Sanctuaries

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Sanctuaries

by

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Home is home even for those who aspire to serve wider interests and who have established their home of choice in distant regions. ~Nelson Mandela, Conversations with Myself

I want to remember everything. Even other peoples’ memories, [and] remembering requires paper.

~Sarah Ruhl, Dead Man’s Cell Phone
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A red and blue “For Sale” sign has decorated the Dillon property in Wheeling, Indiana, for over three years, and someone should tell the realtor that nobody’s buying.

It’s decent land if you don’t mind smelling hogs when the west wind kicks up. You can see the Douglas corn fields from the side-by-side kitchen windows, and there’s a garden out back for planting strawberries, peas, green beans, you name it. And the house itself isn’t the worst I’ve seen: sea green, two stories and a railed-in wrap-around porch, black shutters, black roof missing a small patch of shingles, weather-worn siding easily brightened by a new coat of paint. Inside might be a different matter altogether, but the Dillons have gone, so their stuff should be history, too. No more toast sitting out on the counter for days, toppled cereal boxes hiding full-bellied mice, or soap-scummy bathtub in worse condition than the ones dramatized on commercials for Tilex and Kaboom. When people move, they should clean.

But it’s not the “ick” factor keeping tenants away in the first place. It’s the “Dillon.” In a town—several tiny towns, really—with no unfamiliar faces, people watch your back but talk behind it. There are just certain families—the Whitehouses, the white Williamses, the Greentrees, the Dillons—with whom you don’t publicly associate if you want your pew saved at the Nazarene Church. I’ve only been out there five times: once on account of the 1994 Memorial Day picnic, three times for funerals, and once for putting flowers on the graves of people I never knew but have heard a thousand stories about. No stuffy services
about hellfire and the wickedness of divorce or wearing excessive amounts of jewelry. I wouldn’t’ve been able to stomach it. Pike and Gibson County natives (except for my mother and her mother) have lived for that talk for decades, though, and they’ll be goddamned if chumming with a Greentree or a Dillon loses them a prime seat. I think that’s the same premise behind why no one in 1960s Wheeling ever helped four-hundred-pound Arbutice Whitehouse ascend the hill to the church. She dragged a stiff-backed kitchen chair with her up the incline, huffing the whole way and sitting down to rest and wipe the lenses of her glasses every twenty feet or so, and not a soul ever offered to keep her company.

Same went for Tucker and Junior and Effie Dillon (each within a few years of my mother’s age). As children, they were feared: Tucker had a lazy eye, spoke too loudly, and kissed every girl on the playground until an on-duty teacher would notice and send him inside; Junior never wore a shirt and ate not only paste, but crayons, pencil lead, and tiny yellow flowers lining the schoolyard; Effie wore dresses with holes in the hems, occasionally ate from her dog’s food bowl on the porch, and called soft drinks “sody-pops.” As adults, they are ignored: Tucker pulls a red plastic Tyco wagon up and down the shoulder of the overpass in Princeton (our “cultural” center—a town of barely ten thousand), hauling his belongings back and forth for lack of anything better to do; Junior’s in River Oaks nursing home sopping up soup with white bread and sitting inches away from the TV to watch M*A*S*H reruns; Effie often sits on a porch swing on the balcony of her Prince Street apartment, closing her eyes and playing big band music on oversized headphones.

I stand by the statement that human beings are no more heartless today than they were fifty years ago, but this doesn’t change the state or the fate of the Dillon property. It’s marked, stained dark with fingerprints viewed as contagion. Only outsiders could purchase
this place, but their neighbors would cart over pies or preserves, linger in the doorway, and

It’s the way these people are. Not these people. My people. I admit it. I come from a long
line of rural Southwest Hoosiers—I’m fifth-generation, kin to farmers and teachers mostly,
along with a few excellent athletes,¹ several blue collar laborers, and a handful of crazies.

We learn who we are based on who we’re not—last names and home locations and “what our
fathers do” seem the most telling and popular. We track you down in the Save-A-Lot just to
say hello (we recognize that beige pea coat you got on sale last winter—half off with your
Penney’s card!) and then ridicule you in the parking lot (the cut was all wrong for you, poor
thing). We bend the truth for the sake of convenience—“my father used to work for Toyota”
instead of “my father used to work for Product Action, Toyota’s subsidiary company that
stretches to pay minimum wage.” We sneak story into account if for nothing more than the
sport of trying—“I had a family obligation” rather than “I couldn’t make it because our 1998
Dodge is a piece of shit that can’t run over fifty miles per hour on its best day.”

My birthplace is a series of fields and small hills that support even smaller towns. It’s
brimming with pasty whiteness, four-wheelers caked in mud, mounted deer heads in living
rooms, local pizza places like Ronaldo’s and Winner’s Circle and The Café, and bored

¹ My daddy coached Babe Ruth League baseball for much of his young adult life, and at one time he played for
the Pittsburgh Pirates’ minor league team in Texas. My Grandpa Dave, Daddy’s thin, silver-haired, chain-
smoking father, coached Princeton, Indiana, high school basketball and baseball for decades, and he once went
fishing with Larry Bird. Had a nice time. Bird was funny, Dave said, even though he abandoned us for Boston.
double-check your doorlocks and Germ-X your hands after washing them. I want to get the hell out of here most of the time. I crave proximity to something.

And yet.

Neatly-managed rows of sweet corn lifted topsy-turvy into the jaws of roaring combines signals I’m home. So do the adjacent “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” and Big Mac billboards on Highway 41-North. The Princeton Heritage Days, too, with its peddlers of porcelain unicorns and makeshift booths of blue cotton candy. The Ark Church in Oatsville, essentially condemned by busted rafters and a sheer lack of audience (Oatsville and Wheeling and Hazleton combined don’t make three hundred people). The Owensville Watermelon Festival that boasts, alongside its namesake, pulled pork barbeque sandwiches, blackberry cobbler, sizzling corn dogs and kabobs, banana snowcones, chili-drenched baked potatoes, a Ferris wheel, and all manner of crafts booths and traditional carnival games. The Montgomery Township firehouse’s giant mural of Taz from the Looney Toons. The trapezoidal Owensville Middle School Rec Center—all that’s left of the place where I attended kindergarten and first grade and sealed my fate as a “smart kid.” In making the ten-hour trek from my graduate school in Iowa to my parents’ apartment in Indiana these past three Thanksgivings, Christmases, and Spring Breaks, I’ve noticed that our grass looks different from that of Illinois and the Hawkeye State. It’s more brittle. Our trees seem to stand with greater authority even though they’re more weatherbeaten from Tornado Alley twisters and periodic dry spells. You can see changes in the earth when you cross state lines. I can feel the changes in the passenger’s seat with my eyes closed.

I’m not a States Rights person. I don’t own an American flag and wouldn’t be caught dead saluting one. I’ve been an atheist since I was ten years old. So I want to know what it
is that persistently draws me back and back again to my relatives’ isolated, narrow slice of the world. Can’t be Hoosier pride. Can’t be attraction to a spiritual home, either. We’ve still got Klan members in Southwest Indiana, but I come barreling home each December, nearly wriggling out of my skin in anticipation of touring our towns’ Christmas lights displays, many of which are painstakingly erected by those very tobacco-chewing bigots.

We’ve got this thing we do, my parents and siblings and I, where we drive through Owensville, Princeton, Ft. Branch, and Haubstadt after dusk rating residents’ yard and house decorations on a scale of “Gorgeous” (twinkling multi-colored lights; simple tear-drop clear bulbs) to “Gaudy” (generally, motifs done all in red).

Maybe I need to know what you call that. That fervor for small rituals that don’t mean a thing to anyone but you and the ones you’re closest to. The intense wonder and admiration I have for our past, which so often blends with my present. Whatever this feeling is, it butts heads with a flight response that urges, Make something of yourself.
Part One: Traditions of the Father
Methodology

When our family of five left my childhood home for good in January 2008, my then-eighteen-year-old sister Natalie took pictures of everything: the ornately-framed light switch in the downstairs bathroom, the brown, perfectly Asia-shaped water stain high on the family room wall, the floor vent in our brother Nathan’s room through which we three kids used to spy on unpleasant company, the orange and white floral shelf paper lining the kitchen cabinets, the fading sunshine sticker stamped to the hall mirror, our empty shared bedroom that suddenly echoed. She’s a compulsive record-keeper.

I wish it had been me instead of her who’d thought to carve our initials in the wall of the downstairs hall closet with Daddy’s pocketknife:  

DMR (for David Michael Robinson)  
SLR (for Shirley Lee)  
SLR (for Samantha Lynne)  
NBR (for Nathan Blake)  
NBR (for Natalie Beth)

Gibson County or Montgomery Township at large will no doubt demolish our house within the next few years, so with the carving, it’s the thought that counts. The twins and I loved the front porch columns, diamond-shaped foyer window, and solid mahogany pocket doors, but winter heat bills, leaky faucets, rotting wood, and the rasping of creditors’ voices over the answering machine ushered us out, and no Owensville, Indiana, bank account is big enough to fully restore what I once thought was a mansion. I attempted drafting a letter

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2 The same one, incidentally, that Daddy used in 1962 to carve his and his buddy Scott’s initials into the hickory trunk that saved them from mauling by a pack of wild dogs. Apparently.
requesting that our home be considered a county-maintained historical site—it was once, after all, town hall, a funeral parlor, a wedding chapel, and an informal day care. Home births once happened in our living room. The walls have heard coffins click closed. I learned how to read in this now-empty place.

I never finished the letter—wouldn’t have gotten a response anyway—but we did finish our cataloguing of home via digital photos. Hundreds of them, too, because the kitchen cabinet door gives you one recollection from one angle and another recollection from a different one. The time the Fishers visited and you spilled grape Kool-Aid is not the same, after all, as the time you burned your index finger on the pork chop skillet after an evening game of badminton made more thrilling by having to avoid stepping in dog shit every ten paces or so. That’s the stuff, my family would say in unison (even if the drink had really been strawberry flavored or the shit had been scooped hours prior to the match). That’s classic either way, and you’d be worse off to erase it from memory entirely than to carry its remnants, however patchy, on your shoulder as you go.

**Family Remnant: The Escapee**

I’m still not sure if I believe in Freeze-Off Bass (or if I believe that his name preceded his fate), but I want to. Grandpa Pamp, my paternal great-grandfather, swore that this man stood seven and a half feet tall and could carry a full-grown mule under each arm. As a child I pictured Freeze-Off as an ice-blue version of the Jolly Green Giant, dressed in dirt-caked blue jeans and a straw hat instead of leaves, but now, I mostly see the things he’s supposed to

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3 Called “Pamp” because that’s how Daddy pronounced “Grandpa” when he was little. Such things have a way of sticking.
have left behind: asymmetrically-growing blackberry briars and a pair of white, one-size-fits-all nursing home house slippers placed primly on the window sill of his first-floor room.

In loyal Robinson fashion, Daddy too attests to Freeze-Off’s size and fortitude. He claims that this gargantuan Lynnville, Indiana, resident lived in a largely unfurnished shack five miles outside the city limits. Most Lynnvillians farmed, worked the oil fields, or raised horses during the 1950s and ‘60s, but Freeze-Off had little use for a permanent occupation. When the McMurtreys’ mules wouldn’t budge from their places in the middle of the street, Freeze-Off would appear in his denim bib overalls, hoist one beast under each round-muscled arm, and carry them forward until they bucked to be released. When a Ford wouldn’t start, Freeze-Off would kick it into compliance. He wrestled mad dogs, pulled pet cats out of trees, pulled those cats’ kid companions out of wells, dug graves in half the time it took the actual grave-digging folks. Never asked for payment of any kind, either. One blistering July Daddy and his mother, Beth, wanted blackberries for cobbler, but neither of them had brought appropriate footwear for walking through the stiff, blade-like briars. Fifty-one years later, Daddy still insists that Freeze-Off showed no hesitation in obliging them. The loner never wore shoes of any kind no matter the season, so Daddy assumes the stickers and thorns couldn’t cut through his calluses. Within twenty minutes their silver tin bowl spilled over with pungent purple fruit, and Freeze-Off acknowledged their thank-you’s with nothing more than a slow nod and a tip of his fraying hat.

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4 Perhaps I should start making sense of these towns since we’ve got so awfully many. Lynnville was Daddy’s home, Wheeling (and its neighbors Oatsville and Hazleton) was Mother’s, and Owensville was mine. We moved to Princeton as a family during the foreclosure when the house went up for sale at sheriff’s auction. Only Princeton boasts over 10,000 people. I’ve never once been to the Post Office and not seen someone whose kid, dog, car, purse, or jacket I recognize.
When Daddy was twelve years old, concerned quasi-neighbors decided to “do the right thing” by requesting that sixty-some-year-old Freeze-Off be placed in a nursing home to live out his last days. Apparently he’d coughed and they’d heard it, and custom clearly states that living legends don’t get sick unless something is wrong. The two Doctors Braselton (one father, one son) each took Freeze-Off by an arm and led him to their car, and because Freeze-Off was notoriously a man of few words, he sat politely in back with his hands in his lap, crouched like a conspicuous question mark. He thought they were going to lunch.

It was decidedly not a lunch, this outing, but Freeze-Off didn’t seem to mind at first. One female attendant said that during the waning days of summer, he gladly made his bed every morning, cleaned his tray at each meal, and took great pleasure in watching *Gunsmoke* and *Perry Mason* at night with his window opened wide. But winter came, and anyone who knew Freeze-Off knew that his wardrobe remained constant, weather be damned. The attendant gave him house slippers, but he flatly refused them. Once the temperature dipped below freezing, though, the rules had to be enforced. The nursing home established a checkpoint system: anyone not wearing slippers could not come to the dining room for supper, cards, even conversation.

I want to add here that Freeze-Off fought the system. I want to tell you that he cut a deal with Hal Newman, his slant-mouthed neighbor to the left, that went like this: Hal monitored the hallway long enough for Freeze-Off to sneak in a game of five-card stud with the men at the north-corner table, and Freeze-Off did likewise when Hal got the hankering to smooch crazy Mary Keller four doors down. When the night patrolman caught onto the act, Freeze-Off was restrained in his bed with leather straps—straight out of a nineteenth century
asylum, boy. Straps on his feet, too, to secure those plush white shoes, but straps are child’s play compared to hauling full-grown mules. He broke free. He growled like Frankenstein’s misunderstood monster. He burned those shoes in the nursing home’s coal stove as patients and staff watched intently, the flames reflecting in their eyes.

None of that ever happened.

Two local police officers stumbled across Freeze-Off’s rigid body about a day and a half after he’d made his quiet, no-frills escape in the presence of no one. According to official reports, Freeze-Off crawled through his room window just before the evening meal, and apparently he had a sense of humor, because he’d placed the terry-cloth slippers side by side on the window ledge before heading toward home. I picture him smaller than seven and a half feet when I imagine him walking through old corn stubble and ever-piling snow in the direction of his house. Being cooped up must have softened him. But I can’t see him as old—when I can see him at all.

Freeze-Off’s tale is one of Daddy’s favorites to tell, and he’s a storyteller by nature. Missed his era and his calling, if you ask me. Could’ve been on badly-lit carnival posters that read: “One Night Only: Duke Robinson Spins You a Yarn.” And he sells them, too, for the simple fee of your eternal interest. I haven’t been able to get his characters—real people, I mean (I think)—out of my head for twenty-five years. Daddy’s the spark of all this, I realize now. He, graying and aching but still perfectly capable of pitching an unhittable knuckle ball, is the main reason I’m trying to reconcile nostalgia with reality, because he’s what I’ll turn into

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5 This tidbit is pure fact. During his entire high school, college, and minor league baseball careers as a starting pitcher, my father allowed no one to hit more than a single on his knuckle ball, and even that was extremely rare.
if I don’t do it. I’ll become an aging woman with a wide Robinson nose and a hearty Robinson laugh and the Robinson tendency to foster every dog I find, but I’ll also view my past as perfection, and that’s the danger. Freeze-Off is all well and good, don’t get me wrong, but I shudder to think I might make him my God.
In Southwest Indiana (just like in the South itself, I hear), ancestry livens your veins. Your fingerprints represent furrows in the soil tilled by your predecessors. Blood, in short, is definition, and in the case of my daddy, age fifty-nine, blood has the power to haunt. You cannot understand my father the storyteller—and you cannot understand me, my relationship to him, my fascination with him—without first learning something of his mother. His light. The shadow we live under.

We’re on the same page, you and I, having never met Beth Robinson—English teacher, accomplished artist, self-taught musician, animal lover, chain smoker, tall and imposing and by all accounts elegant. She preferred slacks to dresses and could whistle with two fingers in her mouth like they do at horse races or ball games, but she also loved ballroom dancing and jewelry shopping at Macy’s until dark. Aggressive lung cancer and diabetes, working in tandem, took this woman too soon. We both look like her, Daddy and me. We both tell her stories in whispers.

I begin like this—

The thing Beth hated most in the world was being told what she could do and what she couldn’t, so when she was nineteen and Doc Braselton confirmed her pregnancy, shaking his balding head in reprimand, she raised a cool, defiant brow. At eighteen when the diabetes struck, she couldn’t eat pecan pies or drink milkshakes anymore, she had to pack Snickers bars and bottles of orange juice in her purse in case her sugar dropped to the danger level,
and she learned to give herself the shots three times daily, just to the left of the navel, but
she’d be goddamned if she couldn’t have a baby.

That September two nurses in lavender scrubs rushed my six-pound wailing father to
the ICU and stuck the arch of his foot with a long needle. Insulin cruised through his blood,
and he livened. Beth named him David Michael, after her husband (my grandfather, Dave),
but she chose not to hold him.

It was surely defiance at Doc Braselton’s, because all sources report that my
grandmother couldn’t stand children. Not the small ones, anyway, who cooed and flailed
pudgy, uncoordinated arms in no direction in particular. Dave carried his son bundled in
blankets to the doorsteps of cousins and close friends, but during the oohs and ahhs and tiny-
toe-tweaking, Beth patted her red dachshund’s fat belly and smoked one cigarette after
another.

A photograph, black and stark white, shows twenty-four-year-old Beth, my five-year-
old Daddy, and an open hardback nursery rhyme book sharing space on an overstuffed
family room sofa, and at this stage, they have come to an agreement: he will not burble or
disrupt her soap operas, and in turn, she will read to him. He sports a Lone Ranger cowboy
hat two sizes too big, and the adjustable strap that should tuck snug under his chin hangs
loose, framing velvet-soft cheeks and a closed, pensive mouth. Her hair is as short and as
wavy as his, but intensely black, and her lips are parted mid-sentence, mid-sing-song. I
marvel at heredity—at their resemblance to one another, and to me.

Those two became a package set, rarely apart, but with the role of mothering
reversed. During Beth’s sugar crashes and sugar overloads, Daddy fetched juices, candies,
smokes, and coffees, and he learned to talk her down if she cried (Dave worked; Dave
coached ball; Dave was busy). When a diabetic nears the brink of unconsciousness, she feels that she’s falling; once, Beth reached out for Dave and cut deep streaks in his face with her nails. It was Daddy, freshly teen, who hoisted her up and held her for an hour while her whole world spun.

In 1980 he held her for what would be the last time, avoided her IV line and said, “Sleep tight, Mother. See you in the morning,” and took the stairs to the hospital lobby even though the elevator was closer. I can attest that Robinsons must walk things off, and when they can’t walk, like Beth on that wet May evening, they’re still drawn to action. The third floor nurse on duty never confirmed or denied anything, but the story my parents tell—the one I choose to believe—says my grandmother, forty-eight, shut off her own insulin machine. Whether switch flicked or intravenous needle cleanly removed, I don’t know. No one saw, and she’d have been goddamned if they had.

When Daddy heard the news of her death, he stayed stationed on the bathroom floor of his and my mother’s new apartment for hours, moving only to vomit, and at Beth’s funeral, he chose not to speak. Today, he and I have come to an agreement: I won’t ask him too much about her at once, and in turn, he will answer all that he can.

One day many years ago, Daddy sat down at the table, still wearing his work clothes (at that time, shirt and tie with gray or black slacks), and told my siblings and I the story of Beth and the dog cartoon, without any prompting. I was eight, maybe nine, Nathan and Natalie were either five or six, and we poked in more fried potatoes and buttered bread while relishing the

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6 He worked for the Indiana Workforce Development securing jobs for the “less fortunate.” I find this painfully ironic.
fact that Daddy’s voice always grows louder when he’s in storytelling mode. He told us that one afternoon when he was around sixteen years old, he and Dave sat on opposite ends of the couch watching a cartoon about a dog on some sort of mission. I can’t remember the plot—he could tell you if you asked—but the important thing to note is that a bear is chasing this dog up a tree trunk. The dog nearly makes it to the safety of the uppermost branches when the bear snatches him by the stubby tail and pulls him down again. This happens at least ten times, and for whatever reason, Dave and Daddy found this hilarious. They slapped their knees, chuckled so hard that their throats grew raspy, even developed matching stomachaches as this dog’s peril wore on. Beth heard them from the kitchen, and she walked out, meat-gravy ladle in hand, to silence them.

“What the hell’s all the racket about?” she asked. Beth was a mediocre cook at best, and she wanted utmost concentration while putting the finishing touches on a beef roast.

Neither her son nor her husband could answer for their slobbering fits of laughter, so she watched the screen, watched the dog, watched the bear drag its victim back to solid animated ground. “What’s so funny?” she asked, and when they only wailed harder, she added, “There isn’t one goddamned amusing thing about this. Jesus Christ. Couple of lunatics I live with.”

The point of this story—what we were supposed to glean—was that our grandmother couldn’t have recognized real comedy if, as Daddy says, it had come up and bitten her right on the ass. She rarely laughed at television, had no tolerance whatsoever for slapstick of any kind, was always the last to get the joke. Once, at a Little League tourney, an irate parent on the sidelines called my eight-year-old father a son-of-a-bitch because he hit a pitch thrown by that parent’s child. Still mid-chomp on a bite of her caramel corn, Beth stood up in the metal
bleachers and yelled at the top of her lungs, “Hey! That son-of-a-bitch is my son!” She never could figure out why the onlookers surrounding her snickered into their sodas.

My sister Natalie’s that way—late to catch on. And her middle name is Beth, which has always, admittedly, sparked some jealousy in me even though we’re best friends. I decided, on the evening of the dog-cartoon story, that this is all my sister and grandmother have in common. A name and a sorry sense of humor.

The summer between my senior year of college and first year of graduate school, Daddy cut his face on a clothesline while mowing his boss Jack’s front yard adjacent to the Rawhide property. Jack must be pushing seventy, and when Indiana humidity reaches the brutal stage, Daddy offers to cut the grass for him. On that day, with sweat beads clinging to his arms and back and soaking his baseball cap, Daddy glanced backward to make sure he’d closed the barn door securely. In a flash, he said, relaying the incident from his usual spot in our blue recliner, he drove the mower right up to Jack’s wife’s clothesline. Without time to turn around, he simply tried to duck, and luckily, the taut line only nicked the skin under one of his eyes (it did, however, send flying his bifocals and hat).

He chuckled as he relived the moment—said, “God, I hope not” when we asked if anyone saw his half-clumsy-half-quick-thinking display—and he was reminded of another story. A Beth story. Though exhausted, he said, “Did I ever tell you kids about the time we broke the bed and Mother made Dad run a nail through his hand?”

I sat up straighter and answered for the three of us. “You did what?”

Turns out, the whole thing started with a game: Daddy, then seventeen, six-foot-three, and skinny as a rail with ears far too big for his head, passed through the kitchen and swatted
his mother on the rear end with a dishtowel. They pestered one another constantly, and this was the latest incarnation. Much to his chagrin, Beth didn’t react. She dunked another saucepan into sudsy water and swished concentric circles in its base with a sponge until bubbles took flight all around her. He circled the house, towel still in hand, and swatted a second time. Still no response beyond slow, focused scrubbing.

“But third time’s the charm,” he said in the chair, smiling and shaking his head. Before he had a third chance to strike, Beth turned around and went after him, matching his pace as he skidded around the white sectional couch and bolted for his bedroom. Unable to stifle her unusually giddy laughter, Beth tackled him around the knees and they went down in a heap. Crashed into his bed, more specifically, and the box springs audibly buckled. Both parties covered their mouths to muffle their giggling, afraid Dave would hear, but too late. The combination pop-thud of metal springs un-springing reached my grandfather even from his prostrate position beneath the family Chevy, and he raced to the scene with a wrench and oil-stained rag in his hand. His wife and son sat cross-legged on the carpet, mouths rippling, eyes dancing despite their best efforts to keep straight, apologetic faces. Dave threw the wrench to the ground and said in a bark, “You’re gonna help me fix it. Now.”

Baseball was Daddy’s pre-ordained destiny, and for this reason, Dave never let him work with his hands for fear he’d get injured and louse up his pitching career. My grandfather even forced Daddy, as a toddler, to wear a device that kept his left hand tied secure behind his back so his natural left-handedness would fade away, leaving only a well-honed right hand. A preferable pitching arm. The task of holding things to be hammered, then, always fell to Beth, and on that famous day, in a room with uncoiled bedsprings and a furious husband, her grip slipped. Dave drove a nail through the top of his hand and out the
other side. Blood poured. Dave cursed curses I probably can’t even spell, and without
directing a word to his wife or his son, he kicked the bed frame twice and made a beeline for
the small, bright bathroom to disinfect the wound.

The moment he disappeared through the doorway, Beth took Daddy by the elbow
with one hand, grabbed her huge beige purse from its place on the living room end table with
the other, and headed for her car, now parked in the driveway because Dave needed room to
work on the Chevy. She drove Daddy to Evansville for supper. After loaded cheeseburgers
and Cokes, neither of which Beth’s diabetes permitted she consume regularly, the two hit
Eastland Mall on Green River Road and shopped for hours. They shopped until eleven
o’clock that night when every store in the whole place closed, in fact. I can picture them, the
last lingering customers strolling past gated shop-fronts and a silent fountain with a full day’s
wishing-pennies settled at its bottom.

“And it worked,” Daddy said to us, stretching and rising for a much-needed shower,
snapping me back to the present. “Dad cooled off. Mother got three new turtlenecks and I
got a free meal. Not half bad.”

I rose to set the table when he left, but my mind wandered. I wished I could’ve seen
the matching grins on their faces when they ignored the gravity and incredulity of Dave’s
expression (he was a harsh man, and I love that they defied him at least once in their lives). I
wished I’d been able to go shopping with this woman, too. This legend. Her friends would
have stopped her mid-stride, no doubt, and said, “Out with your granddaughter today?” I’ve
never heard the sound of her voice, so I can’t, to my full satisfaction, imagine her reply.

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7 Evansville’s in Vanderburgh County, south of Gibson (where Princeton, Owensville, Ft. Branch, Haubstadt,
and Wheeling are), Pike (housing Oatsville), and Warrick (Lynnville’s territory), and it’s the largest city in our
region—second or third largest in the state, depending on the calendar year. Non-fast-food restaurants, malls,
radio stations, television news teams, and liberals haven’t yet run away.
Almost every day for years, I feared I would develop diabetes. Not Type II like Daddy now has, but Type I like Beth had. Needles paralyze me with fear. When a nurse at Brink’s Family Practice—ironically, clothesline-Jack’s daughter named Beth—took my blood in 2004 to check me for my mother’s thyroid condition, I experienced a fit of mild seizures and temporarily lost my hearing as well as all sensation in my hands, arms, chest, stomach, feet, and gums. I do not think I could survive insulin injections. If I were a praying woman of any kind, I once thought, I would ask my dead grandmother what made her so strong. I would ask her to channel that strength to me if the worst should come true someday.

But she wasn’t a praying woman either, no surprise, so even if religious drivel is true, who knows if she’d answer? Even during her darkest hours, she relied not on a god, but on her son.

Once—only once—Daddy told me the story of the mice and the hammer. At first I suspected it a ‘Walrus and the Carpenter’ sort of ditty, but instead, Daddy told me that when he was five, their house had a mouse infestation. Mice on dinner plates left on the counter, mice under the couches, mice in the cabinets, mice staring at you from their perch on the tub while you sat on the toilet. During that same time, Beth’s illness hit heavily, daily, and for longer durations than normal. For four consecutive days, she experienced such dizziness, such weakness, that she could not get out of bed. On the morning of that first day in the series, Dave carried Beth to the sofa, wrapped her in blankets, and promised to try to get off work early. Daddy played with his green plastic soldiers in the corner nearby, glancing up at his mother every so often to make sure she breathed.
The mice woke early, too, and Beth watched them skitter in seemingly-motorized circles around her child as he released respectfully-hushed “pows” and “pings” to indicate the demise of yet another Army comrade. I think she got angry. I think she got fed up, because she mustered a voice and said to Daddy, “Get me the hammer from the kitchen drawer, please. You know where it is?”

He nodded and returned quickly, dragging it in stuttered thumps along the carpet until he reached her side. “That’s a good boy,” she said, and she gently pushed him to one side, took the hammer in her other hand, closed one eye for aim, and launched the rusting metal in the direction of a brown mouse skulking about near the baseboard. She hit it dead-on. Squarely in the head. The rodent thudded against the wood of the wall in a burst of dark blood and thin bones, and Daddy said Beth managed a slow smile. “Rat bastard,” she whispered through a hoarse laugh, then turned to her son and said, “We’ll leave that for Dad to clean up, shall we?” He nodded again, and she patted his small, fragile hands and added, “Now how about some orange juice for your momma?”

And so it went. Kill a mouse, take a sip, ask for refills from a child who could barely reach the refrigerator’s top shelf. Ask a five-year-old child to return a badly-stained hammer again and again and again.

*Family Remnant: Crystal Ball*

Daddy celebrated his twenty-first birthday getting his fortune told by a dark-skinned woman in a booth at the Gibson County Heritage Days Festival, 1972. Just after dinner he left one-
year-old Vaughn with Debbie,\textsuperscript{8} then rode with loud-mouthed Jay Fowler and bum-leg Johnny Sprinkle to the Tavern for drinks. Daddy’s never been a fan of alcohol, but he did have two Tom Collinses that night. The young men passed the jam-packed, brightly-lit Princeton Town Square on their way down Brummitt—real “culture,” this display—and Jay suggested checking out the festivities if for no other reason than to sop up their beers with funnel cake before moving on to more serious drinking.

Past tents devoted to peddling porcelain cat and dog and unicorn figurines, past the basket weaving demonstrations, and past stands selling nachos and steak sandwiches and ‘Grandma’s Cobbler’ sat the funnel cake trailer,\textsuperscript{9} and right next to it, “The Crystal Ball.” In late evening light, “The Crystal Ball” seemed to glow purple, and Daddy bumped Jay in the arm and said, “Stupidest thing you ever seen, i’nt it?” Jay agreed and opened his wallet to pay for the funnel cakes, his treat, but Johnny slapped Daddy on the shoulder and asked why didn’t he go in. Just for kicks.

“Just some fuckin’ Indian woman in a cape spoutin’ voodoo,” Johnny said, wiggling his fingers in front of Daddy’s face to indicate, however ignorantly, the conjuring of spirits. “Do it, Duke. I dare ya.”

Duke Robinson doesn’t care one whit about dares, but as I’ve said before, he’s always been a fan of having good stories to tell, and this, he thought, might make for one. Fortunes cost three bucks apiece. Johnny handed Daddy three wadded-up one dollar bills, and Daddy pushed aside the sheer curtain and made himself as comfortable as possible in a short, cushioned chair across from a woman who he claims was Pakistani. She wore a long dress of

\textsuperscript{8} Vaughn is Daddy’s oldest child and my half-brother; Debbie is Daddy’s first wife, pretty on the outside.
\textsuperscript{9} I always find it funny how these mobile food trailers don’t look all that much different from the mobile homes dotting our whole county. It’s just that one set sports cartoon pictures of shortcakes and fried cheesesticks on its sides and the other sports rust from age and dents from storms and “family problems.”
patchwork material and wicker-looking sandals on perfectly-manicured feet, and she had a gold star pasted to her right cheek, just below the eye. Kind of pretty, Daddy said, in the way that “foreigners” can be pretty.¹⁰

The Pakistani woman placed her hands lightly against the outside of an obviously faux-crystal ball fastened to a gold plastic stand, and she asked what Daddy wanted to know about his future. He’d just had a child with a woman he had never planned to marry but did wed out of obligation. He’d just put an MLB pitching career on indefinite hold as a result. His father had recently reminded him, while blowing cigarette smoke into his face, that without baseball, he’d be a nobody for the rest of his life. I can tell you that this woman’s booth felt very small.

“How long am I gonna live?” Daddy asked her. A preoccupation of his, admittedly. His mother Beth’s condition worsened every day, and every day he wondered when his own dying-genes would kick in. I’m assuming he asked the fortune-teller the question while blocking his mouth with some of his fingers. When he’s unsure of what he’s doing, or hesitant, he rests his chin in his palm and covers up his words as best he can.

The Pakistani woman rubbed the outside of the plastic ball and closed her eyes. In less than a minute, she opened them again and said, “You have a son?”

Daddy stiffened in his chair and crossed his arms over his middle. “Yes ma’am.”

“A bright child,” she added, and Daddy nodded. The silence inside this tent muffled the chatter and laughter surrounding it on all sides.

¹⁰ For all my daddy’s good points, his cultural awareness and sensitivity isn’t one of them. Nostalgia and reality collide once again.
When Daddy refused to speak again, the woman said, “You will have grandchildren, but you won’t live to see them. You will not live past the age of thirty-nine.” Sounds cold, but that’s the account I’m given.

Daddy handed her Johnny’s three dollars but didn’t thank her for her time.

Daddy never forgot the prediction, and although he wouldn’t tell you this, he fully believed it would come true. He even begged my mother and our family friends Arlo and Lori Meyer not to throw him a fortieth birthday party because there was no point. They filled our house with black balloons and “Over the Hill” banners anyway, and we ordered pizza and garlic breadsticks and played AC/DC and Led Zeppelin full blast from a little black stereo that’s now tucked away in a storage unit since the foreclosure. I remember being exhausted that night (Arlo put me in charge of music, and finding the perfect spot on cassette tapes isn’t easy), but I doubt Daddy slept a wink.

And it’s funny, because he’s not really superstitious or prone to serious religious inclinations. Not when compared to the rest of our clan. He and I tend to applaud rationality. Concrete and observable facts. We both like Freeze-Off-type stories, granted, but Daddy swears those are true and I’ll never know the difference, so that doesn’t count. I just can’t figure out where he stands in terms of Destiny. Several times I’ve heard him say “When you’re dead, you’re dead,” but I’ve also heard him say, in reference to some tragic accident or death, “When your number’s up, it’s up. No two ways about it.” He must’ve thought his number flashed before the Pakistani woman’s blue-shadowed eyes.

I don’t think we have numbers. I’m confident that we don’t, in fact. I also don’t imagine there’s an afterlife, particularly not one resembling that of the Christian disposition.
I wonder how Daddy reconciles eternal nothingness with God pinning numbers on our backs. If an all-powerful Creator cares enough about us to assign us shelf lives, why would he abandon us after we complete the project he’s mandated?

Maybe Daddy reconciles the paradox because he’s so often felt left behind. Only child of a sick mother and cold and distant father. Father to a runaway firstborn son. Grandfather to mulatto girls whose softball games he hasn’t the resolve to attend. In each of his own grandparents’ deaths, he’s sat beside them holding their leathery hands as they passed, then taken on the responsibility of making the phone calls. Daddy takes responsibility to his detriment: he once called out a co-worker at the IWD for forging client signatures, and she filed a heinous sexual harassment complaint against him (the case went to court and Daddy, entirely innocent, was forced to attend anger management classes); at the Daily Republican Register where he worked as a co-manager, Daddy took on teenagers’ paper routes when they flaked out (in the middle of winter, he drove the open-window mail-delivery truck throughout Mt. Carmel and contracted pneumonia); another time at the Register, Daddy prevented a three-hundred-pound industrial paper roll from crushing a female co-worker, and the weight dislocated his left shoulder (he had no insurance, so he dealt with the pain—and still does); after getting fired from Toyota’s Product Action assembly line for helping other employees fit windows into Tundras to meet their daily quota, Daddy had no job and we got Food Stamps—he stayed in bed for weeks, growing skinny, afraid he’d become the nobody his father whispered about. In 2005 Daddy went into business with his buddy Rick Roney; they opened a Hobby Shop in Princeton, Lucky 13’s (after Daddy’s most-worn athletic jersey number), but it closed down within two years, just an empty two-story rental space with war gaming figurines in boxes on chipped tables. My
parents filed for bankruptcy. In December First National told us we had three weeks to find another place to live, and doggedly, Daddy found a place. An apartment big enough for two or three, not five, but he found it and takes what pride he can in it. He hangs his Astros cap, prized possession, on the inside knob of the main door, just like he did at the house, and I take this as a good sign.
Separation

Day 1: June 8th, 2010

At first I think they have Stan in quarantine inside the barn. He sits in a low black desk chair behind strips of ultra-thick, smudged plastic curtain, and at the top of that curtain a yellow label reads, “WARNING: EMPLOYEES ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT.” But what can be toxic in the golf ball redistribution business? I fiddle with the strap of my Nikon and hesitate at the entrance until Daddy says, “We can go back there. Sign’s just for nosy customers.”

And we’re not customers, nosy or otherwise. Daddy works here at Rawhide Golf Ball Co. six days a week, seven thirty to five, and today I’m with him. I’m part of it. When I was a child, he worked for Vincennes University teaching the jobless how to fill out applications and ace interviews, and the elusiveness of that position fascinated me: sleek black briefcase, equally sleek shoes, deadlines (utterly devoid of meaning to me then), hour-long lunch break, frequent and fully funded trips to San Diego, St. Louis, New York, Atlanta, Orlando. But kids can’t participate in such proceedings because they’re noisy, fidgety, fussy, selfish, you name it. The elementary-school me was none of the above, but I looked the part, being three-and-some feet tall and missing various teeth at various points, so no sale. I never really knew how to picture what my father did during the hours I spent speeding through vocabulary worksheets or playing a tag-like version of Jurassic Park in the backyard with Nathan and Natalie.11 Now Daddy’s fifty-eight to my twenty-four. I think it’s high time that I witness his life.

