One Choice

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One Choice

story by | AMY THELKE

He looks exactly the same. His sandy blond hair cut ruthlessly short; its natural wave hacked close to his skull to keep the strands stick-straight. The moustache I remembered tickling my own lips grows thick and bushy, a straight edging of goldish brush along his upper lip. Skinny with a little belly beginning to poke out over his tight jeans, cowboy boots sticking out like a joker's shoes, he stands in front of our house. My mom is tight-lipped; her eyes wet and angry. Katie, Ben and I stand beside her, upset and uncertain. Why, after four years of no contact, is he back in Iowa, wanting to take us home with him for the summer? We all know he has had this right since the divorce, but he never wanted it until now. Inside the Caravan's tinted windows I can see the silhouette of my stepmother, stubbornly facing forward.

"Sandy, can't you do something?"
"I'm sorry, Dean, this is hard for him."

My mom tries to console Ben. She attempts to unwind his arms from around her neck but he refuses to let go. My dad cannot touch him. Finally, she looks at me, begging.

"Amy, can you come take him?" Her voice is wavery and angry, too. She is still crying. I climb out and pry my brother off. For a six-year-old he is strong, wiry and stubborn. At ten, I am barely strong enough, but I manage to pull him away and climb into the van, his little body clinging to mine.

He cried all the way through Missouri.

Texas has a heat you cannot describe. Heavy with humidity, drenched in sweat, it smotheres the breath. The green grass and oak trees of Iowa are transformed into brown, dried-up straw and spiky palm trees. No cornfields stretch towards the horizon; it's all dust and dirt down here. When we finally get to the house, ugly black bars greet us at all the doors and windows; McAllen has a high crime rate.

"Sorry about the smell, guys, we had to bug bomb right before we left." My dad is struggling to prop open the door, carry our suitcases and turn on the light. We are all half-asleep, the 13-hour car trip having lulled us into a daze. Trooping in, we stand in the center of the living room. This is not our home; we don't know where our rooms are. My dad strides around, jerking windows open...
open, flipping on ceiling fans. My little brother's eyes are red and tender; he is clinging to my arm. My stepmother, Irma, looks even more tired, her thick black hair frizzling into a cloud around her head.

Her accent is musical, stretching out some sounds, cutting others short. She shows us our rooms and goes to her own, shutting the door behind her.

Unpacking, the stale chemical scent of the house burns my nostrils. My tongue feels oily, and I cannot stop spitting. I want to go home. That night, we all three sleep together, Ben crying intermittently. I wonder, before I drift off to sleep, if the chemicals will kill us during the night.

We go across the border a lot since McAllen is only fifteen miles from the Rio Grande. I like to say the river's name, trying to roll the 'r's like Irma does. My dad drives an Explorer now, and the leather sticks to the back of my legs. It takes so long for the heat to dissipate inside the car, I feel sweat making my thighs slick against the seat. Waiting to cross the border, I stare at the other cars. Some are pulled over, men in uniforms going through their trunks.

"What are they doing, Pop?" I cannot call him Dad. I feel like doing so would betray my stepdad, Jim, because I have always called him Dad. He is my dad; he has raised me in the long years Dean was absent. So I settled on Pop after struggling with not calling anything at first. He seems to like it.

"They're making sure no one is bringing plants or animals back into the United States." His fingers tap against the steering wheel; he hates waiting. I wonder why anyone would bring a plant back from Mexico — the only ones I have ever seen there are ugly, brown and struggling to survive. The only animals I've seen are stray dogs and cats, roaming up and down streets, deftly avoiding pedestrians and cars.

Driving through the narrow streets, I stare at the barefoot children darting in and out of traffic. Their faces are dark, dirt streaking their tan, skinny legs. The buildings lining the dust road are dark adobe; the first time we came, I thought everything in Mexico was brown.

Parking is always a challenge; cars are jammed up against one another with little or no regard for damage. There are no real parking spots here, no parking meters with slots outlined neatly in yellow.

On the street, there is an old woman braiding bracelets. Her gnarled fingers...
heads back to Ames, where he will go about his daily routine until the next hardcore show. 

FROM ONE CHOICE PAGE 39

are quick, and she will weave your name into the band for fifty pesos. On the way back across the border, I run my fingers over the colors, red, blue and green, and feel the letters with my fingertips. I pretend I am blind and think to myself that even if I were, I would know what my own name feels like.

