested
in her last of many beds.
I worried that I ruined
the song that was supposed
to help her feel better
about dying, if my song
even made sense without
the first few words inaudible
to such tired ears.

Her mouth curved
upward at the corners
as her blank eyes stared
Through me at what no one
else could see hanging
in the thin crisp air
of the hospital.
Leaving Day

Mom, am I coming, too?
No, honey. You have to stay
with your father.

She had packed everything
in the station wagon.
Clothes, toys, kids.
But not Ricky.
He wasn't hers to take.

Standing on the porch
my father built
with his father,
is my half brother.
He begged her
to take him, too.
Stay with your dad.
He needs you.
His eyes behind
wet lashes pleaded,
But you packed
everything else.

Everything but Ricky.
He wasn’t hers to take.
Next Door Neighbor

Her face and hands were wrinkly like my Gram's so I called her Gramma Kay, made her part of our family. We visited her often and would play on her carpets that were softer on our knobby child knees than our smelly old ones at home.

Gramma Kay and Mom sat at the table with coffee mugs in their hands, wisps of cigarette smoke floating elegantly around the kitchen, the kind of kitchen my Mom wanted with a wagon wheel light and saloon style doors, matching cabinetry and smooth linoleum.

I learned later when Mom thought I was old enough to sympathize that Gramma Kay told my mom, helped my mom leave my dad. I loved her for being Mom's friend, hated her for my father's pain, and blamed myself for letting her in.
Gobbler’s Knob

Home of Punxsutauney Phil

Icy bottles of Yuengling
I have wedged between my bare stomach and my jeans aren’t helping to warm me as I wait in line to board A retired school bus at Groundhog Plaza. I stomp my tiny feet until beer I had from the trunk of the car kicks in. Breath steams my mouth when I giggle. We make friends with boys ahead of us. We pass around their flasks now half full of cheap whiskey. I welcome the burn I feel opposite the cold glass in my waistline.

No heat on the bus. The windows are down. I’m warm and happy going around turns, over hills. Everyone predicting what will happen. A frightened groundhog and its sunrise shadow determine the course of the seasons. I have warmed up so much I put money on early spring.

The Knob is frozen mud. We bump off people who bump off of us. Frat boys behind us shed their shirts, spell P-H-I-L with their winter white chests. The crowd magically chants We Want Phil! As the sun breaks over the Appalachians.
Old men in top hats and tails
take the stage. Things happen
quickly, the groundhog is rustled
from his winter sleep. People cheer
as Punxatuany Phil is held high
above the top hats on stage.
I sneak a drink from my bottle
to stay warm for the next six weeks.
Gummy Worm Good Bye

I don't remember what I was doing but I must have been in the way. Mom and Aunt Shirlee had been putting stuff in the new station wagon all morning. Now, they were standing by the peony bush that mom still wishes she had dug up and taken with her that day. Dad says, “Come on, Case” as he takes my hand to pull me with him.

We were headed up to Vito's, the neighborhood corner store. Vito was old but not as old as I thought he was, just older than my parents. He was big and gruff but funny and friendly in a tough sort of way. Like Mel from the TV show “Alice”. He and Dad were friends, I think. They always talked for a while, each leaning on their own side of the counter, cigarettes burning thin ribbons of smoke.

Dad was smoking with his left hand and leading me with his right. This should have been the first hint that today was not like any other day. I had been walking to Vito's by myself for what seemed like years, even though I was only seven. I'd get sent out with empty packs of Bensen & Hedges and Raleighs, Mom and Dad's brands, and money all the time. I'd put the packs and the money on the counter that I couldn't see over and Vito would give me full ones and change. Every time he'd tell me that I was too young to be smoking and since I was too young, too young to get his joke anyway, I'd say,
"Vito, they're not for me. They're for my parents". He'd say, "well, they're too young, too, and you can tell 'em I said that!"

We walked in silence that day, Dad and me. I felt like I wasn't supposed to talk to him, not that we had been talking much lately, anyway. I had always been his little girl, his very first daughter, but he hadn't been around much those last few years. It had been a while since he needed my help fixing whatever mechanical thing he was fixing at the time. I got to hand him tools from the big red toolbox with all the drawers, the one Mom hated me and my little sister to play around because she said it was top heavy. She'd holler from the house "Chuck, you keep those kids away from that tool box!"

He wouldn't yell back. He used his grumblly soft voice to say "No, Case, I need the socket wrench. Remember...the one with the round head that turns?" as I proudly tried to handed him the monkey wrench. "That a girl!" when I finally got it right.

I knew my parents fought even though they were always careful not to yell at each other in front of us. But they just didn't get along anymore. It's hard to hide that. Dad worked in a factory and after dinner, he'd pull a kitchen chair into the living room. He sat in front of the TV with the lights out, the bright colors of WWF Professional Wrestling or M.A.S.H. flickering on his face. I tried to talk to him, to get his attention one night but he didn't seem to notice.
My mom yelled from the kitchen, "You're losing them, Chuck. You don't even know it. One day they won't be there and then you'll regret it. You'll see. Mark my words." He didn't say anything back.

This trip to the store seemed to have some other purpose. I wasn't asking him questions about the why the car that just passed us was so loud or if he thought that it was a good idea to put curtains up in our play cabin. We crossed the street quickly. My little legs trying to keep up with the giant strides of my father. Inside the store, Dad grabbed a Pepsi from the cooler, set it on the counter and asked Vito for a pack of Raleighs.

"Pick out some candy, Case."

Now this was a big deal. First of all, I didn't have to even ask for candy. Secondly, there was big container of gummy worms on the counter. It took me a long time to decide which ones I wanted. Dad and Vito talked about the usual in grown up voices that were naturally tuned out by most seven year olds. Especially seven year olds that were picking out candy. I picked two different worms, one with red ends and a white middle and one with green ends and a red middle. Dad paid Vito and we started our silent walk home.

Mom and Aunt Shirlee were leaning on the car talking to each other. Dad took me inside and sat me at a dining room table that hadn't been there before. I found out later that it had been brought over from the neighbor's house for my dad to use because
my mom had packed our dining room table. The chairs were different, too. I didn’t like them. They looked dirty but I sat in one anyway. Our neighbor, Dan, was my dad’s best friend. He was also a garbage man which to me meant he was dirty and smelly even though he probably wasn’t. His house was full of things he had saved from the piles of garbage he collected from curbsides all over town. I was always afraid to touch anything in his house. I was even a little scared to touch him.

At this new saved from the dump table, I sat still holding my worms which doubled as my new pets because anything edible and shaped like an animal must be played with for at least a few minutes before you eat it. I had been sucking on one of them because I liked how shiny my spit made it when I took it out of my mouth. Dad turned my chair so I was facing him and crouched in front of me. I pulled the candy worm out of my mouth like it was a long piece of spaghetti and set it on the table. Dad didn’t say anything but I knew he wanted to.

“Daddy, I don’t wanna go.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

I don’t think we said anything else to each other. He held me and I cried. Dad pulled me away from him and took his pen from the pocket of the flannel jacket that he wore all year round, one of those blue and black plaid flannels that are quilted and lined with synthetic satin. Dad’s flannels always smelled the same whether Mom had just washed them or not. I remember how he would hold me and I would feel the soft cotton
on my cheek as I buried my face in his neck to smell cigarette smoke, engine oil, and the warmth of safety that only men who are fathers give off.

“Here...”, he said as he took the slimy but shiny red and white worm from my hand. He drew a smiley face on it. “Now what will you name him?”

“Herbie,” after the Love Bug, of course.

“Well, if Herbie can smile then we can, too.”