11 This was widespread among any group of kids lucky enough to see the film. It’s not at all crazy to be pretend to be dinosaurs or the paleobotanists trying to contain them.
“Stan, this is my oldest daughter Samantha,” Daddy says, patting his co-worker on the shoulder too hard and making me notice Stan’s not wearing the Rawhide “uniform”—dull orange T-shirt with the company’s longhorn bull logo in black like a nametag. “She’ll be comin’ out here with me the next week or so, learnin’ the ropes. Doin’ it for her writing class.”

Stan, who I’m guessing is about fifty-five, says, “Mornin’, Duke,” throws me a sidelong glance, blinks twice behind his rectangular glasses, and continues catching golf balls as they tumble toward him from an unfinished wooden chute.

“Stan here’s our newest guy. Knows the game of golf real well, so he took to everything pretty easy, right man?”

Stan squeezes a “yep” through half-closed lips.

“Likes the Adirondack pretty well too. Am I right?”

This time we get nothing more than an “uhm-hm,” and I’m starting to feel like I’ve trespassed onto private or somehow sanctioned property. It’s obvious Stan works solo. Man of few words. Clock in, down to business, take a smoke break, hunker back down, lunch, lemonade, seventh-inning stretch, smoke break, prep for tomorrow, clock out. He couldn’t give two shits about me or my plans to uncover the grit or elegance or whatever of Southern Indiana blue collar labor (my initial cover, I’ll tell you up front, for sneaking glimpses of my father as outsiders see him). I’m assuming the Adirondack is the machine propelling each golf ball down the chute and into Stan’s waiting, callused palms, and it stinks to high heaven, as my grandmothers would say. The air around it—what little air circulates inside the barn, anyway—smells oily and bleach-tinged, and it clings to my clothes and hair already. Stan doesn’t seem to mind.
“The Adirondack,” Daddy says, “is the only machine of its kind in the world. Specially designed for this operation, okay? Comes from New York, and they hand-built it to streamline the process.”

“Wow,” I reply, but the problem is that I don’t have any idea what process we’re talking about. Looks like dozens and dozens of used golf balls traveling, clattering, from one wooden box to another. Stan seems to be examining each ball individually, turning them like miniature globes between blunt fingers. Some he tosses into a crate, some he tosses into a huge gray bucket, and some he drops into the rusted, two-and-a-half-foot-high yellow cans that circle his feet. They look like storage containers for nuclear waste. For something that would singe the skin, at the very least.

With another twenty or so minutes remaining until work technically starts, I get the grand tour. Picture a bright red barn framed by frayed corn tassels on all sides and you’ve got a clear shot of Rawhide’s main facility. Adjacent to it sits a matching shed for storage, and a few feet from that, the shed for acid washes. Daddy leads me to the wash-house first, cradling his co-worker Shelley’s blue-merle dachshund in one arm like she’s a newborn. I’m less interested in the tour than the dog— she’s a puppy and still has the distinct, comforting smell of one—but that works to everyone’s benefit because I follow close behind Daddy, periodically placing a finger under little Lady’s chin and calling her “such a gorgeous girl.” Which she is.

We’re greeted on the sidewalk by O.B., an overweight but undyingly jovial grey cat who, in a matter of mere weeks, learned close to twenty verbal commands from my father. Rawhide boss Mike Firth discovered the stray one morning after routinely patrolling the
property’s perimeter, and although the cat shied from him each time he held out a hand, it warmed to Daddy instantly and earned the tag Old Barn Cat the next day. O.B., in case you’re as curious as I was, is the shortened version of the name. Leave it to Daddy to cut corners on something as simple as a name, though. He once had a guinea pig called G.P. and a collie called Collie. I have no explanation for things like that—other than maybe he just saves his creativity for grander endeavors.

At any rate, O.B. welcomes me to Rawhide by thunking his nineteen-pound bulk against my ankle. I reciprocate with a nudge and quick scratch behind the ears, and the next thing I know Daddy’s stomping a tennis-shoed foot against concrete floor several feet away. “Get in here, girl!” he says, for some reason laying on his Southern accent extra thick. “You wanna learn somethin’ or don’t you?”

More acidic fumes burn my nostrils from inside the wash-house, but I put up a good fight, scribbling furiously in my notepad as Daddy narrates:

- balls in canvas bags with black stripe=ready for first wash (wear gloves and apron—acid will stain all clothing)
- balls in canvas bags with yellow stripe=ready for second wash (gloves, apron, same drill)
- balls in canvas bags with red stripe=ready for transport into store-house (shed next to wash-house?)

It’s not a streamlined operation, this washing. No industrial-sized tubs with well-controlled water spraying from all directions. No angular, robotic metal hands, as I naively pictured, rolling the golf balls over and over to ensure a thorough cleansing. Just Daddy’s and Shelley’s and Stan’s gloved hands and a specially-rigged jet washer designed to move golf balls from one compartment of the wash system to the next. And the buckets are like
thick plastic trash bins with wheels. The kind you’d find in a middle school gymnasium or an office park basement.

I stop writing and picture pungent solution sloshing over the bins’ rims and staining Daddy’s jeans. Three of his four pairs of pants have pale splash patterns on the legs. “How many times a week do you do this part?”

Daddy pats Lady’s side, then wipes sweat from his brow. His more-salt-than-pepper bangs are already plastered to his forehead beyond repair beneath his cap. “Ah, every Friday minimum? Depends, really. Depends on what else we’ve got goin’ on.”

“What else we’ve got going on” roughly translates to “What Shelley’s got in mind.” The woman’s a trip, be assured. She’s around sixty, close to five feet five and stocky, and she’s got her graying-brown hair strangled in a ponytail so high it makes me think I’ve time-lapsed two decades. Her snug red polo shirt does her no favors, and the sweatpants she wears don’t even reach the tops of her tennis shoes. Lady bounds toward her with all the enthusiasm of a three-year-old on Christmas morning, but I hang back, even going so far as to stuff my Nikon back inside my purse. I fear that Shelley’ll disapprove of my taking pictures of the place even though it’s basically one open-air room dotted with long, identical hand-built tables and chutes down which identical golf balls roll.

“This yours?” she barks to Daddy, gesturing toward me with a nod. No good morning. No how’s it going. And don’t even get me started on the fact that she’s met me at least three times before and should know—just based on our noses alone—that I’m Duke’s daughter.

“My oldest,” he says. Oldest girl, I think to myself, but that’s not relevant today.
“I’m here for a week or two, actually. I’m writing about your operations.”
Shelley sniffs and breaks a beef jerky in half for the dog. “Like a reporter?”
“In a round-about way, kind of.”
“You wanna be a TV-news-type gal?”
I cringe at the use of ‘gal’ and shake my head. “Definitely not.”
“You wanna be famous?”
“Couldn’t hurt.”
“Then use our real names,” Shelley says, her face deadly serious. “We’ll get famous with her, right Duke?”

Daddy isn’t paying attention, though. He’s playfully taunting Lady with her favorite toy—a Tigger figurine from a McDonald’s Kids Meal—and asking her if she wants to be Rawhide’s new mascot.

Turns out that’s most of what Daddy’s day, my first day, consists of: playing with Lady, taking her on what he bluntly calls “potty trips,” pouring more tap water into her shallow freckled bowl. I find his behavior distracting, actually. His voice naturally carries, as does his baby-talk to the dog, and given the relative height of the barn ceilings, he gets a decent echo going. I haven’t been designated a “work space” yet, so I’m nervous. I’m pacing. I like order and timeliness, and I’m getting no help in those departments. Shelley and Stan seem oblivious to both the sounds and the rabble-rousing, though. She sits stiffly, shoulders ever so slightly slumped, sorting Roundups and Mavericks and Prime Grades (whatever those labels mean) into various plastic laundry baskets about the size of bathroom wastecans. Stan, by contrast, sits like a statue in the Adirondack room, his arms the only parts of him he
allows to move. He’s like a robot the way he sorts these golf balls, but within a lonely observer’s hour, I’m onto his game. Every ten minutes or so, our soldier hops up from his chair in search of something—a tool, a new bucket or can, paperwork. You aren’t searching for a damned thing, Stan, I say to myself. You’re just stretching.

By afternoon’s end I’ve got nothing but five photographs to show for my outing. Three of them are of O.B. prowling the wash-house, and the other two are shots of the logo on the barn. You have to squint to read the words, though. On the drive home through rural Mackey, Daddy says off-hand, “Guess I better clear you off some space tomorrow, huh?”

“Space would be good,” I say. I turn up the radio—“Jumpin’ Jack Flash,” my favorite by the Stones—and try not to let the rows and rows of green-gold corn make me carsick.

Day 2: June 9th, 2010

Today I meet the boss, Mike Firth, who’s near forty-five, balding, and has a light reddish mustache that looks like a persistent stain. I’m told I can call him Mike. No problem. I can also use Rawhide’s employees’ real names in my work, he says proudly, but he also adds, “Unless there’s some reason we wouldn’t want to be recognized.” I’m not sure of that just yet, to be honest with you, so I smile and shake his hand and explain to him the vital academic importance of experiencing Rawhide firsthand. I leave out the stuff about hoping to know my father as more than an ex-athlete and storyteller by the time this gig is over.

It’s ungodly hot—upper nineties—and in the barn they’ve only got floor fans, some tall and rotating, others square and stationary. My “space,” as promised, gets cleared before Daddy even clocks in; I’m located at a rectangular gray table in the building’s west corner,
no more stifling than any other spot. To my right sit metal shelves holding a blue jar of Vick’s chest rub, a tape measure, a stained can of De-Solv-It, a brand new paintbrush, several feet of chain, an eyeglasses case, a multi-use duster (“for cleaning those hard-to-reach places”), a giant stapler, and at least ten boxes of metal brackets, almost all of which have already been opened. To my left is the wall, and on it hang two laminated posters, one covered with MLB logos and the other with NHL ones. I recognize them both because they came from our old garage. The garage Daddy always retreated to when we insisted on watching *Mary Poppins* for the eighty-ninth time or listening to mixed cassette tapes featuring The Backstreet Boys and TLC and Christina Aguilera.

Daddy’s partial to classic rock—AC/DC, Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Judas Priest, Def Leppard, The Scorpions—and he blasted the volume in that garage every summer, playing air guitar and closing his eyes as dramatically as possible during the high or especially loud notes. We three kids used to watch him through the wooden blinds in the dining room and make fun of the fact that as much as he loved his music, he never knew all the words to anything besides “Highway to Hell” and “The Zoo.” If Daddy played Bad Company or Eric Clapton or The Beatles (a bit more palatable than some of those others for a ten-year-old girl, I think),¹² I’d sneak in and memorize the words and watch him paint his war gaming figures at the eight-foot-long, four-and-a-half-foot tall table built specifically for that purpose. In a way that garage was like his secret clubhouse, except everyone was invited to come and go as they pleased. He’d put the finishing touches on a battalion of French Dragoons while we’d pretend to drive his red Dodge all over the county. I can still feel the

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¹² I’ve since come to love most all of it, barring groups like Megadeath and songs like “Ace of Spades.” Just terrible.
truck’s vinyl seating sticking to my legs as I’d scoot over to give Nathan or Natalie a turn at the wheel. I can still hear Jimi Hendrix’s “All Along the Watchtower” reverberating against the walls and the posters and the stacked up boxes of delicate miniatures.

And the chair right behind Shelley’s work station came from our garage too, I notice. I’m upset about this, with what I believe to be good reason, even though I know Daddy’s mindset in bringing it was, “Gotta have a place to sit.” That chair, in all its faded yellow and brass-button glory, was Grandma McKinney’s chair. Came from her breezeway where I used to play with the McFaddens’ two dogs or feed sweet potatoes to Grandma’s own rat terrier or challenge Grandma herself to a game of Chinese checkers. Her property doesn’t belong here. Not in a place like this. While I wait for Daddy to return from punching in his time card, I think of ways I might be able to carry the chair out unnoticed.

I still don’t actually work. Instead, I get the low-down on the company via four handy brochures: *Rawhide Golf Ball Co.: Premium Recycled Golf Balls at Discount Prices, 2010 Wholesale Price Sheet, Rawhide Golf Ball Company 2010 School Price List*, and *2010 Retail Price List* (as well as shop hours and address information, the latter of which literally directs you to no exact location whatsoever—“travel 7.5 miles east of Ft. Branch or 3 miles west of Mackey and look for our road sign”).

“Our message to customers is really the most important thing,” Daddy says, at the same time feeding Lady a nibble from his ham sandwich and watching Stan bring in a new bag of golf balls from the wash-house. “Read that first paragraph.”

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13 The collective favorite song of mine and Daddy’s. We really, really love Jimi.
14 Grandma McKinney was Beth’s mother, so my great-grandmother. We visited her in Lynnville every Saturday for the first four years of my life, eating her heavenly cooking until our jeans’ buttons popped. Oh, and she was an animal-whisperer. Neat lady.
First paragraph states: In business full time since 1993, we stress honesty and integrity above all else in our daily activities with our customers. A handshake and our word are as important to us as a written contract. With this in mind, our employees are concerned about the quality and consistency of each order that we deliver and each golf course pond that we harvest.

I hide a chuckle with a weak cough. Daddy couldn’t give a shit about this mission statement. Since my birth he’s worked retail at Siebert’s Department Store and Famous Footwear, run routes and done office work for the Princeton Clarion and the Mt. Carmel Daily Republican Register (although he’s “no goddamned Republican”), counseled the unemployed for the Indiana Workforce Development out of Vincennes University, and worked the night shift assembly line for Product Action (owned by Toyota, but without the benefits). He knows people. He knows that firm handshakes don’t mean a thing when one guy securing dashboards stands to make more than the guy next to him. He knows damned well that profit beats integrity in every short-lived battle. Daddy likes dogs and kids and war gaming and baseball and the radio and fried pork chops, and he’d just as soon stay out of the rest.

But I don’t bring any of this up to him. I ask what “harvesting golf balls” means, and he explains that every few weeks or so, Mike and Shelley drive to various courses across the Indiana-Kentucky-Illinois tri-state area to collect the golf balls people have lost in water and sand traps. Once gathered with a machine that to me looks like a mini farming combine, these balls are bagged and returned to Rawhide. It’s Shelley’s, Stan’s, and Daddy’s job, then, to run the balls through two acid washes and one clean-water wash as well as to stripe (essentially, tag) each ball according to its perceived quality. Roundup grade, I learn, is a
ball in top condition. No marks, discoloration, or cuts. Prime grades have minimal markings
but are still in very usable condition, and Maverick grades, lowest on the totem pole, are the
ugly stepchildren.

    “Now we don’t stop with those categories,” Daddy assures me. “You’ve gotta break
those down into, say, your Titleist Pro V1s, your Callaway HX Tours, you know. The
specific types people look for in stores.”

    No, I don’t know. I don’t know what people look for in stores. I consider golf a
violent slap in nature’s face—“We, the leisure class, want grass and trees and lakes and dirt,
but not yours.” Not my thing. No integrity in it, I dare say, but nonetheless, I memorize the
classifications in my Retail brochure and listen to those very products—some scuffed, some
shiny new—cascading down their respective chutes, sounding like hail or distant gunfire.

Day 3: June 10th, 2010

At eight am I realize there are no fewer than ten clocks in the main barn. Ten. They’re all
identical, too—just black circles with white faces, black digits, and black hands. What’s
more interesting to me than the number of timepieces present is the relationship each
Rawhide employee has with them. Stan, for instance, checks the time compulsively (in part,
I guess, because he’s got the credentials to be an actual smokestack). Shelley glances up
every so often, but she mostly uses cues from Lady—nine-thirty is a bathroom break,
indicated by tiny-dog dancing; eleven o’clock is lunch, signaled by a solemn,
characteristically hound-like stare at the food dish; two o’clock’s symbol is Lady dozing
beneath the chute-table closest to the exit, living the dream of her human counterparts.
Daddy faces his back to the biggest clock. He sings along with Shelley’s radio even though she plays strictly country music, 99.5 WKDQ, and when he’s hungry, he eats. Pretty simple.

At lunch, right after I’m instructed how to answer the phone to take orders, we share crackers and a pecan-crusted, bright orange cheeseball Shelley made the night before. Sweat sticks to our foreheads and we munch in silence until Shelley rises to turn the music up.

“One of my favorites, here,” she says, strutting toward the stereo as though she composed the lyrics herself. The chorus goes: *I’ll keep my God, our freedom, a little money in the bank, and ya’ll can keep the change.* I immediately assume this song targets Barack Obama’s “Change” campaign from the ’08 election, so I tense up, prepared to defend the president and my own liberal (if not completely socialist) values. Nobody says a word, though. Shelley just hums along with the melody and taps her foot, and the men crunch more crackers and lick the salt from their fingers like they haven’t had a meal in days.

I screw up the first order, no surprise. The guy’s from Rochester, Indiana, and he wants his “usual” order. You’re supposed to find the client’s name on the registry in the computer (an ancient-looking IBM whose spreadsheets still have a turquoise background) to pull up their relevant information, but I can’t find a Dan Carroll from Rochester. The list skips straight from Blackard to Catt, and as is my nature, I panic, telling Mr. Carroll that Rawhide has no record of his having done business with them. He barks the kind of bark you hear from lean, tan men who swim laps most mornings and says, “I’ll call back tomorrow when I can speak to someone qualified.”
My jaw suddenly hurts and my self-esteem takes a hit, but I don’t blame the grumpy bastard. I’m about as far from qualified as O.B., who’s spent the better part of the afternoon keeping Daddy from striping the Nike One Blacks that Mr. Carroll wants express-shipped.

Day 4: June 16th, 2010
(brief hiatus from work after a wisdom tooth had me down for the count)

Mike waltzes in around nine o’clock, red-faced from a combination of the killer humidity and his own excitement. He holds a half-inch thick catalogue open in his hands and asks us all to join him at the center chute-table. I’m in the middle of a lesson on how to distinguish quality golf balls from end-of-the-road ones, and I’ve just gotten my posture right, so I’m conflicted about getting up to see what the fuss is about. You can’t sit too stiffly on these stools, you see, or your spine and lower back start to rebel within forty minutes, but likewise, you can’t rest your elbows on the table and expect to avoid soreness. Shelley’s table—she has one all to herself every day—has a black foam strip along the edge, and when I ask Daddy why ours don’t have one, he tells me Shelley’s daughter made it for her and glued it on one morning before the rest of them came in to work. It’s for resting your wrists, sort of like you’d see on some desktop computers’ keyboards.

“Gather ‘round, gang,” Mike says. His voice carries even more than Daddy’s does but sounds irritating—higher pitched and blaring like a siren, I think. “I need opinions.” What he points to in the catalogue is a six-foot-tall, stationary, tin-man-looking robot that, according to the brief description below its picture, acts as a festive lawn decoration sure to please any visitor. “Whaddya think, huh? Pretty cool.”
Stan grins something fierce, and only now do I realize he’s missing the majority of his teeth. Two or three remain in place on the top, but they’re spaced unevenly and appear, in their yellowness, to have limited life spans as well. “How much for it?”

“There hundred bucks.”

“You’re shittin’ me, Mike,” Daddy chokes.

“Okay, so Duke votes ‘no.’ Ladies?”

I press my oncoming laughter into a pensive pursing of the lips, then ask, “What would you use it for, exactly?” That’s diplomatic enough for the circumstances, right?

“Seasonal stuff. You know, dress him up like a scarecrow for Halloween, give him a beard and bells at Christmas time…”

“Paint golf balls and put ‘em in a basket by his feet for Easter,” Shelley chimes in, but only I detect her scathing sarcasm. She doesn’t look up from her nearly full cans of Callaways.

“Well I’m gonna think about it,” Mike promises, although it sounds more like a threat than anything else. “Back to work. And hey Shelley? Do me a favor and copy those special Nike orders down on the whiteboard.”

There’s a whiteboard to the left of my workspace, and some of Shelley’s writing’s already on it. She uses a medium blue marker, and her letters and numbers are legible even from several feet away. I wonder what job she held before Rawhide came along. Her script indicates she got to sit down. To take time. It’s elegant penmanship.
Day 5: June 17th, 2010

It’s possible that Rawhide’s getting to me. I can’t keep my eyes open to eat my Honey Bunches of Oats at the dining room table, and even when I manage a spoonful, my wisdom tooth reminds me of its presence. I doze as we pass the Mackey corn fields. And my shoulder hurts from lifting and sorting. Daddy dislocated his shoulder three years ago catching that three-hundred-pound paper roll, though, I remember. I’m probably experiencing one one-hundredth of his pain, so I keep my mouth shut and follow him inside the barn.

This morning there’s a special on novelty golf balls—Mr. Peanut, the Memphis Grizzlies, Disney characters, Superman, the RCA dog and pup, you name it—and my mission, should I choose to accept it, is to organize them into their respective clam packs, which are plastic containers molded to encase sixteen similarly-themed balls. At the far end of the barn, mere feet from my desk, we display these clam packs on metal and wooden racks like you’d see in an actual sporting goods store, and their prices appear on red stickers attached to the packs themselves. “This is the first thing we show the customers,” Daddy says. “Makes us look more authentic.”

I’m gathering Mr. Peanuts at a decent pace when I hear the phone ring, sharp and shrill. New client, apparent in Daddy’s soft-spoken, “How can I help you today, sir?” And it turns out I’m not the only one who takes issue with the lay-out of the customer registry, because Daddy can’t figure out how to incorporate the new guy into the system. “Just a moment, sir…one moment…please hold, sir…something wrong with our computer today, looks like…” My face flushes when I hear my father bumble along, lost. Because he covers his mouth a little bit with one hand when he’s nervous, and it makes him more difficult to
understand. The miscommunication continues for minutes, but in the end we make the sale.
An order of three thousand. Daddy bangs the phone clumsily into its cradle and hollers over
his shoulder at Stan, “Got your work cut out for ya, bud. We’ll see what that Adirondack’s
really made of now.”

Shelley hasn’t talked to me much since I first got here, but this afternoon while I’m arranging
clam packs in the most aesthetically-pleasing fashion possible, she pulls up a stool. She
slurps the last of her lemonade before jumping in with, “You see those little cardboard
thingies? The ones longer than they are wide?”

They’re rectangular boxes two inches high and eight inches long, sitting on a shelf ten
feet from us. I nod.

“They’re called sleeves. My daughter made ‘em. Five hundred and seventy-six of
‘em.”

“What are they for?”

“Charity event.”

“Well that’s nice.”

She snorts, “The hell it is. You don’t have to fill all those sleeves, do you?”

Shelley is crazy, I’m thinking. She’s hard of hearing in one ear, although I’m never
sure which, and she doesn’t look you in the eyes when you talk to her. Something in her
words stings no matter the subject. Incredibly, my knees sort of buckle. I grow short of
breath, excuse myself to the wash-house where O.B.’s snoozing, and drop to the floor
voluntarily before I have the chance to get dizzier. My chest caves in on itself like an
imploding mine shaft—like the mine shafts our county’s built on, both literally and
financially. I haven’t had a panic attack like this in weeks. Maybe months. It’s like I’m
trapped, but I tell no one because Daddy will worry and make a special trip just to take me
back home, and he already uses his time in ways that are less than productive. I focus on the
cool feeling of the wash-house sink against the back of my head and listen to the cat’s
rhythmic purring. I listen to the ticking of a black-rimmed clock.

*Day 6: June 18th, 2010*

The usual themes of girls, freedom, earning your keep, babies and mommas, Fords, and Jesus
keep two of us foot-tapping and two of us cringing for an hour before I’m told it’s high time I
shadow Shelley. She’s been with the company the longest, and technically, she’s got more
responsibilities than the men. She’s also got an office next to Mike’s, and although the
swivel chair squeaks and there’s no phone jack, it’s warmer in there in the winter. I hadn’t
thought of winter, given that every day in this barn, cereal hardening like a rock in my
stomach, I sweat through my clothes. There’s no central heating just like there’s no central
air. In December and January they use space heaters lined up in the middle of the room, and
they’ve got to be careful not to trip over the extension cords on journeys to and from the
sheds.

I follow Shelley into her office, but while she’s telling me about her latest venture to
a snooty course on the south side of Evansville, all I can picture is her froglike frame stooped
over the chute-table, wrapped in a shawl, her hair loose from its ponytail to aid in trapping
heat. She’s like a turn-of-the-century factory rat glued in position. They all shiver. Daddy
wears the kind of gloves that have openings for the fingertips, and I imagine arguing with
him—*Why wear those kind? They don’t even help.*
“You paying attention?”

“Yes,” I lie. “Just thinking.”

“Well work while you think. Take this Sharpie and label all these can lids. All of ‘em. Vincennes Elks Club’s having a Charity Golf Scramble weekend after next and we’re behind schedule.”

I open the marker but hesitate. “So I just write—exactly what am I writing?”

“Types. Titleist, Nike, whatever. Whatever’s printed on ‘em. Just lift the lids and see what they say and then copy it down. Can you handle that?”

I swallow hard and try to ignore the heavy, swimming sensation in my chest. Seems like I can’t be around this woman without falling apart, and for what? After another couple of swallows I’m stable, at least, so I start printing ball types as legibly as possible and get through only ten before Shelley presses her index finger to her lips and shushes me. The portable radio in her office, same insufferable station as the one that blares nonstop in the main area, features a deep-voiced man promoting a website called ‘measuringworth.com.’ “At measuringworth.com,” he says slowly, reminding me of the quaint, crackly narrator for 1990s Smuckers’ commercials, “we’ll tell you how to value the things you value most.” Sounds authoritarian at first, so I grimace, but he goes on to explain that measuringworth.com is a site designed to calculate Comparative Relative Value, Comparative Growth, and “other interesting questions” you might have regarding your own assets, earned wages, and more. I haven’t the foggiest idea what this means, and even though Shelley’s leaning forward with her good ear (I assume) almost touching the radio, it doesn’t look like she’s up on the lingo, either.
“I’ve been wanting to pawn some stuff,” she tells me when WKDQ has switched to an ad for Taco Bell’s ninety-nine cent Cheesy Gordita Crunch. “I thought maybe that thing was about pawning.”

“The website?”

“Yeah. I got a bunch of my mom’s old rings and some necklaces I’ve never even worn. They’re takin’ up space on the dresser, you know?”

I nod, but once again, we’re at odds. I can imagine what that’s like—having heaps of jewelry coiled together like so many golden snakes basking—but I don’t know firsthand. I’ve still got the upright, dark wooden jewelry box my step-grandmother Elinor bought me for Christmas in 1997, granted, but in its four drawers are glitter-speckled bouncy balls, small plastic Mardi Gras tokens, folded notes written in gel pen and passed during middle school study hall, three bear figurines as lightly fuzzed as peaches, a periwinkle Scottie dog I got at the dentist’s office when I was six, and a few Connecticut state quarters (because when they first came out, I really liked the image of that expansive, sturdy tree). Inside the small door next to the drawers—a kind of tiny closet, I used to think—is a ridged, velvety area for placing rings and a series of gold plastic hooks for hanging necklaces. I have two birthstone rings (topaz, my least favorite) and two necklaces (one made of pale green, peach, and light blue butterfly charms and one that’s just a simple chain). A cylindrical bottle of Sand-Art and my grandpa’s old asthma puffer take up most of the space in there. I’m trying to say that I used that present as a series of secret cubby holes. I don’t buy jewelry just like I don’t buy into golf. I hate jewelry.
“Anyway, back to work,” Shelley says. “And you can sit in here on lunch break if you want, by the way. I’m goin’ to Huck’s for a personal pizza. Might bring one back for Stan. You or your dad want a pizza or bacon cheeseburger or somethin’?”

“Daddy’s diabetic,” I remind her without looking up from my shakily-written ‘Black Max.’ “He’s not supposed to have things like that all the time.”

“Nobody said all the time.”

“Still. I don’t think so. And nothing for me either. Thank you.”

Shelley goes back to purchase orders and I go back to examining can contents. I’m not much of a shadow.

Just after one p.m. I overhear the following conversation, punctuated by golf balls, between Daddy and Shelley and never say a word:

“Hey Duke.”

“Yo.”

“Gimme a layman’s definition of commodity.”

“A layman’s definition?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the context?”

“Nevermind that. Good definition.”

“Uh, well. Huh. Commodities are any type of specialization you might have, really. Any type of good or service you can offer somebody that you provide to them in a unique way.”

“Okay, so we’re a commodity?”
“What?”

“Here. Our job. We’re a commodity?”

“I guess you could say that, sure.”

“Good. Okay then.”

“That it?”

“That’s it.”

“Okay.”

Once I’m back in Shelley’s office I hear rain thumping the metal rooftop and I get a Barbara Walters vibe. I haven’t gotten along with Shelley yet because I haven’t asked the burning questions. I haven’t leaned forward, pen cap poised at my lips, eyes ever so slightly squinted to indicate trust or understanding, and asked, “How does this place—this routine of yours—make you feel?” Of course I can’t ask something like that, partly because I’m chicken, partly because I’m no Barbara, and partly because I know she’d say “Like crap. How do you think?” Carpal tunnel syndrome and locked-up knees and the kinds of backaches Aleve can’t touch hardly complete a person. No one sees this as her life’s work. Or his.

“What do you like about your job?” I hear myself asking in a voice wholly unlike my own. I sound tinny and apathetic, and I don’t want to come across that way. I’m not that way. I study Shelley for a moment, listening to her grind the shells of M&Ms between her molars. She sucks her teeth, clears her throat, and stares at me. “I’m just curious.”

“I guess writers are supposed to be, aren’t they?”

“It’s one of our better qualities, actually.”
“Hmph,” she snorts. “What do I like?” She swivels around in her high-backed chair, ignoring the heinous squeak that resonates from its aging lumbar support. “I mean, it’s really not too stressful, really. You always know what you’re gonna have to do. Your hours might change any given week, but never by so much that you’re gonna feel too different. You still get up early. Still go to bed as early as you can.”

I don’t like the “you,” but I’m noticing that Rawhiders, if I may coin the term, use it every time they talk about work. You put the good ones on the shelf for Stan. You gotta make sure the wash water’s on hot. When taking a customer’s order, you always say, ‘We appreciate your business and hope to see you again soon.’ The “we” helps a little, but by and large, I get explanations of Rawhide’s inner workings as though I’m the one running the show. “We” means a unit, and we are one. But we’re also four specific people who refuse to take ownership of, for lack of a better phrase (or perhaps finally finding the perfect one), the company’s ball-handling. You move the Callaways to the clam pack station. You call Mr. Hassenour back and tell him we’ll throw in a student discount. You cart these over to the wash-house while I give Lady her Milkbone—she likes them best from me. You work this Saturday. Please.

Two more things I notice today: one’s a back-and-forth and the other is, I think, a psychological observation.

Toward afternoon’s end Daddy’s leading a repeat customer down the novelty ball aisle, pointing out a pack of Looney Toons characters apparently of interest. The guy’s got kids. Boy and a girl, nine and five respectively, who by my estimation have impeccable taste
in children’s programming if they’re fans of Daffy and Sylvester and Foghorn Leghorn.\textsuperscript{15}

“I’ll take every one you’ve got,” the man says. “You take MasterCard?”

Daddy rings him up—forty-eight dollars for golf balls nobody’s even using for golf—and Shelley yells to him, “Duke, you remember the little boy that came up with his dad two weeks ago? ‘Bout four or five.”

“Real little fella? Coal black hair?”

“Yep. Had a Cubs cap on.”

“I think he’s a Ziliak from Haubstadt.”

“Maybe, but you remember him comin’ in, right?”

Daddy shakes Mr. MasterCard’s hand and tries not to roll his eyes at Shelley. “Yes.”

“Well after you left, him and his dad went pokin’ around over there by the Resales and knocked over all those war figurines you’ve been storin’. Those ones you were gonna take up to the shop to have repainted, you said.”

“The shop” is what’s left of Lucky 13’s—an unheated, un-air-conditioned space above Louie Andriakos’ restaurant and candy store, Greek’s. Daddy, my uncle Greg, and their buddies Rick, Buford, Seth, Carmike, Mike Pike, Mike Fanensteil, and Cas rent the facility to hold bi-weekly Warhammer tourneys, and they do, as Shelley alludes to, paint figures for one another depending on who has the most free time in his schedule. Daddy rarely paints anymore. He says that because Greg went to art school, he’s got the precision and they all might as well make use of that.

\textsuperscript{15} Nathan and Natalie and I used to lie on our stomachs in the family room at the Owensville house and eat bowls full of crushed-up chocolate Teddy Grahams in milk—our own original cereal—while watching old cartoon marathons. Daffy hiding from the “little man from the draft board?” Bugs and the Masked Marauder? Yosemite Sam refusing to take his oversized stepson Wentworth to the park? Unmatchable.
“He dropped those Beastmen,” Daddy confirms, almost as though he’d predicted the incident long before it happened. “Who cares?”

“Thought you’d wanna know.”

“It’s okay though. For God’s sake. He’s just a little boy.”

I love my father in this exchange. You don’t blame a little boy for an honest mistake.

I love my father in the last thirty minutes of the workday, too, when we’re all sorting a shipment of Titleists from southern Illinois. Stan sorts his allotment like they’re unwanted specimens of rock from another universe; he touches them lightly and quickly but with a critical eye and throws them into the proper crates or cans as though they’re contagious.

Shelley’s like a surgeon: methodical, deliberate, but entirely removed. I cradle each ball like a new puppy, afraid I’ll somehow bruise it. But Daddy’s different. He makes his job a game. He mines his treasure trove of athletic skills and finds that behind-the-back tosses, jump shots, hook shots a la Kareem, and the fancy upward flicks of shortstops put the balls in their containers as well as anything else does. You sing “House of the Rising Sun” or “Iron Man” under your breath and win the State championship for Team Rawhide. You make this day bearable.

Past eleven p.m. I’m using my torso to block as much of the computer screen’s light as possible. It’s in Nathan’s bedroom because our apartment only has five rooms including the kitchen and bathroom and we don’t have any space to put it any place else. My brother’s sleeping, so I depress keys quietly. I’m on measuringworth.com, and I’m as nervous as a fourteen-year-old searching Google for porn.
On the site’s welcome page, I read, *Intrinsic things are priceless. The love of your life or a beautiful sunset. There is no objective way to measure these, nor should there be.*

Further down the page, they say, *MeasuringWorth is a service for calculating relative worth over time.*

Give me a layman’s definition of ‘intrinsic.’ Tell me how much my father’s worth has decreased over time in the eyes of employers and co-workers. No calculator for that.

*Day 7: June 19th, 2010*

The Charity Scramble’s creeping up on us, and to dramatize our toil, a summer storm brews. Thunder shakes the wash-house while I’m tying my hair back in the bathroom. Even the mirror rattles, and in that motion my face goes blurry like I’m mutating or somehow disappearing. Just outside the door O.B. licks his giant paws and occasionally looks up to assess the weather conditions. His fur matches the sky.

“You okay out here by yourself, buddy?” I ask him, kneeling down to his level and rubbing his forehead with three fingers. He blinks, pushes against me, then jumps straight into another round of bathing. “Holler if you need me,” I remind him. “I’ll be around.”

Sitting around in the dark, more or less, by ten o’clock. Lightning, we all agree, struck a transformer, which isn’t unlikely given the beautiful targets wide open spaces make of sparsely-placed power lines. Out of necessity we take the latest cheese ball, a pack of shaved deli turkey, a can of pineapple chunks, and Shelley’s pea salad out of the fridge and proceed to eat every bite. No one talks because everyone’s too busy listening to the cracks and booms overhead. In storms all people are four years old, seeing and hearing nature for the first time.
Wonder turns to confinement before long, though. We get restless. We scoot on our stools and tap pens against tabletops and make trips to the cooler even though we’re all water-logged. Trying to sort for the Scramble isn’t easy without adequate lighting, and as I squint to identify scuffs and cuts, I start to feel like I’m in a bunker. Massive super cells, I imagine, have laid flat the entire Midwest—golf courses not excluded—and only our safe house remains standing amid the rubble. We’ve stayed off the news so far because no legitimate news station even knows we’re here. We’ll eventually need more than canned fruit and glorified crackers.

Shelley snaps me out of my trance by asking the group, “You know what I think’s shit?”

Our silence means we’d love to know.

“That we don’t get no extra money for all this separation.”

“Separation” meaning the sorting of individual brands for an event, without a winner, whose proceeds go to Riley’s Children’s Hospital. Why put us through that part of the labor, then? It is shit. So what do we do? Keep right on sorting like we’re mechanized. We don’t even notice the skies have cleared until we hear the back door screech open and watch Mike cross the room with a clipboard in his hands. It’s not the usual clipboard. Far less paper clipped in.

He leaves the door open, and backlit by sunlight, he says, “Duke, Stan. My office for a sec?”

The two men follow, Stan stiff-postured, Daddy taking long strides and, as usual, chattering to Lady lying still in her dog bed. They’re in there five minutes, tops. Daddy walks back to his work station, sorts the last of the Nikes bound for Vincennes Elks Club
members, and removes his keys from his jeans pocket. “All righty, hon. We’re takin’ off. Grab your camera.”

“It’s only two-thirty.”

“I know,” he says. “Day’s over.”