I wonder if the ocean will look like it does on TV. We leave early in the morning to avoid traffic. Pop says. To get to South Padre Island, you have to drive across a mile-long bridge. In the sunlight, the white bridge looks endless stretched over the blue-green water. Diamonds glint on the water’s surface, hurting my eyes. I am terrified and enthralled crossing the bridge — so much water swirling about it seems impossible that it could end. We drive right up onto the beach; our car is only yards away from the surf. Seagulls circle over us, screeching in hunger. We eat lunch tailgate-style, shaded by the trunk above us. The wind blows sand into my face. It sticks to the mayonnaise on my sandwich and stings my eyes.

Although the water is a shimmering blue-green and sunlight burns down on us, the ocean is cold. The spray licks at my feet, goading me to jump in. I dive in as a wave rolls in, and when I come back up, I find myself almost back on shore. Salt stings my eyes, fills my mouth. Pop takes me out further. Pretty soon I can’t touch anymore and Pop has to carry me. We keep walking until only his neck and head are above the water. With his next step, we are suddenly out of the water, the waves eddying around Pop’s knees.

Pop laughs at my astonished expression, “It’s a sandbar; they’re sprinkled all over; little rises on the floor of the ocean.” It had seemed for a split second that Pop could fly above the sea.

Standing on the sandbar with him, the waves pushed against me, pulling me back towards shore. Careful to stay near Pop, we let the surf take us back, rolling our legs out so our entire bodies were swept along by the waves. It feels like flying.

I was six when my parents divorced, ten when Pop came back into my life and twenty-one today. The summer trips to Texas are no longer possible; I have to work all summer and the responsibilities of leasing an apartment and a serious relationship tie me to Iowa the entire year. Pop comes up twice a year, usually for Christmas and once in the summer. He still looks exactly the same. As an adult, I can see so much more — the shyness peering out from his eyes, the awkwardness he carries like a shield and the deep love he has for me that he holds like an unwieldy package — difficult to grasp but impossible to set down. Even so, he sometimes forgets birthdays and his letters are always separated by great lapses of time. It is hard to forgive someone who forgot you for four years. It is harder still to admit to yourself that you have nothing to prove. I used to be so angry at Pop for forgetting us, but deep down, I just wanted one more chance to be so great that he would never forget me again.

To just let go was the most difficult challenge of my life. I don’t know why Pop left us for so long; the one time I tried to talk to him about it he started crying. Covering his face with his hands, he told me, “You don’t know what it was like. You don’t know how it was for me.” I had never seen a grown man cry before, and his tears made me feel as if I had done something terrible to him. I will not ask him again. 

because of the violence that is associated with it,” Rice says.

In other areas, you’re just discounted as not being straight edge anymore. “If you slip up now, and you were only drug free or abstinent for a couple years, you never were straight edge,” Rice explains.

Straight edgers, caught slipping up, might also lose their friends over the indulgence — there’s that much disgust involved in the act.

Both Slaba and Rice agree things are a lot tamer in this area. Neither can say how many people are claiming straight edge around Ames and Des Moines, but Slaba says he can think of only about ten. Rice says it’s more like two dozen.

There’s no real hangout for these people, except for the venues that host hardcore shows in the area. Rice says Minneapolis is the closest big city with a solid base of straight edgers. He’ll often drive there for a show.

Slaba says being straight edge, for him, is a chance to meet likeminded people who listen to hardcore music and hold the same moral standards.

There’s no need to force his beliefs on other people, he says.

And he is in it for the long haul.

There’s not a doubt in his mind he’ll be able to maintain his current subsistence. “I’m pretty sure I’ve made it through the hardest times,” he says.

“College is obviously where people are pulled into partying and drinking and stuff, and I’ve never felt the desire to do that.”

It’s after midnight when the show ends. Rice sees four bands play at the Fallout Shelter this particular night. Each sound similar, with screaming vocals and loud punishing guitars, but Rice points out the good ones from the bad ones. The crowd starts to disperse, but many stay behind. The music has stopped, so the anonymous mass of bodies that heaved itself in front of the stage has now broken back into small groups.

Rice doesn’t stay. Four bands and one liter of Diet Coke later, he heads for the door. He opens his car door, slides back behind the wheel of his Paseo, and