Dad stood up and cleared his throat with that familiar rumble way and went outside. I set Herbie on the table and quickly ate the red and green worm, the one I hadn’t befriended, and swallowed it hard with that weird bump that sticks in your throat when you’re sad. When I picked Herbie up, he wasn’t shiny anymore. My spit had dried and the combination of moisture and sugar was strong enough to stick him to the smooth surface the table. When I peeled him off, he left a bright red stain. I licked my finger and rubbed at the 'S' shaped stain but it wouldn’t come off. I started to cry again, really hard this time because I ruined Dad’s new table and it was one of the only things left in the room and Dad had to live here alone in this empty house and I didn’t want him to be alone at night or at dinner time. What if he got scared or cold or hungry?

I went outside and Dad helped me get in the front seat of the car where my little sister was already waiting. I don’t remember Carina being around that day until we were in the car together. She was only in kindergarten and was probably with my mom. Mom was really protective of her because Carina was sick when she was a baby. She was
always in the hospital. Carina was sitting there playing with her toys. She had no idea what was happening.

"Ya in?," Dad asked like he always did before he would shut the heavy car door. Through the rolled down window, he told me he’d call later that night and I believed him. I didn’t tell him about the stain.

He walked over to Mom. They talked, but not for long. I couldn’t hear what they were saying. She walked away from him with her arms crossed over her chest and got in the car. Mom backed the car out of the driveway with Dad watching from the porch. I crawled on to the dirty floor of the front seat and cried. I didn’t care that pebbles and pine needles were sticking to my skin and pressing sharp and hard against my knobby knees. I needed to hide.

“I don’t wanna leave Daddy.”

“I don’t either,” Mom said through her own tears. Carina’s skinny little legs were trying to wiggle their way into my space on the floor and I was busy defending my territory.

“Don’t you love him anymore?”

“Yes, I still love him.”

“Then why are we leaving?”

“Sometimes its better when Mommies and Daddies don’t live together,” she said as she signaled to turn the corner at Vito’s and Dad was too far behind to see.
We lived in the next town with my mom's dad and step mom for the rest of second grade and most of the next summer. Grampa Tucker had a pool and a big yard with a big hill and woods behind it. Dad came to visit a lot. Sometimes he would bring us Happy Meals and eat dinner with us. Sometimes he would take to his house for the weekend. He had a drawer full of construction paper, markers, and scissors for us to play with.

I kept Herbie in the drawer of my nightstand for a few weeks. I would take him out and play with him, holding him gently in my hand as if he were real, waving him through the air as I imagined he would slither on the ground. I would slide him around on the surfaces of the furniture. He would jump like a super hero from the back of the couch to the end table to the TV. Sometimes, if I had a pocket on my shirt, I'd carry him around with his smiling face peeking out to watch the same things I was watching. I still liked him better when he was shiny so each time I played with him I would suck on him for a few seconds leaving just his face sticking out of my mouth so I wouldn’t erase it with my spit. I was always very careful not to set him down on anything. I was afraid he might stain something else.

One day, I was sitting on the edge of my bed, my legs dangling over the side, and I pulled Herbie out of the nightstand drawer. I held him for a little while before I put him in my mouth. He was hard and I had to move him around a lot with my tongue before he was as soft as he used to be. I took him out of my mouth and looked him right in the
eyes while I decided that I didn't need him anymore. I put him in my mouth one last
time before swallowing him with that bump I was becoming so accustomed to.
Weekend Visits

Sundays were hard.
Saying good bye
he would hug me
While I cried,
soaking his shoulder
with everything
I didn't have
words for.

He would peel me
away from his chest
and walk to his car.
Driving off, his left
hand would wave
to me over the car's
roof.

Twenty years later
there is much less
crying but his waving
open palm is still
the last thing
I see.
Providing

He stopped hunting
the same year he stopped
being a husband.
I remember asking him why.
He told me, 'Without
Mommy and you kids,
it was just too much
for me.'
Exchange Rate

Dusk at the pick-up point
between Mom's house
Dad's apartment.
We waited in his white
Trans-Am for her headlights
to pull into the almost empty
lot. Blinded for a moment,
he breathed deeply, Your mother's
here, and pushed his weight
into the heavy driver side door.
My sister and I gathered toys
that had kept us quiet
for the two hours to halfway.
Dad was unloading his trunk.
Mom blew cigarette smoke
out her open window.
From Mom's back seat
I saw his tall silhouette against
sunset as he pulled his balled fist
toward his face to stop the tears,
I couldn't see him crying.
Trail of Giants

We camped when they were married
and we camped after the divorce.
Just without Mom.

Dad took us to the same park.
We used the same tent,
played the same games.

Hiked the Trail of Giants
like we always did. This time
he stopped us halfway through
just before we started back down,
our mountain covered in trees
too big too wrap your arms around.

'Tell the judge,' he said.
'when you're twelve that you want
to live with me and not Mommy.'

I was almost nine, Carina just seven.
'Mommy will understand.'
I promised him, like he wanted.

But I was scared sitting on his knee
in the mountains I loved, ancient
trees shading us from summer sun.

He wanted us but didn't know
what to do with little girls.
He didn't know how to French braid.

I was too young to tell him what I needed
him to be. To tell him what was happening
was too big for me

to wrap myself around.
Not long after my parents divorced, Mom started dating. Her first boyfriend, Bob, was the best. He bought us presents and treated us like his kids. He owned a bar outside of town. During the day, when it wasn’t open, he would take us there and turn on the lights and the disco ball. He would play music and let us talk over the microphone. And we got all the soda we could drink.

After a long day of swimming in a near by creek, we went back to Bob’s bar and he ordered pizza. I remember that he played an Air Supply song, “You’re Every Woman in the World,” and he and Mom slow danced around the square dance floor while I did cartwheels around them.

Soon after this, Bob surprised my mom and bought her a house. He asked her to marry him but she said no. He still wanted her to move in to the house with him even though she had rejected him but she said no.

We didn’t see much of Bob after this. Mom started bringing another man around. David. A few months later, Mom packed our things and moved us into David’s house three hours away from our dad.
"I've had sex with two girls now," Davey said as he straightened his clothes. "You and my cousin Mandy. She's a lot prettier than you are though."

I looked at Davey with disgust and, if you can believe it, jealousy. He was my twelve year old stepbrother.

Me, Davey, and my little sister, Carina. Our mom and his dad had just moved in together. The three of us were all close in age so we played together in the woods and in the tree house my step father had built. We had invented some game that was a combination of "House" and "Hunting" or "War" to satisfy both us girls and Davey, the only boy. We would stay outside all day long and play. It was fun and we loved it. It made me and Carina feel like we belonged in this other family's home.

Davey started coming up with reasons for Carina to go off by herself to 'hunt' or something. She always objected saying that it wasn't any fun for her to play alone, she was only nine, but he always convinced her.

The longer our parents were together, the more threatening Davey became. He eventually started hitting us when we disagreed with him. He was a boy and he was bigger and older and we desperately wanted him to like us. He used these times when Carina wasn't around to introduce a new idea into our game. He wanted to pretend that he and I were married. I agreed at first because it was just pretend. Soon, he began holding my hand when we were out on our own 'hunting trips' and he would hug me when we pretended it was time to go to sleep. We would lie down beside each other and
pretend sleep. At first, we only closed our eyes and ‘slept’ for a minute or two before we would get up and pretend that it was morning and we had imagined chores to do. But the ‘nights’ got longer and longer. Carina always did her pretend sleeping far away from us. At Davey’s command she would lay still with her eyes closed somewhere else in the yard.

Hidden in our pretend bedroom, Davey’s hands eventually began to find their way over my body, his fingers found the edges of my clothes and would try to slip under the elastic bands. I wriggled under his weight and tried to stretch my clothes to keep him out but boys are always stronger than scared little girls. He always found a way in, pinching the skin on my chest where I would one day have breasts. He would say, “It’s ok. It’s what grown ups do. Aren’t we pretending to be grown ups?”