Job’s over, more like. I learn that night, alongside my mother and brother and sister in the living room of our too-small apartment, that Mike’s not getting enough golf balls on his harvesting runs. Without supply rolling in on a steady basis, you can’t very well feed demand, now can you? Daddy and Stan are laid off indefinitely, but Shelley stays on because of those responsibilities I mentioned earlier. Either that or because she’s got the most efficient technique, or because she scares Mike as much as me. All I know is that Daddy’s been on Unemployment before and we’ve managed. Eaten a lot of grilled cheese sandwiches and hot dogs and Jack’s frozen pizzas four for five dollars, but managed all the same. My reporting ends without my consent, and I’m pretty sure that rarely happens to Barbara. I’ve got photos I may not show to anyone. I’m not using real names. I’ve got matching blisters on my hands and feet. But I am so glad to see Daddy cry out in pain when he lifts his orange T-shirt over his head for a shower, because that will be the last time. His separated shoulder might, with rest and luck, start to heal.
Part Two: Other Men
Picture a man six foot even, forty-one years old, donning a V-neck white T-shirt more stained than clean and a pair of wide, darkened bifocals. He’s got gorgeous black hair combed back slick with Brylcreem, but his dull gray hard hat flattens it out. Looks like an upturned lunch bucket on his head. He’s Pup Phillips’ field hand through the week—doesn’t own enough farm ground by himself to make a steady income—but on Saturdays, when you’re seeing him, he does odd jobs. Today it’s building support beams for the rafters in the ceiling of the Nazarene Church in Oatsville, and as soon as he’s done with that, he’s off to visit somebody. A woman.

He’s sixteen years her senior, closer to her parents’ age, but when he sees her at Sunday service balancing her two-year-old daughter on her lap, crossing her long, tan legs, reaching up with one hand every four or five minutes to make sure her glasses sit straight on her nose, he feels something. Admiration, you think, by the way he takes off his hard hat and pats down his hair and brushes off the fronts of his Levis before knocking at her door at dusk. Her parents’ door. She’s living with them for now, you see, since her ex-husband, my biological grandfather Ray Falls, left her one month after my mother’s birth. Our man taps the outside screen lightly with only a knuckle. A filthy knuckle covered in paint. He fiddles with the rim of his hat again and hears footfalls, two sets, heading toward him.

My mother, petite and dark-haired with eyes as bright blue as a husky’s, pops her head out from behind my Mamaw’s leg. Mother and daughter have opened the door together, as a unit, and they’re assessing. “Howard,” Mamaw says.

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16 “A little dab’ll do ya.” Couldn’t resist.
“Evenin’, Bonnie.”

She looks down at his hat. “You come from work?”

“Just over at the Ark. Beams needed fixin’.”

“Yes they did.”

He clears his throat and shuffles his feet a little and manages to wink at my mother, whose open mouth and slow blinking indicate he’s at least caught her interest. He’s taller than most men she knows.

“Howard, Mother and Daddy went to the chili supper up at Adkinses. It’s just me and Shirley.” Mamaw’s known Howard Barton forever. He’s a friend of the family. A handsome, generous friend of the family. He can repair anything.

You’ve got to picture him grinning on just one side of his mouth when he confesses, “Actually, I didn’t come here to see Ott and Marie.”

Mamaw squeezes Mother’s tiny hand in hers and smoothes down the front of her own cotton dress. “Well I’ve got potatoes boiling.”

“All right.”

“And Shirley needs a nap.”

“All right,” he says again. “I’ll just come back tomorrow night.”

He gets halfway to the road past the driveway when Mamaw yells to him through the closed screen, “You can come back as many nights as you want, but it won’t matter.”

Our man nods his head but keeps grinning all the way back to Pup’s place.
In three weeks of evening visits, Howard Barton convinced Bonnie Clem-Falls to go to Dick Clark’s Restaurant with him. She brought my mother along, a wide-eyed chaperone who, by the date’s end, had eaten all three helpings of coleslaw on the table. The adults shared a basket of fries with their cheeseburgers and never got past talking about the year’s meager corn crop.

The evening got good on the ride home, I think. Howard insisted on buying my mother two dips of vanilla soft serve at the Tasty Freeze, and Mamaw insisted that if he did, they’d have to stop the car and let Shirley eat the ice cream in the parking lot. “Kids spill,” she told him.

“I know,” he said, putting his dark blue Buick in park. “I’ve got four of my own.”

“I know.” *Nancy, Richard, Edwin, and Bobby.* She’d seen the Barton brood, all sandy-haired and exuberant, out with their mother. Howard’s wife. No, his ex.

After a few beats and a few slurping sounds from the backseat, Howard added, “I could install a telephone in here if you want.”

Mamaw raised a dark brow. “You what?”

“You know, so I wouldn’t have to shout to talk to you.” He gestured with an open hand to the enormous amount of space between them. Mamaw had pressed her side against the passenger’s door handle to the point that it left an indentation in her hip.

“You aren’t a bit funny,” she said, biting her lip. “You know that.”

“Nope. First I’m hearin’ of it.”

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17 Princeton’s Dick Clark is no relation, sadly, to the face of *American Bandstand* and New Year’s Rockin’ Eve.
The way Howard Barton became my Papaw—my real grandfather—wasn’t by proposing. On a cool day in early October 1956, he handed my mother a pack of generic caramels, ran a weathered thumb along her cheek, looked up at Mamaw standing firm on the Clems’ porch steps, and asked, “Your furniture or mine?” On the sixteenth of the month Mamaw bought a new, knee-length blue dress, and on the nineteenth, they got married at the Ark in front of twenty-or-so people. I’m not positive, but I think they used her furniture on the grounds that she knew better how to match things.

As endearing as I find my grandparents’ relationship, as much as I look to them as models for how human beings ought to love one another, I’m not painting romance. I don’t think they had one. Oatsville and Wheeling—wild grasses, corn harvests, bad storms, nosy neighbors, prayers and hymnals, an old house, the constant aroma of pig shit in a good westerly wind, raising an eventual seven children\(^\text{18}\) on a farmer’s salary—kept them from that. Kept them from learning as much about each other as I think they otherwise could’ve. Mamaw had her perfect husband for thirty-three years before smoking finally destroyed his heart and lungs in 1989, but they spent most of that time apart. He drove a combine from five a.m. to four p.m. and loved it. Harvest time was like Christmas to this man. She tended house and cared for kids and made sure his recliner was empty of toys when he returned home.

“What stands out to you most about your evenings together?” I asked her this summer, sitting in her mauve rocking chair sipping iced tea.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{18}\) Nancy, Marvin, Edwin, Bobby (Papaw’s); Shirley (Mamaw’s); Jason and Amy (theirs together). A full house.

\(^{19}\) She still makes tea with saccharin tablets, cancer-warnings be damned. She’s the healthiest person I know, and that stuff is delicious.
She stopped rocking for a moment, stared down at her fuchsia-painted toenails as lovely as a teenager’s, and said, “When he’d decide to go to bed—he went to bed at nine o’clock, as a rule—he’d get up out of his chair and rub my arm and say, ‘Mommy, I’m headed north.’ I can hear him say that plain as day.”

At eighty, despite her white perm, Mamaw still looks thin and feisty and pristine in her Jacqueline Smith brand blouses and solid-color slacks and thin belts and bare feet, but on that day, positioned in the recliner adjacent to mine with one leg tucked beneath her frame, she looked twenty years younger. When she talks about Papaw she physically changes. I do too. We want him back, mostly, but in some ways, I think, we’re glad we can conjure him up in whatever fashion we choose.

**Family Remnant: No Two Days Were Ever the Same**

That’s what Mamaw says most about Papaw: “With Howard Barton, no two days were ever the same.”

When the newlywed Bartons and their five children, suddenly shared, first moved into the old green house on the hill by the Belcher place, they had company. Mice. Mice watched *Perry Mason* with them and cleaned up their toast crumbs and escaped every slab of peanut-butter bait Papaw set along the edge of the refrigerator. My mother cried when they said they’d try glue traps, so they didn’t.

Mice you can coexist with to a certain extent, but when blue smoke starts wafting from your floor vents—bad wiring, Papaw said—you can’t stand idly by. Sometimes houses win, though. Sometimes you have to move from a place even though you just got there.
One afternoon a cement block stacked too close to the hog pens fell and killed a black and white pig that wouldn’t have been up for slaughter for a good year and a half. He was underweight and obviously a little accident prone, but it’s too late, though, once they’re dead. Papaw carried the bloodied animal to the worktable he’d built in the shed out back and skinned it in minutes. He cut the meat into thick chunks and placed those chunks into silver buckets, juices and all. By the time Mamaw got home from shopping for a new head scarf at Frank’s department store in Princeton, those meat buckets lined the kitchen floor. The smell lined everything they owned. Papaw shrugged his shoulders from his position at the doorframe as if to say, “Isn’t this always the way with me?” and he proceeded to help his wife clean the flesh and pack it inside the ice chest in the basement between the laundry machine and the kid-sized car little Jason affectionately called “Beep Beep.”

Another afternoon Papaw got the idea that Mamaw wanted her kitchen appliances to look like the ones in the Penney’s catalogue. Avocado and a putrid yellow were the “in” colors besides pink, and Mamaw’s mother had pink, so Papaw went with an olive shade he thought balanced out the other two. On his knees he spray-painted the refrigerator, and as he moved to the mini-freezer next to the breadbox, the air conditioning kicked in. Should’ve. High reached ninety-one degrees that day. It’s just that a strong air current blows fresh paint loose. Airbrushes it onto nearby walls, cabinets, countertops, curtains, table legs, carpet, baseboards, and sinks.
For a week the Bartons wore socks in the house.\textsuperscript{20} For a week and a half the laundry came out tinged green.

\textit{Family Remnant: Go-Go Boots}

For some adolescent Christmas my mother wanted white Go-Go boots—she always had to be the first in the boonies to own something kids in cities or on the coasts already sported and loved. Frank’s had them. Three pairs total, one of which sat on display in the window between a full-length mink coat and a burgundy party dress. “Janice Carnahan’ll have ‘em by Monday,” she pleaded with Mamaw, watching her whip mashed potatoes almost to a froth. “Today’s \textit{Saturday}.”

“There’s ten inches of snow outside, girl. No way.”

“I’m so \textit{mad}!”

“Well you’ll have to get glad in the same clothes you got mad in.”

And then Papaw let his newspaper rest against his thighs and asked, “What store is it? Frank’s, prob’ly?”

“Howard, you just stay right where you are. Supper’s on.”

Next thing you knew the recliner’s footrest came down with a notable sproing in its aging hinges. “We’ll be back before it’s ready.”

“You’ll be in a \textit{ditch}. It’s still comin’ down out there. You’d need chains just to get the truck out of the driveway.”

“We’ve got chains.”

\textsuperscript{20} Unheard of in our area. Socks are for winter, bare feet are for summer (shoes are generally just optional).
Papaw kept snow chains in the flatbed throughout the winter in case he came along someone stranded. That telephone-in-the-car idea of his hadn’t come to fruition yet, you know. And it’s not like any decent stretches of Oatsville or Wheeling roads were close enough to a house to cause immediate alarm. More than one person has frozen out there, surely.

Took them over two hours to make the thirty-five-minute trip there and back, but Mother got her boots and made every other middle school girl jealous as hell. I’ve seen pictures, and they look to me like glorified ice skates without the blades. Papaw thought so, too.

*Family Remnant: Bad Connection*

Talking on the telephone in Wheeling or Oatsville was like talking through the proverbial two cans and a string. According to Mamaw and Papaw, you either picked up every word of every conversation within ten miles to the point of confusion, or you learned to love the crackle of static.

Until 1963, that is. That year, Wheeling and Oatsville residents banded together, taking turns calling the phone company to request the crisp connection they all craved. They got the run-around. *It’s a rural location, ma’am*, the phone folks often said. *We’ll look into it.* Papaw thought they looked about as far as the edges of their desks before relegating the problem a small-town complaint that would cost money, not make money.

One morning in late spring, Mamaw rose, prepared Papaw’s breakfast and packed his lunch pail with a cold meatloaf sandwich, then lifted the receiver from its wall-hanging
cradle to call her mother (some question about Sunday service, she vaguely recalls). No dial tone. Just a very bad connection nearly sparking into her ear.

 Turns out someone had broken the front window of the phone company’s closest headquarters building and subsequently shot up the equipment inside. Yes, this person rose pre-dawn and took a shotgun to the switchboard that operated every phone in the Wheeling-Oatsville-Miller-Gyro-Francisco-Petersburg area.\textsuperscript{21} Nothing but a pile of broken metal, shattered glass, and twisted wires remained when employees arrived at 8:00 a.m. Tan local police squad cars assembled nose-to-nose in the gravel parking lot outside, and eventually, for what might have been the first time in history, two FBI agents paid a visit to our little hamlet of the state.

 The agents interviewed Mamaw and Papaw at their dinner table two days after what was now being called “the incident.” Mother, nine years old at the time, took her one-year-old half-brother Jason outside in the warming morning sun (today, she only remembers being acutely aware of the competing colognes the agents wore and the great lengths of their neckties; Wheeling men’s neckties, she tells me, were ordinarily too short). Mamaw didn’t bother changing out of her pink-flowered housedress, and she poured the agents coffee just as she would’ve poured it for any other Monday morning guest. Papaw kept the newspaper within reach, almost as though he anticipated his visitors would bore him into believing his hometown could have news.

\textsuperscript{21} They’re all just the shittiest towns. Dry grass, lots of trailers, white or yellow houses with missing shingles or siding and several plastic toys piled haphazard in the front yard for all to see. The Ark Cemetery is the hotspot for visiting people. That should tell you something.
“Mrs. Barton,” said Agent One, “do you have any idea who might’ve perpetrated this crime?” That’s how he said it, according to her story. She and Papaw figured he thought country people wouldn’t know words like “perpetrated.”

Mamaw looked briefly across the table at her husband, smiled the slow smile of mutual understanding between couples, and replied, “Everyone in this town wanted the phones fixed, sir. I’d-a done it myself if your perp hadn’t beat me to it.”

Agent Two’s eyes bugged out behind his small glasses. “You’re not making a very good case for yourself, Mrs. Barton. You do know we’re not above taking you in for further questioning, don’t you?”

“That isn’t happening, sir,” Papaw said, his tone of voice as level and pleasant as always. “Now if you gentlemen will excuse us.”

“No one can excuse you from obstruction of justice, sir.”

“Well I’ll just take you both outside and clean your clocks and see where we stand after that, then.”

Gasps, one from each of the suits. Agent Two got brave, though, asking, “And just exactly where do you bury your dead?”

Papaw hooked a thumb in the direction of the pig houses and replied, “Just under those shade trees out yonder. Whole woods belongs to me.”

Both agents fidgeted with their jackets, finished their coffee in large gulps, and bid the Bartons a good day. And they never asked anyone if they could search the old barn loft adjacent to the Smith farm. For all we know, the shotgun might still be there, resting snug beneath silent straw.
Family Remnant: Three Fingers

Papaw was missing parts of three fingers when I knew him—his left middle finger almost in its entirety, his right index finger from the nail up, and his right middle finger from the larger knuckle up. In every instance, farming was the culprit; either the corn picker or the combine claimed those coveted prizes of flesh and bone.

I was Papaw’s best pal from my birth in 1985 to his death in 1989, and his absent digits never troubled me. I don’t remember noticing, to be honest. I preferred occupying my time in his and Mamaw’s Mulberry Street apartment by routinely checking the pressure in his breathing machine, doing voice-overs for the stuffed red fox that perched behind him on the headboard, and examining his various belt buckles if they happened to be lying on the dresser within reach. My favorites were the ruby-centered piece and the one made almost exclusively of turquoise. Papaw had treasures. And he could carry me just fine, so what did missing fingers matter?

Family Remnant: Simon and Schuster and a Balanced Breakfast

I wasn’t a normal kid—plastic tea sets and dolls with exaggerated eye make-up could only hold my interest for so long. I preferred books, especially those profiling animals and their habitats, so that’s the kind of stuff I brought to Mamaw’s and Papaw’s when they babysat me. By this time, early 1988, Papaw had suffered three heart attacks, routinely wore thin blue-green oxygen tubes in his nostrils, and only got out of bed to use the restroom or brush

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22 I stayed with them every day when Mother worked for the *Clarion* and Daddy for the *IWD*. Three years of complete bliss—the longest stretch of bliss I’ve known.
his teeth. Wasn’t odd, though. To me “grandpa” meant soft-spoken playmate with whom one shared corn flakes and jelly toast and a good read. I didn’t know any different.

In our daily ritual I hopped into bed on his left side, wrapped one of my pudgy legs around a leg of his tray-table, and ate half his toast, cereal, scrambled eggs, or sausage links, depending on what Mamaw had decided to prepare each given morning. He got coffee—a substitute for cigarettes, Dr. Brink said—and I got grape juice, and when breakfast ended in a clean plate, we moved on to Simon & Schuster’s *Field Guide to North American Wildlife*. I loved the page with raccoons and muskrats whose chestnut coats were drawn in careful cross-hatching, and my favorites to this day, wolves, often warranted special attention as well. But for whatever reason, I remember the fish, reptiles, and amphibians most. Slitherers commanded a whole chapter: spotted newts, salamanders, ghostly axolotls, nearly eyeless mudpuppies, blue-tailed skinks, somber toads, and snakes of all sorts.

The mudpuppy, in its somewhat amorphous shape and log-like texture thanks to the artist’s rendering, threw Papaw for a loop—“What’s *that* cotton-pickin’ thing?” he asked the first time we thumbed through.

“It’s a mudpuppy,” I replied, recalling from memory what Mother or Daddy had told me the words said. “*Necturus maculosus.*” My pronunciation of scientific names, from what I hear now, rarely faltered. I’m perhaps most famous for wrapping my always-running mouth around the word “hydrochlorothiazide” over the phone to a nurse when she asked if I knew where my grandpa’s “medicine” was kept. This sort of thing floored the adults, so I certainly didn’t want to lose my touch. Field Guide sessions were practice for dazzling everyone I knew, and Papaw never tired of hearing about where mudpuppies lived, what
bullfrogs ate, and how long brown bears hibernated. He’d smile so hard that his oxygen tubes would ride up too high on his cheeks and make him cough.

On the morning he fell over in the bathroom floor—another mild heart attack—I crouched in the corner between the bathroom and hallway and held my book against my chest and watched. He gripped the shaggy green bathmat on the edge of the tub for balance while Mamaw and her mother (who lived right across the street) lifted him underneath his arms as best they could. In the frenzy no one noticed me looking. He scared me when he wasn’t in bed. As my audience, my ultimate source of encouragement, I could control him, strange as that may sound. This slow, dim scene of groaning and panic wasn’t part of our routine.

*Family Remnant: Last Birthday*

More and more often, as ’88 drew to a close, Papaw would be in the hospital getting breathing treatments when I’d come over. But on his seventy-fifth birthday, November 8th (just four days before I turned three), he was allowed to stay home to celebrate with family. Now, I realize this was Dr. Brink’s way of indicating there wouldn’t be another birthday, but then, I focused on the silver-backed helium balloons tied to the bedposts and the white-frosted angel food cake carried through the front door by Jane Ann and Mary, Papaw’s primary nurses and good friends of mine. Jane Ann wore powder-blue eye shadow and had her hair pulled back in a frizzy, crimped ponytail, and she bent down eye-level with me and handed me a bright magenta noisemaker. “We’re all gonna sing for your papaw, Samantha. Can you sing ‘Happy Birthday’ too?”
A silly question if ever there were one. I knew every verse to “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” and Whitney Houston’s “I Wanna Dance with Somebody,” so “Happy Birthday” was a cinch. I sang loudest of all. I opened all Papaw’s presents for him, too, and we fed each other bites of cake from beige plastic Wendy’s forks. Mother’s teary expression, Jason’s hovering, and Amy’s silence struck me as rude. I knew my manners. I knew you acted happy on somebody’s birthday whether you were happy or not. I’m just glad I really was.

“You remember the strawberry ice cream I stirred up for the two of you after you finished your cake?” Mamaw asked me on that same summer afternoon I accidentally interviewed her about evenings with her husband. Her tea glass, fourth one of the day, sat empty and sweating on a damp coaster.

“Of course I remember.” She’d stood in stocking-feet in that tiny kitchen whipping our ice cream dollops until they were as smooth and silky as homemade icing. And the pinkness in those bowls wasn’t ordinary pink. It was the kind of magical, perfect pink you eat in overflowing spoonfuls and greedily savor even though the cold of it ravages the roof of your mouth.
My Big Brother’s Sort-Of Super Powers

I once thought my big brother turned the world in his hands. Heroes are tricky. Hard to abandon.

Master of Solitude

It’s mid-June, 1974, and my half-brother Vaughn’s second birthday’s coming up fast. Grandma McKinney wants to ask him what flavor cake, frosting, and ice cream he might like for the family party, so she wipes her bony gardener’s hands on her floral apron and approaches him. He’s seated on the creek bank, dangling tiny-tennis-shoed feet over the edge and tossing loose rocks into low water. He reminds her of our father—the curly hair, the prominent nose, the tendency to play alone.

“Vaughn Lee,” she says, stooping down to meet him eye level, “somebody’s got a birthday pretty soon.”

Without lifting his eyes from his meticulous pebble dropping, he wipes that Robinson nose and says, “Fuck off, Grandma.”

She covers her mouth and runs to the house. She doesn’t want him to see how hard she’s laughing. He’s a child. Her only great-grandchild. He hears things, and there’s no harm in hearing.

Giant Brain

When our father and his first wife, Debbie Wallace (Vaughn’s mother), divorce in 1975, three-year-old Vaughn divides his time as he is told. Weekdays with Debbie and her
boozing, much younger boyfriends, weekends with our father and the woman who will, ten years later, be my mother. But when my parents marry in 1976, Vaughn proposes an idea. “Why can’t we all live together?” he asks. “Why can’t we all just live in this house?”

Daddy and Mother and Debbie and the boyfriends, he means. More people at whom he can “Ping, ping!” fake pistols. More people to read bedtime stories, he figures (and he can convince them each to read three apiece before lights out. Later, he teaches me that it’s lips pursed loosely, roll the eyes upward until you feel the tears sting, then sigh like you’re trying for no one to hear it. I once got a pair of gleaming red patent dress shoes using exactly that technique).

Nobody has an answer for his question—nobody wants to tell him that they’d kill each other if they had to occupy the same space—so our father buys him tickets to Six Flags in St. Louis. Debbie lets him stay up late to watch The Wolf Man.

His mind comes up big in the story about the new shoes, too.

So Vaughn’s in first grade, slinging an empty backpack over his shoulders, running from the bus to Debbie’s townhouse with a Mississippi-wide smile. He’s wearing used-to-be black dress shoes rubbed paper-thin at the heels, sporting holes in the toes, caked with recess dirt, laces fraying, soles tearing off.

“I just got you new shoes!” Debbie scolds, twisting him around to assess the damage from all angles. “What the hell did you do?”

Debbie calls my future parents, and when they arrive on scene, on the couch, the truth unfolds. No crying from Vaughn. He knows he shouldn’t be in trouble anyway. He got the other kicks from a friend at school, he says. Skinny black boy named Scotty Hardiman who
lives out on State Street. They traded shoes on the playground. Scotty’s family, Vaughn says proudly, “doesn’t have no money” (later, he tells me, “If you’ve got enough, why not just share?”).

And so comes the second late-night showing of *The Wolf Man*, complete with popcorn and root beers, and my parents spend the night. Everybody under one roof. The dream.

*Meditations*

Vaughn likes my mother and calls her “Shirl” and sometimes “Shirley Magee.” She takes him mudding on the four-wheeler when Daddy’s busy coaching Babe Ruth League. They sing Michael Jackson songs into hairbrushes and practice his moves in front of the hall mirror, and when they tire of that, he plays He-Man to her She-Ra. When he’s got homework, she checks it. When he’s got respiratory infections (common in our family), she plugs in the humidifier and makes tents out of blankets and afghans to trap the moisture and open his lungs.

When I’m two or three or so, Vaughn tells me that my mother’s got guts, and when I ask why and what “guts” means, he tells me about the time the two of them spent in the McDonald’s drive-thru box. For a while (and maybe still, in some places) McDonald’s had a section of pavement marked square with yellow paint, and they called that “the box.” You parked your car there if your order was large-ish and the line behind you considerably long, and after no more than five to ten minutes, someone would bring your food straight to you.

On one special occasion in 1983, five to ten minutes becomes twenty-five to thirty. Greasy fried hamburgers don’t warrant a half-hour wait then or now, and after fiddling
impatiently with the air conditioning knob and turning down the shrieks of Motley Crue
(Vaughn’s second favorite band after KISS), Mother says something to the effect of, “I’m
givin’ ‘em one more minute.”

Vaughn’s interest is sparked. He wants to see Shirl yell at somebody.

And he gets his wish. Mother exits the car, her purse thumping her back as she
speed-walks, and Vaughn’s an arm’s length behind her, his eyes glowing. They reach the
counter. Mother demands her food, but the teenage boy manning the cash register blames
rush hour and asks that she wait in “the box.” Mother says, “Oh, we’ve been in the box.
We’re done with the box.”

“But ma’am,” the boy says, and Mother says, “I’ll take the food or the money. Your
choice.”

After a second, much more strained “Ma’am” from the gangly youth, Mother smacks
the countertop with an open palm and shouts in a register only dogs should hear, “The food
or the money!”

They leave with a bag of six burgers (twice what they ordered).

Vaughn takes this fierceness to heart without hesitation and studies it. Nine-year-olds
are impressionable, and this impression’s probably worth keeping.

When Vaughn is in the fifth grade, Debbie (then Meeks) packs as many of his things as she
can fit in his school backpack and a spare suitcase and heaves both bags to the sidewalk
outside their home. It’s a gorgeous yellow-lit day, but chilly, and Debbie wraps her arms
across her stomach and shakes her head over and over while her son watches her face. “I
can’t deal with you,” she tells him. He’s come home with another black eye (this time for
punching some kid named Tommy for saying, “Robinson runs with the niggers.’). She says again, “I can’t deal with you anymore.”

Our father and my mother take Vaughn on full time, and he doesn’t speak a word of how he feels about the arrangement.

Days-Long Daydreamer

By the time middle school hits, straight A’s don’t have the same appeal. Too many journals, Vaughn says, about feelings. His sixth grade English teacher, Mrs. Doughty, makes the class write personal reflections about their home lives every Monday morning. What would he have written? Everybody works, my stuff’s always in duffel bags, mom’s an alcoholic and got raped in the Laundromat by a guy with a knife who said he knew my name and what time I got off the bus, Dad quit baseball after I was born because mom asked him to even though he had a chance to play for the Pirates and now they’re not even together, I have to sit here when I’d rather be dead. The end.

He starts skipping classes. Teachers send notes home: Vaughn is rarely prepared for class. Vaughn asked to be excused to the restroom and never came back. Vaughn is exhibiting a hostile attitude toward me and my colleagues. Vaughn’s grades are slipping. Vaughn no longer seems interested. To that last one, our father asks, his hands clasped in his lap, “Interested in what?” Mrs. Doughty lets her glasses hang from their chain and says, “Anything, Mr. Robinson. He isn’t interested in anything.”

But that’s not true. He likes KISS and Star Wars and growing his hair out long in the back because it makes people notice him.
Super Strength (My Hero)

From my birth in 1985 until I am three-and-a-half, Vaughn visits Debbie only on the
weekends she invites him. She does not like his friends, but I think Teddy Thompson and
Brian Doerner are gods walking. Neither as supreme as my brother, but deities of a
secondary order all the same.

These boys teach me these things:
Darth Vader is far cooler than Luke Skywalker
Dipping sweet pickles in sour cream (or butter) isn’t half bad
Ordering a zombie-on-the-rocks at Darryl’s restaurant at age two will illicit
laughter from the grown-ups
Dogs are better company than any person you’ll ever meet
How to whistle
How to snap
How to lie and keep a straight face
I teach these boys these things:
Tea parties are not girls-only
Parading through the house listening to Christmas cassette tapes, looped, helps
pass the time any Saturday afternoon
Dancing can be spur-of-the-moment
Apple juice is king of beverages
I wasn’t running out of questions any time soon

Teddy even takes me out of my car seat if I ask.

My family treats me like I’m the center, the fabric, of their existence, so I milk that.

When we arrive home from shopping or eating out or a doctor’s visit or a day at the Mesker
Park Zoo, I select who carries me out of the car. I choose at random, and one day in the
sunlit garage I see Teddy Thompson washing his father’s Pontiac with a giant blue sponge.
He’s very tan and dressed in a bright orange tank top, and I have a crush on him, so I call out
his name. “I want Teddy to get me out!” I cry. Mother’s and Daddy’s lines of reasoning for
why this request is extreme fall on deaf ears. Vaughn removes his Tigers baseball cap, scratches his head, and yells louder than I did, “Teddy! Get your ass over here and get this kid outta the car!”

My big brother never questions my spoiled-rottenness. He feeds it. He believes that your feelings are more important than the inconveniences they might create for somebody else.

I learn “ass” on the day Teddy carries me back to the house, and I learn “shit” shortly thereafter. Evidence of my learning this word happens on a rainy day in July ’88: I’m seated near the sliding glass door reciting by memory the story of *Little Red Hen*, Mother’s washing dishes nearby, and I ad-lib, saying in a sing-songy voice, “Not I said the duck, not I said the pig, and the cat said ‘Oh shit!’”

Mother lets a clean plate plunk back into sudsy water, walks to Vaughn’s bedroom door, and asks him if he taught me that, and I hear him say “Not on purpose.” I can tell that’s a sly maneuver. Vaughn doesn’t believe in bad language, and to this day, I don’t either.

These examples show the difference, according to my big brother, between a fib and a lie:

A lie: Vaughn’s accused of spray-painting some curse word on a school-owned building and says he didn’t do it.

A fib: Vaughn’s accused of spray-painting some curse word on a school-owned building and says he didn’t know the school owned it.

The fib, no doubt, lessens the duration of his grounding.
Another lie: Vaughn and I slip a raw egg in Mother’s dishwater just to see what happens, and when she crushes it and throws a fit, we say Daddy did it.

Another fib: Vaughn and I slip a raw egg in Mother’s dishwater just to see what happens, and when she crushes it and throws a fit, we say we must’ve dropped it in there accidentally when we were making breakfast.

The fib, in this case, makes my parents laugh. I learn fibs are like jokes.

Everybody’s smiling.

Vaughn and I play memory games. We play the traditional memory game where you place face down cardboard squares labeled with koalas or picnic baskets or playground slides and then try to remember where each of them is hidden. Reading’s a game, and as he says the words, I stare at them. By age three, I have memorized verbatim twelve *Golden Books*. We also play a game with his *Star Wars* figurines, and in this one, he lines up Yoda and Obi-Wan and Han Solo and Chewbacca like soldiers and tells me their names while pointing to them. At the end of the line, it’s my turn to recite. I never miss even one.

I don’t think he lied when he said he wanted everyone to know I was special.

Some people say you can’t remember as far back as I can, in strong detail, but they’re wrong. I know all of my locker combinations throughout school, the name of every crayon in a 98-box of Crayolas, all sixteen digits on the plastic credit card that came with my toy cash register the Christmas I was six, every AKC-registered dog breed in alphabetical order and by group, the outfit my best friend Ashlee Huff wore for second grade picture day (a navy blue jumper and white turtleneck), the first and last names of each of my fourth grade
classmates’ pen pals, and a hell of a lot more. In part thanks to Vaughn, I have a brain that takes permanent pictures. It’s not bragging. It’s conditioning.

I bring up this memory thing because I want you to know that I’m serious when I say I can still see Vaughn standing beside my crib when I’m just big enough to stand up in it.

Red rims his large brown eyes, but I’m one-ish, so I don’t see this as indicative of pot-smoking. He takes my hand and rubs my fingers. He may say G’night, kiddo or Get some sleep, girlie. My memory’s not quite sharp enough for the dialogue, I guess. I’m hooked, though. I know that even then. He’s tall and intimidating, but he smiles at me even when he won’t so much as look at anyone else, save to spin a story. He’s not my half-brother. He is the God, walking.

*Dark is Edgy*

At the start of Vaughn’s freshman year of high school, Mother gets pregnant with the twins and we move to a bigger house in Owensville, population 1200. Vaughn rarely sees Debbie and is not invited to attend her third wedding. He changes schools, and he quits baseball because Daddy wishes he’d practice more. He changes friends. And these are the charges brought against them, 1988-1989:

- Constant truancy (the least of their worries)
- Breaking and entering (three homes that we know of)
- Theft (one television, one stereo system and speakers, contents of a liquor cabinet)
- Vandalism (“Fuck You’s” graffitied on the walls of the Montgomery Township fire house)
- Public intoxication (they’re minors, too)
- Grand-theft auto (some old man’s Firebird)
- Possession (of what I’ve never found out)
One night Vaughn and these new boys decide to run from the law with beer bottles still in 
their hands. No footage of this exists, of course, so I picture them long-armed and clumsy, 
wearing T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers, bolting in a clump from the oldest kid’s mother’s car. 
They head for the closest thing Owensville has to an alley, and over the wall they climb, 
giving each other boosts as needed. One boy rips his sleeve on the way down. Another half- 
laughs half-curses and abandons the group for the safety of his two-story-plus-basement 
home three streets away. And then our town’s only two police vehicles block both paths out 
of this pinch; blue and red lights illuminate flushed faces forced into belligerent, alligator- 
like smiles. Officer-I-Wouldn’t-Know cuffs Vaughn. He takes a fistful of his long-in-back 
hair to shove him into the cop car’s backseat.

**Clairvoyance—or Mind Control**

Psychologists and psychiatrists at the Mulberry Center in Evansville can’t figure Vaughn out. 
At each appointment following the patients’ riot, my big brother sits, sometimes grinning and 
responsive, sometimes sullen and distracted. He has no nervous habits: chewing fingernails, 
drumming fingers incessantly, tapping his feet, whistling, humming. *Troubled teens* are 
supposed to show signs of something. When you con fellow juvenile detainees into storming 
nurses’ stations with raised fists and turning over cafeteria tables and demanding civil rights, 
you’re supposed to show signs of lots of things.

One psychologist, whose name I will not disclose, sits on the edge of his desk one 
Friday morning and stares at Vaughn sitting quietly opposite him. “Do you think it’s time
you went back to school, Mr. Robinson?” he asks, fidgeting with his tie. “Because only you know when the time is right.”

“When the time is right,” Vaughn repeats back, gazing out the double-paned east window to his left. He has a way of looking through things. Straight through them. People, too.

“Have you given it much thought, Mr. Robinson?”

“Much thought,” the doctor’s mimic sings back.

“Mr. Robinson, please. This is serious, you realize. Your parents are worried. Your teachers are worried.” The shrink is ruffled. He takes off his glasses and wipes them with his shirttail. “Aren’t you at all worried, Mr. Robinson?”

“No sir,” says Vaughn, flashing the gator grin. “School’s important shit. Wouldn’t wanna disappoint anybody.”

Mulberry calls my very pregnant mother to come pick up her stepson. They’re releasing him that afternoon on good behavior. As he walks past the check-out desk with his duffel bag over his shoulder, he says to no one in particular, “I came in here smarter than you, I’m leaving here smarter than you, and the saddest part is, you know it as well as I do.”

_Time Traveling_

I’m not sure when, chronologically, Vaughn starts trespassing on farmers’ property at night to raid anhydrous tanks for the production of homemade methamphetamines, but that’s because when Vaughn turns sixteen (five months after the twins arrive), he gets emancipated (with no protest from any parent but my mother) and takes a road trip with five friends to Washington state. He steals thousands of dollars he didn’t earn. No phone call. No note.
For a while I think if I wish hard enough—if we all combine wishes or wish at the same exact time—he’ll come back, but he doesn’t. I become a realist at age four. I block out his absence and focus on the babies, one boy and one girl, who have taken his place as my siblings, full-blooded. I make it my mission to become their best teacher.

So the meth might start when he’s on the west coast, then follow him back to Indiana like a shadow. He’s nineteen when he finds himself in corn country again, and he marries Lisa Greer (of the black Greers, not the white ones). My paternal grandfather spouts that it’s Lisa and “her people” who started Vaughn on this “drug thing.” Grandpa Dave never saw the red-rimmed eyes, I take it. My half-brother can pull Mulberry-tricks on anybody in the free world.

_Immortality_

It’s late November 1991, below freezing, and Vaughn’s knocking at the door cradling a squirming, pink-blanketed Genesis Nicole. Her skin is like silky cocoa, and her nose is like ours. Like mine and my half-brother’s and our father’s and our father’s mother’s.

My parents only let him inside because he’s got the baby and it’s cold. We sit on the couch. He asks if I want to hold my niece. I’m six years old. I’m not going to say no.

When they leave and the back door clicks closed, three-year-old Natalie says, “Daddy, who was that man?”

When I’m eight and press my mother for details about Vaughn’s latest arrest, I learn that he has antisocial disorder (he was hastily diagnosed during his stint at the Mulberry Center—I’m inclined to think he’s a Borderline Personality), and this doesn’t mean he hates crowds or
tends toward introversion, like me. My mother says that it means he has trouble
distinguishing between right and wrong in the way that most people can. That his conscience
is skewed, if not somewhat absent in select situations, and always has been. He craves
immediate satisfaction of all his desires. Things should happen like they’re *supposed* to.
Consequences are theoretical and don’t apply to him. High is high, low is low. All in
between is myth.

*Villainy—or is it?*

When you’ve stolen money from your parents that wasn’t set aside for you to begin with, you
become the family pariah. When you drink more Budweiser than a body can rightly hold and
then slide behind the wheel of a buddy’s SUV and decide red lights are for the timid, the law
revokes your license and locks you up for as many nights as it takes for some Robinson or
Meeks to bring your bail. When you hustle like a little boy on Christmas morning to make
your own meth in the two-car garage after dropping your daughters off at Brumfield
Elementary, you can expect to lose teeth eventually. And when you believe in your own
invincibility, it lands you in prison, no chance for bail for a very long time.

In my parents’ house, on holidays, no one mentions Vaughn. We assemble, put away
inordinate amounts of pie, watch football (the guys) or talk about how much we hate football
(the girls), hand wash the dishes, reminisce as I assume all families do when gathered as
units. For them, the picture’s complete: father, mother, eldest daughter (valedictorian; the
example), the twins (very smart; surely going places), grandmother, one aunt, two uncles,
three cousins of several (our athletes). It’s the picture I know best, so I say nothing. But I
don’t want to give up on him.
Vaughn’s Grandpa Elam dies in August 2007, and as I read the obituary, it hits me that I remember him. Bald, wheelchair-bound, and incomprehensible thanks to two strokes. He’s the only person in this world I ever let call me “Sam.” I buy a pale blue sympathy card from the Dollar Tree and mail it to Vaughn L. Robinson, Inmate 187, c.o. Gibson County Jail, 207 W. State Street, Princeton, Indiana, 47670.

“This came in the mail for you,” my roommate Ann Marie says, tossing a sloppily-closed, too-long envelope onto my bed in our Forrer Hall dorm room in Lexington, Kentucky. She says nothing about the warning label stamped next to the return address: Gibson County Jail is not responsible for the contents of this correspondence. What do they think inmates send their half-sisters?

The letter reads:

Samantha

Hey there well I sure didn’t expect to hear from you thank you for the card. I miss you too I know it’s been a long time since I saw you and hey it wasn’t the best of circumstances anyway but I do miss you. The girls are fine Lisa’s working at Toyota Gen’s on the basketball team and man is she good Kennedie’s a pistol what can I say. I think it runs in the family. These are some pictures of our house and the girls and our dog he’s a miniature pincher I know you like dogs you always have.

Between you and me I’m sick of this drug stuff. It messes you up and I know that I always did know that and this jail thing makes me feel old I just feel so old. I’m done with this. You’ve always been the smartest girl I know so keep doing good in school I never was any good in school but I know you won’t make my mistakes. I cut out news about you and the kids in the paper and I’ve got them here with me with the girls’ pictures and stuff you’ve done real good. I’m proud of you it’s Dad I don’t understand because he never goes to any of Gen’s ball games and I don’t know why.
Listen I get out Tuesday September 7 and I’m going back to Evansville with Lisa and the girls you should call the home phone and we should get together sometime. I’ll buy you lunch. Write me back if you have any free time I know you’re at school so put that first.

Love ya,
Vaughn

I’m wiping at tears just as fast as they fall, but all I can think is that his rotten sense of punctuation hasn’t changed a bit.

In January 2009 I draft a letter to Vaughn telling him about my boyfriend David. I have an overwhelming sense that big brothers—even the absent kind—need to know when their baby sisters are in love with someone.

I put the pen down and picture the wedding I imagine I’ll have. No lacy veil, no preacher presiding, no stained glass windows, no doves, no feeding one another square-cut bites of a cake that costs money I’d rather send to the ASPCA. I want family there. I want to see faces I know when I promise, to the best of my ability, to meld my life with someone else’s. Inviting Vaughn would hurt our father, shock my cousins, set my mother to sobbing for good and for bad. I have no idea what to do about that, but I do make this deal with myself: I’ll mail him my letter if I have any stamps. Turns out I have several left over from Christmas.

Invisibility

I have 2002 newspaper photo of my orange-jumpsuit-clad half-brother (his second possession charge of the new millennium) tucked in my billfold just in case I don’t recognize
him. We’re set to meet at the McDonald’s on Richland Drive in Princeton. I don’t have a license (they say it’s too dangerous with my anxiety disorder), so Mother drives me to the parking lot, silent. Still seated on the passenger’s side, I keep looking in my purse to make sure I’ve packed my cell phone. I check at least six times.

“So you’ll call me when you’re done?” Mother asks, her hands tapping the wheel in no particular rhythm.

“Yeah. Probably won’t be long. We’re just grabbing burgers and catching up.”

But we’re not catching up, and I know that before I step out onto the blacktop and scan the lot for cars inside which I think my half-brother might look normal. He already knows I’m an English major and a sort-of-socialist and that I cry at Humane Society commercials. I already know he’s got two gorgeous daughters with Lisa and a two-year-old daughter with a white woman I’ve never met and that he’s gained twenty-odd pounds since they put him away for possession and resisting arrest in Texas in ’05. We’re not catching up at all. We’re just seeing each other. We’re just reminding ourselves that we’ve got the same nose and the same sense of humor and the same ability to lie to people point blank, straight-faced, if the situation warrants it.

But today I can’t do it.

I’ll call Lisa’s home number later and say something came up. “Family emergency” won’t sound good, though, I realize, so it’s back to the drawing board as I sit stiff in the passenger’s seat and stare out the window at rows of green corn flashing by. He, in part, taught me this kind of story-spinning, after all, so leaving without word and lying without remorse is kind of like an ode or an offering to a great master. And maybe great masters—our gods—are better off invisible.
To my younger brother Nathan, athletes are something like gods, and when it comes to football—not the ugly, American, line-of-scrimmage-first-down-touchdown-dance kind, but the European kind—I can’t entirely disagree. Soccer is our thing—the thing we always do together. It reduces us either to speechlessness or to awkward, guttural shouts directed toward coaches who can’t hear through the TV screen. We’re moved by players’ grimaces and glory whoops. Their grace. The way they propel themselves upward in mid-air, arms outstretched, calf muscles taut as wire, all for the possibility of a toe-tap that brings the ball back in their favor. We’ve seen men fall to their knees at a match that concludes badly, but they do not hide tears from television audiences. We’ve seen men dive to their knees and slide toward the nearest sideline photographer upon scoring during stoppages, and when they tug the fronts of their jerseys or make the sign of the cross or blow a kiss to their wives, they stare the camera down like herding dogs holding flocks at bay.

At least, I think we both feel that energy when we share vanilla-milkshake Pop-Tarts or a bowl of Oreos and glue ourselves to the living room carpet for a ninety-minute match of the Euros or Premier League or World Cup. Nathan’s had Asperger’s syndrome since he was a toddler—right around two, he stopped smiling in photographs—and as with most individuals afflicted, obsessions control his life. As a child he loved MicroMachines and Legos and talked of little else. He could line up his model cars and semis and tanks—most of which Vaughn left behind in a blue plastic satchel after he fled for Washington—and remember the order he placed them in. Natalie and I made a game out of swapping two vehicles’ positions and betting on how long it would take for our vigilant brother to notice
the change and restore his microcosmic order. He never reprimanded us directly. Instead, he would hold his breath, turn bright pink, and make the appropriate switch as quickly as possible, dropping to his shapeless knees to examine his property for additional blemishes. Looks cruel now, what we did, but at that time, we saw Nathan as a chubby-cheeked, soft-haired playmate who had an especially short fuse, an endless supply of “weird” behaviors, and was, admittedly, fun and easy to tease. The perfect target for our process of sisterly bonding. We knew nothing about the autism spectrum.

As a teenager, it’s been hockey and soccer for Nathan every day. He even keeps notebooks covered margin to margin with individual players’ numbers and stats and has ninety-five percent of them, I swear, memorized in full. He can spell Russian and Serbian and Finnish surnames without a second thought and pronounces them like a native, and he can tell you how many World Cup titles Uruguay has won, how many hat tricks Pavel Datsyuk has scored during his career with the Detroit Red Wings, and the precise minutes during which Diego Maradonna or Wayne Gretzky made plays that should, according to the known laws of physics, prove impossible.

Nathan is now twenty-one, tall and lanky, and he wears wire-framed glasses and can grow an impressive beard and mustache. He’s sharp and thoughtful and precise, but he can’t look people in the eyes or order his own food in restaurants without going flush and stammering and popping his knuckles repeatedly (a tic that has kept him focused his whole life). He’s not Rain Man. Don’t picture that. He can’t count the toothpicks when they hit the linoleum, and he can’t multiply five-digit integers in his head. He’s terrible at counting cards when we play Hearts or Up-and-Down or High-Low-Jack-and-the-Game. Nathan’s simply part of a group of people who would rather take cereal and a carton of milk to their
dorm rooms and, alone, tune in to an online replay of Liverpool crushing Manchester United,

than sit in the college cafeteria amidst chattering and nonsense and the clacking of plastic

trays.

People don’t understand that preference. Not the people who populate our region, anyway. They’re big into festivals, gathering as a community to select fresh watermelons and cantaloupes and blueberries from the Chamberlain farm or the Jochim property, joining hands in the Owensville Rec center for group-prayer on Wednesday nights. Stuff like that. Nathan can’t do it and doesn’t want to, and he’s not alone. It’s not as though Natalie, fraternal twin to our loner, could be described as outgoing. Me neither. We’re all quiet, studious, almost painfully introverted, pensive, and analytical. We’re all anti-religious to a fault. We all enjoy old movies and get sappy during the holidays and eat too-big portions of our skinny, vibrant Mamaw’s savory cooking. We’re each others’ closest friends, and in many ways, we’re the only people who have witnessed each others’ social marginalization and been able to relate to it. Small town parents think that any children who belittle their own offspring must be jealous, and I am here to tell you that this is not the case for spectrum kids like us. Yes. I think all three Robinson children, despite our straight A’s and varying degrees of social ineptitude, compulsive habits, and general friendlessness outside the realm of family, cross the autism line or at least teeter perilously close to that mental divide. As someone who uses words as her actions, I feel it’s my job to ask, *What possible difference does our condition make? What makes my brother an enigma to you, and why is that so bad? And if you’re like us, like him, still fashioning your place, what do we do to convince all the others we’re worth more than study?*
Nathan is a victim of discrimination that has yet to be sociologically nailed down. And I equate the ridicule of autistics to the persecution of blacks as an inferior race, women as a lesser gender, Jews as a vile religious sect, and gays and lesbians as sinners. I know the dangers of that claim, but I make it almost daily. Bullying on the basis of disability is a hate crime, and it leaves indelible scars. When you’ve got as good a memory as Nathan does—as we do—and you’re living in a run-down house recognizable to all your exuberant, bubbly classmates as “the place where the kids hardly go outside,” your fight is forever.

Family Remnant: Amy’s Wedding

We were in a Ft. Branch church as big as a country kitchen listening to Reverend Nichols pronounce our aunt Amy and new uncle Greg “man and wife,” and when Greg kissed the bride, four-year-old Nathan threw up all down Mother’s back. She’d been holding him over her shoulder like a sack of Idaho's since we arrived, and in his cry, the four-year-old Natalie and seven-year-old me knew something was up. Because Nathan had just started talking months earlier, saying two and three-word sentences as long as we didn’t look directly at him, Natalie and I were more used to reading his posture, gestures, noises, and subtle shifts in expression. That day his demeanor spelled “off.”

On the ride to Carriage Inn in Mamaw’s white Lincoln, he threw up two more times, hitting Natalie’s leg on the second go. She scooted closer to me, pinched the skin on my forearm, and said in her most mind-bending squeal, “He puked on my pink panty-hose!”
Get over it, I thought, but it was always better to appease in situations like this one. Mamaw pulled over on Highway 68, right in front of the Neufelders’ neat brick place, and carefully held Nathan over a small ditch until his stomach emptied. We knew then he wouldn’t eat at the restaurant, but it was Amy’s wedding reception. Mother’s baby sister. No choice but to attend and keep an eye on the kid while we buttered our baked potatoes.

Bear in mind no one knew Nathan had Asperger’s yet—we wouldn’t technically know for over a decade—so we labeled him “odd” when, after climbing into the chair nearest Mamaw, he snuggled into the hood of his navy blue zip-up sweatshirt and refused to take it off. Daddy spilled his tiny cup of French-Roquefort salad dressing in frustration and said, “Come on, son. Time to sit up and eat like a big boy,” but no sale. When our server placed a plate of steak and fries in front of Nathan, he audibly whimpered and grew so small in that high-backed chair that he nearly disappeared. Mamaw began cutting his meat into small squares with one hand and rubbing his back in small circles with the other.

“Does he want the grilled chicken instead?” the server asked, looking to Mother for help.

“No,” she replied quickly, apologetically, “he’s just shy. He’ll be fine.”

I was embarrassed. Not embarrassed enough or far-sighted enough to ask for my own refill of water thirty minutes later, but humiliated all the same. “Shy” was a dark word. It made us sound weak and backward and, in some strange way, hateful or dismissive of other people. Maybe even haughty. I’d realized by age seven that a lot of people confused “shy” with “stuck-up.” There we sat, illuminated by blue crystal candles, the family with the kids

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23 Once, a drunk driver launched his four-door truck airborne into the Neufelders’ yard, scuffing up the lawn and bending the branches of every bush lining the front foundation. Local scandal. Everyone knows the spot.
who didn’t act like other kids. “Something about them,” people probably whispered, “seems off.”

*Family Remnant: Mucus-Eyeball*

We thought we had pink-eye, but it was an upper-respiratory infection brought on by sharing space with twenty-five other kids in a single room for seven-and-a-half hours every Monday through Friday. We sat side by side on the exam table, and Dixie, Dr. Brink’s most reliable nurse in the mid-nineties, started the process by asking us “how we felt” that morning. An idiotic question even by elementary-school standards, I thought, but I whispered that I felt pretty bad. Natalie nodded. Nathan, as usual, looked to Mother for a response. She didn’t say a word and wouldn’t even look his way, so after a few more seconds, he stared hard at the tile floor and blurted, “We’ve got mucus-eyeball!”

The room erupted with Dixie’s and Mother’s laughter—strictly adult. Three more nurses popped their heads in without permission just to be privy to the mayhem, and each time, the story translated to, “Nathan Robinson made us laugh. Can you believe that?” I could. Easily. He was funny then and he’s funny now. He just typically won’t share that side until you’ve become more to him than an inspector in a long white lab coat scanning him for deformities.

I wanted to throw the prescriptions they gave us into the wastecan.
Family Remnants: Blackboard; Locker Room; Knocked Unconscious

In second grade just before recess, Josh Ross\textsuperscript{24} slammed Nathan against the blackboard, making the metal chalk tray dig deep into his back. “You don’t got no balls,” Josh said, spitting in Nathan’s face, poking him in the collarbone with two fingers as though WWE Raw were taping the interaction for an audience of thousands. Natalie, never far away, says Nathan looked off to the side—essentially stared down the wooden cubbies where the kids put their backpacks and puffy coats and Arctic Zone lunchboxes. Nathan and Josh shared a cubby because of the proximity of their last names, so we suppose the challenge was a long time coming.

At any rate, Natalie refused to let such harassment continue. She smacked Josh across the back of his head with her own Lisa Frank lunchbox and screamed, “What did he ever do to you? Why won’t you leave him alone?” She cried as she spoke. Robinson children are known to sort of lose it over even the littlest confrontations.

Josh stepped back and wiped a sleeve across his freckled face, then changed his mind and shoved Natalie as hard as he could into the nearest desk. “You’re both freaks, you know that? You’re the weirdest fuckin’ kids in this whole fuckin’ school.”

We always say twins have a kind of communication outside the realm of spoken words or visual signals. Nathan and Natalie intuit each others’ thoughts—even as babies just learning to sit upright, they’d giggle at one another, sharing some secret joke no one else had witnessed—and on that day in 1997, they silently decided not to push this problem further.

\textsuperscript{24} Mr. Ross is now serving a prison sentence for abusing and then proceeding to stalk his girlfriend. We blame Josh’s older brother for introducing him to pornography at age five.
After a game of flag football in second-period freshman P.E. class, somebody launched an Adidas running shoe at Nathan’s head in the locker room. Impact caused the left nosepiece of his glasses to cut into his cheek, and soon blood puddled at his feet. “Didn’t hurt much,” he told Mother after the school office secretary paged her from her Resource room upstairs. “And I don’t care who it was. Doesn’t matter. I just want to forget it.”

Three weeks later some boy named Brock or Bryce or something shoved Nathan to the gym floor with such force that he lay unconscious for several minutes while the rest of the class kept playing basketball. They actually kept playing. Coach O’Brien, twitchy and clipped in speech and bobble-headed with his boxy haircut, never left his spot on the bleachers strategizing for the night’s regional game against Wood Memorial. Student Council lackeys never stopped hanging their maroon and gold “GO TITANS!” banners along the walls. Nathan revived on his own, but he missed every shot he attempted after that. “I have a hard time playing with a headache,” he says. We believe him.

Like most people with mild Asperger’s or mild autism, Nathan creeps out of his shell on occasion. In kindergarten for show and tell, he once donned a pair of red and blue plastic sunglasses that said “Pepsi: You’ve Got the Right One, Baby—Uh-Huh” right on the lenses and sang the “Eye-to-Eye” lyrics from Disney’s A Goofy Movie. In third grade he signed up to be a balloon-popper contestant in our school’s annual Game Day, sponsored by D.A.R.E., and he gives great speeches in what I think is a soothing, authoritative baritone. He can

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25 Remember those Pepsi commercials with Ray Charles and his trio of gorgeous African American back-up singers in the glittry dresses? These ultra-cool glasses came out at the same time this classic ad hit the air.
function in large-group, but he’ll never be mistaken for someone without a disability unless he’s home.

That’s how all three of us are, though, so I don’t see him as the odd man out in the way others might. We’re each outrageously forward and social in the spaces we love—the Owensville house, the new apartment in Princeton, Mamaw’s apartment five minutes away, Amy’s and Greg’s house in Ft. Branch, our college friends’ homes, our dorm rooms, our yards. I can do voices.26 Natalie can moonwalk.27 Nathan can bounce a soccer ball on his head while telling a dirty joke. But you won’t see that when you meet us and ask us our majors or where we’re from. I will say English, Natalie will say art history, and Nathan will say undecided, but we’ll all say Southwest Indiana because we know you won’t know our towns even though they mean everything to us. We crave going back even though it means receding into the heart of our denigration as worthwhile human beings. Even at home Mother and Daddy sometimes urged us to “get over” our issues and “try to act normal.” If “freak” is our identity, collective or separate, then our homeplaces are where that formation began. At least we know how we’re seen when we’re there. We know the drill, and we’re each fond of order.

I like to think blackboard-bullying rarely happens in places like New York or San Francisco. Places where you don’t have time to know your neighbor and his tendency to avert gazes and walk quickly and recite statistics in a whisper as he writes them down.

26 Literally any voice—Yosemite Sam, Hitler, Gandhi, the Croc Hunter, British diplomat, nineteenth-century Russian peasant, you name it.
27 She watched Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” performance on Youtube and mastered the move in eight minutes.
Asperger’s syndrome’s supposed to leave its victims unable to muster much empathy for people outside of their own social circles. Nathan tired of hearing about September 11 within days of the tragedy, for instance. Natalie and I would watch footage of German shepherds and golden labs wearing orange vests searching for bodies in the rubble, and Nathan would say, “You didn’t know those people. What’re you so damned sad about?” He’s not a harsh person. He’s never hateful. He simply spends no time worrying about things he can’t change. Stats are fixed sets of data; people constantly transform and surprise you. I don’t think his mindset’s completely irrational.

I mention all this because when Daniel Jarque, the Number 21 captain of Espanyol’s soccer team, died of Sudden Death Syndrome (SDS) on August 8, 2009, Nathan worried, and that worried me. It was unusual even for him. He researched Jarque online. He rifled through stacks upon stacks of six-inch-thick official FIFA books profiling players past and present, scanning each page for notes on this man. But after hours of methodical madness, Nathan abandoned the computer. He sat on the end of my bed looking slumped and too tall for my room, and he shook his head. He said, “Jarque was about to be a dad. Did you know that?”

“No. Oh, God. The poor woman.”

“Yeah,” Nathan agreed. “Nobody’s even talked to her about all this shit. But they should.” He scratched at his stubble and added softly, “I think it’d be neat if you wrote a story about them.”

My little brother doesn’t ask for much, and so for the sake of a suffering most people, even doctors, think he can’t feel, I’ll tell this:
In Spain, where Jarque played, as well as in Italy and England, scouts seek out grade-school-age boys for youth leagues owned by the big names. The faint of heart need not apply, though, because the twelves and under warm up alongside the champions they revere: running break-neck speed up the pitch and down the pitch, jogging miles on standard rubberized tracks even in winter, stretching their skin beyond its years, slide-tackling dummies (and later teammates) in hopes of all ball. Learning the offsides seems hardest to me. It requires such keen peripheral vision. Such a sharp, palpable knowledge of where other men stand in relation to you.

Defenders like Jarque set offside traps—create the confusion—so their worries are different. Jarque played hard, cut angles, kept corners from coming, and he shone in the Spanish Under-21 team. In every game Nathan and I watched, Jarque would throw up his tanned arms regardless of a referee’s decision. Yellow card, up they flew, dark from sun and gleaming with the sheen of televised adrenaline. Same went for plain fouls, failed traps, unfair free kicks, even crowd encouragement. He played with electric cleats, but his arms did the talking.

Coverciano papers stated that Espanyol teammates found twenty-six-year-old Jarque on the floor of his hotel room just before a celebratory pre-season meal, but Barcelona sources say that Jarque’s girlfriend, seven months pregnant, sought out the team manager to “report his absence.” “Report his absence” insults her.

I imagine her sitting in the hotel’s dining area surrounded by men in matching windbreakers mumbling strategy or barking muscular-bellied laughs, and then I see her pacing, searching, her own round belly a hindrance to squeezing past people who bottleneck the smoke-smelling space in front of the elevators. She is not exactly pretty, in my mind, but
striking in that her hair is long and gently curled at the ends, and bellhops and squat maids think so too because they clear the hall for her as though she’s a celebrity of higher caliber than her mate. After two Daniel, Daniel’s? and no answer, she wouldn’t “report” to the manager. She would demand her own key.

I don’t believe in honorable death, exactly, but a footballer’s heart attack should hit on the pitch. Over ten soccer players have fallen victim to SDS in the last year, but only two of these happened on the field beneath the sheen and fluorescence and oversized flags waving. Obligation to perform actually keeps men alive.

On the fifteenth of August during a match against Everton, Cesc Fabregas scored what would, in the end, be a game-winning goal, tucked tightly, bottom corner, and behind the net he sped, arms spread wide, stubble-framed smile almost too camera-worthy. He performed the sign of the cross, then darted from sight behind the coaches’ bench. “What a moment for him,” I said to Nathan. “It’s not showboating.”

Fabregas returned carrying high in the air a bright red jersey, Number 21, and he let it ripple, catching the wind and the light. They hadn’t been teammates for years, he and Jarque. Not since youth league.

That moment was hers.

Nathan’s idea. Not mine. So much for the spectrum, I say. So much for what we think we know.
Part Three: An Education
The Re-Hashing

It’s a ritual with me and my siblings, and despite my best efforts, it’s become a ritual with me and my boyfriend (also best friend) David. He sits on one end of our ninety-nine-dollar-discontinued-style sofa, skinny legs outstretched, toes wiggling, popping multiple animal crackers into his mouth at once while I sit on the other end, legs tucked against my chest, arms interlaced around my knees, and we talk about school. Not about college in Lexington, Kentucky, where we met over a bland Sodexo dinner, felt sparks ignite sitting thigh to thigh watching *The Prestige* in his dorm room, or said our first good-bye beneath campus-planted dogwood trees, but about grade school, middle school, high school. Places far more suffocating and far less identity-affirming. Places where we dropped lunch trays and sported shiny dental work and stood up to bullies who laughed in our faces and still shoved us against the lockers whenever they felt like it. I fared far worse than David in this department—mainly because I developed a self-righteous attitude that gradually, visibly increased the height difference between the hallway floors and my nose in the air—but neither of us would willingly return to third period bells or middle recess or D.A.R.E. programs or pep sessions without the promise of cash. David volunteered to wash science lab equipment, of all things, during pep rallies, and I hid in the unpopular girls’ bathroom situated between the soft drink machines and the Home Ec. and music hall until chants of ‘K-K-i-c, c-c-c-k-s, K-i-c, C-k-s, Kicks, Kicks, We’re the Best!’ subsided.

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28 Cue the collective “Ooooooooh!”, or, alternatively, a round of mock-applause instigated by some “class clown” or other who, perhaps by virtue of his own general cluelessness, never drops his own tray.
29 Or maybe a lifetime’s supply of Boston Cream pies (for him) or double-fudge brownies (for me).
30 For some reason, Owensville Kickapoos got shortened to “Kicks.” No one, I assure you, asked what’s left of the tribe.
We narrate our educational (and oftentimes decidedly non-educational) experiences like they’re origin myths, though, and same thing with me and Nathan and Natalie. It’s as if school, despite its ugliness and myriad intellectual shortcomings, gave birth to us. I think that’s part conditioning. Conditioning by the parents, commercials, psychological research, and simple desires of the 1980s and early ‘90s, that is. Reagan—sloppy-smiled, uninformed, yet somehow fiercely intimidating fool that he was—liked privatization and individual liberties at any cost, so the American Dream spread its wings for flight once again. You can be whatever you want to be, Children of the Land of Plenty. You’ve inherited the whole wide world, and it’s yours to mold. All you’ve got to do is stay in school, say no to drugs and yes to McGruff, pick a profession by the time you’re ten or twelve, and crush any opposition that stands in your way of reaching success—elusive as sparkling buried treasure. Nevermind financial setbacks—you won’t have any. You live in a democracy. All this preposterous drivel plus people telling us we were the smartest generation yet. The best and the brightest. Children of our new millennium seem destined for texting their grandmothers’ eulogies to the family minister, but babies born in the ‘80s who spent childhood in the ‘90s were destined to achieve some sort of undefined greatness that can’t be categorized as merely technological, scientific, artistic, or literary. We were simply told we couldn’t fail, and now that we’re in our twenties and early thirties, most of us failing in at least something, we have no choice but to look back. Such notions of future grandeur were sanctuary, if nothing else. In some ways like a temporary safehouse for the woman who returns home the next evening for her hundredth beating. Promises of perfection shaped the lives of all the friends I have. They are our collective origin stories, and we’re somehow safe when we’re within them.
August 18th, 2010, Ames, Iowa:

Apartment living room, just after spaghetti and garlic bread supper

I plunk sauce-smeared plates into a beige tub of tepid water, add a touch more Dawn (the green bottle that’s supposed to use one dollar of its total cost to save oil-drenched wildlife), and ask over my shoulder, “You doing anything important right now, babe?”

David settles into the couch cushions, scratches his brown-blond beard, and tells me no, he just doesn’t want to be in the way. He knows I like to wash dishes by myself. That I consider the rhythmic motion and warm water on my hands a catharsis rather than a job.

“Will you tell me more about how they experimented on you guys when you were kids?”

“You guys” refers to his graduating class in Ashland, Kentucky, and “experimented” sounds worse than it is. At first, when David told me he and his schoolmates served as lab rats for a whole new method of teaching and learning from 1990 to 1999, I pictured cartoonish, balding scientists wearing wire-rimmed opaque glasses and speaking in overemphasized German accents while dropping tiny kindergarteners into elaborate mazes. “Veind your milk unt cookie schnack, shildren,” they’d say, and then off went the stopwatch, up went the notepad. What actually happened in no way resembled my imagined scenario. David’s group just never spent time in one classroom for more than a fifty-minute period, even in first grade. Block-scheduling dominated, so little kids wearing He-Man or Barbie backpacks as big as they were migrated from room to room at the bells, learning English from one teacher, math from another, science from another still, and so on. Each subject could then be explored in greater depth, was the idea, and administrators predicted that
because of the decrease in time devoted to subject matter itself, instructors could dedicate increased time to activities related to critical thinking, group problem-solving, and creativity. No one belittled wrong answers; every response the children provided was verbally filed away as a productive possibility or worthwhile, though not yet fully developed, approach.

“They taught us to be confident in the choices we did make,” David tells me now, staring at the living room rug as though lost in recounting a pleasant dream. “One girl ate her book report—just chewed it up right in front of us—but the teacher was like, ‘Next time you’ve got a paper due, it’d be better if you didn’t eat it.’” He laughs and squeezes my hand. “We had all the power in that place.”

All the free time in the world, too, I discover. Tuesdays and Thursdays the corporation bussed his class to mobile trailers off-campus, each specifically designed for the crafting of creative projects or the assembly of educational presentations.31 As the smartest in his class, David also participated in the district’s Gifted and Talented Program, which for my neck of the woods was called Project Discovery. While he spent his Smart-Kid time researching the dwindling usage of swords in nineteenth-century battle, giving speeches about the cultural significance of baseball in Japan, and reconstructing the Aztec empire in miniature, I spent mine preparing for the yearly Ethnic Fair, learning that my closest ancestors were greedy Brits who enslaved black people, put too much stock in divine rights, and punctuated every afternoon with hot tea, which I despised then and now. In third grade, the only year I took part in Discovery, I dressed in a cream-colored blouse five sizes too big in the bust and a multi-layered peasant-looking skirt of maroon and blue and passed out jelly-

31 David, his buddy David, and some other kid composed a Powerpoint slideshow detailing the effects of advanced weaponry in Civil War tactics and outcome. In the fourth grade.
filled shortbread cookies to my less-gifted classmates who, against their will, had to attend our celebration and sample the “exotic” foods our mothers had prepared the night before. David loved Gifted and Talented because it got him out of the regular classroom and meant numerous pizza parties. I dropped out of Project Discovery because it singled me out as highly intelligent (read: different, unusual, snobbish, eccentric) and forced me to miss Social Studies worksheets every Tuesday. He didn’t have to make up for his absences because the entire class was part of the system. I wasn’t so lucky, but I was savvy enough to tell Nathan and Natalie, then just five years old, never to join. And they didn’t.

September 7th, 2010:

Apartment living room, dark but for one overhead light, post-viewing of
The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus on DVD

We kiss, deeply, even though we’re both getting killer sinus headaches. This, I’m learning slowly, is part of living with the person you love: you kiss them no matter what. And you’re also able to break that moment with an unrelated question that neither of you minds even though it snaps the mood closed. I ask, “How did Jim and Kathy feel about you being so smart? I mean, I’m not trying to compare it to the way my parents felt about me, but—”

But I am. I’m baiting him. I’m wondering how much pressure he felt to perform at an A+ standard not only five days a week, but seven. I’m not saying that Mother and Daddy rode my case about making bad grades—I never made one, and every August, even before I picked out a Spacemaker or Trapper Keeper from Wal-Mart in Princeton or the Joe’s Red &

32 My mother bought vanilla cookies on sale at K-Mart, dug little holes in their centers with a teaspoon, and dropped a shiny gem of purple jelly in each one. Just as believable as Melinda Barbour’s “homemade” Italian pizza whose blend of spices bore a striking resemblance to those at the local Sandy’s Restaurant in Ft. Branch.
White in Owensville (still our homeplace, then), both of them would say, “Do your best. If a C’s the best you can do, then that’s okay.” But do you notice the problem with that statement? With that advice that should, by virtue of its benevolent intent, have made me feel relaxed about grades? Their default example of failure was a C, and Cs are supposed to be average. To demonstrate average skill in academics was, by Robinson family standards, to blow it. I don’t know if it’s because 70% of my grandparents and great-grandparents and second cousins were teachers or if Mother and Daddy merely hoped their own offspring would exceed their personal school achievements—Mother got a full ride to Tennessee’s Austin Peay University for English but dropped out; Daddy went to Texas A&M on a baseball scholarship but transferred to Southern Indiana University out of homesickness for his mother and grandparents and wound up with a business and marketing degree. No matter how you shake it, though, and no matter how badly I don’t want to pin my perfectionism on my parents, I felt immense pressure to do things right and do them right the first time. And because I held steady at the top of my class all twelve grades, I cast a tall shadow for the twins. It’s a cycle. It’s gifted disease.

David tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, mindful of my glasses, and says of his parents, “They encouraged me really early on. They read me dictionary entries as bedtime stories.”

He asked them to, if you can believe it. The kind of three-year-old who pulls the ten-pound Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary from the bookshelf, bypassing Clifford and Elmo and

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33 No more than eight aisles total, freezer section on the far side, meat guy who knew your name when you asked for a pound of lean ground chuck or butterfly pork chops, and a glassed-in bakery whose rosy-cheeked employees made some of the lightest, sweetest chocolate long-johns in existence (not to mention broccoli cheese soup, tenderloin sandwiches, fresh pea salad and coleslaw, fried chicken fingers, honey-glazed ham, and spicy potato wedges as lunch specials). You brought the stuff home in Styrofoam containers with plastic lids and never had leftovers.
all the other bright red characters meant to entice children’s visual curiosity, and begs mommy to tell him what the words mean is my kind of kid. Jim’s pensive and quiet and Kathy’s a conscientious, meticulous, and abundantly friendly woman, and I can picture them both scooping a toddling, pajama-ed David up against their chests and pointing out the not-so-subtle differences between *aardvark* and *abacus*.

“They never cared what I volunteered for, either,” he tells me. “I stopped asking after second grade, actually. I remember in junior high I came home and said, ‘Guys, I’m working at the school museum ‘til 4:30 on Wednesdays and Fridays. You’ll need to pick me up.’ Just like that.”

I marvel at this. Not at parents doing whatever you ask them to—Duke and Shirley are nothing if not softies when it comes to their children’s requests—but at parents being supportive of extra-curriculars. I joined the Spell Bowl team and the Spotlight News Team in eighth grade, mostly to take my mind off of what I now call my “fat-year,” and while Spotlight News was great in their eyes because it gave me a chance to write, Spell Bowl was questionable because it meant staying after-hours with a bunch of kids they didn’t know. The likes of bookworm Crystal Boyd, air-headed Tela Martin, and soprano-for-life Aaron Luttrell inspired no anxiety in me, but Mother insisted on being the first parent to arrive at five o’clock those evenings, parking in the horseshoe-shaped bus lot adjacent to Mrs. Seale’s social studies room where we practiced so she could see through the windows and make sure none of us had been kidnapped. Jim and Kathy let David work in a chipped-white, seatless school bus the history department converted into a museum, and my folks got nervous when I

34 After my initial request for two of the neighbors’ kittens was rejected the first time, I plopped my five-year-old body onto the porch steps, gazed pensively into the yard, and said to my parents, “I’ve never really been a happy child.” Hook, line, and sinker. I named the kittens Smudgy and Licorice.
suggested going to Sandy’s Pizza with my fellow spellers and coach after our practice
tournament in the my own school’s library. I’ll be the first to admit that I was antisocial and
generally wary of anyone my own age, assuming they secretly mocked the high-index lenses
or frizzy hair or chubby cheeks of my adolescence, but sometimes I wonder if that behavior
was more nature or nurture.

At any rate, I swallow hard but sprinkle salt in my expanding wound, asking, “They
told you to be whatever you wanted to be, didn’t they?” Something our buddy Reagan and
the tight-smiling Nancy would’ve approved of without hesitation.

He pats my leg—a tender gesture, I think—and nods. “Oh yeah. I went from chemist
to biologist to astrophysicist, and they said, ‘Awesome. Go for it.’ Mom would tell cashiers
at the grocery store that I was gonna be famous because I was a genius.”

“Mother told every fucking person in Gibson County my I.Q. after I had the test in
ninth grade.”

“Sounds like Shirley.”

Is exactly like Shirley. Picture high school graduation night, stuffy gymnasium,
eighteen-year-olds sweating against their maroon robes as they ascend a rickety metal
platform to shake hands with the dimwitted head of the School Board and accept their
diploma holders from a principal who’s a dead ringer for Santa Claus, and there’s my
mother, wearing a tasteful black dress and cross necklace and whispering loud enough for
everyone in the surrounding bleachers to hear, “That’s my daughter there. The one with the
white and gold sash. She’s the valedictorian.”

But she and Daddy only boasted to others that I would take the world by storm in
whatever manner I chose. I wanted to work in a wildlife rehabilitation sanctuary ever since
the days of the Simon & Schuster Field Guide, but that, my family warned, was too dangerous. Bengal tigers and gray wolves are beautiful, yes, but they’re unpredictable. You could get hurt. *We don’t want you to get hurt.* I’ve still got my old fourth grade class booklet made of yellow construction paper, hole-punched, and tied together with loops of yarn, and inside it, each student wrote a paragraph about what he or she wanted to be upon growing up. Most boys believed they’d be professional athletes on par with Grant Hill and Ken Griffey Jr. and Deion Sanders, most girls dreamed of being teachers, nurses, or the next Mariah Carey or Alanis Morissette, and I wanted to be what I called an “animal teacher.” This meant, according to my poorly-composed paragraph, that I would work with coordinators of wildlife preserves to educate visitors about the importance of maintaining species diversity on our planet. Again, I didn’t say it in those words, but that’s what I had in mind.

That’s what I pictured—I’d wear the khaki shorts and pine green polos even though they’re atrocious, I’d wear my hair back in a ponytail even though that used to give me a headache, and I’d speak in front of crowds even though the thought of performing on stage used to make me nauseated. At age four, I twisted out of Mother’s firm grip at the Mesker Park Zoo in an unsuccessful attempt to pet the snow leopard some trainer had on a leash between the glass-fronted Hyacinth Macaw exhibit and the disinfectant-smelling restrooms. By age nine I’d befriended all the sitatungas (reddish, spotted antelope native to Africa’s Great Rift Valley) at Mesker, and I could approach them and touch them without any food offerings (usually dry brown crackers pilfered from the petting zoo section). At age twelve

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35 Remember the days of “Always Be My Baby” and “Ironic?” Gangly girls and chubby girls outside on recess with their bright purple boom boxes blaring the muffled sound quality only cassette tapes can produce? Classic.
on a trip to the St. Louis Zoo, I waited until no one was looking, stuck my fingers through the
gate of the king cheetah pen, and touched the largest male on the bridge of his nose. In sixth
grade a brown-bearded herpetologist with dreadlocks put on a presentation for us in the
school cafeteria, and when I volunteered to hold the boa constrictor he kept curled in a beige
cat carrier, my classmate Ashlee Smith whispered to a cohort, “That’s the bravest thing she’s
ever done.” Her comment stung because it emphasized my introvertedness, but just then I
\textit{was} pretty daring. Animals made me brave. Still do.