I always ended up letting him pretend to be a grown up while I lay under him no longer remaining a child because I was afraid that if I didn’t he would tell on me. He would convince David, his father, that I was doing something wrong and then my mom and my sisters and I would have no where to live. We would have no family and it would be my fault.

Mom and David got married after several years and several break ups later. Three or four different times, Mom packer our things and moved us back to our home town only to move us back into David’s house a few months or even weeks later.
The worst of these break ups happened one summer. I was between the fifth and sixth grades. There was a huge drought all over Southwestern Pennsylvania. We didn’t have much water in the house. Davey and Wendy, David’s daughter, had been staying with us for the last several weeks. Wendy was fifteen or so. We had all just returned home from a picnic. The sun was setting and everyone was hot and grumpy from spending an entire day outside.

Mom yelled at Davey because he was using too much of the little water we had and somehow everyone started fighting. Mom and her kids and David and his. Four against three. Mom slapped David and he hit her back. All the kids were yelling at each other. Wendy hit my mom. Mom ran down the hallway to the back of the house and David followed her, throwing her from side to side so that she fell every few steps leaving dents in the plaster down the length of the hall.

When the fighting stopped, both families retreated to separate rooms of the house. Mom was bleeding from a lot of different places and my sisters and I were trying to take care of her while she explained through the telephone to an old boyfriend, Bob actually, what had just happened. She made arrangements for him to leave right away and come get us and take us back to St. Marys with him. She then sent us to our rooms to pack enough things to last a week or so until we could come back for more.

Carina and I shared a room and we silently stuffed our favorite t-shirts and stuffed animals into the giant duffle bags that David and Mom had received as free gifts for
signing up for some club or something. Carina wanted to pack her toys. I did, too, but I
told her that we would come back for them.

“But what if David won’t let us have them?” she asked me.

“He will. He has to. They’re not his. Besides, Mom won’t let him.” I told her
confidently even though I only half believed it myself.

An hour later, we were waiting in the driveway for our ride when Wendy came
storming out of the house and said that the duffle bags we had packed our clothes in
belonged to her dad and she started pulling them off our shoulders and out of our hands.
She dumped our clothes out on the ground and took the bags into the house. Mom
refused to go back inside and sent me in to ask David if I could have some garbage bags. I
was scared but I did as I was told.

“We need some bags to put our stuff in,” I said. I looked straight ahead as I
walked past them into the kitchen. Wendy started saying nasty things to me about how
white trash should use garbage bags for their clothes but David stopped her.

As I walked out of the house with my arms full of garbage bags and crinkled
plastic grocery bags, David switched all of the exterior lights on so we could pick
everything up. Mom decided that we should start walking. We carried lumpy bags full
of our now dirty clothes and headed in the direction that our ride would be coming from
even though it would take several hours for him to reach us.
We got another apartment in St. Marys. It had dirty turquoise carpeting. The wallpaper in the dining room was left over from the seventies. It was striped orange and green on an ivory colored background. Like the style, the integrity of the wallpaper had not lasted. It was torn and curling at the edges and in some places it was missing altogether and gouged yellow plaster showed through in irregular patches.

Summer ended and I started sixth grade. David visited a lot. Mom seemed to be happy about it but my sisters and I were not. He said he was sorry and that must have been enough for Mom because she moved us back to Greensburg and into David’s house before Halloween.

Settled once again in David’s house, things carried on as they had before. Mom and David fought constantly. My sisters and I were miserable most of the time. Luckily, Davey had grown old enough to create a life for himself that didn’t involve me. He was hardly ever at our house and when he was, he and I spoke very little.

Eventually, I had no actual relationship with Davey. Not speaking to each other was synonymous with not acknowledging what had happened between us. What I didn’t realize was that this lack of acknowledgement was the beginning of a cycle that I would perpetuate for the rest of my adolescence.
Winter in Pittsburgh

There's no ice on the sidewalks but they are frozen. You can tell by the sound shoes make hard hollow like banging metal on metal. People hide necks in their shoulders to keep them from cold that blows over the rivers. Snow falls between buildings with tops hidden high in the gray of January's sky. River's breathe through streets and catch snowflakes that will never touch the ground float up down and up again.

It is always snowing in the middle of the city.
Breakfast

She stares through the kitchen window of our the house isn't really hers.
Built by her new husband and his first wife, it is set back from the road,
she can see trees beyond the yard that must have been so young when the ground had first been broken.

Thirty years old
she is still tiny like a girl.
Legs gathered in to her chest,
she has her old pink night shirt pulled over her knees as she perches on a chair picked out by the first wife.
Her right hand arranges and rearranges numbers,
trying to make not enough money enough money for school clothes and groceries.
Left hand alternates between coffee two creams two sugars and a lit Benson & Hedges.

Kids are waking up.
Waffles she has started for them jump from the red heat of the toaster and start cooling.
She stares still, at air.
Smoking her breakfast.
Food Stamps

I wouldn't touch my mom's food stamps. I didn't want to be poor like her. I wanted all seven years of me to be glamorous and I silently refused to stand in line with her at the A&P. I wanted grown-ups to think I wasn't with her as I took inventory of their carts and pretended to know just where to put the Drumsticks and Handi-snacks in the cupboard at home. Tiger Beat magazines and racks of candy that I couldn't have because my mom was paying with poor people's money. But she'd call to me. Case, get up here. And everyone would know that I was her daughter, my tiny pride trembling with humiliation because she was poor, she was divorced because I was afraid of what that made me.
Shampoo Bottles

I moved in with my dad when I was fourteen, right before high school. I let everyone think that it was because my mom and I fought so much. And we did. Everyone knew that. We would scream at each other. I was mean, nasty to her. I called her names. What still hurts me is the time I called her a whore because she had my oldest sister when she was only seventeen years old. As soon as I said it, I somehow knew how much harm I had done to the both of us with those few words. But I was so angry with her for things that had happened. Things that didn’t happen. And things that shouldn’t have happened.

I was always shy about my body. I was little, I mean really little. My mom had to have my shoes and clothes specially made. In elementary school, kids were relentless with the names they would call me. Shrimp, midget, and dwarf are the ones that stick out most. I didn’t reach a hundred pounds until I was sixteen years old. On top of this, I was a late bloomer. I told my mom that I needed a bra even though I knew I didn’t. What I did know was that once the summer was over and seventh grade began, I would have to change into a uniform for gym class. I would be the only girl without a bra on. I had
visions of the other girls telling everyone and that I would never get a boyfriend because I was so flat that I couldn’t even fill a double A training bra.

It took some convincing but Mom finally agreed to buy me one bra. She took me to the store that we always shopped at for almost everything; Hills, a department store with affordable prices, a.k.a. no brand names. But this time it was ok because no one would really be able to tell that my bra wasn’t from the mall. Unfortunately, I forgot that school was about to start and that most kids, rich or poor, went to Hills for new Trapper Keepers and pencils.

I had hoped to ease into this transition between no bra and bra but my mom took me straight to the underwear department and opened a box that had a white training bra with a little rose between the stretchy triangles of material in it. Then she pulled me over to her and made me put it on over my shirt. I wanted to tell her no but I was afraid that she would change her mind about the whole situation. Just as she fastened it and was checking the fit by putting her fingers under all of elastic straps, one of the Yokopenic girls walked by. She was a year older and wore the kind of clothes that came from the mall. She was also obviously past the training bra stage. Against all of my hoping and praying, she recognized me. I tried to act nonchalant and I rolled my eyes. She didn’t sympathize, like I had hoped. She laughed. Out loud. My mom didn’t even notice. She just kept pulling and adjusting, saying “I think it’s too big.”
David found out that I got my first bra. He started calling me Boobsie Twin.

When I'd walk into whatever room he was lounging around in he'd say, "There she is. There's the Boobsie Twin". Ignoring him made it worse. He started yelling things like "Come here, let me see them little boobies" as he'd reach for me to make me stop so he could look.