But now I’m a writer and an English instructor, and the only creatures I see on a
regular basis are the neighbors’ unbrushed dogs pissing on small trees that surround our
apartment complex.

\textit{October 5}\textsuperscript{th}, 2010:
\textit{Apartment living room, commercial break during MSNBC’s \textit{The Rachel Maddow Show}}

We’ve just heard Rachel prove to us once again that Delaware’s Tea Party Senate candidate
Christine O’Donnell lacks even the brain function necessary to dress herself in the morning,
and up next is a segment about school bullying, prompted by the recent rash of gay teen
suicides nationwide.

I pull on a pair of fuzzy socks—gets chilly at night in Iowa in early October—and say
absently, “I had it bad enough. I can’t imagine what these kids must go through.”

We share stories:

—When I was in the fifth grade, TJ Newman showed up in August and sported a
black leather jacket and T-shirts with pictures of eighties bands on them. He became the boy
whose name girls scribbled and traced in their five-star notebooks and whose New Jersey accent boys tried to mimic on the playground, and on recess sometime in September, he and a group of my male classmates walked past me propped against the side of the school reading *The Catcher in the Rye*. I wore a short-sleeved shirt that day, and TJ leaned down and said to me, “You should think about shaving the tops of your arms, you know. They’re really hairy.” The boys barked and howled in my direction until they reached the tennis court for a fifth-graders-versus-fourth-graders game of kickball. I started wearing my turquoise windbreaker even inside Mr. Emge’s classroom because it would be years before I knew to respond instead with, “It just means I’ve got higher androgen levels than other girls, and those increase your sex drive.”

—David got pushed into the mud by a broad-shouldered, overalls-wearing redhead named Justin who started deer hunting at age five and spit sunflower seeds on the sidewalks at recess (practice, I’m sure, for the chewing tobacco he’d later inherit from his father). Reason for the brutal shoving? David was too skinny and sometimes got reduced-price lunch.

—Bryan Parker and Jonathon Kelley, the classic images of lunkheads 1950s TV series warn you about, liked to drop-kick basketballs in the gym on days we were relegated there for recess because of inclement weather. One Wednesday Bryan aimed for my head because I looked like such an easy target, pacing the perimeter of the court in search of a quiet spot. I held a drippy ice pack to my temple the rest of the day.

—At the eighth grade graduation ceremony in May 1999, retiring teacher Brock Walters presented David with a shining black plaque for “excellence in the sciences” and said into the whining stage microphone, “Mr. Adams, I always wanted a son like you.” Even
on his last day as an awkward middle schooler, my boyfriend had to wear the nametag Suck-Up.

—One Friday my sixth grade year, Mother hadn’t gotten the chance to do laundry and the only jeans I had clean were a pair of high-water Riders—hand-me-downs from Mother’s best friend Laurie’s twin daughters—that exposed more than half the height of my socks. Walking from lunch break to grammar, repeating eighth graders Camren Henson and Heather Tichenor, heavily eye-shadowed and smelling like an entire floral shop, bent down and tugged at the backs of my pantlegs. “Cute outfit,” they managed between giggles, standing so close to one another their bell-bottoms touched. “Your mommy pick that up at a garage sale?”

—That same month Corey Martin kicked me in the calves, hard, because I told my study hall teacher Mrs. Norris that he was the one breaking the metal trays attached to the undersides of the desks. I’d cut my ankle on one of the loose bars and didn’t want the same thing to happen to anyone else.

—In the P.E. locker room, one of the sporty girls I despised most asked if I’d gotten my period yet. I said no but that it was none of her business, and she said, “Figures.” Apparently, according to the wisdom of my social superiors, that’s why I was so immature and still wore a 34-AA bra with a tiny white bow on the front.

Maddow’s long since ended, and in fact, Lawrence O’Donnell’s wrapping up tonight’s edition of The Last Word. I rise from the sofa, rinse our plates and the scalloped potato dish, check to make sure the oven hasn’t been on this whole time, wipe down the countertops, and decide the trash stinks and I need to take it out. David and I wear a similar sized shoe, so I
step into his flip-flops and the thong part crams sock fabric between my big and second toes. I step funny all the way to the rusty dumpsters between our apartment and building 107, and I suddenly picture us living in a different place once my stint as a grad student concludes. A suburb, maybe, with organic mulch in the flower beds and space enough in the backyard for a large-breed dog or two. Or a kid. I hoist the trashbag over the bin’s rim, shiver a little, and touch my stomach inadvertently. For a one-hundred-twenty-eight-pound twenty-four-year-old, I’ve got a great deal of elasticity in the skin around my abdomen, and sometimes, usually at night, I stand parallel to the bathroom mirror and pooch my stomach out to see what I’d look like newly pregnant. Tonight I won’t, though. Not after all this talk. Tonight I’ll double-check that I’m up to speed on my birth control and then thank the God I don’t believe in that I didn’t overdose or slit my wrists at fourteen because I’ve got a partner now.

Someone to back me up.

_*October 10*th, 2010:*

_*Shortly after midnight, lying in bed _

_*with just the sheet over us because even in Iowa _

_*we’ve hit a warm spell _

“You awake?” I whisper, tracing the edge of our black bedsheet with my fingertips.

“Yep. Just had one of those half-dreams where there’s a shower in the front room, though.” David’s always having dreams about rooms being oddly measured or having the wrong furniture or fixtures inside them.

“They should put you away.”

“For a showerhead in the foyer?”
“Absolutely. You see guys in white lab coats on the doorstep tomorrow and they
want you to come with them, don’t hesitate. All standard procedure.”

He pokes me lightly in the ribs. “Why’re you awake?”

I try to adjust my eyes in the dark, but I’ve had them hopelessly closed for over an
hour now. Everything’s too fuzzy. All that lights the room are the dull red glow of my alarm
clock digits and a faint sliver of moonlight our too-narrow curtain lets in. I’m starving, is the
truth, and that pitiful state’s made me think of something I haven’t shared aloud with anyone
but family. “All through high school,” I begin, staring blindly at the ceiling, “I never ate
lunch.” That’s not entirely true—one, Janelle Johnson gave me half a chicken strip and a
paper cup of mild cheese dipping sauce, another time Laura Crisp got a snickerdoodle with
her honey-mustard salad and split it with me, and second semester senior year, I started
taking a lunchbox, doctor’s orders36—but the gurgle my stomach used to make when its walls
rubbed together, a warped begging, feels like it lasted a long while.

David’s nothing if not a diplomat, so when he hears that his someday-wife bordered
on the anorexic for four years, he says, “I knew a lot of girls who did that. It’s pretty
common.”

That’s not what I want to hear. I don’t want justification for my behavior. I want a
reprimand. Finally. I tell him about how when I’d get home at ten ‘til four, I’d go straight
for the nacho cheese Doritos and eat half a bag while doing my geometry homework. About
how I developed headaches every single day sometime between fifth and seventh period.
About my cravings for sausage pizzas and Culver’s bacon burgers and even the gloopy

36 Nobody besides my siblings knew I skipped lunch. It’s just that my “weirdness”—the shy demeanor and
random heart palpitations and painful aversion to most social contact—got a diagnosis in 2004. Panic Disorder,
Dr. Brink said, and chewing something can help distract you from anxiety. Can.
helpings of chicken tetrazzini on other people’s trays. I substituted three or four sticks of Extra Wintergreen gum for the midday meal. I read Franny and Zooey and To Kill a Mockingbird in the cafeteria to ignore the warm aromas of turkey melts and spicy fries and pastas and butter-laden mashed potatoes. I told myself that by passing on eating, I saved my family money, and at face value, that was true. It just so happens that even without my diligent fasting, we still would’ve gone bankrupt and lost the car and lost the house we loved. My actions didn’t make up for bad credit or bad investments or the perpetual condition of low-income status.

When David asks me why else I did it, seeing right through me as usual, I say, “Partly for financial reasons, yes, but partly because I couldn’t stand in those lines. So crowded, you know? I couldn’t bring myself to chew and swallow in front of those people.”

Those monsters. The ones who’d berated me all my life for doing nothing more than following my generation’s tall order and following it flawlessly. Straight-A’s. Manners. Ingenuity. Dreams of living and working beyond the border of Gibson County. Most of the girls I hated—Lindsey, Megan, Valerie, Cassie, the other Lindsey, Brittany, Ashley, Melanie, Darcy—are either married to Gibson County guys, married to those guys and carrying their Gibson County babies, or married and mothers and living all of five miles away from their original homesteads. They’ve all gotten fatter in the arms, chins, and guts (mostly from beer and sorority-party margaritas the size of punch bowls). They all went to the same college (and trust me, a savvy four-year-old could pass muster with the human vegetables running admissions at USI in Evansville), and many of them roomed with each other, convinced that the bonds they forged in high school through make-overs and jewelry-shopping and tanning and dating the same guys in a rotation should last forever. Real B. F. F.’s, be assured. I’m
more intelligent than they are. I’m more driven. I did our job—they opted out—but I look on Facebook at their two-storey homes and new Pomeranian puppies and huge Christmas gatherings in well-furnished basements and feel a twinge of jealousy grip my jaw and cloud my head. They got the rewards of a ‘90s-child life without faded red kickballs to the head or choruses of “Teacher’s pet” and “Cry-baby” and “Dog-face” ringing in their ears. Maybe they had their battles—I can’t say with certainty either way. All I know is they owned Gibson Southern High School at seventeen, and by extension, they owned my second-home and set the rules as firmly as any hard-lined parent eager to see her offspring mirror her image. This is an old story. Doesn’t make it less true.

October 19th, 2010:

Apartment bedroom, early morning hours

We’re sleepily awake, and next thing I know David crawls out of bed, shuffles into the computer room and makes a drawer-opening sound, and comes back holding a square brown box as big as the center of his palm. He crawls back in next to me and pulls me by the wrists so I’m sitting up, frayed hair spilling over one shoulder, eyes bleary. I’m wearing a black cap-sleeved Indiana University basketball T-shirt and my legs haven’t been shaved in almost
forty-eight hours, but he asks anyway. He opens the square brown box and asks, “Will you marry me?” I say, “Wow,” and “wow” means “yes.”

It’s my Great-grandma Hattie’s ring, given to her by my Great-grandpa Pamp in 1917. David’s just had it sized down to a six and soldered for strength. It’s actually a combination engagement ring and wedding band fused together at the bottom to make a matching set, and we want a December “wedding” (just the two of us in the courthouse signing papers—no frills), so what would be the point in separating the two rings now? They look shinier than I remember them tucked away in the strong box in the downstairs hall closet of the Owensville house. Pamp left the ring to me in his will, and knowing this as a child, I’d frequently ask to see it and then slide it onto my left thumb where it still barely fit. Always huge, just like Hattie’s frame and Sunday menus and kind presence. Fits me perfectly now, though, and I can’t help doing that thing new fiancées do where they straighten out their ring finger and bob it up, then down, allowing the jewel to catch the light.

“You sure this isn’t a dare?” I ask absently, breathless.

He laughs deep in his throat. Laughs like a true Kentuckian, allowing the accent to dominate every utterance. “A dare?”

“David Wilson asked me out on a dare in sixth grade. He was held back a year,” I add, as if his stupidity somehow made up for the indiscretion. “My best friend Cody White did, too, the year before that. He sort of meant it at the time, I think. We had the same exact birthday and his mom used to hand-make doll clothes for my Barbies and we always sat together in art class—”

“Well I don’t want to sit next to you in art, pretty lady.”

That’s convincing.
I spiral the ring around my finger as I walk down our townhouse’s creaky stairs, I stare at it while I pour a glassful of pulpless orange juice, I concentrate on its coolness against my skin as I lean the small of my back against the counter. When I call Mother to relay the big news, she’ll squeal into the phone like a thirteen-year-old and tell me the dress shop that just opened on Main Street in Princeton doesn’t have a terrible selection at all even though it’s cramped and the carpeting looks like the gray-ish lumpy kind you find in shabby office buildings and free clinics. Daddy will ask if I’ve changed my mind about the walking-down-the-aisle thing, Nathan will say that’s “awesome” and then try his damnedest to sound more interested in this development than in last night’s NHL match-up between the Flyers and the Bruins, and Natalie will ask if she can please be in charge of the music at our party—^—the part where we actually invite our families and closest friends to celebrate with us.

I don’t picture a party or an aisle or a mediocre dress shop when I picture our quasi-wedding, though. I see the two of us standing, hands clasped, on a section of crumbling blacktop next to a cluster of silver maples that, at their sparsest spot, reveal a small field of corn stubble and a patchy backyard littered with Tyco wagons and water guns and discarded Denti-Bones. I’m not sure who the field and yard belonged to, but they sat adjacent to the old Owensville school playground when I was in kindergarten and first grade. Our asphalt play area extended just up to the maples and the dusty hill they took root in, and on morning recesses at least twice every week, we gathered there under a sky I can only remember as sunny to witness the marriages of countless classmates.

^And she essentially wants to select songs alone, without our consent. If left to her own devices, she’ll pick Backstreet Boys ballads she and I loved in 1998 and then string in a few classic rock pieces for good measure. Eclectic, boy. That’s what we are.
Allison Mounts, a tall, skinny redhead and one of the prettiest girls in my grade, married at least four different boys in that spot, and during her nuptials with Eric Campbell, I lost a front tooth biting down on a peach Jolly Rancher (all that excitement!). Most memorable, though, was Brittan Bush’s almost marriage to Rachel Wilson (no relation to the boy who jokingly asked me out years later). Rachel was shy like me and wore huge, pink-framed glasses that magnified the size of her eyes. Her hair was curly and cropped in a sort of bowl-cut, and on her wedding day in 1992, she wore a teal and violet flowered jumper with a white turtleneck underneath.  

Brittan, cross-eyed and dark-ish-skinned and pudgy, brought with him the sapphire ring his father had given his mother on their most recent anniversary. Rachel allowed him to slip the ring over her finger, but when he tried to kiss her, she pulled the ring back off, threw it to the ground upon which it bounced repeatedly, and ran for Mrs. Braselton, tears streaming, sobbing. We all wondered what went wrong. The outgoing kids formed an investigative circle in the dirt by the maples and said things like “It’s ‘cause he’s retarded” and “She’s dog-ugly” and “She doesn’t look like a wife anyway.” I sat on a large tree root and pretended I was part of the conversation, nodding or laughing when appropriate, but I also watched the German shepherd in the nearby backyard sweep his tail back and forth and press his nose against the gate that separated him from us. I yearned to let him loose or, alternatively, to sprint across the field and join him in his owners’ shitty yard until Mother arrived to pick me up that afternoon.

I loved that dog and I hated those kids. I was alone on that tree root, and the view outward was both shimmering and commonplace. Gliding butterflies and crippled corn.

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38 Rachel herself would never remember the outfit. May not remember Brittan, even. None of the kids at OMS or OCS or my high school would remember half the things I remember about them. I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing.
Both at the same time. It’s what I picture when I picture getting married. Aging blacktop, a
whining dog, fickle children, and the sound of a teacher’s whistle signaling don’t swing on
your stomach or don’t jump off the highest bar of the jungle-gym. Maybe there’s safety in
knowing you’re excluded, and maybe that’s why I’m drawn to this place even now. I want to
stand under shade trees holding hands with my fiancé and make other people nod and laugh
and guess what went right between us.
After freshman P.E. concluded for me in Spring 2001, I cut my maroon and gold Taz T-shirt—part of our required uniform for the class—into rough-edged strips at the dining room table. I shredded my written tests over badminton and field hockey and softball and asked if I could donate my tennis shoes to the needy. The night I graduated high school in May 2004, I flipped the bird to the building as Daddy drove us off in a light rain. Good riddance. I swore if I ever had to go back there, ever had to smell the lingering fried-scent of that cafeteria again, someone would pay.

Gibson Southern High School stands amidst three cornfields on the precise midpoint between Owensville and Ft. Branch, Indiana, and from the outside, at least until its recent renovation, it more closely resembled a maximum security prison than a place designed to educate. Concrete walls, small portico windows placed too high to see out of, dingy brown doors, low ceilings. We never knew what the weather was like in Mrs. Schuster’s French room or Mr. Walden’s Spanish because they had no windows at all. The art room had no potter’s wheel and no real canvases for painting. Biology teachers stopped requiring lab assignments because they lacked proper equipment and space and funding for dissections. The social studies teachers were also the coaches, and we all know where that leads us: free days, open-book tests, lots of movies, lots of hall passes granted to the boys on the teams and their chipper, lip-glossed girlfriends. Only in the math department was school serious business, but those teachers tended to get uptight about things like short-shorts and flip-flops and belly-button piercings and then say nothing at all about kids using pocketknives to carve “Jew” and “Fag” into the backs of their plastic chairs.
Not my finest moments, sitting silent in a “Jew” desk counting the hours until dismissal. I got along with the instructors. I aced literally everything put in front of me, from trigonometry to etymology to Hardy Weinberg Equilibrium problems. But that place crawled with people who launched spit-wads in health, gave blow-jobs in bathroom stalls and the empty space next to Ms. Obert’s accounting classroom, terrorized anyone even rumored to be gay, and boasted about their tractor tires and cat strangling and regular church attendance and about their uncles or fathers being lifelong Klan or NRA members. I didn’t give two shits about manicures or Sweetheart Dances or FFA or eight-point bucks, and that’s all there was until 3:10 p.m. when the buses circled round, played country music, dropped me off, and allowed me the peace inherent in binge-eating Doritos, completing my assignments, enjoying the company of my siblings, and basking in the comfort of shelter.

In May 2010, I went back. I volunteered, as insane as that sounds, to return to GSHS to assist my mother and her colleague Lana Beloat with their Resource students (read: students whose disabilities are usually invisible and rarely serious enough to warrant them access to more individualized special education). Resource teachers like Mother work for the Co-Op, which means they receive bread crumbs for pay and respect in periodic waves. Corporation faculty often approach them with requests like, “Shirley, could you make two hundred copies of this worksheet for me while I’m on lunch break?” and “Ladies, would you mind filling in for me on Thursday and Friday? The girls have softball and John and I always travel with the team.” Resource, I’ve learned, equates to study hall in the eyes of those who don’t watch

39 It’s a tradition in Gibson County for young males to kill as many housecats as possible on the nights surrounding Halloween. My neighbors’ black domestic longhair—sire to my own cat of sixteen years, Licorice—was found dead in a ditch, his green eyes bulging from the chicken wire wrapped numerous times around his neck.
it unfold. In reality, Resource is populated by kids with ADHD, behavioral problems, Asperger’s, autism, hearing impairment, wheelchairs, walkers, speech impediments, dyslexia, sleep apnea, and minor mental retardation, to mention a few, and a large portion of these teens come from homes that are filthy, abusive, neglectful, clouded with smoke from pot or meth or cigarettes, too small, too crowded, or too empty. My mother worked as a proofreader for the Princeton Clarion newspaper for eighteen years—right up until I entered kindergarten and the twins turned two—and after that, she was a stay-at-home mom. Unparalleled cooking and reading skills, but no formal training in how to handle a fifteen-year-old boy who still bites his teachers. Same thing with Lana. Both women raised highly intelligent, well-mannered children in their own homes and watched over them, diligently, every single day, every single week. They’re good mothers, and they’ve attempted to extend that nurturing instinct, if I may call it one, to kids whose own parents either failed or fled or got dealt a difficult hand in the genetics department. Before I shadowed them, I imagined they read spelling tests aloud and left instructor’s manuals open on the corners of their desks, turning blind eyes for the sake of convenience. Dead wrong.

*Classroom Rules*

I feel like I should be wearing an oversized Unionbay T-shirt and loose-fitting jeans to hide the baby fat that used to form a soft, pale roll above my waistband. I’ve thinned out since high school—lost a solid twenty pounds via healthier dieting, occasional cardio DVDs, and that thing called growing up—so I should exude confidence entering the renovated lobby in my turquoise button-front and black dress slacks and short heels. Not the case. Something about the hazy smell of lockers and cheap watermelon-scented Bath & Body Works spritz
and day-old chicken grease congealing in industrial-size vats in the cafeteria kitchen puts you back in the place you occupied a decade before. Mother’s a fast, ticky walker, so I have to haul ass double-time to keep up. The whole place looks different. Maroon and gold on the walls now. Titans banners everywhere. New trophy display case for girls’ basketball and softball and boys’ track. Instead of opening up to stacked cafeteria tables and a scuffed freckled flooring, the lobby now provides options: go left to find the new auxiliary gym, fine arts facility, and auditorium, go right to find the main office, copiers, nurse’s station, and conference rooms, and head straight if you’re interested in lunch. We veer right, sweep through the office quickly enough that none of the secretaries recognize me, and check Mother’s mailbox for memos. All we find is a fake rat in Lana’s adjacent cubby hole. I take the thing out by its peach rubber tail and ask what the hell’s up.

Mother buys a Diet Dr. Pepper from the vending machine and answers over her shoulder, “She and Stefanich have this thing going. Lana hates mice, rats, anything like that, and she told Rick one day, so now he’s giving her a hard time about it. Last week before you got home, he put that same toy on her computer keyboard.”

If the faculty’s pulling pranks at this point, I would like to swiftly exit the premises, but no dice. Today I have fashioned my own dismal destiny. I put the rat in my pocket, tail first, and we head upstairs to the classroom.

You remember your kindergarten and first grade rooms—rocking chair, big rug for story time, low bookshelves, vibrant posters on the walls espousing phrases like “You can read!” and “Reach for the stars!” and “You’re a winner!”? That’s what I walk into, only it’s for adolescents who already know, thanks to years of bubble-testing and doctor visits and peer hazing, that they hold steady positions on the bottom tier of intelligence and aptitude.
The first poster I get a good look at is a yellow-bordered vertical one reminding us of math’s Order of Operations: Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally—Parentheses, Exponents, Multiplication, Division, Addition, Subtraction. There’s another with Einstein’s frazzled head floating in front of a purple-galaxy background, and with his tongue extended to a point, the genius explains, “A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new.” We’ve got one with Garfield holding up the weight of precariously-balanced textbooks, another with him tapping his orange palm with a ruler and asking us via expressive eyebrows to pay close attention, and a third where he’s informing a slobbering Odie that math can be fun.

As infantile as these visuals are, they aren’t as demeaning to me as the Classroom Rules Lana’s scrawled on the board with red and blue dry-erase marker: NO i-Pods, NO cellphones, NO food OR drink, NO whining, NO sleeping or laying head down; then, in a second column: YES do your work, YES do ask for help, YES you can succeed, YES you can read. The YES column essentially parades grammatical errors—you need commas after every single “YES” displayed—and it’s also a lie. The succeeding and reading parts, anyway. Some of these kids will make it out of high school with a diploma, find a decent-paying job, have a family if they so choose, and take vacations to Disney if global warming hasn’t turned Florida into a roasting swamp by then. Others will fail forever. That’s the long and short of it. That’s reality.

But we clearly don’t introduce the students to something like reality, because as soon as we get settled—I’ve got a hard black chair near Mother’s desk, in the corner—Dr. Isaacs, GSHS principal, announces over the PA system that we’re about to say the Pledge. Least real thing ever, by my estimation. Each student stands as Isaacs begins the chant in his
gravely baritone. Lana stands and places her hand over her heart. As my mother rises from
her desk, I have to hold back gasping.

When I attended, we didn’t practice this militant morning ritual, and during the twins’
four-year stint, Natalie refused to stand or recite, even going so far as to turn her head in the
direction opposite the drooping flag tacked to the wall in Mr. Stansberry’s English room.
Stansberry was my creative writing teacher senior year and taught Natalie freshman and
sophomore literature, so I’m not sure why, knowing that he liked our family and called us
some of the brightest and most pleasant students he’d worked with in a thirty-plus-year
career, he reported my sister’s insubordination toward mass patriotism. One of the school
counselors called Natalie to the main office and asked her why she wouldn’t conform—“Is it
a religious thing?”—but she kept her lips sealed. I would’ve said it was my constitutional
right not to say the Pledge and that if they so much as politely asked me to reconsider, I’d sue
their asses for all they were worth, but that’s just me. The counselor’s answer to Natalie’s
silence was this: “You don’t have to say it, but you do have to stand up.” Natalie’s response:
she stood but faced her back to the flag.

Sidebar: We don’t hate the place we live. We don’t hate the notion of democracy or
disparage the victims of September 11th or build votive shrines to Karl Marx in our spare
time. We simply understand that it’s not “one nation under God”—which excludes an
estimated twenty to twenty-five percent or so of all Americans who are atheists, agnostics,
Buddhists, Hindus, pagans, etc., etc.—and that there isn’t “liberty and justice for all.” There
are kids walking Gibson Southern’s halls who go to bed hungry. Gibson County at large
can’t retain a black family for more than a year because paunchy white slobs with
Confederate flags in their truck windows run them out with scare tactics.\textsuperscript{40} It’s all crap.

Anyway, I can’t believe my mother participates in the Pledge thing, although I
suppose sacrifices must be made in order to keep one’s job. After the ode to Uncle Sam
come the morning announcements—softball game postponed to Thursday night, chicken
parmesan on the salad bar line, Sunshine girls must report to the nursing home no later than
four-thirty Friday afternoon, finals week schedule TBA—followed by a flourish of bodies
gathering in front of Mother’s desk. The kids give me sidelong glances, and most seem to
assume I’m Mrs. Robinson’s daughter, what with our matching wide-set eyes, dark hair, fair
skin, and tentative smiles. Others ask, “Is she the oldest one? The one who goes to grad
school? Is she the one who’s so good at grammar and stuff?” Yep. That’s me. Wordsmith
extraordinaire. For my next trick, I’ll pull a Spelling Bee champion rabbit out of my hat.

Mrs. Beloat explains that Ms. Robinson—weird to hear out loud—is here to assist for
the next two weeks, reading tests, helping with homework, helping write papers. “You are,”
she says firmly, fists on hips, “to treat her just like you’d treat me or Mrs. Robinson. Is that
understood?”

Apparently so. They all hunker down to read, pretend to read, or forgo pretending
and pick calluses on their thumbs, count ceiling tiles, or “sneakily” text friends from behind
their purses or backpacks. First period stays silent for fifty straight minutes. I’m glad I
brought a book.

\textsuperscript{40} I realize this is a common stereotype—bristly guy with a big gut toting a shotgun over his shoulder and
complaining to neighbors about the disgusting influx of “niggers” and “spics” and “gooks” in his town. But it
happens. This vile cartoon in our heads was my reality for more than twenty years. And you can’t reason with
these people. I’ve bawled them out in Wal-Mart parking lots, shaking my fist in absolute rage at their bombast,
and they smile in return. They feel they’re directed by God—even Christ—to spread their message. To wipe
out invaders of a lifestyle they can’t even define for you.
Second period, though, given the first group’s reluctance to walk to my lonely chair for assistance, I’m relegated to Mrs. Sherry Dile’s resource room to watch five boys struggle with remedial pre-algebra. Getting a root canal without anesthetic sounds preferable, but I shrug my shoulders during the four minutes between periods and say to my mother, “I’ll go wherever you need me to.” I collect my reading and pen and notebook and add, “Are they really, really bad in there?” I’m not sure whether I mean their behavior or their disabilities.

“Sherry’ll do everything. Just watch.”

Mrs. Dile’s room is connected to Mother’s and Lana’s by a rubber-lined door that blends into the supposedly-soundproof wall and, ironically, has trouble shutting completely. Kind of wrecks the illusion. Inside’s a set-up similar to theirs: reddish wood cabinets, low bookshelves, a large whiteboard on wheels, various posters of cyclists and trumpeters and football players and glasses-clad Asian kids achieving their dreams, an overhead projector, and lots of space for filing. What this room has in addition is a laptop cart and accompanying printer, and I take a seat near that and open my notebook to a clean page. Mrs. Dile sort of winks at me, which could mean just about anything.

Three of the five kids bumble in past the bell, but their soft-spoken teacher pays that no mention and instead plods to her computer to pull up the morning’s graphing program. I’ll call the boys Sam, Jason, Kyle, Max, and Elliott, and I’ll tell you that in initially sizing them up, my hopes aren’t high.\textsuperscript{41} Sam’s one of those big-boned, very tall, wide-mouthed kids who shouts everything he says, and I can tell this based on how he greets Max, a lanky

\footnote{\textsuperscript{41} By law, I cannot disclose the real names of any student who has an IEP—Individualized Special Education Program—on file with Gibson Southern High School (or likely any other school, for that matter). Their diagnoses, family backgrounds, and personal characteristics are strictly confidential.}
young man with matted brown hair and cock-eyed glasses (cock-eyed, I’m sure, from spending the majority of class periods sleeping against a folded arm). Jason is the baby brother to a boy from my grade, and just like his brother, he highlights his hair straw-blonde and wears baggy jeans, oversized T-shirts that reach his knees, and long silver necklaces with everything from crosses to dollar signs dangling at their ends. Though shorter, Kyle is, like Sam, overweight and slow-moving, and Elliott limps and can’t pronounce his R’s, but he’s got pencil, paper, and calculator ready to go. He shakes his leg, and I realize I’m shaking mine, too. This just in: “Small-Scale Earthquake Initiated by One Student and One Visitor at Gibson Southern High School—Both Claim Nervous Habit Can’t Be Stopped on a Dime.”

Mrs. Dile interrupts my physical assessment of the boys by introducing me, then transitioning with a hearty, “All righty, guys. Last time we worked on writing equations in slope-intercept form. Who remembers what that looks like?”

Sam, Elliott,42 and Max rifle through wadded up, graphite smudged papers poking out of the sides of their math books while Jason checks his cellphone for the time and Kyle picks his nose. There’s a laminated sheet of green paper taped to the bulletin board that reads: Slope-Intercept Form: \( y = mx + b \). I’m the only one who notices, and I feel compelled by years of molding to raise my hand before the others get the chance.

“Let’s get out our own whiteboards,” Mrs. Dile interjects over the boys’ scattered mumbling, “and practice a few problems. And you know what? Let’s grab our worksheets from last week and use those as examples for what to do, okay?”

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42 I re-read “Sam, Elliott” and think of Sam Elliott the actor. Could be that I’ve chosen those fake names on purpose, as Mr. Elliott’s role as the hard-nosed but eventually repentant father in the Christmas film *Prancer* is essentially unparalleled. I love that guy. Him and Sam Waterston and Peter Coyote and Dennis Weaver. Something about them reminds me of my older male relatives. Their important-sounding voices, maybe. Or maybe they just tend to play characters who are tougher on the outside than they are on the inside.
I make a quick note that Elliott literally cannot keep his ass on his chair for more than five seconds at a time, and then, at the pitch and intensity of a fire engine siren, Sam blurts, “It’s that M and XB thing, ain’t it!”

“You’re pretty close. It’s—”

“It’s y = mx + b!” shouts Max, and when he sees he’s talked out of turn, he raises his hand to make up for the indiscretion. Better late than never.

“Good. Can the rest of you find your assignments?”

Collective silence means some homework is missing. “I know I did it,” Kyle whines. Truthfully, he probably did. It might simply be sticky with peanut butter and hidden beneath electric bills or spa brochures or uncleared dishes from the most recent supper.

“I’ll bet you all haven’t ever lost your skateboards, huh?” Mr. Dile teases.

I try picturing Kyle and Sam on skateboards, jumping curbs, riding stair railings, avoiding parking meters and fire hydrants as they cruise—well, as they cruise Princeton, because it’s the only place in the county that has parking meters.

“Think of your math assignments like your skateboards. If you lose ‘em, you won’t be happy with the results.”

Mrs. Dile hands out additional worksheets to those without, and the lesson spirals into more talk of skateboards and scooters and mopeds, a conversation about the video rental place in Wadesville going in and out of business,43 and arguments over who can be the first

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43 Daddy used to take us three kids to Wadesville to pick out VHS movies all the time. The trip down there to northern Posey County (right below Gibson) is a hilly one, and on the steepest inclines, Daddy would gun it and our stomachs would leap and catch like we were braving an upside-down roller coaster at Holiday World in nearby Santa Claus, Indiana (only two counties away, to the east). We rented My Little Pony flicks, a thirty-minute movie about a blue dog named Foofur, and an equally short serial show starring a pink-eared cocker spaniel named Poochie no fewer than twenty times. I hope, during math, that the place stays open for at least a few more years. I want to go back just to see what they’ve replaced my childhood with.
to control the computer’s graphing function projected onto the pull-down screen in front of the board. It’s chaos, this classroom, and I start to wonder as a headache sets in why these five individuals are even required to take pre-algebra. Who made up that rule? Who decided that kids destined to work car washes and fast food and maintenance should suffer through algebraic equations and subject-antecedent agreement and allopatric speciation? It bores them to the point that their eyes, in a very literal sense, glaze over. Jason can’t stay awake long enough to copy a single problem down on his whiteboard. Kyle’s stare is a solid blank. Elliott’s eager to show the other boys how it’s done, but his physical deformity makes him a joke, not a role model. I’m watching a six-ring circus without the promise of cotton candy, and these tightrope walkers have no safety nets below. You’d think that’d make it more thrilling, their peril, but in reality, I experience quite the opposite effect.

And then, while Max types the wrong integers into the graphing program for the fourth consecutive time, Kyle says, his voice nasally and words drawn out, “So if it says ‘parallel’ in the question, then you gotta make ‘em the same slope?”

Victory at last after forty minutes of flipping through last month’s chapter and letting his bird-like mouth hang open in apathy.

“That’s exactly right, Kyle,” Mrs. Dile encourages. “Everybody hear that? Parallel always means ‘same slope.’ Now what would perpendicular mean, then? What do we do with perpendicular lines on a graph?”

Negative reciprocals are too much, though, I’m afraid. Back to unrelated chatter and laughing and the snapping of rubber bands (which I still think should be counted as a weapon in public schools, as I’ve sported the welts to prove their potential for injury). Nobody but me will remember any of this tomorrow.
Third period I read Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and decide I’ll never be this good.

Ever.

Fourth period, split in half by B lunch, I help two kids with a geography crossword puzzle, and fifth period brings the same worksheet. That’s dull.

Sixth period I learn that we *help* some kids and *kind of cheat* for others, depending on their moods that day, the effort they want to put forth, and the degree to which their family is unstable. That sounds fair.

Seventh period I head down to Shawn Spear’s biology classroom for a look at non-resource teaching, but he’s got them watching the latest *Sherlock Holmes* starring a convincingly-British Robert Downey Jr. I slip in through the back door that leads to black-topped lab tables and wave, and after he’s got the DVD running, Shawn trots back in the dark to greet me, tennis-shoed and bright-blue-eyed and upbeat as always. “There’s a worksheet that goes with this activity,” he assures me, perhaps embarrassed I’m shadowing him today of all days. He hops onto the stool beside mine and clarifies. “It’s a logic thing. I’m having them watch the film to better understand the difference between assumptions and gathering evidence. That’s what science is all about, you know.”

I do know. I nod, lean in, and whisper, “Plus it’s a kick-ass movie.”

“Totally.”

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44 We’re close friends, Shawn and I, and have been since I graduated GSHS in 2004. He’s thirty-three, painfully bright (although libertarian, which terrifies me), and doesn’t belong in the public school system—especially one at which the issue of teaching Creationism in tandem with evolution has been raised numerous times.

45 Downey’s the only man I’d ever leave David for. I’m kidding. I think.
Extra Ticket

A blonde girl I’ll call Carrie doesn’t belong in first period, I notice, and since Mother and Lana are schmoozing in the lounge and purchasing their daily soft drinks for stamina, I’m the one in charge of this rodeo. “Good morning,” I say, remaining at Mother’s desk but glancing in the girl’s general direction. “Can I help you find something?”

She pulls her faded pink sweatpants up from the back with one hand—they’ve got “Flirty” printed across the butt in raised white lettering—and says back to me, “I gotta give this ticket back to Mrs. Beloat.”

“How?”

She’s exasperated with me already. I can tell by the way she keeps fiddling with the nose ring she’s not supposed to wear on school grounds according to the new dress code.46

“My graduation ticket. For my mom.”

“You can leave it with me. I’ll be sure it’s in good hands.”

“No.”

So we wait ten minutes trying not to stare at each other, and when Lana returns, Carrie bounds to her desk and shoves the two-inch-long paper rectangle in her face. “Here.”

“Oh, Carrie, you’re mother can’t make it after all?”

“Nope,” I hear her mutter under her breath. “She was s’posed to get outta jail Wednesday last week, but she done somethin’ else stupid I guess. Grandma told me I shouldn’t’ve expected anything anyhow.”

46 A rule-set which also, I might add, forbids flip-flops, shorts and skirts higher than one inch above the knee, tattoos of any kind, T-shirts featuring or advertising alcohol, drugs, violence, or sexual conduct, artificially-dyed hair besides blonde, brown, black, or red (although they frown on the Kool-Aid-red kind), clothing with visible holes, and shirts without sleeves. You know, the important things.
In Lana’s place I would feel compelled to defend the offender. *Mothers always love their kids no matter what*, maybe, or *They might let her out just for this one night, though, right?* No such coddling from the long-skirt-wearing, no-card-playing, Episcopalian woman I’m learning is one tough cookie and one hell of a teacher. “Well Carrie Jean, if she can’t behave herself long enough to make it, then you don’t want her there.”

And at this Carrie softens. She even stops messing with that godforsaken piece of metal jammed into her nostril. “Yeah,” she says. “But you’ll be there, right? You and Mrs. Robinson?”

My mentors nod and Carrie leaves the room with a bounce in her step, and I’m left reeling. Imagine the possibilities beyond grad night. And imagine if everything lay open, plain as day, printed in greasy marker on the whiteboard or posted as bulletins for everyone to see:

- **Dear Mr. Asay, Please excuse Natasha from class this morning.** Her mother and I have been fighting again, and this time we’ve broken glass and cut our feet all to shit. Miller bottles, mostly, but hey, at least we’re sticking to Lites.

- **Mrs. H., Please excuse me for being tardy.** Mom’s alarm didn’t go off this morning because she forgot to buy a new battery for it and our power went out so we had no back-up. Also, I have to walk a way’s to the bus because I don’t have a car yet. Mom says maybe when Grandma and Grandpa die I can have theirs.

- **Bradley’s babysitter will be coming to your Parent-Teacher conference thing next week due to a scheduling conflict with my court date.** I’ve filled her in.

I spend the rest of this day counting bracelets and Coach purses and holes in T-shirts and the knees of jeans and comparing those accessories to the faces. I guess how much their parents make and what kind of vehicle drops them off at these dungeon doors and whether they eat cereal or Snickers bars or digest their own stomach linings for breakfast. My
parents: less than $30,000 put together. Transportation: Bus 8, driven by seventy-some-year-old Dorothy “Dot Ann” Kelley who occasionally wore a dark blonde wig and always took the curves with youthful abandon. Sustenance: Little Debbie specialty brownies on sale at Save-A-Lot for eighty-nine cents. When people sized me up—and you know they did—were they right?

_Filibuster_

Sixth period students are taking an econ quiz in the back corner of the room next to the rocking chair, and the new boy from Kentucky, face like a moose and build like a bean pole, springs up from his seat and yells, “Hot damn, Miss Robinson! I know _this_ one! I remember that guy!”

Later on we’re grading those papers and using tiny red Dairy Queen spoons from Mr. Bengert’s supply closet to finish up the leftover graduation cake Mrs. Dile hauled in on a TV cart, and Mother eventually comes to the Kentucky student’s exam. “Lana?” she asks, cake crumbs sticking to her lips and a look of befuddlement spreading across her face, “Did Parker say he knew the answer to number twenty-five?”

“Is that the last question?”

“Yeah.”

“Then that’s the one."

My mother can usually control her laughter in public settings, especially when people’s personal feelings are at stake, but today, she chuckles so hard she drools icing, and it’s not pretty. “Read it,” she wheezes to me, her face turning so reddish-purple it looks bruised.
25. Name a form of obstruction in a legislature or other decision-making body whereby a lone member can elect to delay or entirely prevent a vote on a proposal?

   ____Bill Buster____

I laugh too, almost as raucously, but Mother and I suggest together that we should count his answer half right. The “guy” he remembered so well may have, in his mind, delayed plenty of votes. Who’s to say? There was only so much space on the answer line.

Anonymous

It’s one of my last days at Gibson Southern before school’s out for summer, and I spend the better part of it supervising a group of freshman English students whose teacher has left them to whisper snide and racist remarks during a viewing of Coach Carter. I pipe up with a brisk “That’s enough” once I hear a boy in the back tell his rail-thin girlfriend, “You know black guys rape more people than white guys do? It’s a statistic.”

Fifteen minutes before the final bell, though, I’m back in Resource with my mother listening to Sam—same big kid from Mrs. Dile’s remedial math class—gush about his new class ring. We’d heard about this ordeal before: Sam wanted a class ring and saved the money he’d made pumping gas at Swifty to pay for the cheapest design the catalogue offered—a plain silver band with a small, dark red jewel in its center. Turns out his older sister Tara, eighteen and divorced and proud mother of two, found that money under Sam’s mattress while he was at school and used it to pay for diapers and formula and cigarettes. Up the proverbial creek, Sam moped and threw periodic temper fits and refused to hand in

47 Sam hides deodorant, toothpaste, and socks under his mattress, too. When Tara’s boyfriends stay the night, they sometimes wake up after him the next day and “borrow” whatever accoutrements he’s got sitting in his cabinet in the bathroom.
assignments on time. Nurse Scott even found him sitting on the east wing steps crying during lunch period; he complained of a pain in his side, but no one bought it.

So today he’s wearing a class ring with detailed facets and an engraving of his anticipated graduation year and a giant garnet smack-dab in the middle, and he tells us he won it in the raffle. Didn’t Dr. Isaacs tell us about the raffle? The office ladies put each student’s name in a giant fishbowl and folded the slips of paper so no one could cheat, and yesterday, Dr. Isaacs drew one name out. Whoever’s name was on that paper won a free class ring! Isn’t that awesome? And out of all the kids in the whole school, would you believe that Doc pulled Sam’s name? Lucky. So lucky. What are the odds?

About the same, I reckoned, as the odds of Dr. Isaacs telling Sam one afternoon between classes that lately, some guys were showing up to school early and taking showers in the boys’ locker room. Just to get out of the house. Just to save time. Some even brought their shampoo and soap and cologne and things and just kept them on the premises for easy access. Sam thought that was a great idea.

Hats off to you, Doc. Now I’ve got at least one more good memory from this place.
Part Four: Traditions of Our Mothers
The women who raised me half-listen to everything you say. They run dish water in the kitchen sink and make you shout over the roar. They roll peanut butter cookie dough into identical tan globes and press those orbs flat with a lightly-sugared fork while you ask them questions. They make you pair socks and sort through other people’s underwear while they fold towels to their own exacting specifications, and by the time you’re concentrating on your point again, they’ve decided to run the vacuum (the “sweeper,” as they say). But our women have also, through time, balanced the checkbooks, doled out spending money to their husbands, and worked their slender fingers to the bone in gardens and banks and classrooms. If they want to ignore me on occasion, they’ve probably earned the right.

In 1987, Latina feminist philosopher Maria Lugones wrote an article called “Playfulness, World-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” and in this essay she argues that in order to know our mothers and grandmothers, we must travel to their worlds. We must see ourselves through their eyes, and likewise learn to see our own perceptions of these women in a completely objective sense. No easy task. My mother, grandmother, and I each wear size nines, but to walk a mile in their figurative shoes, I’d have to reprogram my entire mode of thinking. I’d have to rationalize living life as a stay-at-home mom when I know that if trapped in that lifestyle, I’d go crazy. I’d have to come to terms with not flinching in disgust when men deliberately open doors for me and stand aside as I pass, and I’d have to concede to the dreaded “things happen for a reason.” Fate. God’s plan for me prior to my birth. Bad and good are in the cards.
No easy task, I reiterate. But Lugones also says that we must world-travel in order to
love our mothers and grandmothers and all the women who came before us. As a child,
Lugones remembers watching her mother, a lifelong maid, scrub the floors of white women’s
bathrooms and kitchens, scrub the floors of their own three-room home, and prepare meals
while her husband relaxed outdoors or smoked and gabbed with male friends. Their
religion—and my family’s religion—outwardly supports female subservience, so Lugones’
mother never questioned what she called her “duty” as wife and mother. I’ve watched our
women eat only a single spoonful of peas and a slice of buttered bread when they thought the
kids or the men might want second helpings of pork or potatoes or macaroni and cheese. I’ve
seen them turn down pie at Thanksgiving even though they mixed and rolled and baked the
dough themselves over the course of several weeks (not to mention shucked twelve dozen
ears of corn, preserved persimmon pulp for cookies and pudding, prepared homemade
dumplings from scratch, and picked apart the innards of a turkey).

Lugones and I don’t want to be our mothers and grandmothers because we don’t want
to sweat or to settle at the behest of tradition, but we do want to love our women and
understand why they made such stifling choices.\(^{48}\) We want to know whether nature or
nurture played a bigger part in their alternating states of fulfillment and entrapment.

I’m one of them, my gender says. They’re in my blood. I’m a link, however
reluctant, in this badly twisted chain, so I owe them a trip outside of my world.

\(^{48}\) Read: sacrifices. We just can’t, in this day, even in our language, deny them “options” regardless of whether
or not they had any.
Family Remnant: Infidelity; Infirmity; In the Interest of Living

My mother’s father’s mother, Mary (I just called her Grandma Falls like everybody else did), regretted marrying Charlie Falls not long after the honeymoon, and during the summer right after their country wedding, she tried to run off with the preacher. Nobody remembers this preacher’s name, as he’d just moved to Oatsville, but Mamaw says he stood six foot four, had sun-bleached blonde hair, and walked with a notable spring in his step. Charlie had black, thinning hair, was heavier set, and plodded along no matter the occasion. He smoked strong cigars. He wanted to be in the military. Mary’s mother said of her son-in-law’s desire to serve, “That means that he’ll be a good man to you.”

Good Man Charlie caught Mary and the preacher kissing in the front seat of the preacher’s early-model Ford, but before he could hoof it up the hill, the preacher gunned the car and the lovers were off. Charlie watched them sputter along the road until he could no longer distinguish the bun Mary wore her hair in. Exactly one week later, before dawn, Mary returned to her husband’s house carrying nothing but her handbag. Neither one of them said a word face to face in that lightless sitting room. Charlie grabbed his coat from the rack and left for work at the grocery store. Mary grabbed flour and salt and black pepper from the pantry to make fried chicken for Charlie’s lunch. She fried ungodly crispy chicken.

For the duration of their marriage, even when wheelchair-bound after complications from a World War I leg injury intensified, Charlie never spoke more than ten words per day to my great-grandmother. Punishment for the infidelity? I don’t know, nor do I know if the ten-word count is wholly accurate. Mamaw took a guess based on her many visits to the Falls home once she and Grandpa Ray (Mary’s and Charlie’s youngest) began dating. I only met Charlie once before he died. Mother and I—just the two of us—stopped in on the Fourth
of July to have hot dogs and fries and homemade vanilla ice cream with the Fallses.

Awkward, this gathering, because Mother is Ray’s and Mamaw’s child and Ray abandoned her at birth. The Fallses do not blame their own for any indiscretion, so you can imagine the stares we received for “rising above it” and showing up at all. I was six that summer, and I remember reaching for a hot dog bun with my hands. Becky—Ray’s niece—physically moved my hand aside to select an untorn bun for her sister Cassie’s child. My face flushed scarlet, and when I averted my gaze from the refreshment table, I saw Charlie watching me.

His wide, floppy, bass-like lips worked noiselessly behind the clear oxygen mask strapped to his face, and his eyes appeared glazed with a yellowish film. He reminded me of Jabba the Hut—enormous, wrinkled, partly crippled from the waist down. Now, I would say that Charlie looked like a deposed and decaying king on a wheeled throne, but then, I would’ve said he looked like a monster.

Before anyone could eat—even the children—someone had to lead us saying “Grace.” Over the wheeze of her husband’s labored breathing, Grandma Falls volunteered to thank God for our food and our health and our happy family. I lowered my head in mimicry, but I kept one eye open to survey the unfamiliar faces and the way the sunlight streaming into the cramped kitchen danced in people’s eyeglass lenses. That’s one of the main things I remember. Almost every Falls wore glasses.

We’d been eating for ten minutes or so when Charlie raised his water glass and pounded it against the tabletop. Twice. I jumped a little, and Mother shot me a look that said *He does this all the time. Don’t say a word.* Grandma Falls and Mother talked on the phone every Monday. Grandma Falls herself didn’t believe in family pariahs. She told Mother about Charlie’s wordless demands, his glass-pounding, how sometimes she hated him.
And this time, at this meal, Grandma Falls didn’t rise to fetch the metal water pitcher from the counter. Charlie banged his glass twice more. Harder. No response. At the third slam, much to my chagrin, Grandma Falls went for the pitcher, but when she returned, she poured the freshly iced water directly down her husband’s shirt and into his lap. She handed him a paper napkin, then fixed herself another hot dog, this time with sauerkraut on top. I’m certain I heard her whistling.

In 1935, at the age of forty, Grandma Falls had a heart attack in the backyard. She’d always been round at the middle, which we now know is more dangerous than being pear-shaped, but she worked Potters’ Grocery Store shelving flour and canned goods and balancing the books every day of the week, and at home, she canned her own vegetables, made preserves, washed clothing against a washboard, and raised two extremely bright children, Ray and Lucille. The woman had muscle. Her daily regimen makes *Cardio Inferno* look like child’s play.

Maybe overworking caused the attack. We don’t know. All we know is that it left Grandma Falls paralyzed from the neck down. Charlie kept her in permanent care at Gibson General Hospital. The third floor, literally called Third Floor by my relatives even though invalids now occupy the fifth floor and have for twenty-odd years, became a gathering ground for Fallses. Grandma’s nieces and nephews brought bouquets and read books to her. Lucille combed her hair and brushed her teeth, and Ray kept her abreast of local news stories and fed her with a wide-mouth spoon. For seven months she lived bedridden.

And on the eighth month she spoke without slurring. She took the comb out of her daughter’s hand to brush through her own hair. She asked the doctors if she could ‘try
something,’ and by something, she meant anything, any movement at all. Responsibilities wait for no woman.

Within a year’s time, Grandma Falls returned to her garden. Mamaw calls the recovery a miracle, Mother calls it the power of love, and I call it the will to regain what defines you. I’m pretty sure Grandma would call our conversation lunacy, unless of course we discussed such matters while pulling weeds or cleaning cucumbers or setting the table with time to spare.

In the early ‘90s, Grandma Falls told us she was “pissed off” when she heard new-fangled doctors preaching that milk was bad for you. “Milk’s what babies drink, and if the Lord let babies drink it, it’s all right by me.” I wouldn’t’ve touched that argument with a ten-foot pole.

Grandma also said that if you cooked with anything besides lard, you might as well put your apron away. “You gotta live, honey!” she said to Mother when talk of poor childhood nutrition habits and their long-term effects swept the nation. “You and your kids gotta live, and good food’s the stuff in life worth livin’ for.”

And even in her last days, in her tiny white house on Princeton’s south end, Grandma Falls watched college basketball religiously. Out of state pride, she pulled for the Hoosiers every year, and she’d sit not five feet away from her rabbit-eared television set and call fouls before the refs had a chance to. Instead of paying for grocery home-delivery or turning the heat above sixty-five degrees, Grandma paid for her cable.
In her high school days, my great-grandma Hattie boasted Lynnville pride by playing center for the Lady Lindys basketball team, but the remaining group photos stacked in shoeboxes in our closet illicit laughter rather than reverence. Back then uniforms were puffy bloomers and extra long jerseys, and those don’t work harmoniously with hair done up in tight curls framing the face.

I mention the basketball because that’s one of the only things Hattie remembered when the Alzheimer’s was at its worst. She didn’t know Vaughn anymore and didn’t remember how to make Thanksgiving stuffing or spaghetti sauce, but she knew jumpshots, pivots, and the pick-and-roll by heart. And even that part’s funny: a round, always aproned, glasses-on-a-chain grandma recounting her glory days sweating and setting screens on a squeaky gym floor.

What’s not funny is the situation of the food she tossed in the creek for which everybody seems to have a different name. To the Robinsons it was Robinson Creek because it ran right through their property; to most other residents, it was Little Muskrat; to Warrick County, unnamed, as it was only the run-off that ran no place worth mentioning. Today it’s dry land, but in 1977 stray dogs (and perhaps muskrats, too) survived on the feast it contained.

Grandpa Pamp would find a ham missing from the garage deep-freeze, let’s say, and he’d take Hattie by the elbows, guide her to the sofa, and ask if dinner had sprung legs and bolted. He liked to keep the mood light, but in her confusion she didn’t understand.

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49 Daddy’s father’s mother, rotund and rosy-cheeked and an exquisite maker of homemade breakfasts and beef roasts. She’s the one whose engagement ring and wedding band I now wear.
Vegetables both store-bought and home-canned disappeared, along with pork chops, beef steaks, jams and jellies, melons, and cartons of eggs. She’d bring home receipts from the grocery but within a day have nothing to show for them.

One August evening Pamp decided to trim the weeds lining the creek’s bank, and it was then he discovered his wife’s treasure trove. Plastic-wrapped Styrofoam packages of bright red meat had been torn into and devoured by carnivores who liked easy pickings. Glass jars and bottles lay in shattered shards in the low water. The sour brine of pickle juice mixed with the palpable odor of rotting fruit and tomatoes, and the result nearly sent Pamp to his knees. He re-entered the house but couldn’t approach Hattie. She sat rocking in the dark blue living room recliner turning a misshapen sweet potato over and over in her pudgy hands and said of it, “What a little monkey.” Pamp went to bed early that night.

I wish dogs passed down stories. Lynnville cross-breeds are heartier than most, and they travel in packs and seldom migrate. Stump-tailed pointers and lean shepherds could stretch themselves out in the shade of the evening and tell tales of the days when the creek gave dogs life. A bank to bank banquet at least once a week, all thanks to the lapses of great Hattie Mae. My family has a way with canines, and I sometimes pretend that it started with her. That they’ve spread this old story and they’re paying us back for her kindness.

*Family Remnant: The Great Dress Swap*

Aunt Pleny—Daddy’s great-aunt, my great-great aunt, one of Grandma McKinney’s six sisters—always defeated her big brother Calvin at bottle-cap-shooting. In their one and only public challenge far away from the eyes of the law, Pleny propped her bare foot on a tavern
chair, hiked her dress up a little for show, closed one eye for superb aim, and hit her bottle cap nine straight times before it fell to the floor in a clang. She won a whole, amber-colored jug of moonshine (I picture an off-white label reading “XXX” pasted to its front, and it’s plugged at the top with a cork like you see in old movies), and Uncle Calvin left the premises in a huff, claiming he wouldn’t stand for being beaten by “no woman.” The thing is that Aunt Pleny kept a tidy, silver Derringer on her person at all times. At home it stayed in her housedress pocket, and at church, she tucked it inside the lining of her pink pillbox hat. Calvin shouldn’t have been so surprised at losing.

But Pleny’s husband Beaver Taylor’s shotgun came in handy on the night Pleny had no choice but to kill two men, one of whom had threatened Beaver, the other of whom planned on helping follow through on whatever grisly promise had been made. Their names were Bud and Bud Sr., and they were tied up in a moonshining war as old as the history between Hatfields and McCoys. Beaver’s brew started selling better, and Lynnville wasn’t big enough for competing business of this kind, according to the Buds. In tall boots and loose workpants they skulked around Beaver’s and Pleny’s perfectly square house looking for the best way to get in (either of the two windows or two doors), but Pleny heard them. I picture her dropping to the floor, easing open the wooden wardrobe in the bedroom, and silently removing the shotgun from its resting place behind long skirts and winter coats. When the Buds entered through the front door and demanded in hoarse hollers a face-to-face with her husband, Pleny peered around the doorframe and told them to kindly remove themselves from the premises. And when they declined, she put one bare foot up on her mattress and shot them both: Bud Sr. once, his hulking son three times. The younger of the
Buds had run right at her full speed, so after the third bullet he occupied the bedroom proper. Big oaf fell forward dead against Aunt Pleny, staining her housedress bright red.

In Act II of our veritable family matinee a sheriff’s deputy cuffed Pleny and drove her to the police station (he’d been patrolling the country roads as per usual and heard the shots ring out). Little did he know that Grandma McKinney had heard the shots, too, and could cook up a plan just as well as she could cook homemade dumplings in turkey broth at Thanksgiving or toss together mind-blowing vinegar slaw in the summertime. In the pitch black, carrying nothing but her house key, my wiry Grandma McKinney—the woman from whom I get my nose and my wavy hair and my love of animals—took backroads to the station and walked in through the employees-only back entrance. While the single clerk on duty gabbed to her own sister on the black rotary phone, Grandma and Pleny traded dresses. They each stripped down, right there, and swapped clothes through the space between cell bars. Grandma wore the physical evidence home, and the police dropped the charges against Pleny the next morning. What was the matter with Deputy Forrester, they wondered, that would make him hallucinate bad enough to see a bloody dress on an innocent woman? Hitting the bottle pretty hard, they all agreed, and gave him the rest of the week off, paid, to pull himself together.

Two days after Pleny came home, Grandma burned that bloodied dress in a trash fire she’d been planning to burn anyway. The leaves were starting to pile up, and she didn’t care for that kind of messiness.

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50 Guess it’s true about people never locking doors “back then”—even if they’re jail ones.
And then you’ve got Dolores, who isn’t family but seems like she should be because she’s
given Mamaw perms since the 1970s at least and keeps newspaper cut-outs of Nathan’s and
Natalie’s and my school achievements in a spiral-bound notebook. I think of her as a refugee
who found sanctuary in a place most people run from:  

Dolores Thompson was only thirteen years old, still living in Chicago, when her
stepmother tossed a tube of plum-colored lipstick into her open leather handbag and said
through crooked teeth, “I’m going to town. If you’re still here when I get back, I’ll kill you.”

When her stepmother drove down the street and turned the corner, heading for the
Old National bank where she worked, Dolores packed a cloth hand-me-down purse with two
changes of clothes, a toothbrush and paste, saltine crackers, and her painting supplies. Fan-
tipped brushes, fat, sturdy tubes of vibrant acrylics, and plastic sets of silky smooth
watercolors were her only extravagance, and she would not leave them behind. Not in that
house where being a “step” meant missing meals and spending hours sitting in the cramped
corner of a lightless upstairs hall closet. The stepmother never punished the four children
from her own bloodline, and Dolores’ father couldn’t stand up for himself or anybody else.
We’re not sure if some domestic scuffle cost Dolores her left eye, and we’re not brave
enough to ask.

But Dolores had a sweet-tempered, Nazarene-preacher uncle in Oatsville, she
remembered, so she tucked the overstuffed purse under her arm and snagged a dog-eared
road map from her father’s desk drawer before setting out. She didn’t get far because it was
raining buckets and the route she needed to take to reach the bus station crossed Old

51 It’s true that many people who grow up in Gibson, Pike, Posey, and Warrick counties stay there as adults, but
I’d say that a fair number of them, at one time or another, swore they’d get out. Thought they’d open a business
up in Northern Indiana, maybe, where there are stoplights and nightclubs and even a skyscraper or two. No
stoplights in Owensville or Oatsville or Wheeling, and only God is big enough to touch the sky.
National’s path. The well-trimmed bushes lining her backyard weren’t rose bushes—no thorns, then—so Dolores scooted her near-skeletal frame beneath the lowest, most overgrown branches and fluffed up the purse as a pillow. That night the stepmother’s headlights flashed at Dolores’ hands as the car swung full throttle up the blacktop driveway, but apparently she hadn’t been spotted. She tells Mamaw that at that moment, wet-haired and wet-clothed, she wished she’d snagged a kitchen knife along with the map.

Just before dawn in a thin, almost violet fog, Dolores crawled from the shrubs like a muddied soldier ducking enemy fire. She cut through people’s yards rather than sticking to the main streets. Once outside the confines of her own neighborhood, she asked an elderly gentleman whom she affectionately refers to as “the Hero” for a lift. He obliged, slipped a folded twenty into her shaking palm, and said, “You watch yourself, Honey. You watch yourself now.”

She watched everything else, too: narrow streets turn to long stretches of highway, cityscape turn to golden-green cornfields, bus-mates shifting sweaty in their seats, impatient as she to seep into the rural.

Her Oatsville Uncle told Poppy (Mamaw’s father, my great-grandfather) that when Dolores showed up on his doorstep, she couldn’t have weighed more than eighty-five pounds. “Coulda wrapped my arms around her two times easy,” he said. Her short, dark hair stuck to her head in damp mats, her cotton top and skirt smelled of other people’s cigarettes, and her voice quavered to the point of incomprehensibility when she whispered, “I’ve got no place to stay.”

I’d have expected an “I’ve got no place to go,” but Dolores had done the going already.
Her uncle made up the spare room for her—low-slung bed and a hand-crafted nightstand on bare wood flooring—and he let her sleep several hours before driving her to Princeton for a new dress and a meal. The two of them ordered plain cheeseburgers and Pepsis from Rexall’s cafetera and ate silently on stools at the counter, but afterward, when they walked through town square toward the JCPenney, Dolores stopped dead in her tracks and asked, “What’s that up there?” She meant the oxidized-green World War I memorial statue standing on the county courthouse’s perfectly-manicured lawn. Five men, each with a similar countenance and identical build, stand at attention, facing west and flanked on both sides by enormous American flags sculpted in the fluttering position. Dolores approached the figures, ran her fingers along the barrel of the front man’s gun, and said, “He looks like Dad. Just in the face, though.”

Even after she married Ralph Thompson at seventeen, had a child three years later, opened her own hair salon (she still gives Mamaw a perm once every two months, at age 81), and decorated that salon with a hand-painted border of elegant ivy, she would return to the courthouse memorial alone, just every so often. Louie Andriakos, present-day owner of Greeks’ Restaurant & Candy Store on Main, says he used watch Dolores stare at the monument when he first started working for his father as a fry cook. Forty-five years later he

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52 Rexall, by rights a pharmacy, used to be the place where kids and bank employees and retail workers went for sodas or sandwiches during lunch break. Pick up your prescription, grab a bite, chat with the person occupying the stool next to yours, and leave a nickel tip for the skinny guy who wiped down counters. Now, in 2010, the old Rexall building houses law offices. The adjacent JCPenney’s—a two-storey affair with Princeton’s first and only escalator—is now a “Silver Spur” dance hall, drab yellow and dilapidated and bringing in a grand total of zero customers. The movie theatre has a bat infestation. “Sonshine Christian Bookstore” currently sells diet books and Teen Beat and soft-core-porn romance novels to drum up decent business. The Princeton town square is dead.

53 Greeks’ may be the one claim to fame we’ve got. Louie sells his homemade candy—hand-crafted on the premises—internationally. I recommend anything in a chocolate.
reports in still-broken English, “She looked like she’d-a seen a ghost. Like she was at a
cemetery or something.”

When I pass the square at night, I am tempted, so tempted, to duck behind the
sunned-green soldiers and scratch her name into the stone base that holds them.
Vitality, vulnerability, violence, we’ve got it all. I’ve often fancied my family tree the perfect cast of characters for a film, but we’re not all flash, if you can believe it. We’re rooted to this place—this yellow-brown stretch of long-abused farmland dotted with Methodists, Nazarenes, Baptists, Presbyterians, and the very occasional Catholic, marked in the public eye by a Toyota plant that expels dark fumes like they’re going out of style. Roots are nice when they’re sturdy. When they ground you firmly in something that enriches you. Less so, I’m afraid, when they double back on themselves, coil, strangle, induce claustrophobia, whatever. We don’t like talking about it, but I don’t want us to cooperatively creep, as a unit, behind the wallpaper, back into a choking set of pearls. Pick your own reference metaphor. Any one will do.

As a young girl, tan and skinny with hair as black as the oil fields her father worked in, Mamaw used to lie awake at night running her fingers along the edge of her thermal quilt, imagining what she’d grab from her closet if there were ever a fire. She planned an escape route down to the minutest of details: grab a sweater and skirt and put on shoes, wake Wilma and take flashlight from her nightstand, turn the corner to wake their parents (in as few steps as possible), climb out their bedroom window (unless the fire started there, in which case an alternate plan fell into motion).
She’s always worried that hushed laughing was laughing at her. She hates going to the grocery alone, even for something small like a sack of potatoes or a pack of Little Debbie strawberry-cream-cheese Danishes (a rare treat). And as a teenager she worried about singing in choir at The Ark even though she joined Glee Club at school and always sang walking home from the dime store or Betty Ice’s house. She’s never feared crowds, exactly. She loves people, and she loves talking so much that she claims she was “vaccinated with a Victrola needle” at birth. This gets a laugh, but her worrying doesn’t. It gets a dreaded name in our nosy, particular, obsessive family. *Nervous.*
Picture that tan and skinny black-haired girl grown up into a tan and skinny black-haired woman who owns two dresses—one pink-striped and one blue-striped—and two suit-skirt combos—one navy, one beige—for wearing to work at the bank in Princeton’s town square, right across the street from Rexall’s and Frank’s and Eve’s (second in popularity after Frank’s, mainly because it’s a bit more pricey. Especially on shoes). She’s one of those women you notice when she walks across the street. She’s regal. Her haircut is short and neat, curled under, and she has dark brown glasses upturned at the temples that sit, always, at the very top of the bridge of her nose. She hates when they slip down, so if you watch her while she’s working the posting machine or the adding machine in her office at the bank, you’ll see her push those glasses up at even their slightest change in position. Co-workers say Bonnie is a perfectionist, which is why she’s never made a mistake on anyone’s checks or deposits or withdrawals, but you’re with me, watching the glasses-thing, and we both think it’s more than the desire to be perfect. Looks, by our estimation, like a tic.

And why wouldn’t Bonnie have some nervous habits? It’s 1952, and her husband Ray Falls has been stationed in Germany for almost two years (thank God he didn’t have to go to Korea and do any actual fighting). He keeps her senior picture taped in his locker at the Base and she keeps his letters in the nightstand drawer and keeps track of the days’ weather and local goings-on for him while he’s away—Forty-two for the high, Lucille home from Bloomington for one week school vacation; Rained all morning, chilly, couldn’t get Christmas lights all working on little tree at bank—Charlie Watkins gave me money to buy new string. Bonnie loves details. She loves writing things down, waking up before six a.m.,
walking to get tuna salad or a hamburger for lunch, and working that posting machine. Loves handling people’s savings because she knows everybody in town trusts her.

In early July 1953, a few months after Ray returns to their apartment from overseas, Bonnie finds out she’s pregnant. She starts taking a thermos of pre-mixed chocolate milk and packs of cheese crackers and two large dill pickles in baggies for lunches every day, and by the time she’s five months along, almost all food curbs her appetite. She routinely but quietly vomits in the wastecan nearest her work desk and thinks to herself that she’s not cut out for this.

One gray December afternoon, Bonnie sees Ray walking with a dark-haired woman. They turn the corner at Frank’s, overcoats blowing in the wind, then cross the Penney’s parking lot in the direction of Ray’s car. The woman waves a black-gloved hand at the window and Ray waves back from the driver’s seat, reversing the Chevy slowly, mindful of small patches of ice collecting in potholes. Bonnie runs through their grocery list alphabetically, over and over, while she adds and subtracts in her office: beef, beets, corn, cottage cheese, flour, mustard, sauerkraut, vanilla.

One January morning Ray wakes early and dresses quickly. Doesn’t even shave. “Gotta make a delivery up at Decker,” he says, pulling on his boots at the foot of the bed. He works for Potter’s Grocery Store, just like his mother Mary used to, except he drives the truck to make meat and ice and ice chest deliveries in most the rural parts of Gibson and Pike

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54 Mamaw allowed herself no more than fifty cents for lunches at Rexall’s counter, but once, she and co-worker Mary Hunt spent a little extra to split a piece of strawberry pie when strawberries were in season.
55 Mamaw adored all her offspring, biological and step, and she babysat her grandkids willingly, but she’s never liked children in the truest sense of the word. She never wanted to hold people’s babies when they offered. Like me, she gags at the smell of formula and diapers. She won’t admit it, but she’d much rather have held the handle of that posting machine all her life.
counties. But Decker’s in Knox County, up past Vincennes, and it’s nearly the size of Princeton. Has plenty of its own ice, you’d reckon. “Wanna come?” he asks. Bonnie agrees, but she winds up sitting in the passenger’s seat by herself for over thirty minutes, rubbing her hands together in a noticeably set rhythm while Ray does what he needs to do inside the two-storey green house Bonnie’s never seen before.

Bonnie gets a phone call late one February night—right around Ray’s birthday—and the unfamiliar man’s voice on the other end says her husband is drunk and yelling at some guy from Evansville about getting his money back. “He’s got the car,” she says. “Ask somebody to bring him home.” Ray plods in with a black eye—though not worse than the one he got the time he stepped on Mary’s rake and the handle flipped up and hit him square in the face—and he waits in the doorway of the bedroom for his wife to make the first move. She stays deadly silent and crawls into bed on her side, pulling the sheets taut against her back just like always. Ray sleeps on the couch.

The evening my mother Shirley is born—March fourteenth, 1954—Ray uses the hospital desk phone to call the dark-haired woman from the Penney’s parking lot. He asks her to head over to his and Bonnie’s apartment and tidy things up a bit for when they bring the baby home. The woman happily obliges. She rinses dishes in the sink and dusts the dining table and re-folds clothes stacked on the arm of the discount sofa. Some of them are tiny unisex pajamas Bonnie’s mother Marie has hand-sewn for her new grandchild. They’d been stacked darkest on bottom to lightest on top, and now they aren’t.

Bonnie can count on one hand the number of times Ray’s been home at night since Shirley’s birth, and she’s had enough. At one o’clock a.m., April twelfth, wearing a short light blue nightgown with three pearl buttons at the neck, Bonnie blocks the bedroom door
with her slight frame and says to her husband, the man she’s loved since first grade, the man who gracefully fell into an iced-over pond with her one New Year’s when they were teenagers, “Do you want to leave or should I?”

“I guess I can,” Ray says. He stares at her with delicate blue eyes. Same eyes Shirley’s got. They always look sad.

“Okay,” Bonnie tells him. She removes her glasses, pitches them onto the dresser where they land askew, and goes to bed. No dreams.

Now it’s fifteen cents for lunches, maximum, and at home, Bonnie eats Swiss cheese sandwiches cut diagonally so she can afford baby food for Shirley. One morning she stands in line at Potter’s with her infant on her hip and reaches for a silver bag of Hydrox cookies. Imitation Oreos, you know, crumbly black with soft cream in the middle. They’re a nickel, but a nickel will buy another miniature jar of strained bananas or peas. Both girls’ stomachs growl.

And then there’s the time Shirley’s seven months old and sick and needs antibiotics fast. Bonnie’s paycheck won’t clear for another two days, and even though she doesn’t go to church anymore—doesn’t really think Jesus was anything beyond a regular-type guy, actually—she prays. Kneels at her bedside just like she did as a little girl and laces bony fingers together until the knuckles turn white. The next morning there’s a letter in her mailbox from an Aunt Iris who “can’t wait to see the little one!” when she comes to visit over the holidays, and along with that letter is a folded check for ten dollars.
Most nights Bonnie cries while she feeds Shirley, and there’s evidence left on the baby’s plump cheeks where beads of salt water glisten like gems. It’s a running joke in the family, now, that my mother’s overly emotional because her first baths were with tears.

Even with five Aunt Irises, Bonnie wouldn’t be able to afford the apartment by herself, turns out. Back to the country. Back to her parents’ house. Back to rising with the sun and smelling the refuse of pigs wafting into the drafty kitchen while you crisp yourself some bacon. The irony is not lost on Bonnie.

Her father Ott, skinny as she is, drives her to work now—no Chevy; wasn’t hers to take—and Marie and neighbor Martha Lewis take turns keeping Shirley, pampering her, reading her what storybooks they own and then resorting to passages from the Bible or lyrics from Christmas carol sheet music. My great-grandfather, smelling like oil from a morning’s work, returns in the evenings to pick her up, drives her back to the Oatsville house, and walks inside ahead of her so he can stretch out on the couch to read before supper’s on. Bonnie helps her mother in the kitchen, patting out puffy biscuit dough or whipping mashed potatoes, practices crocheting, visits with her child, maybe watches a Western on television, goes to sleep in her childhood bed.

The warm evening in 1956 when Howard Barton shows up at the screen door with a lunch-bucket-looking hard hat on his head and an unlikely proposal for a date, Bonnie’s brought

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56 Basically all my female relatives could sing, so you were never far from hymn books, a piano, or melodious humming when you stayed with them.
57 Poppy read the Bible cover to cover fourteen times in his eighty-five years. He liked the gospels best, but he revered the whole thing, word for word. Even during tornadoes—frequent, since southern Indiana’s part of Tornado Alley—he’d pull his brown leather Bible down from the roll-top desk and thumb through a passage or two. If it was his time, it was his time, and if it wasn’t, it wasn’t. Sure made decision-making a breeze.
back to us. We see that attention to detail again: the glasses-adjusting, the smoothing of her
dress every five or ten steps she takes, the sense of hard purpose in her speech. It’s not that
she needs a man, mind you. Forty-eight years later, in 2004, she will give me a “lucky
penny” that’s meant to find me a good boyfriend, but while pressing the shiny copper coin
into my palm, she will tell me no woman needs any man to be happy.

She’s practical about Howard. He’s older than she by sixteen years, so that’s
something to consider carefully—she considers it over plates of French fries and tomatoes,
while she’s shopping at Frank’s, while she’s rubbing lotion into her golden-skinned legs,
while she’s driving out to The Ark cemetery to walk among the headstones of her late
relatives. Reminds me of a faithful Buddhist reaching out to the ancestors for guidance,
doesn’t it you? Our ancestors must’ve said take a chance, because she climbs into Howard’s
blue Buick eventually, keeping a set amount of distance between them in the front seat but
admiring his strong jawline when he’s concentrating on what little traffic there is.

Bonnie has the briefest of honeymoons in Madisonville, Kentucky (not far from
Howard’s hometown of Dawson Springs—a tiny hole in the wall where residents like to sit
inside their rusted-out vehicles on Sunday afternoons and watch for unfamiliar faces). It’s
the only time Bonnie’s ever stayed in a motel—the only time she ever will, because she
doesn’t like using other people’s soap or towels whose cleanliness you can’t really check.