David was my mom's third husband. She had divorced my dad, her second husband, when I was in second grade. By the time third grade started, she had moved all of us, herself, me, and my two sisters, into David's house just outside of Pittsburgh. David had been building houses since he was sixteen and did very well for himself. He lived in a large ranch home that was all cedar on the outside. He and his crew built it in the early eighties. I had never seen such a large house. It had four bathrooms. We found out right away that we, my sisters and I, would get to use the best bathroom in the whole house.

We called it the Brown Bathroom. It had ceramic tile on the floor, half way up the walls and on the sink top. Above the tile was golden colored wallpaper that had a very intricate scrolling design in chocolate colored brown velvet. The toilet was disguised as a wooden throne. The arms and back were padded in more velvet. The flush handle wasn't even a handle. It was a delicate chain with a large wooden bead that hung from the ceiling and needed to be pulled gently to flush. The bath tub was a Jacuzzi. It was dark brown and glossy. It sat in the floor like a swimming pool. It was only a little
larger than a standard bath tub but to a couple of little girls it was an indoor pool. There was a window, too. A really big window that was above the bath tub. It was the type of window that was really tall and wide and had the handles that you cranked to ease it open and closed. Dad's house had old wooden windows that were held open with thin slats of wood. We smashed our fingers in those windows more times than I remember.

Mom had been down to visit David several times before we all moved in with him and she had already put curtains up in the Brown Bathroom on an earlier visit that added peach and green to all of the brown. I couldn't wait for my first bubble bath in the Jacuzzi bath tub.

We used to play in the driveway a lot. It was paved and there was a basketball hoop. We'd ride our bikes and skateboards in circles around each other. Mom and David would come out and play with us pretty often. We'd usually play Four-square since the driveway was paved in square sections that were the perfect size. After a day like this, the kids would have to pick up all the toys and things we had been playing with. Mom and David were laughing so I went over to see what was so funny.

David was behind my mom and had his hand under her butt, between her legs. He was lifting her up from under her crotch, just enough that only her toes touched the cement. He pushed her from behind and she skittered along, laughing.
“What’re you doing?” I asked. I was uncomfortable seeing David’s hand between her legs. I was only seven or eight at this time but something told I shouldn’t have seen them like that, David’s hand between Mom’s legs.

“Is fun, Case! Come try it,” Mom said.

“Yeah, come here. I’ll lift you up,” David said as he walked toward me. I was backing away. David kept moving toward me, trying to convince me that I should let him lift me up like that. But I knew I shouldn’t let him so I ran away.

I remember a shirt that Mom bought for me. It was a white ‘v’ neck t-shirt that showed some of my stomach, but not too much. I was only fourteen. I wasn’t supposed to wear it for another week. It was my first piece of clothing from the Junior’s section at Kaufmann’s, a brand name department store in Western Pennsylvania. I finally felt how I imagined the rich girls I went to school with felt everyday. The shirt was meant for the end of the year school trip to a Pirate game at Three Rivers Stadium but I wore it early. The Pirates were really something in the early nineties. I was head over heels in love with number 3. Short stop Jay Bell. I had been to several games that year already but never in a new shirt. I pretended he would see me in my new white t-shirt and fall immediately in love with me, too.

David put his big construction worker hand on the back of my neck and pulled me hard against the front of his body and said, “I can see down your shirt.” I tried to pull
away but I was still really little for my age. Tiny, my mom always said. "Boys like tiny
girls," she would tell me when I would get embarrassed by the children sizes I was still
wearing because they were cheaper and they still fit me when I was a teenager.

"You shouldn't be looking," I said to my mom's husband in the most grown up
voice I could muster. My mom didn't tell her husband that I was right. She didn't pull
me out of his hands and away from him. She said, "Good answer, Case!" and laughed.

I wore an old t-shirt to the baseball game the next week. I put the white 'v' neck
under my bed. I never wore it again.

The fighting between me and Mom peaked when I entered Junior High. That's when I
started to really get ready for school in the morning. The only two showers in the house
were in the master bedroom and the basement. It was David's rule that we were not
allowed to use their bathroom, even though his son who was exactly my age would come
to visit and not have to take baths. And I was not about to go down to the dark basement
for a shower. So, I took a bath every morning before school, not minding that I had to
get up about a half hour early when it was still dark outside.

As the decorative gold plated fixtures poured hot water into the bath tub, I would
sit on plush rug in front of the tub and curl my toes in its soft fibers. It was so different
from the old towels we used for bathroom rugs before we moved into this house. The
bathroom was always cold with all that ceramic tile. After a few inches of water was
swirling in the tub, I'd step down into the steaming water and let it swallow my toes, my feet, and ankles. My pale skin looked so bright against the cocoa brown of the tub.

Every morning I sat there in the water hugging my knees to my chest to stay warm until the water was high enough for me to clean myself up. With three sisters and my mom, there were always tons of shampoo bottles and soaps scattered around the tub. I had my pick of smelling like apples, baby powder, or wild flowers.

When I would wet my hair, I was little enough, or the tub was big enough, for me to lie all the way down in the water with my legs stretched out. Sometimes I would stay like that in the warm water. I'd fall asleep, even, in the warm and muffled world the water created around me.

That window always did make me uncomfortable. It let so much cold air in and when I would sit in the water, I could look up and see spaces of outside because of the way the curtains ruffled. Every other ruffle showed the darkness of early morning that was just outside.

Once, when I was sitting in the warm water waiting for it to get high enough, I looked up at the spaces of outside and I saw a face. It pulled back so fast that I couldn't tell if it was real or not. The usual suspects popped into my mind. Freddy Krueger, Jason, the girl with the scary spine disease in "Pet Cemetery". Then I thought maybe it was one of David's construction guys. They were always outside in the morning getting the equipment they needed for the day's job. But I remembered that the window was a little
too high for even a grown man to look into without a ladder. I blamed my imagination but I started using the almost empty shampoo bottles to push the curtain against the window so no outside came in.

Nothing like that happened for a long time and I eventually fell out of the practice of using the shampoo bottles. My mom had eventually thrown them all away. There were only two bottles left by the tub and they were both full of shampoo and conditioner.

It seems that as soon as I felt safe in the water again, I looked up one morning and there was the face again. The light from inside was bright enough for me to tell that I wasn't imagining anything. It was David. David's face was watching me from the space in the curtains. And he didn't jerk away this time. He looked right at me as I hugged my skinny little seventh grade legs to my chest so tightly that I couldn't breathe. Then he was gone. I scrambled for the old, almost empty shampoo bottles so I could push the curtain against where David's face had been but they weren't there. I jumped out of the tub and covered myself with a towel and sat as far away from the window as I could. I went to school that day without taking a bath.

I began hoarding empty bottles. Or, I would start a new bottle before finishing the old one. I even started filling the empty ones with water for two reasons. It made them heavier because when the weather was nice and the breeze would come through the window, the empty bottles would blow off the sill and I would sit there hugging my
knees to hide myself, too terrified to stand up put them back. But the water filled bottles also tricked my mom into thinking they were still full of shampoo and she wouldn’t throw them away.

One day, I think it was about a year later, Mom and I were in the kitchen. I was helping her clean the house so it must have been a Saturday. She asked me why I didn’t use all of the shampoo in one bottle before I opened another. She asked why I kept the old bottles on the window sill. I looked down and didn’t say anything to her but I could feel her looking at me. I backed down the single step that separated the kitchen from the living room. Moving away from her into the other room I said as quietly as I could, “Because David watches me take my bath.”

She stared at me for a moment, a dirty dish cloth in her hand dripping soapy water onto the newly cleaned kitchen floor, “No, he doesn’t. Don’t you say anything like that ever again.” For once, I listened to her.