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58 I had that lucky penny in my purse the night I met David. That’s as interesting as you make it, I guess.
59 Nancy, Richard, Edwin, and Bobby—Papaw’s four children with his first wife—had a cousin Robert from
Dawson Springs who only had one arm, and he liked to carry a shotgun on his person at all times. Robert was
the nephew of Papaw’s cousin Dolly who, after getting hitched to a guy with a temper problem, wound up in
pieces in a garbage bag at the bottom of a creek near the Dawson Springs cemetery. I’ve never been, thank
goodness, but Mamaw and Papaw once took Mother and the older kids there when the weather was warm, and
they visited Papaw’s older brother Jack whose wife made iced tea that tasted like lead and gravy so runny it
poured like piss from a boot. Mamaw wouldn’t let Mother sit down on any of the furniture, instead keeping her
daughter on her lap the entire time. Chickens meandered through Jack Barton’s living room. Mamaw counted
the minutes until it was time to head back to a floor she knew was clean and food she knew was cooked with
standards.
When they return to Indiana, they lift Bonnie’s and Shirley’s things into Pup Phillips’ truck and make their way to what will be their first house in Wheeling. Large medium-green number with black shutters that in some cases hang by one corner and creak when the wind blows. It’s funny to return home from your honeymoon with five children to feed. It’s less funny to come home to a washing machine that malfunctions with every load and an upstairs that won’t retain heat and downstairs furnace vents that blow thin blue smoke into all your rooms. They live there for nine or ten months, communing with rodents and crickets when they first turn on lights in the mornings.

The second house is better. It’s white with black shutters, perched on a small hill that’s part of fifty-plus acres, and there’s room in the basement for canning-shelves and a washer and dryer and an ice chest for storing meat (which they slaughter themselves), Thanksgiving corn (which comes directly from Howard’s harvest as a sharecropper), and pies (which Bonnie makes herself, crust to filling). Ends up being used as extra space for toy tractors and scooters and dump trucks in addition to the other things, but that doesn’t enter Bonnie’s mind right away because she hasn’t thought about having more kids yet. They go six years with just the five children, and the oldest four range from teenage to young adult and come and go as they please. Nancy, round-faced and sandy-blonde and obsessed with Elvis, sticks around as much as possible to help Bonnie with pitting cherries and frying pork chops and slicing watermelon in the summers, and she doesn’t mind babysitting Shirley, either. The three women style each others’ hair on the porch and sing out loud to Nancy’s
Elvis records in the front room and pronounce words in silly ways—like saying “suave” as “soo-wave.”

Jason Howard Barton’s born on Christmas morning, 1961. My mother is seven-and-a-half and thinks opening presents in a flash and having no time to change out of your nightgown to go to the hospital is cheap, but she complies as long as she can take her new Midge doll along for the trip. Bonnie’s had a horrific time carrying this new child—had to have Nancy and Howard push her up the hill to the monkey exhibits at the Mesker Zoo that summer because she couldn’t balance her weight on an incline—but the baby’s got wide-set, green-gray eyes just like his father and clings to her immediately. She reads him a story and rocks him to sleep every night until he’s almost ten years old. She lets him learn to drive Howard’s favorite red tractor, supervised, at age four, largely because watching her husband and his identical son as farming partners gives her the good kind of goosebumps. She lets Jason eat Reese’s peanut butter cups and drink Pepsis and Hershey’s chocolate milk and make forts in the living room whenever he wants because one day his smooth, eager face will morph into a man’s.

And along comes Amy Jo in January 1970. Bonnie is forty when she gives birth for the last time, but she’s been through it before so it’s a piece of cake. Amy’s the best baby, we all learn years later, because she never cries and always eats and then sleeps through the night as though she were automated. She turns into a bit of a tomboy as she grows, asking for footballs for Christmas in lieu of the Barbies Shirley loved and considering fishing with

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60 That’s sort of a thing in our family—pronouncing words in ways they’re not really pronounced. Not sure why we do it, but it’s almost obsessive. Natalie and I often approach the matter like, “What if someone said ‘Jweese’ when they meant ‘Juice?'” I admit it’s odd. But there’s an impulse in us to unpack letters’ sounds and functions and imagine what would happen if they fell out of order or took on new qualities.
her daddy the best vacation available. When Amy’s six years old, Shirley is twenty-two, working at the Clarion in Princeton, and dating Duke Robinson, thin athlete extraordinaire with curly brown hair like Greg Brady’s and a bright yellow GTO that he washes by hand every other weekend. On a visit to the Bartons’, Duke challenges little Amy to a bottle-cap-shooting contest—he’s heard she’s quite the Annie Oakley with a BB-gun. It’s muggy out, and they set up discarded metal Pepsi caps on the fence separating the backyard from the field where the Jersey cows graze. Duke misses the first cap on purpose, giving Amy a chance to jump ahead from the get-go. The little redhead sticks the tip of her tongue out, closes one eye for aim, and fires. The BB whizzes right between two caps, and Duke thinks he’s blown his first try for naught. Think again. Amy may have missed the Pepsi tops, but she’s split an inchworm clean in half. She’s daring and meticulous, and Bonnie watches her do things like this from her look-out spot at the kitchen window and just knows her youngest will get hurt one of these days. Bonnie has a recurring nightmare about taking Amy on a walk over the old stone bridge connecting Oatsville to Hazleton, and in her dream, Amy peers over the edge to watch the fish and falls headfirst. Bonnie’s too scared to jump in after her because she can’t swim either. It would be a double-drowning.

The kids survive small scrapes because Bonnie and her own mother know special remedies, like wrapping a bee sting in raw bacon. But nobody can keep a sad-eyed teenage girl from having a nervous breakdown if she’s planning on one; nobody can keep a natural-born

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61 Once, at age three, my aunt dug her own earthworms from the soil, pierced them with her fishhook, and strolled on out to the pond by herself to catch some bluegill. She returned an hour later with five fish, beaming proudly even though she’d broken Mamaw’s rule about never leaving the house without a grown-up. Two weeks after that, Papaw dragged a six-foot-long water moccasin back to their house after killing it with a stone. He’d found it in that same pond, resting coiled beneath floating vegetation. He and Mamaw had nightmares for a while.
curious boy from smashing half his hand in a tractor door when he considers it his second home; nobody can shield an adventurous redhead from the scarring caused by broken friendships. My mother does break down when she’s fourteen-and-a-half, and she stalls her freshman year of high school by an entire semester. Jason does sustain more bone-crushing injuries than any child should because he spends every waking hour following his father in the fields, and Amy does, partly due to her kind and trusting demeanor, suffer being shunned by various close buddies throughout school and beyond. Bonnie watches these traumas with guilt. She lets Shirley stay out past curfew with Bryce Bruce and Chuck Wethington (even though Chuck’s in a rock ‘n roll band called The Midnight Evil) because that way there won’t be a blow-up argument; she traces Jason’s geometry homework and geography maps against the lampshade in the front room because she knows he’s happier when he’s outside; she calls Wendy’s and Kelly’s mothers on Amy’s behalf, hoping to coax someone to incite a truce because Amy’s no good at confrontational diplomacy. Bonnie Barton does anything her children ask of her because they didn’t ask to be here. They didn’t ask to be born in a place where the best you’ll do, because of the benefits, is get on at the coal mine.

She packs Howard’s sandwiches in plastic wrap inside his lunchbox, washes everyone’s T-shirts and blouses and underthings, cooks every meal along with dessert, feeds the dogs and barn cats like clockwork, and goes to sleep at night tracing the edge of her bedsheets with thin fingers that grow steadier every day—more than steady enough, it turns out, to whip strawberry ice cream to near-liquid perfection for awe-inspired grandchildren like me. Howard’s strong back braces hers when she finally rolls over, but she never quite settles into the almost-mark her body’s left from the night before.
When my mother was little—anywhere from five to ten years old—she liked to play Miss America. She’d wrap one of Mammie’s headscarves around her neck or drape it over her shoulder to represent those sashes with the girls’ home states printed on them, then parade out into the front room of the Wheeling house while Mamaw sat on their black sofa, feet tucked under her, assuming the roles of both emcee and judge. Mother played every contestant, all fifty states, and she visualized what each of her characters wore and expected Mamaw to write those facts down on a legal pad and remember them: Linda from Oregon, five foot nine, brunette, yellow silk dress; Catherine from Texas, five eleven, redhead, short black number that makes the judges question her morals; Leslie from California, five foot four, ash blonde, aqua chiffon evening gown so light she seems to float across the stage. There was always an ash blonde Leslie dressed in aqua chiffon and hailing from the West Coast because those were the qualities my mother desired for herself, even as a small child. She wanted light hair and a prettier name and decadent clothing and to live on the water. Mamaw made all her real outfits, and if you look at the pictures, they were complicated and unique and attractive for the time, but they weren’t high fashion. They were things kids in Wheeling wore. Things you wore if you were landlocked.

The young Shirley Falls spent a lot of time bicycling through the country with her friends Becky Johnson and Janice Carnahan and Janice McDaniel and Keith Kolb, too. She routinely coasted down steep hills with no grip on the handlebars, and on several occasions, she and the gang would pedal out past the “city” limits and into the woods, returning home
with ticks in their hair and bright red chiggers embedded in the weave of their socks. Mother wouldn’t have taken these trips alone, but with companions, she had no fear of getting lost. With people around you, she’d always been told, everything was okay.

The people around you change, though, she realized as elementary school wore on, and those with whom you associate help determine your own social standing. My mother broke up with little Keith Kolb in second grade because his father was a pig farmer and he came to class every day smelling like the hogs and kids laughed at him and pointed, jeering, at his shit-covered boots and overall cuffs. In Bible school Keith hadn’t yet been old enough to help the family with work, so he’d smelled like Dial soap and sweat just like every other five-year-old boy in Gibson County. And Mother cut ties with Becky Johnson after fifth grade. When Mamaw asked her why she hadn’t spent the night with Becky for a while, she said, “Because they’ve got too many people over there.” Just one year earlier, Mother’d rambled on and on about how delicious Becky’s mother’s cooking was—huge crock pots of macaroni and cheese, pork chops three inches thick, corn on the cob dripping butter, the crispiest fried potatoes she’d ever had—and how nice it felt to stay over at a place where there were brothers and sisters. By junior high in 1965, though, it became important to wear midnight blue eye-shadow, white lipstick, sheer white pantyhose, and bright-colored dresses so short they showcased half your ass, and Becky’s big-breasted, big-voiced mother wouldn’t allow that. Mrs. Carnahan and Mrs. McDaniel would.

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62 Mother loved Nancy and her male step-siblings dearly, but they were so much older (Marvin was married by the time Mother turned three). Jason may have had chubby cheeks and gorgeous eyes and a contagious laugh, but you can’t go biking and share secrets with a baby. In a very full house, you can still feel alone.
Zero in on summer breaks when cousins Steve, Pam, Jan, and Lisa came up from Tennessee to stay at Mamaw’s June through August, and my mother’s attitude shifted again. She and Pam and Lisa used to play a game where they pretended they were “poor,” dressing up in Papaw’s oldest button-front shirts or his T-shirts sporting holes or oil stains. They’d cut out cardboard knives, forks, and spoons for meals. They’d drape old quilts over the clotheslines out back and pretend that darkened space was their shanty house, and beneath it in the scorching heat, they’d can actual food using discarded baby food jars and the fruit and vegetable remnants Mamaw didn’t need or refused to use because of waning quality. Years later, long after the girls had graduated high school or gotten married, Mamaw found a few putrid jars of that stuff tucked away in an upstairs spare room’s unused armoire. “Stunk to high heaven,” she told me last Christmas when the subject came up. “And to think they pretended they were poor! Land’s sake. If they’d only known.”

Seems like Mother dealt with the same push-pull I feel day after day. Aqua chiffon and rule-breaking white lipstick versus the soothing draw of carefree bicycling and creating whole worlds under blankets your great-grandmother sewed by hand.

The air gets stale under quilts in the summer. The canning goes rank, and you grow up little by little. Your dark hair gets longer and coarser and there’s a big wave in the back of it that your mother has to iron alongside her blouses every morning before you ride the bus to seventh grade. Your legs and arms get longer and skinnier and you grow just the faintest bit

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63 Mamaw’s sister Wilma—redheaded and petite and a big fan of the fellas—had Steve, Pam, Jan, Lisa, and Eddie, some by different fathers, but she liked to spend her summers free of the burden of children. Mamaw treated all the kids as her own and gave them free reign of the house and yard, and while Steve usually opted to stay with Mammie and Poppy and Eddie usually stayed in Tennessee with his father, the girls relished every day at “Bonnie’s.”
of a mustache to match the fluffy dark hair on the tops of your forearms, which people tweak and mock mercilessly (everyone’s got differing amounts of androgen and estrogen that combine and battle to affect hair growth, but you don’t know that in 1967). The boy you like kisses another girl on the mouth in plain sight, right in front of the lockers next to the home economics room, and inside that room you get an F on the assignment asking you to draw a completely-to-scale blueprint of your house (you aren’t Picasso on your best day, but this you don’t even try). You start to obsess over little things, like how the tip of your index finger feels when it depresses buttons on the telephone (soft and smooth and tight-fitting is good; grazing the pointed edge of a button means hanging up and starting over). You do this weird thing with your eyes where you roll them, then glance quickly to one side, and although it feels satisfying, people are noticing and telling you to cut it out. Acne decides your cheeks and chin and forehead are great spots for multiplying, so you end up going to a reputable dermatologist in Evansville who prescribes a daily facial cream and small bottle of tiny white pills which you down with root beer instead of water. And then you spend a summer—the one between eighth grade and ninth grade—with cousin Pam in Tennessee, and she’s got this boyfriend Ernie who introduces you to his buddy Clark. Clark’s got wavy blonde hair and a fantastic tan and his own car because he’s sixteen, and the four of you go on numerous double-dates to drive-ins and two-storey shopping malls and pizza parlors that have actual Italian waiters in them. August comes and you break up with Clark, remove your fingernail and toenail polish on the drive home, and sleep with the covers over your nose that night because you’ve forgotten how terrible it smells when the wind flutters over the pigs’ stalls and carries their stench through the beams of this old house. The walls of your room close in on you. It’s not your mother; you couldn’t live without her and you know it. It’s not
your father; he calls you disease-peddler when you’re moody and warns that your back might
grow crooked if you keep reading scrunched up in the recliner, but he spoils you as rotten as
he can afford to. It’s something else. You are gasping for breath in this bed.

A week before high school starts, you swallow two huge handfuls of Aspirin in the
kitchen, timing the deed so that your mother catches you in the act. You don’t want to die.
You just want everyone to know that you wish you wanted to. You remember the dizziness
and the stomach cramps and things growing dark inside your father’s blue Buick, but the next
thing you know you’re being excused from academic pursuits until further tests can be run.

Dr. Swanson had a deep voice and no hair to speak of, and when he spoke, he leaned back in
his mahogany leather chair and brushed through his mustache with his fingers. Sounds like
TV, I know, but Mother swears to it. On their first/last meeting, Swanson removed his Coke-
bottle glasses in a deliberate, painstaking motion, closed his eyes, and asked, “Miss Falls, do
you get on well with your parents?”

She thought for a moment, and I imagine that she twirled a lock of nearly black hair
around her index finger before responding. “Okay. We get along okay most of the time.”

“And a boyfriend? You have a boyfriend, I’m guessing. Pretty girl like you…”

“I did,” she said, cutting him off. She looked longingly in the direction of the exit.
“What does that have to do with anything?”

Swanson actually chuckled. “Will you do me a favor, Miss Falls? Will you tell me
what you see in these pictures?”

So commenced her first and last Rorschach Test. She says she answered honestly;
she wanted to try that for a change. And Swanson called her sexually repressed. Said her
parents must not have a loving relationship with one another and that her responses indicated a vast array of phobias, each of which connected to some childhood trauma or other. “Your diagnosis,” he said, “is simple. You’re a beautiful girl who’s terrified of absolutely everything.”

At the session’s conclusion, Mother bolted to the waiting room to relay the news. Dr. Swanson approached Mamaw a few moments later as she signed paperwork at the receptionist’s window after Mother and Papaw had gone to the car, and he shook her hand and said, “Mrs. Barton, may I ask you a question? Would you say that you and Mr. Barton have a healthy sex life?”

Mamaw completed one final signature, then looked up and said in front of patients and parents alike, “It’s great, Doc. Maybe you should try it sometime. It’ll take that awful look off your face.”

No more Dr. Swanson for sure, but Mother was given a choice: toughen up and enroll in school Spring semester or spend the rest of the year in therapy. She enrolled in December. Decent schedule. Didn’t take long for Bryce Bruce, a five-foot-seven-inch junior with dark hair and a Holden Caulfield vibe,64 to notice how lovely she was, ask her to dinner, take her to bad movies they could make fun of together, spend nights with her in his car just talking because they shared a sense of humor and a sensibility—bring the boys home from Vietnam, rock and roll, live and let live. He’s the guy she might’ve married if he hadn’t graduated so soon before her and kept half an eye on another girl at all times. But after him there was

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64 To both my mother and me, Holden Caulfield vibes are the kind you’re supposed to be attracted to. Compact, sullen, broody guys with bangs in their eyes and profound insights into the phoniness of the mainstream. You know it won’t work out with these men, but you love them as deeply as you can for as long as you can.
Chuck Wethington, lead guitarist for a band called The Midnight Evil. Mamaw let Mother date Chuck even though he was several years her senior, and I think this bolstered the self-esteem. To other girls who had fewer blemishes and wore city clothes, she could say, “My boyfriend’s part of The Evil, and last weekend they flew to California for a national battle of the bands.”

She loved Bryce and Chuck. She made friends like Laurie and Elaine and Glenda that she’s still got today; they’ve all gained some weight and cut their hair short and had children, but they’re the coolest moms their kids know. None of this means, mind you, that she was capable of signing up for Driver’s Ed. when it required walking to the head of the largest study hall room in front of fifty classmates; Mamaw taught her to drive in the parking lot of TheArk church. Doesn’t mean she didn’t fret before every date she ever went on because she worried that the guy might have a strange car door handle she wouldn’t know how to open or take her to a restaurant whose bathroom she’d have to ask someone to point out. Certainly doesn’t mean she didn’t curl up in the recliner and read escapist literature for as many hours of the day as she could, dreaming of castles, carriages, cobblestone alleyways, and slim men who wore hats and gloves and ascots and thought aquamarine was her color. Outta sight. No time to be nervous.

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65 Very true. The Midnight Evil made it to this televised competition’s final round, but the judging, my locals say, was rigged. Somebody giving scores knew the lead singer of the other band, so the Evil, despite having stories of smoke-filled, neon-lighted San Francisco streets, came home essentially trophy-less.
Abyss

_Nervous_ hurts.

It happened for the first time during sixth period study hall my senior year of high school. I had the new Family & Consumer Sciences teacher, Mrs. Brown, who despite being in her late thirties wore her hair in a ball of red-brown frizz and dressed in long denim jumpers and white flowered blouses and sometimes vests you could tell were hand-crocheted. She had absolutely no control over a classroom, so every period, wealthy Haubstadt pricks like Caleb Pfohl would sneak to the cooking stations to the left of our desks and turn on burners, mix cherry Kool-Aid, scramble utensils in every lab area’s drawers, even bang on pots and pans and sing the lyrics to songs by Green Day and Papa Roach. One December afternoon Mrs. Brown actually brought in a jug of red Hawaiian Punch and a pack of imitation Oreos for us if we promised to behave, and because I make it a policy never to accept food from a person whose house I’ve never entered,66 I stayed seated and read from Steinbeck’s _The Winter of Our Discontent._

A sentence wobbled in my vision while other students poured punch into clear plastic cups and attempted to throw black sandwich-cookies into one another’s open mouths. Literally, words glided up and then down on the page, flowing like a slow-motion whip before me. I jolted a bit. Adjusted my position in the desk chair. Maybe the lighting, I said to myself, is on the fritz in here. Maybe Caleb Pfohl fucked something up in the electrical

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66 We didn’t celebrate Halloween at our house much beyond eating Reese’s cups and Dum-Dums and coloring pictures of ghosts and bats and hanging them from various nails in the living room and stairwell, and when we did receive candy (from kids at school, mostly), Mother only allowed us to eat the snacks from kids whose homes she’d seen before. Even airtight wrappers didn’t pass muster. I still can’t accept food from strangers.
wiring before sauntering into class five minutes late, chuckling low in his throat like all self-absorbed male teenagers do when they want you to notice them making an entrance.

The words jumped again, this time faster, and as a comma took flight, so did my heart. I could feel each chamber pumping blood like a malfunctioning machine. Like the old water pump Jimmy Stewart can’t get started in *Mr. Hobbes Takes a Vacation*. I could hear, actually *hear*, the rhythm varying with every stilted breath I took. My chest collapsed in on itself—not in reality, but in feeling—and my ribs retracted against my lungs, pinching them like forceful fingers, causing them to spasm. I choked involuntarily and then coughed on purpose (I remembered hearing on some TLC medical special that patients experiencing cardiac distress should cough to kick-start a more regular heartbeat). No dice. I got so light-headed I couldn’t see straight—recipes for apple-cinnamon crepes and banana pancakes blurred on the chalkboard to the point that they looked like large white paint splatters—and my gums and cheeks went simultaneously numb. It was as though in the middle of study hall, in the middle of kindergarten-mentality-chaos, I was disappearing from the chest up.

But I reappeared as quickly as I’d faded. Didn’t know what to say and didn’t dare move for fear I’d start the whole mess up again. I finished the Steinbeck. I never told a soul what had happened for fear I’d learn it was a sign of cancer or diabetes or imminent demise. What you don’t know can’t hurt you. For a time.

*Family Remnant: Studies Show That Led Zeppelin Frightens Old People and the Insane*

On January seventh, 2004, I raised my hand during Mr. Bengert’s fifth period government class and asked to be excused to the nurse’s office. Bengert, skinny and short and loud with light brown hair parted straight down the middle, insisted Ashley Dike accompany me—said
I looked a little pale, and I wondered how the hell he figured, given that I couldn’t get tan from a booth—but on the way downstairs I told Ashley I’d make it the rest of the way solo. I waited until she’d gone and then ducked into the girls’ bathroom across from Mrs. Norris’ advanced health class. From the narrow window in the room door, I could see students taking turns performing CPR on a faceless pink-peach dummy, and their patterned counting combined with the hollow popping sound the dummy’s chest made turned my stomach. I didn’t actually get sick, but I did crouch to the floor of the nearest stall and hang my chin over the toilet bowl. I knew if I even attempted throwing up, I’d only dry heave. It’s not like I’d had any lunch prior to this sudden surge of despair, impaired movement, dizziness, erratic breathing, and crushing chest pain. Bengert was outlining the parameters of the Fifth Amendment—the Eminent Domain part—and without warning I’d lost control of my left hand. It had locked up. Physically couldn’t take the notes anymore. I assumed that was a sign of stroke—partial paralysis of an entire limb, partnered with the numbness I’d experienced back in Mrs. Brown’s study hall the previous semester—so up shot my functional hand like a survival reflex. I reconsidered bailing on the way because I realized I couldn’t explain to Mrs. Vieke—the nurse who always assumed that if you were a girl and in her office, you were pregnant—what was happening to me.

Perhaps, I thought, wiping my sweating brow with a wad of toilet paper so thin you could see through it, I was losing my mind. People lose their minds daily. Just go nuts washing the car, walking the family labrador, checking frozen peas off the grocery list, watching Sonny and Brenda break each others’ hearts on General Hospital. And didn’t schizophrenia have odd symptoms that made you feel as though you weren’t all there? Weren’t quite the you you remembered from the day before? If I was losing it, I wouldn’t be
the first in the family. Most of Grandma McKinney’s sisters—especially Rosie, who’d sit on her front porch cradling a shotgun and cuss you out playing poker whether you beat her or not—were considered crazy by their neighbors. Mother’s great-aunt Luda\textsuperscript{67} shouted strange things at strange times and often burst into hysterical fits for absolutely no reason at all. My great-great grandpa Stillwell, a World War I vet, once chopped off a bartender’s hand for asking him to leave the premises on account of he was too drunk to sit up straight (though not too drunk, obviously, to sever a limb). There’s precedent, is what I’m saying.

And then I remembered Daddy once telling me that when Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” hit the air waves, it caused mental patients on Deaconess Hospital’s sixth floor to writhe in their beds, pull out massive chunks of their hair, roam the halls moaning, even physically assault other patients on the ward (with bare hands, with sharp instruments, I don’t know). I wondered why orderlies were allowing the mentally unstable to casually listen to the radio and then exit their respective rooms at will in the first place, but the images he portrayed stuck with me for years: guys in backless gowns and tall socks beating each other with IV-drip bags, old women shrieking in each others’ faces and shaking fists full of cottony white hair, young bearded men crouched in corners, rocking back and forth, cowering from and threatening passersby.

I didn’t visit the school nurse after all, instead splashing my face with ice cold water and pacing the bathroom for the remainder of fifth period until the floor stopped zooming in and out of focus beneath me. During sixth the chalkboard rippled, and during seventh I had trouble hearing Mrs. Buck as she worked an example parabola with bleedy blue marker on an

\textsuperscript{67} Luda’s birth name was, hold onto your hat, Lula. As a young woman, Lula decided she didn’t care much for her name, so she went to the courthouse and paid somewhere around twenty or thirty dollars to get it legally changed to Luda. Clearly a few bricks short of a load.
overhead transparency. Once home, once re-fueled with ranch-flavored chips that stuck in my molars something terrible, I downloaded “Whole Lotta Love” on our family computer and listened to it on the oversized headphones that came with Natalie’s purple personal CD player, circa 1998. Didn’t give me the urge to hurt a soul, though. Just got stuck in my head for the rest of the night.

And so a few weeks went by without a hitch, and then I’d have one of those attacks again. Unprompted. They were usually brief but strong, and the worst part was the fear that if the crushing chest pain didn’t let up, if I couldn’t get a satisfying breath, if I didn’t regain feeling in my extremities, I would die. I don’t believe in an afterlife because (a.) no scientific evidence suggests one exists (b.) the entire conceptual framework of heaven only exists because human beings can’t accurately imagine a world in which they, individually, are nothing and have no place (c.) it’s just downright impossible. But we atheists have as much empathy and feeling and as many existential hang-ups as the next person, you know. The prospect of death is no hayride.

And for me—for the girl whose entire mid-childhood was predicated upon not making a scene, doing what she was told, keeping mostly quiet in public—the prospect of losing control of my faculties in front of a live audience proved even more terrifying. Imagine collapsing to the floor in Business Law class clutching your dead-weight arm, then walking to study hall at the bell only to discover that every girl whose eyelids shimmer blue-gray and whose “allowances” add up to more than your savings account knows about how you fell apart. Flopped to dull carpeting like a ragdoll, and there were tears in your eyes.
Teenage girls only cry over boys and broken French-tip nails and being grounded from
dances and keg parties. You belong in junior high at best. You’re kind of a psycho.

The day I finally did visit Mrs. Vieke in the nurse’s station, I curled my feet up in her
green swivel chair and blubbered, face splotched and stinging, that I feared I’d reached the
end of my rope. “It won’t stop,” I told her, dabbing below my eyes with a crumpled
Kleenex. “It’s like every breath I take is the last good one there’ll be.”

Mrs. Vieke scratched her head, and one of her bright red fake nails got caught in a dry
tuft of old-lady hair, dyed blonde to keep up appearances (though of what I don’t know).
“Well, honey, doesn’t sound like you’re pregnant.”

_No, ma’am, I don’t believe I’m really en route to becoming the next virgin mother in
a long line of historically fictionalized Marys._

“Well, could be you’re allergic to something. Have you been eating any new or unusual
foods?”

_I stir barbeque sauce into mashed potatoes, dip pizza in sour cream and horseradish,
_and eat bleu cheese salads with Chinese food. Unusual is a staple._ I told her no.

“Well, could be you’ve got a thyroid condition. Anybody in your family have a
thyroid problem, hon?”

“My mother. She’s got hypothyroidism.” And badly. In 1995, the winter Grandpa
Pamp passed away after contracting the flu from a flu shot

68 He’d never gotten a flu shot before, in all his 98 years. I know they’re precautionary and prudent, but I refuse
to get them. Never know when you’ll come across a questionable batch.

She’d lost almost twenty pounds in three months, and the black and red suit-skirt and jacket
she wore to Pamp’s funeral showing looked like it could’ve fit a fourth grader. Her cheeks
had hollowed. And yet one tiny pill every morning at five thirty, downed with a cup of decaffeinated Folgers, made her healthy again. Sounded so simple. I could take a tiny pill if I had to.

Listen to the way my confessionals to the parents turned out:

Me: Daddy, I think I have a problem.
Daddy (using his paint-stained index finger as a page-holder in his book about Napoleon’s Waterloo): What do you mean problem, Sug?\(^{69}\) What happened?
Me: Nothing happened. I just think I’m sick (and here, fill in everything about the pain, the tingling, the blurred vision, floors taking flight, dizziness, so on, so forth).
Daddy: Well tell your mother to make you a doctor’s appointment. Shirley, make Manthy an appointment with that goddammed left-handed doctor!\(^{70}\)

Me: Mother, I think I have a problem.
Mother (scraping remnants of burned hamburger from the iron skillet): You what?
Me: My chest keeps hurting. Like, really hurting. Not just like heartburn or something (I physically can’t burp—never have been able to—so I want to throw gastrointestinal possibilities out the window fast).
Mother: Probably just a pinched nerve.\(^{71}\)
Me: I don’t think so. And it’s not just that. I can’t breathe right—
Mother: Some days I can’t get a good, deep breath either, Samantha. That’s nerves. We’re just those kinds of people. What you need to do is relax. It’s all in your mind.

\(^{69}\) Short for “Sugar.” I could spell it phonetically—Shoog—but that’s never how I’ve pictured it.
\(^{70}\) Daddy knew Dr. Brink Jr. when they were younger—when they played baseball—and he always mocks Brink for being left-handed even though he knows that I am and that he would’ve been, too, if not for Dave’s insistence. Daddy hates needles and medicine and prodding just as much or more than I do. Any excuse to make Brink seem small.
\(^{71}\) The women in my family think that literally every physical ailment a person might have relates to a pinched nerve. I’ve heard it all my life. Backache? Probably a pinched nerve. Stomach cramps? Just a nerve pinched up wrong. Neck spasms? No big deal—pinched nerve. If you ask me, I think this nerve business is an easy excuse for “I don’t know” or “Could be serious, but I’m an optimist and also don’t want to jinx you.”
All in my mind. Figments of my imagination where I’m having what is often, I now know, easily mistaken for a heart attack. She could’ve said anything but that.

I’ve faked sore throats for more than a decade to get out of school, and I started doing it again.

When we used to skip, we got to lean way the hell back in the blue Lay-Z-Boy, prop our heels on the footrest, watch Bob Barker get squeezed nearly to death by jubilant, big-bellied women wearing “Have Your Pets Spayed or Neutered!” sweatshirts (not to mention correctly guess the price of Wheat Nuts—$2.39), and eat a heaping plate of whatever lunch sounded best to us right then.\[^{72}\] In 2004 I didn’t do it for the venerable Mr. Barker or for massive helpings of day-old General Tso’s chicken and crab rangoon, though. I rarely had these attacks at home, so I felt safer there. Less likely to lose my grip on reality, if reality was indeed what slipped away from me. I could lean back and concentrate on my breathing and reside in the space between sleep and wakefulness.

Family Remnant: Rock Bottom

I’ve always loved nature shows—Nathan and I used to watch Wild Discovery every Saturday night at seven o’clock, marveling at how wasps made nests, how orcas traveled in pods, and how lionesses hunted as a lethal unit—so on April tenth, 2004, I put my government notes aside and settled deep into National Geographic documentary footage of what a British narrator called “the last great frontier on earth.” The ocean’s abyss. Thousands of feet below

\[^{72}\] According to our women, your body tells you what you can and can’t handle when you’re sick. Baked potatoes with light butter or a small platter of saltines might be best for your stomach, but if you’re hungry for garlic breadsticks or Stouffer’s lasagna or vegetable soup or the leftover, foil-wrapped soft tacos from Taco Tierra on South Main in Princeton (they’re just sitting in the fridge—food’s there to be eaten!), go wild.
the water’s surface, entire ecosystems flourish. Nearly transparent angler fish dangle bulb-like appendages in front of smaller fish that glow neon colors, the neon fish eat hearty krill, and so the food chain maintains itself. Thirty minutes into the program I saw a lake on the ocean floor—a lake, for crying out loud, self-contained amidst trillions of gallons of identical water.

And then, as divers strapped on flippers, fit goggles to their eager faces, and descended into multi-million-dollar bubbles of glass and metal that take both depth-readings and high-resolution photographs, I leapt from my spot on the couch. Ask Nathan or Natalie either one. They watched in horror as I scrabbled along the floor, moaned, and gasped for air. Over eight tons per square inch of pressure bears down on abyss organisms daily, and that night, I empathized. “Get Mother,” I whispered, pounding the floor with an open palm. “Don’t call 9-1-1.”

Mother’s response, after she jogged to the family room with a dishtowel in one hand and our cordless phone in the other, was to sit me up straight in a hard-backed chair and bring me a glass of regular Coke with a straw in it. She instructed me to drink slowly. To concentrate on the carbonation as it fizzled against my cheeks and tongue. My head stayed fuzzy for more than an hour, but the pain did lessen after a Coke and a half, so we returned to the family room to finish watching the program. In the last ten minutes, our British guide finally appeared on screen and held in his age-spotted hands the delicate bones of Anoplogaster cornuta, nicknamed the “fangtooth.” Inhabiting waters over sixteen thousand feet below sea level, fangtooths have mouths that span the whole height of their heads. Their teeth, needle-sharp and several inches long, hook prey with eerie precision, and a filmy blue
clouds their eyes—some visual adaptation I no longer remember. They look demonic. Like masks of themselves. Their skeletons will crack if handled incorrectly.

Over the next month and a half—late February to early April—I gave up marinara sauce, Italian and Caesar dressings, green peppers, pepperoni, tuna sandwiches, salsa, bananas, and grapefruit juice. We switched fabric softeners, and I switched shampoos and body washes, swapping both scents and brands. We kept the house cooler at night. I went to bed earlier. Then later. Then I couldn’t sleep at all.

And it’s difficult to describe the feeling of having absolutely no energy. When you eat nothing at all until evening corn chips and heavy suppers, spend the waking hours bent over books and notebooks and workbooks, and then stare at the television screen until ten o’clock just waiting for your leg to go numb or your face to tingle or your heart to explode all over the family room, your body rebels. By the time purple bags drooped beneath my eyes, Mother said, “This isn’t an allergy. I’m taking you in. I know you hate it, but if there’s really something wrong, you’ll go. You should want to go.”

She meant to Brinks’ Family Practice, home to rubber glove smells and an asylum-white bloodwork room and nurses who’d all seen my bare ass at one time or another. A prospect almost worse than death. I said okay, but when April 20th came and the blood-draw began, I lost my vision and hearing, all sensation in my gums and lips, and experienced a mild seizure that lasted for at least five minutes. Beth, the nurse, held down my arms while Mother braced my legs, and after the shaking staved off, Beth brought me a plastic cup of water from the cooler in the hallway. I drank in gulps and listened to the fully-adult women
talk about what mild weather we’d been having. No storms yet, they mused. In my head
their voices sounded like echoes, and I silently despised them for making light of my trauma.

The message Beth left on our answering machine three days later went like this:
“Shirley, Duke, this is Beth from up at Brink’s. We’ve run the works on Samantha’s blood
sample, and she’s healthy as a horse. Glad to help you out. Take care.” No thyroid
condition, no diabetes, excellent white-count, perfect triglycerides, well-balanced
electrolytes. No disease of the body detected.

*Family Remnant: Tension*

Dr. Bruce Brink Jr. has been our family physician since before I was born in 1985, but when
I sat before him on April 24th, 2004, scrunching up examination-table paper beneath my
jittery legs, I almost feared him. In the late ‘90s, Brink survived a devastating traffic
accident, and afterward, a surgeon fitted him with adult braces to realign the molars that the
wreck knocked sideways. While scrunching the paper and breathing in sick-smells of the
office and wringing my hands, left over right, I tried not to stare at those braces though they
gleamed silver-white straight at me. Brink’s six foot three with thinning, dark brown hair
and ocean eyes, and he’s actually somewhat handsome, but the braces dominate his face. On
that day he wore a black tie with Looney Toons characters printed all down it, and he
wheeled his leather stool right in front of me. He put his enormous hands on my knees.
“Okay, kiddo. Need ya to fill somethin’ out for me.”

Looked like a survey of sorts. A diagnostic fill-in-the-bubble-type deal that would
indicate whether or not I was, God forbid, depressed. I knew that he’d share these answers
with every nurse in the place because the entire staff knows Mother and Daddy and Mamaw
and still pictures me as the eighteen-month-old with curly black hair who recited the ABCs to the receptionist many moons ago. I filled in the bubbles anyway, then moved to the open-response section:

1. How many hours of sleep do you get each night, on average?—(Six or seven hours. Seems sensible)
2. How much time do you devote to non-school social activities, on average?—(Not enough, or this wouldn’t be a question)
3. Would you consider yourself a depressive person?—(Now that you mention it…)
4. Please indicate the severity of your current symptoms on a scale of 1-5, 1 being the least severe and 5 being the most severe—(This system is contrived. How the hell should I know?)

After examining my questionnaire, Brink wheeled back toward me and fiddled with his stethoscope. “There’s medication we can give you,” he said, never disclosing the name of my affliction, “but I think you can manage without it. Whadda you think?”

I told him I guessed he was right. I hate taking medicine. I’m the type who usually reserves Tylenol only for migraines.

“So it’s settled,” Brink announced, and the squeak of his wheels on the slick floor made me cringe like I’d heard nails rake down a chalkboard. He noted the grimace. “Mind if I check one more thing?”

What he checked was my degree of neck tension, and after some pressing and prodding up under my jaw and down toward my shoulders, he let a laugh slip out. “Never seen anything like this, kiddo. Not in twenty-five years of practice.”

According to him I easily took first prize as the stiffest, most tense human being in the free world. Brink’s an osteopath by inclination, so he asked if he could work some of the kinks out of my system. I didn’t object, so he laid me flat on the exam table and pulled at my
neck, twisted it, pressed his blunt fingertips into muscle cords clenched tight as fists,
pounded at my back, cracked my spine in five different ways. I can still hear the popping
sound my bones made.