David kept watching me through my ninth grade school year. Mom was quick with the empty shampoo bottles now and they were hardly ever there. It got worse as I grew older and rounder and softer. He wasn’t careful anymore. I could hear the metal extension ladder hit the side of the house. I could hear the ladder’s rungs creak and rattle under his weight. Step by step, I always knew when he was coming. I’d I would sit in
the water knowing he was up there watching, hiding as much of self as I could. I hoped that if he couldn’t really see anything he would stop. I learned how to take an entire bath with out ever laying back into the water. I kept my knees to my chest and poured water over myself to rinse the bubbles away while the man who introduced me to people as his daughter watched.

The summer after ninth grade, I moved in with my dad. I told my mom that it was because she and I fought so much, because I hated her. But I mostly just wanted David to stop. My dad brought his pick up and we loaded it up with my stuff and drove away. My sisters told me not to go, to think about it some more, that I was breaking Mom’s heart. I acted like I didn’t care about anything like that. We drove away and I cried so hard that my dad had to pull over so I could throw up.

I finished high school in the same small town that I had been born in. I hardly ever went to visit my mom and sisters. I would go months sometimes without seeing them. What mattered to me was that I wasn’t seeing David. And he wasn’t seeing me. I talked to Carina, my little sister, the most. I remember trying to convince her to move to Dad’s with me because I was afraid David was watching her, too, and I didn’t know how to ask if he was because I didn’t want to know she was going through the same things I had. But she never said anything and she never moved to Dad’s.
When I graduated, I was only seventeen. Mom was angry at my dad for not making me go to college. Since I was still a minor, I had to move back into David’s house because Mom said there were so many more opportunities in Pittsburgh. She made me enroll in the local community college. I never took baths when David was home. I finally had the courage to use the dark and musty shower in the basement. Mom and I still fought.

Carina and I were up late one night talking in her room. She knew I didn’t want to live there.

"Because David looks at me", I said as I stared at the comforter on her bed.

"What do you mean?"

"When I take baths."

Carina didn’t say anything for a minute. I was still staring at the comforter. When I finally looked up, she was crying and I thought it was because she was sad for me but then she said, "Me, too. He watches me, too."

We cried and talked about the times when David said things or did things that he should’ve known crossed the line. About the times when he touched us and he shouldn’t have. About the separate times we had both tried to tell Mom about what was happening to us. How she brushed it off and didn’t believe us. I apologized to her over and over again for leaving her with him.
Mom and David never had a great relationship but they managed to stay together for eighteen years. Things were really bad toward the end. They probably should have divorced years before they did. One night toward the end of their marriage, Carina, my mom, and I were sitting at the kitchen table. I was nineteen at the time. We were telling ‘remember when’ stories and laughing. Until Mom brought up the shampoo bottles.

“Remember how you kids would put all those empty bottles on the window sill in the Brown Bathroom? I always thought that was so funny. Why did you girls do that?”

I couldn’t look at her but I didn’t hesitate. “Because David watched us take baths.”

She stopped laughing and looked at my sister. Carina answered the question that was hanging on her face.

“Yeah, he did.”

“You should’ve told me. I would have done something about it.”
Lovely Before Dying

The sun had just fallen below Center Street. Silhouettes of smoke stacks and hard sharp corners of factory buildings stood black against pink sky. Air stiff with cold October.

Nathan had a crush on me. Said, Cassandra You look lovely tonight. I said, Thank you sir.

He looked at him and said, Doesn’t she look lovely Paul?

Paul took my hand and said, Yes...lovely. Then he bowed and I played at a curtsey.

Nathan pushed him and they were fifteen year old boys again.

Eight days later Paul was dead. I haven’t been lovely since.
Young Paul's Old Room

She is in the doorway
unmoving.
It’s storage now.
She changes the sheets
that will not be slept on.

She washes dinner dishes,
one setting less.
She cooks too much food.
Graveside Banter

He tells me what he was thinking as it got harder to breathe. That he wanted to put his feet down but it was too much to stop kicking. He tells me he thought of his mom, hoped she wouldn't cry too much at his funeral,

for his dad to hold her hand if she did. He tells me that he thought as the mechanics of his throat caved under the pressure and air was around him but not in him. He knew what was happening as his kicks became shuffles and his face got hotter and hotter. He tells me the thought that dying was scarier than living.
Rossetti

I'd do it at night
so we could be alone.
The fiery red lacquer
of his casket would be
long burnt out.
I'd put my foot on the side
of the box that hides the lower
half of his body to brace myself
so I could force the hinged lid
open. Most of his skin
would be gone. His soft blonde
hair turned to woolen wire.
I'd ease him out, dance
with his corpse. We'd get dizzy
from turning, twirling.
Moonlight plays like confetti
sparkling on tombstones.
He'd tire quickly, want to rest
So I'd put him back being watchful
of any parts of his brittle body
that may have broken off
during our dance. He'd say,
You look lovely tonight,
as I lowered the lid, the slice
of moonlight on his face
getting thinner and thinner.
I'd polish his casket.
I'd shovel half the dirt in
before I pushed him back
into the ground so I won't
have to dig as long the next time.
Paul’s Woods

The cemetery forgotten
under the shade of pine,
maple, oak. Hundreds of years
from now, it’s once sunny
hillside swarms with underbrush.
Headstones without places,
perennials grow rampant
in patches of sunlight.
Someday, an oak will reach
pull his body through its veins,
alive again. The sun
will shine on the thousand
leaves of his face.
My mother and I were painting smoke stained white walls a shade of pink that was so light I could barely tell we were using paint. It was easy to miss a spot if you weren't careful. "I was pregnant with you, Case, and this woman kept calling the house. Sometimes in the middle of the night." I concentrated on the patch of wall in front of me as she spoke. I don't know how the subject came up but it did. Maybe because Mom needs to be the favorite.

"She was pregnant, too, and she said it was your dad's. And he went to her every time, that son of a bitch. In the middle of the night. She'd call crying about how she was pregnant and alone. He'd leave me at home and go to this woman."

Maybe she thought I needed to know. I let her keep talking because lately I was trying to feel out the ground between being mommy's little girl and my mother's daughter. I was about twenty two or three and fighting my way through a succession of failing relationships of my own. I just kept on painting light pink over smoke stained white. I acted interested, even tried to provide some sort of insight when she paused in her telling. But what was I to say? She was my mother, not my friend.

Earlier in this same week, I had volunteered to help my mom paint the walls in her living room, the one we really only used at Christmastime. I thought it would be a
perfect time for me to ease my way into a conversation about the most recent problems I was having with my boyfriend. But she wasn’t getting the hints I was dropping. Mom was volleying back and forth between wanting to divorce her third husband and wanting to stay with him. She had just moved back in with him after another one of her ultimatums seemed to have worked. That’s why we were painting. There was no furniture in the room and since one of Mom’s stipulations was that David quit smoking, painting over the nicotine covered walls seemed like the right thing to do.

So, Mom was preoccupied with trying to hold her own marriage together and she dominated our conversation. She would say things like “David says he’s really going to try to make things better this time...” or “David says he’s finally going to start wearing his wedding band...”

Opportunities, I thought, to mention similar situations that existed in my relationship. I braced myself for baring the secrets of my personal life and tried to shift the momentum of the conversation with phrases like “Yeah, Ryan does that, too.” But she never caught on and I was never good at directly asking for help. After twenty years she was no better at picking up my clues. I was beginning to realize that our day of mother-daughter bonding was not going to focus on me.

My history of relationships with men was anything but smooth. I was engaged at twenty to a man that turned out to be an abusive alcoholic and a compulsive gambler. I had just
woken up the morning Barry proposed. I didn't cry or say yes, even. I nodded my head. Things were already hard for us but I wanted so much to be a part of something, a part of a family. I thought that if I started from scratch, I could create the family that I had always wanted, needed. Even though the proposal was lacking in every way, no bended knee, no candles, no ring, I believed that this could be the beginning of something better. Even when he suggested I pay for my own engagement ring I took it in stride and agreed.

A few weeks later, the bank called to inform me that I had bounced a check. I argued with them and insisted there was some mistake. But there wasn't. Barry had borrowed money from me behind my back to pay a gambling debt. Stupidly, I told him to never do it again. He promised me he wouldn't.

Three months later, Barry sat on the edge of the bed and began confessing to me that he was sick. He admitted that he was gambling and that he didn't think he could stop. All of his money was gone. All of my money was gone. My credit cards were maxed out because he had taken cash advances from every single one of them. I had no idea any of this had happened because he had recently taken over the finances so I could concentrate on school. Barry cried as he told me all of these secrets. He expected me to forgive him, again. Part of me wanted to. I wanted to help make things better for him even though I would be making them harder for myself but somewhere inside of myself I was able to find the voice I had wanted to speak with for so long. I calmly told him to put as much of his stuff in his car as he could and go stay with his brother. We would set
up a time that was convenient for me to get the rest of his things out of the apartment. I remember the total disbelief on his face.

It was, coincidentally, New Year's Eve, the new millennium was about to break wide open. Since the plans Barry and I were obviously cancelled, I called my friends and told them what had happened. They were all together and already getting dressed up, drinking champagne, and just being girls. I cried into the phone as I gave them a truncated account of things. I wasn't crying because I was sad. I was scared. I knew it and my friends knew it. My problems with Barry were never a secret I kept from them.

I knew I was in a bad spot and I knew no one could help me fix it. I needed several thousand dollars to pay off Barry's debts. I knew it would take me years to be free of him. I had decided to stay home and be alone, ring in 2000 by myself. My friends wouldn't let me and soon I was right where I needed to be, toasting in a new year and a new part of my life.

By March of that same year, I was dating this guy, Ryan. Red hair, blue eyes. He played basketball and football in high school, starting quarterback. He was a college graduate and was up for a huge promotion at his office. He took care of me. Dinner, movies, gifts. He would even take me and all of my girl friends out for drinks and insist he pick up the tab. He had an older brother and his parents were still together. He grew up in a two story house with an in-ground swimming pool in the back yard. He was a 'catch', as they say. And he really was perfect. Unfortunately, I wasn't. Beyond the
anger I was still harboring from my relationship with Barry, I hadn’t even realized that there was a whole other level of me. The level that has been resting just below my actual life. The level that contained emotions from my childhood that I was only now beginning to grow mature enough to process.

Ryan and I had been together for about a year. After Barry, you’d think I was in prime condition a guy like Ryan. When he had brought up the topic of living together, getting married. I went along with him but I had so many doubts about myself. I thought I wasn’t good enough for him but I had no idea why. I had even let another guy believe that I was single and I welcomed his advances so that I could sabotage things with Ryan and have a reason to break up with him. No girl in her right mind would give him up. But I was about to.

Dad has never spoken to me of this other pregnant woman, the possible half sister. My parents had been married for a few years in the late seventies when these phone calls began. The real time line of it all is blurry, though. Mom and Dad have different stories and different dates for their stories. I have been told the date of my parents’ wedding but I have not retained it. I do remember seeing wedding pictures, though. Nothing professional, just snapshots from someone’s camera. Dad has thick shaggy hair the same color as mine. His sideburns and moustache are full and his upper lip is hidden by the sun-kissed blonde fringe that tickles it. Mom’s dark brown hair is long, shiny, and
straight, parted in the middle. She is wearing a frilly yellow sundress and a hat with a large brim. She is tiny beside her new husband and they are both young and fresh looking feeding each other wedding cake with one hand and holding burning cigarettes with the other. I have only seen them that way, happy and together, in these pictures.

I don’t know if my parents got married before or after I was conceived and normally it wouldn’t matter but I’m pretty sure it works out that they were married a few years before I was born and that my dad must have cheated on my mom. Or maybe they married because my mom was unexpectedly pregnant and I was never told this because they were afraid their being married under circumstances less than ideal would have some negative effect on my development as a human being.

According to Mom, these phone calls from the McDermott woman went on for a while. Dad left their bed to go to the crying woman on the other end of the telephone line. Sometimes he wouldn’t come home until the next morning.

“He started peeing blood, too,” Mom went on. “I never said anything. I guess he went to the doctor because it eventually stopped. I was too pregnant to have sex with him so I didn’t care. I just wanted those phone calls to stop.”

This woman was such a part of my parents’ life that Mom even knew the other baby’s name even though she couldn’t say for sure if the baby was Dad’s or not. Dad had always been secretive about certain things so he probably wouldn’t have told her
anyway. Mom didn’t work so Dad managed the money. She never would have known if Dad was paying to raise another child.

* * *

“Are you ready for more coffee?” Mom asked me as she climbed down the step ladder.

I finished the still hot coffee I had in my mug and said “Yeah, always.”

I handed her my mug and she headed for the kitchen.

“I think she had a little girl. I’m pretty sure she named her Olivia. Do you want to try this new flavored creamer I bought?” Mom’s voice traveled from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I’ll try it. There was an Olivia in my class. Olivia McDermott. Her locker was near mine.”

“Oh, yeah? What’d she look like?” I told my mom that Olivia had long black hair, that she had hazel green eyes, that she looked trashy even though she was just a kid when I knew her. It was well known throughout my high school that she wasn’t any where close to being a virgin.

“That was probably her. That’s what her mom looked like. Mountain trash. Small world.”

I couldn’t tell Mom that I had always thought Olivia was beautiful. That I thought she was womanly. She had older boyfriends and she seemed so mature to me. Olivia was mysterious to me. I would watch her sometimes, watch the way boys would flirt with her. Boys flirted with me, too, but not the way they did with her. And she
didn't just giggle like I did. She was coy and sexy. She knew, even though she was only fourteen, how to tease them, drive them crazy. I was cute and little and shy. Boys wanted to hold my hand and pass me notes. They desired Olivia. Now, I can't help but wonder if all that spying on her and envying her was rooted in some deeper connection. Like the connection I have with the women that I know are my sisters.

As my mother spoke to me like I were friend of hers, as if she couldn't possibly know the effect this bit of old time gossip would have on me, I remembered that I had once secretly wished Olivia and I were friends. I now wondered if the shade of her eyes matched the green of mine.

Watching Mom meticulously apply the paint to the corners and edges of the room, something she had always taken pride in, I spared her the realization that this new found knowledge would forever disrupt the fragile balance of my identity. I wondered if I should find Olivia. Find her and be her sister. Or if I should keep pretending, like Mom was.

I eventually ended things with Ryan. I dragged the breakup out for six months or so. I didn't want him as my boyfriend but I still needed him to love me. I needed him to be hanging just on the edge of my life so I could come back to him when I figured myself out.
I started dating that other guy, Tim. My relationship with him would come to tie with my disastrous engagement to Barry for first place in the category of the worst decisions ever. I actually started to let Tim in to the details of my childhood only to give him fuel to control me. Because I had come to believe that my failure in long term relationships was all due to my inability to be honest about things that had happened to me and to my family, I told him everything. The divorces, the fighting, the half dozen times we moved and switched schools, the abuse I endured at the hands of other boyfriends, my step father, and my step brother. Unfortunately, this strategy would only have worked if I were also ready to confront that these things actually happened.

Tim used my past against me. His favorite way to hurt me was to call me, my sisters, and my mom a bunch of white trash whores and then express his great pity for my father. He could convince me that I was disgusting and that I was lucky to have him in my life. I even begged him, more than once, not to end our relationship. I moved in with him after only a few months and moved out less than a year later. And, true to my primary example of the way not to solve relationship problems, I let him move into my new apartment only to watch him move out six months later.

Again, I would drag things out for several months longer than necessary and endure his violent tantrums that, on several occasions, left us with broken furniture, bruises, and calls to 911.
One night, when we weren’t living together, we were fighting. I don’t remember about what because we really fought about anything we could fight about, and he threw me out. Because he had picked me up earlier that evening, I didn’t have my car. It was a rainy spring night and I didn’t have a jacket to wear or even shoes on my feet because Tim had pushed me out the door before I could grab them. My cell phone was still inside, too. So I pounded on the door and I screamed for him to let me back in. That I was sorry. He eventually threw the door open and I stumbled in because I had been leaning on it. He manhandled me out again, squeezing the soft flesh on my upper arms and pushed me down on the wet concrete path that led up to the townhouse. He had my shoes and my phone in his hands and as I stood up to take them he hurled them over his head into the field that stood opposite of the front of the building.

“You’d better find your phone fast to get a ride cause I just called the cops on you. I gave them your name and they’ll be here looking for you any minute.” His silhouette boomed down at me from the lighted doorway.

“Tim...wait. I’m so sorry...please...,” but he closed the door on me and switched off the outside lights, leaving me in the dark. It was too dark to find my shoes and even if I could have found my phone it was probably ruined from the rain. I stood there barefoot for a few minutes, before I decided that, shoes or no shoes, I had to walk somewhere. I started past the row of townhouses. One of the neighbors’ doors open up
to me, spilling warm yellow light onto my cold wet feet. A woman, a little older than
me, came out with a towel and hurried me inside.

"Come on. Everything's ok. I'm Tina. We'll get you cleaned up." I hadn't
realized that I was bleeding from falling down on the sidewalk. I also had bright red
welts on my arms where Tim had grabbed me. Tina put her arms around my shoulders
and led me inside.

She introduced me to her boyfriend, Brad. I should have been embarrassed but
there was no room left in me for it. I needed their help so I handed myself over. Tina
said that they had heard the whole fight and that it wasn't the first time, either. She
showed me the bathroom where she had put out some bandages and peroxide and a
clean, dry t-shirt. I washed the blood off my knees and elbows and changed my shirt. I
threw my wet one in the garbage. It had ripped at some point and I didn't really care
what happened to it, anyway. After I had calmed down, I went back downstairs. Tina
was sitting on the couch. Brad was leaning against the wall. I sat down and Tina gave
me a blanket and a cup of tea. I used their phone to call my mom and ask her for a ride.
I waited there, not speaking until Mom showed up.

That day, as we painted, I bit my lip and held other stories like this one inside of me
because Mom wanted to talk through her problems, not mine. I didn't ask her what I
should do or what I should say because she was asking me those questions.
“Did I make the right decision, Case?” she asked. She was looking for my approval when I was looking for guidance she couldn’t give me because she had never learned from her mistakes, the same mistakes I was beginning to make. I answered her as best I could while I focused on the blurry lines between old stains and new paint, trying to paint the brighter color over the stains of the past but the lines between them were becoming too difficult to see.
From the Fire

The light from the fire
and his hair is not graying.

The heat feels like sun
burn on my bare legs

That are curled up in front
of me. Light from the fire

and his face doesn’t startle
me with age I forget he has.

Life lets go his smile
in the fire’s light

and he is younger
than he has ever been.

Warm and earthy
is the smell of the fire

the smell of my father.
I blink over and over.

Sometimes it is
too much to bear.
Freckles

I had lots of freckles
when she left my dad,
her second husband.
They were scattered across
my nose and sprinkled
on my knee caps,
Tawny colored and reaching
for something.
Each summer I got more
of the ugly brown spots
that no one else seemed to have.
They dotted my arms and traveled
from my left shoulder to my right.
I had hoped they would relent
a little during college.
I already thought I had too many.
I stayed inside but they kept coming
like ants at a picnic,
crawling on my chin
and nesting on my upper lip.

She left her third husband
after eighteen years.
told me that she and my dad
didn’t have a bad marriage,
that she gave him papers
to sign instead of a reason.

I have more freckles than ever now.
They’re darker and closer together.
Sprawled on the backs of my hands
and retiring on my chest and thighs
because there aren’t many
vacancies anymore.
She’s seeing someone now,
before the third set of papers
are even signed.
I might be lucky enough
to have a third dad
and I'll have millions
of new freckles.
And maybe, someday,
I'll be all filled up.
My Grandmother's Eulogy

I wrote something that wasn't
worthy of the woman I didn't know.
I was afraid her children would see
through my words to the Catholic
that I wasn't, know that it had been
years since I had visited her tiny
apartment at the High Rise.
I looked out at the people I had never seen
and didn't know why they were so few.
I read as if I deserved to be the one telling
them what they knew her to be.
I focused on the sound of each word
I had written because I had only heard
them the day before when her children
sat around cups of instant coffee, smiling
through their memories. I read on and on
wanting to be one of them. Wishing I had kept
the birthday cards stuffed with two dollar bills.
My voice quivered and my eyes blurred
because I knew I had been loved.
Catching Clams

Saltwater peels itself
back from already wet sand

pulling with it clams the size
of my baby toe’s nail.

Stumbling down with the tide
they catch on something
too small for me to see.
wiggling transparent bodies

out of the crack between its shells
they slide beneath the beach

leaving only a sandy bubbling
pit. I watch you through my hair

blown wild by the salty wind
of sunset as you try to scoop

them up before they burrow
too deep. Try after try

your hands come up full
of sand and you smile at me.

‘Almost got that one,’ you say,
already pulling up more.
Middle Child

I have read somewhere that every member of a family subconsciously assumes a role that is meant to contribute to the overall dynamics of the family. Like every other child, I was born into the role of 'the baby', a very coveted spot. Soon, before I was ready, I was forced to relinquish my reign and step down into the realm of 'the middle child' even though I was still only able to identify myself as 'the baby'.

I don't remember but just after I was born I'm sure my family called me 'the baby' almost as much as, if not more than, they used my name.

"Can I hold the baby?" my older sister said.

"Don't wake the baby!" Mom yelled when things got noisy.

"My little baby girl..." Dad whispered as he held me.

Like many babies, my reign only lasted so long. About six months after I was born, my family was expecting another baby. I suppose it's hard for any child when someone comes in to the picture to claim your spot as 'the baby'. Especially when there is no way for the child who is no longer 'the baby' to verbalize let alone comprehend the feelings brought on by such a shift in family dynamics.

...
Carina was born in seventy-nine. Just six months into my own existence, instantly making me a middle child. Carina was very sick. Always in and out of the hospital. Had we lived centuries in the past, she would have been at the mercy of Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Carina was born without the instinct to suck. She couldn’t take a bottle or our mother’s breast. My mom has told me stories about how she would have to squirt formula into the little target of Carina’s mouth. Unfortunately, this wasn’t a perfect solution. Since it was so difficult to feed her, Carina was always hungry so she always cried. She never slept through the night.

After many months of this, she was underweight but ready to move on to jarred baby food and eventually solids. A milestone, it must have seemed. My parents were still worried about her, though, because, on top of all of the feeding problems, Carina wasn’t speaking. She could make noises, just not words. And when she ate, Carina often pounded on her abdomen just under her ribcage. It was discovered that she was having pyloric spasms. The muscle at the opening of her stomach locked shut and food would begin to back up in her esophagus, slowly choking her. These spasms were related to her inability to suck on anything. Carina’s doctors had recommended she attend a special school called “Crippled Children”. Specialists realized that Carina was born without much control of the muscles in her throat and her tongue. She began taking classes at her new school.
The goal was to teach Carina how to move her tongue so she could both speak and eat. One exercise she had to do daily was to eat a spoonful of peanut butter. She was told to put the entire spoon in her mouth, like a lollipop, and figure out how to move her tongue in a way that cleaned the spoon of all the peanut butter. I remember this happening. Mom gave her spoons of rich creamy peanut butter and I complained until I got one, too. I thought they were snacks. I never realized it was a sort of homework for Carina.

Despite the encouraging words of Carina’s doctors and specialists she was considered disabled. They said she would never speak or have any sort of physical coordination. Never learn to skip or jump rope. They told my parents she would be in special education classes her whole life. My mom was actually trying to teach us sign language because doctors said that would be the only way we would be able to communicate with Carina. I remember the big hard cover book Mom had checked out of the public library. It was Sesame Street themed and geared toward children. Big Bird was shown signing with the full color pictures of real people. Mom says that we all tried to learn the different shapes we were supposed to contort our hands and fingers into. All of us but Dad. I know she still holds that against him over twenty-five years later.

I was still young, maybe three years old, when all of this was happening with my little sister and my family. I couldn't have possibly understood the situation. I was jealous of the ‘school’ Carina went to. It was full of toys and it even had a playground.
with swings and a jungle gym behind it. My school, South St. Marys Street Elementary, only had a grassy area that we got to run around in sometimes.

I stopped eating everything but peanut butter and butter sandwiches for so long that I eventually got to see a doctor, too. He said something like “as long as she’s eating, she’s fine.” I didn’t get to go to Carina’s special school but I did get as many sandwiches as I wanted. I was very particular on how they were made. I liked the peanut butter to be put on the bread first, then the butter. I could tell if Mom did it right by peeling the two pieces of bread apart. I would look for pools of bright yellow in the swirls and ridges of thick peanut butter. I kept it up for almost a year. I remember my mom pleading with me.

“Just one bite of spaghetti, Case. You used to love it. When you were a little baby, remember?” But I still wouldn’t eat.

I have seen the pictures of me in my high chair. They are now yellowed with age but my head of shiny blond ringlets is unmistakable. I’m face-down, sound asleep in a plate of noodles and tomato sauce. She said that every time she made spaghetti for dinner I would fall asleep in my cut-into-bite-sized noodles even though they were my favorite.

Between me refusing to eat and Carina not knowing how to eat, Mom couldn’t have had much free time. Those times when I would shake my head and purse my lips to keep food out of my mouth, I imagine Mom looked at me the same way she looked at
Carina. Frustration and worry hanging on her like a perfectly tailored suit that she wore it as well as she could.

All I really wanted was to be 'the baby' again. I wanted Mom to make choo-choo sounds and airplane motions when she tried to feed me. I wanted to be able to sit in the little baby carrier that Mom lugged Carina around in even though I tried to fit in it once but I was too big. Again, there is proof of this in photographic form.

My new role as the middle child is that of the peace keeper, the one that holds things together by involuntarily sacrificing their own emotional comfort for the good of the family. Middle children are like glue or hinges that stretch and bend whatever way everyone else in the family needs them to go and they learn very early in their lives to do this instinctively, without ever being asked.

I can see evidence of this in my own experiences, maybe because it really is there, or maybe because I need something to help me rationalize the many paths my family has wandered, to help me fill in my missing parts and hold myself together now that I've learned the hard way that my family is something I will never be a part of. I have learned that my family is a part of me and I am one part closer to being whole.
Things

My mother used to dress me and my little sister alike. Always in the same outfits. Just different colors. We were born fifteen months apart and we were both very tiny as children. Perhaps we were like twins to her.

Mom would ask me which set of t-shirts and shorts I wanted and I could never decide. I could always find a reason to want or to not want both sets. The pink was pretty but my brother would say it was too girly. The yellow was too bright but it was my favorite color.

The truth was that I wanted both sets. Not because I was greedy. I was afraid that if I chose the pink set over the yellow I would wind up needing the yellow set for something and be in trouble because all I had was the pink one. The reasons why one color would be more necessary to my survival was never clear to me, though this hesitation and indecisiveness would become two of the most consistent and defining traits of my adult self which would bloom into a puzzling form of possessiveness.

I like my things. I always have. I need them around me. I have not always understood this strange trait I posses. I may still not understand it.
I don't often lose things. Many times I have impressed myself by being able to locate the most inconsequential item in a matter of minutes. My boyfriend likes to use my fingernail clippers to trim his toenails. He never puts them back where they belong which is in the pretty green box that holds all of my nail polish, files, cuticle lotions, polish remover, and cotton balls. The box is always neatly tucked under the foot of my bed. I have learned to pay attention to where he uses the clippers and to where he sets them down, which is never inside of the pretty green box that is tucked neatly under the foot of the bed.

I also don't lend my things to other people. I'd rather spend my time burning them a CD or buying them a book than risk one of my possessions. This is partly out of fear of losing them and partly because I need to know where they are at all times. In the case I should need something specific and at the same time very random, I need to be able to get to it in a matter of seconds. For this simple and, to me, very rational, reason, I do not like to share. Yes, I learned all about sharing in kindergarten, just like everyone else. And I was ok at it, at first. As I got older and began accumulating things of my own, purchased with my own money and cared for and maintained by me, I became protective of my belongings. I was always cleaning them and I was very attentive to them. No one smoked in my home or my car. There was no eating while sitting on my new couches. No shoes were worn on my carpets. The one exception the shoe rule was if you had particularly smelly feet. I'd rather follow you around with a bottle of Resolve
carpet cleaner than worry about foot odor seeping into my carpets and furniture. I became very particular as to how my things were used and when they were used. Even where they were kept and how they were kept. Everything belonged somewhere and that gave me great comfort.

Eventually, life on my own gave me the freedom to arrange and rearrange my things according to my comfort level. When I became overly stressed, I would clean and straighten and resituate my things and eventually I would feel calm. I could rearrange a room in an hour or two and somehow have a new perspective on life. Or, if I had been having trouble sleeping, I would move the bed to another wall and then I would get the best night’s sleep I’d had in a long time.

When I was at ease and all of my furniture had a new position in the room, I would often look around and admire how organized and perfectly angled all of my belongings were. Books were on shelves according first to height and second to genre. Hardbacks were separate from paperbacks. CD’s were all in their respective cases and alphabetized. Picture frames were staggered so their subjects could all be viewed at one time from the frequented places in the room. Pillows were fluffed. Curtains were evenly ruffled and there wasn’t a speck of lint on the carpets. Only when all of this was accomplished could move on to something else. And these requirements applied only to the living room, of course. Each room had its own unwritten list of necessary tasks.
Roommates have been very trying for me. I do an excellent job of hiding my possessiveness, at first. I always volunteer all of my furniture because I could not bear to not see my couches on a regular basis. I let people think that my things are your things, make yourself at home, but as I see them getting comfy on my couch and covering up in my blankets I reach a level of anxiety that is seldom rivaled. And using my coffee mug, well you may as well be wearing my underwear for as personally as I take it.

I'm not often vocal about my attachment to my belongings. I'm pretty embarrassed about it, actually. I know it's not exactly normal. Looks of confusion and many, many arguments have taught me to silently protect my things. I have even taken to hiding thing that I don't want other people to use. For example, I am hopelessly addicted to coffee. I own three stainless steel travel mugs, one of which I use almost every day of every week. My current roommate also drinks coffee. I have over looked the way she abuses my coffee grinder and my coffee maker. Until she began using my travel mugs. At first, she asked to use them and she brought them back the same day. Then she began using them, without asking, and leaving them in her car. One morning I brewed my coffee and was getting ready to head out the door when I realized that none of my coffee mugs were where they were supposed to be which is on the top right hand shelf of the second cupboard from the left. An argument ensued later that day and she eventually bought her own travel mugs which she always left in her car. Instead of walking out to her car to get her own and she started using mine again. Once I was able
to regain possession of two of my mugs, I kept them hidden on a shelf in my bedroom. It has become a horrible cycle that causes me much anxiety but I am forced to deal with it.

Looking back on the course my life has taken, this possessiveness is not all that surprising. I have realized through much self analysis, which is the most reliable kind, that my belongings are so important to me because I can control them. I know where they are. I know that they will be there when I need them, if I need them, and they will never let me down. Through this knowing, I am left with nothing less than a sense of peace that has been missing from my life for too long.