I had on light blue pajama pants and one of Daddy’s old gray sweatshirts with “Indiana
Workforce Development” printed across the front when I diagnosed myself.

Now barreling forward in my second semester of college at Transylvania University
in Lexington, Kentucky, I’d enrolled in General Psychology with Professor Meg Upchurch,
and our text book’s Chapter Seven, page two fifty-six, profiled a little-known mental disorder
plaguing millions of people (mostly women) in the United States:

**Panic Disorder:** a type of anxiety disorder that affects some 2.4 million U.S.
adults. The disorder most often begins during the late teens and early
adulthood and strikes twice as may American women as men. No one knows
what causes panic disorder, though researchers suspect a combination of
biological and environmental factors, including family history (PD seems to
run in families), stressful life events, drug and alcohol abuse, and thinking
patterns that exaggerate normal physical reactions.

I gripped the edges of the sleeves of my sweatshirt, balled them up in my fists, and
read on. I reread the symptoms— sweating, difficulty breathing, chest pains,
numbness/tingling, dizziness to the point of fainting, momentary visual and auditory
problems, overwhelming sense of doom—at least four times. I moved to the middle of my
dorm room bed and sat cross-legged with the Psych book balanced on both my knees and
read all of Chapter Seven until no more light peeked through the blinds. I memorized every
anxiety disorder that the field of psychology had yet discovered, and I jotted down the panic
parts in a black and white Composition notebook. Proof of my sanity. That night I slept pretty well.

*Family Remnant: Write It Down*

It took me three years, over one hundred panic attacks,\(^73\) and much mental revision of Mother’s Dr. Swanson story, but in February 2008, three months before college graduation, I decided to pay a call on Dr. Georgeann Stamper-Brown, Transylvania alum and on-campus psychologist. Students got free sessions, so I figured going just once couldn’t hurt. Unlike Brink, Dr. Stamper-Brown is petite, blonde, doe-eyed, and hushed in speech, and she inspires trust. That first day, waiting in the hall, I’d heard the patient ahead of me sobbing about “trying it again.” *I swear to God I’ll try it again*, she said, choking on the last word of her sentence as though it would strangle her. As she left the quiet lobby moments later, I scanned her wrists for bandages. Her coat sleeves covered any evidence that might have been.

Dr. Stamper-Brown lingered in her doorway and called me inside, her voice almost melodic. She sat across from me in a dark green swivel desk chair with a Freud-looking notebook and bullet-sleek pen poised in her hands, and I found this unnerving. I like to be the one holding the writing utensil. I like to be the one doing the assessments. I kept my purse in my lap and tried hard not to stare at the carpet like some timid lunatic you see on the crime shows—you know, the ones who burn down animal hospitals because one rabbit was humanely euthanized or stuff their toddlers in the dumpsters behind their apartment.

\(^{73}\) Once in the Haggin Auditorium in front of hundreds of people during an informative speech about historical power and privilege bestowed upon whites, once in the smaller auditorium during a string concert, numerous times during dinners (from which I would have to excuse myself and take deep breaths in the fresh air of the adjacent courtyard), twice in Wal-Mart, at least twice in Lifetime Fitness class, and the list goes on.
complexes because they refuse to let the ex-husbands get partial custody. I filled out paperwork in silence, and so did she.

Then came the Big Questions. Had I suffered from:

- Drug addiction?
- Alcoholism?
- Child abuse in its various forms?
- Mental trauma?
- Deaths in the family?

She’d read Chapter Seven all the way through too, boy. I answered:

- “For eight years I used Afrin nose spray nightly. Is that bad?”
- “I rarely drink. Just on my birthday or New Year’s, usually at home.”
- “God no. Of course not. Nobody in my family would hurt a soul, let alone each other.”
- “What counts as mental trauma, exactly?”
- “Papaw in ’88, Poppy in ’90, my Grandpa Pamp in ’95, Grandma McKinney in ’96, Grandma Falls in ’97, Mammie—that’s my great-grandmother on my mother’s side—in ’99, Grandpa Dave in 2001—that enough for you?”

Dr. Stamper-Brown scribbled in haste, then looked up and said, “I’m sorry to ask this, Samantha, but is there any history of sexual abuse in your immediate or extended family?”

“Definitely not.” I do retain a vague memory of being around four or five and having my jeans jerked down too hard in the doctor’s office, then feeling sharp pain in a place I

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74 Most people don’t believe this one when they hear it, if they know me. *You were such a good kid,* they say. *Why would you do something so stupid?* I don’t know. I just know that as a kid, at night, I’d have trouble sleeping, fearing the worst just like my mother and grandmother before me. The nose drops (kept around the house for winter colds) stopped stinging my nasal membranes after a couple of years—nine squirts, three times the recommended dosage, in each nostril. They helped me rest. They helped me breathe.

75 When I say “Mammie” people tend to assume we had an African American maid growing up. Not at all the case. For whatever reason, we just all called Mamaw’s mother Mammie. She was short, stocky, square-faced, serious, and a beautiful singer, and she didn’t seem to mind the nickname.
figured I shouldn’t, but none of my relatives accompanied me into the exam room that time. Whatever happened—if anything even did—wasn’t enacted by someone I knew. We didn’t need to revisit that past, so I said nothing about this to the tiny, very Nordic-looking woman taking notes in front of me.

“Okay, she said, “That’s good. Thank you for being honest with me. Now, would you say you have any major fears? Anything that gives you nightmares or otherwise infringes upon your day-to-day?” She smiled quickly and leaned back in the chair a bit. “I’m just trying to get a handle on what might be your panic’s triggers, if there are any. Okay?”

Okay. Fears. I wrestled with this. Clutched my purse strap until my knuckles went yellow-white, too. “I guess driving, maybe. I don’t have my license because of the, well, because of all this.” I gestured to her office as though it alone—coffee mug and framed diploma and stumpy footrest and comfy sofa—spawned my inability to breathe and cope and exist like a regular person. “I meant to take the written test when I turned eighteen—I didn’t trust myself any younger and didn’t want to ruin my GPA with Driver’s ed.—but then we lost our car, so I had nothing to practice with. My parents said the new car—well, not new at all, it was really old and used and barely ran—was too dangerous for a beginner. Things just got worse from there. All this stuff started happening to me right around then.” Guess I wasn’t short on words after all.

“And now you’re afraid to drive?”

I exhaled and closed my eyes. “I’m afraid I’ll hurt people, yes. If I had an attack in the driver’s seat, I wouldn’t be able to stop it.” I paused and swallowed rising bile. “I could kill somebody.”
By second session we came to the conclusion that my panic is biologically generated, not environmentally provoked. The history of mental illness in my family abounds, I told the doctor, and she said that given this background, I’d probably inherited my affliction. That was not to say, however, that outside factors couldn’t make the problem worse.

“When do your attacks usually hit?” she asked, finishing her last bite of a Lean Cuisine lasagna. I’d shown up early, as is my wont, and now I had to sit in a mauve-toned office breathing in garlic and oregano and watching a woman half my size chow down on limp noodles covered in orange sauce. “Is there any sort of pattern at all to them?”

“Oddly enough, usually when I’m doing something I like. Being with friends, eating meals, right before bed, watching television or going to the movies. Stuff like that. Also big crowds, though, and going to new places. I’m terrible with directions.”

Now we were getting somewhere. My adrenal glands, Dr. Stamper-Brown hypothesized, are over-functioning. They produce adrenaline at significant rates constantly, and so even during activities most people would find relaxing, my body is on high alert. So it makes sense, then, that situations like public speaking and traveling to unfamiliar places would send my system into a kind of crippling overdrive. I’m already hyped-up, basically, and then you throw change at me and I buckle beneath its weight. Makes sense, goddammit.

Session three commenced the breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, and visualization strategies. Dr. Stamper-Brown first suggested I take a mild drug like Lorazepam or other beta-inhibitors to fight back, but as I told you before, I’m not a fan of medicine. Beta-blockers can make your hands ice cold, increase fatigue, and even change some people’s
personalities, and for the first time in my life, I was relatively happy with who I was. I was Samantha Robinson, English major, art history minor, animal-lover, big sister, oldest daughter, and four-year sufferer of PD, and I was getting help voluntarily. Making choices. Felt good.

So we started out with breathing: in through the nose, out through the mouth, just like when you’re running the mile in P.E., only this time you’re not wearing hideous athletic shorts and a Taz shirt and getting red in the face because you don’t sweat well. She advised me to close my eyes and to make sure that when I inhaled and exhaled, my stomach rose and fell. “Too many people breathe shallow, just with their chests,” she told me, and then she placed her hands under her own diaphragm and added, “The ribcage should elevate. Let those muscles relax as completely as you can.”

Part of the reason I ordinarily breathed like the shallow crowd she described was because I’d had so much practice sucking in my gut for hours in junior high and high school. When you hold your stomach in as hard as you can, the belly flab artificially disappears, and that’s the ticket at fourteen or fifteen. Remember? That and curling your barely-there bangs and smelling like the entirety of the mall’s Bath & Body Works.

Breathing exercises didn’t turn out so hot, though. That day in the office I very nearly hyperventilated after three minutes—even had to jog out to the lobby to fill a Styrofoam cup with water and collect myself (not to mention receive burning stares from two work-study students manning the phones). Plan B was muscle relaxation techniques, which went somewhat better. First you clench your fist as tightly as possible, then let loose. I’d

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76 Another curse from my mother. We’ll turn beet-red and pass out before we’ll let out one drop of healthy sweat. Eventually, in school, Mother started bribing Mrs. Giesky for C’s in gym in return for walking the track. I started forging sick notes.
grip the edge of the doctor’s sofa, right on the risen seam, then slowly release it. Next, tighten the calves, release, tighten, and release again. Then the feet, the shoulders, the thighs, knees, neck, whatever. It’s a progression, and it’s designed mostly, I discovered, to take your mind off of the anxiety. It’s a distraction tool, and I’ve never been easily distracted.

For visualization strategies, Dr. Stamper-Brown browsed the Internet for a website that provides audio recordings of licensed therapists talking patients through their recovery. I closed my eyes and focused on the sounds of the introduction, opened by a trite, upwardly-inflected melody reminiscent of when a new puzzle pops up for Wheel of Fortune contestants. Then a man’s baritone came in, smooth and whispery, kind of annoying because he had one of those voices that, when it’s pitched at low volume, makes sticky-spit sounds. I’d almost rather have heard him scream directions at me, but I tried to ignore the lip-smacking and concentrate on his purpose. We’re going to the beach right now, friends, he said. Can you imagine your favorite beach? Maybe it’s got pure white sand. Maybe it’s the French Riviera where the water is a brilliant turquoise. Maybe you’d like to see dolphins or whales not far from shore. Let’s go there together.

Hold the phone, I wanted to say. What if you’re terrified of water much more expansive than what’s in a bathtub? What if your parents were the ultimate softies who never made you take swimming lessons as a kid because you cried at the very thought and then, so as not to seem completely hysterical, made the convincing case that you preferred and should prefer reading and playing Animal Restaurant77 to flopping around in a public

77 The establishment: Swan’s House Restaurant—a.k.a. our dining room table. The menu: any item pictured on the Schwan’s home delivery frozen foods magazine. The premise: one of the three of us played the waiter/waitress, the other two played customers whose attitudes varied from pleasant to boisterous to downright hostile. The catch: the customers were animals. Animals who walked upright, had families, wore business attire, and spoke as proper an English as precocious grade-schoolers could muster. I am not making this up. If
pool that’s been peed in umpteen-thousand times? And beyond that, what if your family never took beach vacations because, unlike Dr. Lip-Smacker and Patients X, Y, and Z, you weren’t upper-middle class? You weren’t even regular middle class by the time you were eight or nine and your twin siblings were five or six and your parents were in their early forties having late-night talks about savings accounts and heat bills when they thought you’d gone to bed already. What if you’ve never seen a real beach? What the fuck do you do then, wise-ass?

But I said none of that, because it turns out the point of taking us on a mental trip to Pensacola was so we could relate our panic attacks to the rhythm of the tides. *If our anxiety is a wave, we need to picture ourselves as surfers. You can ride the little waves by now—they’re not so bad—but the bigger ones still capsize your board, don’t they?*

If by “capsize your board” you mean give you black-outs and heart palpitations that thump so fast you can’t get a good count when you take your pulse, wrist or throat, then you bet.

*Remember that every wave, no matter how strong or how large or how overwhelming, will crest and then fall. Our panic will rise up, but it will always fall away. It cannot last forever.*

Two hours and nineteen minutes feels a lot like forever sometimes.

*Now that you can see the end in sight—now that you can picture that wave shrinking back into calm, cool water—let’s travel to another place. I picked the beach because I feel*
most relaxed there, but you may feel safe somewhere else. Maybe in a cabin in the Rocky Mountains. Maybe on a picnic near the woods. Maybe in your grandmother’s living room. Find your safe place, friends. Find your safest place and go there, absorb that feeling, hold it close. Lock the doors against your anxiety. You’re the only one with a key to your safest place. You own it.

But a new family—cousins to Jim Farmer, the man who used to mow our yard and take our trash to the dumpster—owns my safest place, and you wouldn’t have needed a key to get in because our doors were so old, our deadbolts so flimsy, our windowpanes so fragile. Every night sleeping in my childhood home, I worried about burglars breaking in through the back porch, kicking aside my black cat (and best friend) Licorice in their wake, and stealing our TV and, more importantly, the strong box in the uppermost kitchen cabinet next to the blender and food processor we rarely used. Our birth certificates and some of our savings and my great-grandma Hattie’s wedding ring were in there. I’d always try to imagine how I’d alert the rest of the family if I heard the intruders first. The pink bedroom I shared with Natalie was to the right of the staircase, so if I’d gotten up to warn everyone, I’d have had to cross the landing in plain sight, the hall plug-in illuminating all my features. My plan had always been to sneak quietly through the “back” door of our bedroom—the one that connected to a short hallway leading to the bathroom and windowless den—and then tiptoe from the bathroom to my parents’ bedroom, which was to the left of the staircase. The bathroom floor, bright white tiles with small blue and beige shell designs, creaked something awful, though, so I’d even considered shuffling across it with a stuffed animal strapped to each foot. I owned several rabbits and bears that had ribbons around their necks, so I figured
I could use those as shoelaces of sorts. And rabbits and bears don’t mind getting their guts stepped on if it’s for a good cause.

So even in my safest place I worried myself to death. Nobody broke into homes in Owensville. The town was home to no more than twelve hundred people when I was a kid, and most of them I’d said hello to at the post office or Joe’s Red & White or the annual Watermelon Festival in the square at one time or another. The greatest portion of the population consisted of citizens over sixty and under ten; not your most common of petty thieves. Perhaps I worried that I had it too good. Perhaps I sensed that in a place so insular, something big’s bound to happen eventually.

Dr. Lip-Smacker’s streaming audio decided it needed to buffer. Dr. Stamper-Brown’s voice sounded exponentially amplified when she asked, “Did you come up with a safe place you’re comfortable with using?”

“Yes,” I said, my eyes still shut. “I think I’ve got one.”

I’m not better.

I’m not worse, certainly, but I’m too tense for muscle relaxation and I’m too antsy and impatient for breathing exercises. I try the visualization strategies on occasion—when I’m on the CyRide Bus headed across Iowa State’s campus, when I’m at my desk in the apartment I share with David, when I’m walking down the aisles at Wal-Mart watching moms in loose sweatpants spank their kids in public for touching Playskool toys whose open-

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78 Maybe fifteen hundred live there now, and that’s a generous estimate. We’ve retained more Mexican migrant workers as the years have gone by because fewer and fewer local teenagers want to work in the melon fields anymore. It’s hard labor, lifting ripe watermelons and honeydews and cantaloupes out of brittle dirt and hauling them into flatbed trucks for transport. Melons, corn, and soybeans are what we do. What we want done, anyway. And that kind of economy only supports so many.
face packaging allows for buttons to be pushed or lights to flash or beeps to resound and
spark migraines. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes my heartbeat
returns to normal within minutes, and sometimes I’m still jittery and bleary-eyed a half-hour
later, devouring spoonfuls of peanut butter straight from the jar in hopes that the floating
sensation is just my blood sugar acting up. It’s genetic, this disorder, and I’m merely the
newest incarnation. It’s in my bones. It’s part of being a woman related to other women
who double-check their doorlocks and alarm clocks, dial phone numbers with strict precision,
and peek in on their babies twice, three times, before slinking off to bed themselves.
Part Five: Conversions of Some Kind
Beginnings

Up until my twin siblings Nathan and Natalie arrived on scene, I attended Princeton’s Church of God with Mother, and as a three-year-old, my sole concern lay in memorizing the lyrics to “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” and “Old Rugged Cross.” In a pastel dress and pure white patent shoes, I’d echo my mother’s love for Jesus via song, all the while leaning as far out of our pew as possible in order to size up the crowd. I liked newcomers. Especially children my age or older. I interacted almost exclusively with adults until kindergarten, so kids—along with their grubby fingers, deplorable manners, and ridiculous babbling—mystified me.

In June of 1988, a seven-year-old girl with bronze hair past her waist joined the church, and in my fascination I noticed her near-constant habit of rubbing a bald spot on the back of her head, right below where her mother had pinned a festive pink ribbon. I asked my own mother why the girl couldn’t sit still, and she whispered, “The little Leister girl? She’s got Lyme disease.” Over the course of that summer, I developed an irrational fear of ticks. Ticks are what I remember most about church.

After only four weeks of official Brownie membership, Fall 1992, I turned in my tan and white uniform and dropped out.

The only good part about being in Brownies in first grade, for me, was saving half my peanut-butter-and-blackberry-jam sandwich from lunch and eating it in the car in the parking lot of the United Methodist Church, waiting for Karen Flynn to unlock the doors.79 Our

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79 I liked it because it was out of the ordinary to finish part of your lunch in the afternoon. Thrilled me to death. Felt risky. Tasted like the plastic.
troupe met Monday and Tuesday evenings in the church’s basement, and I admired nothing about the building except for its alternating dark purple and shamrock colored windows. Inside it looked more like the free health clinic where we received our immunizations than it did a church, to me. The neighboring house—a huge-columned place made of brick and owned by Pastor Douglas and his brood—had a black lab in the yard, and I was always more concerned with how to convince Mother to let me untie the dog from its metal stake than I was with earning Brownie badges for community service or studying the cracked paintings of Christ all around me.

I never got along well with the other girls in Karen’s troupe. Most of them were grade-school classmates of mine, yes, but they’d pegged me as stuck-up from the get-go just because I was so shy. Sitting at the pale pink Bible-study table by myself reading a book from my mother’s bookshelf showed I thought I was better than them. Somehow above dressing in the glitzy costumes and constantly-shedding white and magenta feather boas Karen unpacked from the back of her navy blue station wagon on the first night. Not true, but when you’re shy, it’s also hard to give rebuttals.

On the last night of Brownies—the night I quit something for the first time in my life—Melinda Barbour’s mother poured grape Kool-Aid into my clear plastic cup and splashed some of it onto a page of my only copy of *Peppermint*, a story about a scrawny white cat who overcomes her timidity by falling into a bucket of bluing and accidentally entering and winning a local cat show.

“Sorry, honey,” Mrs. Barbour said, handing me a paper napkin. “I’ll buy you another one.”
“You can’t,” I said coldly, rising from my seat. “It’s from 1968 and they don’t make it anymore. It’s my aunt’s book.”

Mrs. Barbour ignored my whispery voice and the headache-inducing squeals of my cohorts and guided me, one hand on the small of my back, to the crowded snack table. She knelt down eye-level with me then, her gold hoop earrings jangling against the side of her neck, and said, “It’s your turn to lead the prayer tonight. You sit at the head of the table, right here.”

She pulled out the chair for me, but all I took note of were the metal legs’ dragging sound and the complete silence that followed it. Brittany and Ashlee and Janelle and the other Ashley stared at me the hardest, but even the other girls ceased their mindless chatter to watch my eyes fill with tears and blankness. I didn’t know a prayer. Not even one. At Thanksgiving after we’d all filled our plates, Daddy used to jokingly say, “Good Lord, good food, let’s eat,” but something told me that wouldn’t fly in the United Methodist basement. If you sat at the corner table, reading, you were stuck up, but if you didn’t know a prayer, you were a heathen. Your parents hadn’t raised you right.

But I didn’t believe this for a second. My daddy taught me that dogs don’t belong tied up, and that’s as right as anything I figured the scriptures said. I fought crying and asked to use the off-white wall phone to call home. Mother picked me up without asking what happened—she still doesn’t know, to this day. Down Main Street, past Second, and down Poplar, I stared hard out the passenger’s side window. I was counting which houses looked nicer than ours.

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80 These were the days before amazon.com and E-bay, remember.
When my black-and-white cat Smudgy was struck by a car on Sunday, February 6th, 1994, I saw Daddy cry for the second time in my life. We mourned our buddy’s death together in the family room recliner, and after my eyes burned so badly I couldn’t cry any more, I went to the middle drawer in the dining room’s built-in cabinet area, pulled out a packet of Prang watercolors, and set off to making my memorial contribution. Came up with a large rainbow, several cumulus clouds outlined in purple, and a textual section that read: “Smudgy and Samantha, Best Friends. He is in Cat Heaven.”

I thought that after your pets died, they went to their own designated ward of the Christian heaven and waited patiently until you passed on, too. Your soul—which in my mind looked exactly like the old you despite claims that God gives you a “new” body—then ascended through the atmosphere on an escalator not unlike the one in JCPenney’s, and you picked up your canine, feline, avian, or reptilian friends as you went. Sort of like lay-away. One heck of a smooth operation, and no one I talked to contradicted it.

Church existed in our family the way it weaves into a lot of Midwesterners’ lives, I’m guessing. Go to service dressed in anything from a colorful skirt and hosiery to jeans and a nice sweater, pat older ladies on their upper arms, laugh at older men’s crass or outdated jokes featuring phrases like “young lady” or “colored boy,” play peek-a-boo with the little ones, grab a banana nut muffin and coffee from the back, and spend forty-five minutes listening to Pastor Phillips explain why it’s good to be good. This is not religion. It’s happy hour, substituting intense amounts of caffeine for booze. In my elementary school years, I

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81 First time was when we watched the original *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, right at the part where Spencer Tracy orders “boosenberry” syrup on his ice cream sundaes. As an old man, Tracy reminded us both of Grandpa Pamp.
figured God, Jesus, Santa Claus, Mr. Rogers, and the guy who invented Nickelodeon’s afternoon cartoon blocks had a meeting once a month to decide which ones of us still seemed empathetic enough and gracious enough and selfless enough to experience life behind the golden gates. I say “golden” and not “pearly” because to me, if you want to be so ostentatious as to have a gate made of valuables, gold’s your obvious pick. It’s what I pictured, anyhow, when I occasionally read the captions of my Children’s Illustrated Bible or eavesdropped on Mother’s and Mamaw’s conversations about the afterlife, usually initiated by tandem-cooking massive amounts of vegetable soup or potato salad or casserole and exhausting all other topics first. Black-haired Mary from down the street? She’ll get what’s coming to her sooner or later. To this day when I see Mary puttering about, I superimpose flames on whatever starchy pantsuit she’s wearing.
**Hush, Little Baby**

No mockingbirds or looking glasses, here. Just the distinct feeling in Mother’s gut that Natalie, the younger of the twins, our “sweet, emotional girl,” could find room for Jesus in her heart. Too late for me, what with my analytical nature and tendency to disbelieve anything I haven’t seen on the National Geographic Channel, but Natalie was more gullible back then. A Momma’s-girl who jumped rope and sang along with the radio and gave ribbon-dancing performances in front of the wood-burning stove in our living room every afternoon. She longed to live out anything fantastical.

Natalie used to have these horrific nightmares as a pre-K-ballerina-wannabe, and since we shared a room and I’m a perpetual light sleeper, I woke to her cries every time she stirred. I’d ask what the matter was and she’d blubber back, “Everything.”

Yes, she once was melodramatic, but I eventually learned that “everything” translated to “Samantha, I’m thinking about the planets and the universe and death again.” Duke and Shirley Robinson didn’t often hold back with respect to imparting upon their children knowledge of the world and its vast scope. We knew about rotation and revolution. We knew about birth, and we knew what dying meant. Heaven—in Mother’s eyes a far-off place of intense beauty in which our deceased beloveds spend their days checking up on us and doing whatever had made them happiest in life, be that fishing or farming or writing poetry—seemed the odd man out in their lessons. By nine years old I assumed the God-thing was

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82 Now, at twenty-two, she’s even more analytical than me. She’s an art history major and religion minor who loves cardio work-outs and musical men, eats healthily despite our family history of food obsessions, chooses her words carefully, and has developed a sense of patience that only those who meditate generally achieve.
probably a crock. Nathan’s Asperger’s syndrome kept him focused on MicroMachines and Sonic the Hedgehog. Natalie held conversion potential.

On a night in October too warm for sweats but too cool for the nightgown that bunched and tangled around my stick-skinny legs, I decided I’d ignore Natalie’s sobs. I sandwiched my head between both pillows and clenched my toes in frustration. Mother always counted to ten if irritated to the brink of shouting, so I tried that, too. I couldn’t press on my ears hard enough to block out the sound of Mother’s footfalls against our squeaky floorboards, though, so I let up completely, now straining to decipher the whispers.

“Don’t you worry,” Mother said (that part I know for sure, verbatim). The rest went something like, “Jesus’ll take care of you. He’s here with you all the time.” I stifled objection as she continued on, patting my sister’s shoulders while assuring her that God created space and time and earth and every person on it, our family included. Jesus, apparently, was like an invisible uncle. When Natalie calmed, Mother rose to check on me, but I faked deep sleep, too hesitant to accuse one of my own as a liar. Tall tales like Freeze-Off’s thick skin and Great-grandpa Stillwell’s assault against the bartender seemed fine because they were told to us with smiles. They rooted my past but had no hold on my future, and that I could handle.

Over Christmas just a year ago, Natalie and I discussed the nightmare nights and the Jesus promises.

“Did you believe all of it?” I asked her, lifting a mixed-berry pie from the top rack of the oven. “’Cause I never did. I couldn’t.”
She took a cautious sip of cider and drummed her fingernails against the bartop. “I just thought everything she said was true.” After a few beats, she added, “And it’s not like it isn’t a nice idea, you know? It’s a really nice idea.”

I shook my head right then, but right now, I must admit that remnants of those promises still live within me no matter how much I despise them. When Daddy travels alone from Indiana to Iowa or back again, I think, “Please let him stay safe.” When David applies for a new job or when I submit a short story to a magazine or when Nathan’s New York Rangers are poised to make it to the play-offs, I raise my eyes to the ceiling and whisper, “Come on.” The savior from “Old Rugged Cross” is never the recipient of my wishes, but I haven’t the foggiest idea who is.

It’s like when I had that string of nightmares as a child after watching The Neverending Story. Daddy thought I’d like it because of the huge flying dog, so he rented it from Pat’s Place since he had to stop at the adjacent Marathon station for gas, anyway (that’s the mentality with my parents; if you want something, you get it. It’ll make you happy. Life’s too short.). The film didn’t scare me at all as I watched it, but I woke that night sticky with sweat, convinced that the robotic, claw-footed creatures that break through the ice during the quasi-ballroom scene lay in wait for us downstairs. For months I’d have the same nightmare, and every time I had to cross the top of the stairwell to go to the bathroom upon waking, I’d scurry across the carpet so quickly that my houseshoes would spark blue with static. Back in my bed, I’d face the wall to my left, secure the sheets tight across my shoulders, back, and neck, and say to myself that no caring God, no God my family believed in, would let something that terrible happen to us when we’d done nothing wrong.

It’s strange to have mantras you never had faith in.
There used to be a Heinz Factory in Princeton, Indiana, but in 1925, a tornado turned it to dust. “Mammie told me,” Mamaw says in our interview in her apartment’s living room, “that the sky got real, real green. Poppy worked out there for Heinz ‘fore he got on at the oil wells, but he went home for lunch every day. They were eatin’ lunch when it happened. Fried potatoes and cornbread and soup beans.” She pronounces “potatoes” like “puh-tay-tuhs,” but I ignore how much I love that and ask her to elaborate. She clinks ice cubes in her squat tea glass and glances out the window before continuing. Leaves are upturned. It’s going to rain.

“Well, Poppy just picked up his Bible off the end table by the rockin’ chair and started readin’. Mammie asked him don’t you think we oughta head to the cellar at Mom’s, and he said no need. If it’s our time, it’s our time.”

I hate Destiny for stifling my great-grandfather’s well-honed intellect (he studied trigonometry in school and actually attended a semester of college before he and Mammie married), but as with puh-tay-tuhs, I brush that aside. “And it destroyed the whole plant?”

“Whole place was nothin’ but scraps on the ground. Carol Beech’s mom—we’re kin to Beeches, you know—she said she found a plank of factory wall stuck clear through the maple tree in their yard.”

This twister also carried Mammie’s mother’s cow, Betsy, miles from her stall in the barn, but after several days of limping sideways, she turned out all right. She couldn’t give milk anymore, but she lived.
That 1920s buildings in Princeton still stand at all baffles me, so a few months ago, I looked up the 1925 Twister on our town’s amateur-ish website. The “Welcome” page states:

Widely considered the most devastating and powerful tornado in American history, the Great Tri-State Tornado ripped through Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana on March 18, 1925. In its 219-mile-long wake it left four completely destroyed towns, six severely damaged ones, 15,000 destroyed homes, and 2,000 injured. Most significantly, 695 people were killed, a record for a single tornado. The Great Tri-State Tornado left a legacy that is evidenced by ghost towns, lost ancestors, and stories passed from generation to generation.
Nobody kin to us died that Wednesday afternoon. Six hundred ninety-five fatalities, and my extensive clan survived whole, just sitting in their sitting rooms taking refuge in the Lord and watching dark clouds billow by.

I remember a tornado in 1995 that fused our brightly-colored aluminum drinking glasses together, and permanently. Mammie’s mother had a gorgeous set of glasses colored scarlet, royal blue, emerald green, silver, and an almost liquid gold, and she passed them down to Mammie who passed them down to Mamaw who passed them down to us. They kept tea and lemonade ice cold without ice, so they got a lot of summer use.

When this particular tornado hit, we gathered in our dank, unfinished basement as was the drill, avoiding see-through camel crickets and spotted slugs that called the cool space
home.\textsuperscript{83} Daddy dragged kitchen stools down the uneven gray steps, and we three kids sat on those and ate chocolate Teddy Grahams out of the box, careful not to crunch too loudly when ABC-25 weatherman Wayne Hart’s voice broke in over our portable radio (ABC news comes in through WRY, which plays country music, so we suffered through Billy Ray Cyrus and Wynona Judd in the name of meteorological accuracy). Wayne used phrases like “out of the woods” and “under the gun” when he predicted various towns’ fates, and that night he asked that Owensvillians prepare for the worst. I kept the Teddy Grahams moving around the circle, but I remember staring up at the mason jars screwed into our basement’s ceiling. They held nails and nuts and bolts and things, and my biggest fear of the evening, for whatever reason, was that the storm would cave that ceiling in and break the glass on top of us. Going against my principles, I bargained with God, promising that if he spared our lives that night, I’d actually sit down and read the Bible. I’d give him a chance if he gave us one.

The tornado danced her disastrous ballet right down the length of Clark Street, not far from us, but our century-old, creaking two-story sat at the corner of Second and Poplar, and neither of those streets saw any damage to speak of save losing power for the night. With flashlights in hand, we crept upstairs to the kitchen when Wayne gave the all-clear. I don’t know about your family, but in ours, every single time the power shuts off from a storm, somebody’s suddenly deathly thirsty and has to open the fridge and let cold air seep out. On

\textsuperscript{83} When we first moved into the Owensville house in September 1988, we talked about refinishing the basement. In middle school more than a decade later, I even daydreamed about having my own room down there so friends and boys could come over (didn’t know at that time that I’d have fewer than five friends and no boyfriends, so you can’t fault me for hoping). We never made progress. The walls leaked when it rained, bugs got in and multiplied, the stairs sagged, the concrete walls collected grime, and a musty smell developed. I’ll bet the three of us went to school smelling like it but couldn’t tell. It’s like when you wear the same perfume for long enough. You stop noticing it entirely.
this night I was the parched culprit, so I quickly grabbed the tea pitcher from the top shelf, shut the door securely, and reached into the kitchen cabinet for one of those aluminum glasses. I liked the blue one and it was on the bottom. Stuck. I yanked as hard as I could but eventually enlisted Mother’s aid. Not even Daddy could pull them apart. “Must’a fused together,” Daddy said with a goofy sort of smile on his face. “From the air pressure, you know? Do you feel that?”

“Yeah,” I said back. And I did. Your breath felt heavier and the hairs on your arms stood up, ever so slightly electrified. I walked to the sink to pick another glass or cup, and I happened to glance out the kitchen window overlooking our backyard. A few fence planks had fallen to the wet grass, but Natalie’s pink-and-white swirled beach ball, big as a pumpkin but light as a pillow, still sat in its place in our red glider swing. I’d respected tornadoes before—even thought of them as elegant sisters carving out names for themselves in the Alley that was their home as much as ours. But this sure was somethin’. God? I hoped not and hoped so at the same time.

We’ve still got those glasses, by the way, stacked stuck together, and I’ve got dibs on them. They’re for my daughter, of course, should I happen to have one.
Mother’s late best friend DeeAnn Green, a devout Catholic, swore she’d been Cleopatra in a past life. Her husband Mike, superintendent of my former school system, took her to Egypt for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in the early ‘90s, and during their tour of some underground hieroglyphic display or other, he lost sight of DeeAnn. At Mike’s breathless pleas, their guide ordered via walkie-talkie that all tours halt until further notice. With fewer people milling about, he assured Mike, the chances of quickly finding DeeAnn improved. After an hour of searching the tunnels, Mike decided to return to his hotel and phone the police.

But DeeAnn, slightly sunburned on her exposed shoulders, met him just outside the entrance to the attraction. She fanned herself with a glossy brochure, dropped her reading glasses into her handbag, fussèd with her perm, and said, “What’s the hold up, huh? I’ve been readin’ the paper waitin’ for you.”

After a glass of water in the hotel suite, Mike learned this: DeeAnn knew the guide left out one particular hall of writings she’d hoped to see. Prior to this vacation, DeeAnn Green had never ventured outside the borders of the United States. The Greens subscribed to basic cable, meaning that National Geographic specials never made it to their living room. Nevertheless, DeeAnn successfully navigated the section of tunnels unmarked on the tourist map and successfully located an alternate route leading her back outside. Once there, she found an unoccupied outdoor table and waited until her husband finished what she called the “amateur tour.”
That’s the first I’d heard of reincarnation. I liked it.84

The following pieces of evidence, when viewed separately, in no way indicate that my sister might have been Amelia Earhart, but when viewed together in list format, we can’t help but wish:

*Exhibit A:* On September 11, 2001, no teacher in Natalie’s and Nathan’s sixth grade class received permission from the higher-ups to inform students about the Trade Towers or the Pentagon or the Pennsylvania field. No one turned on televisions. No one so much as hinted that national disaster had taken place or that, given the attacks, local concern rested with keeping our power plant and the skies above it under strict surveillance (it’s the third largest power plant of its kind in the world). Despite her instructors’ obedient adherence to earthworm dissection and plot summary of *The Giver*, Natalie felt, as she puts it, “uneasy.” She left most of her turkey sandwich at lunch. She reports difficulty breathing during various intervals throughout the day. “I had this feeling we’d have to go to the safe rooms,” she says, and on that afternoon when Mother and I prepared to relate the news, she said to us, “Something’s happened. Something big.”

For two weeks planes soared over our small towns, patrolling the skies because of worry over the power plant’s security, and we learned to predict when their engines would start to rumble based on Natalie’s behavior. She’d tense up. Tighten. Become terse in her

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84 I’m not saying I liked it enough to *buy* it, necessarily, but it did prompt my foray into Buddhism—a tradition for which, despite its myriad rituals and potential belief in gods, I have immense respect. Balance in all things. Reality as it really is, right now. That’s poetry. That’s human.
words. It was like having a dog that sleeps in the bathtub when a thunderstorm rolls in or having an outside cat that disappears hours before the earthquake.

Exhibit B: A few years back, a Russian plane crashed in a dense green Russian field, and Good Morning America displayed the wreckage once every half hour of their program. Perhaps this happened during a summer before my college classes at Transylvania resumed. Perhaps it took place over Spring Break. In any case, note that I watched the footage while my siblings were at school.

Three thirty came, the twins returned, and Natalie refused an after-school snack. Highly unusual. I followed her upstairs to our room and told her she looked pale. I offered to bring her a soft drink, but she declined, sitting on the edge of her bed and saying, “Did something happen today?”

I probably replied with a sarcastic “Lots of things, I’ll bet” or “Nope. World stops when you’re away,” but her eyes—the only brown eyes in the immediate family—narrowed in so grave a way that goosebumps dotted my forearms. “Like what kinda something?” I asked.

And I swear she said, “Like a plane crash.”

I’m a sucker for tests, so I turned this inquiry around. I told her to please describe to me what the plane crash she envisioned might look like, and without hesitation, she proceeded to give Diane Sawyer and crew a run for their money. Dark green foliage, considerable fog, mid-size aircraft, no survivors, accident the likely cause. She got it all. Even pinpointed the angle at which the crumpled plane appeared on-screen.
**Exhibit B ½:** In late spring or early summer 2009, I woke Natalie early by request. She bolted upright, bit her lower lip, and said while shaking her head, “I had this dream about Italian passengers on a plane in Florida, and they were on fire. Turn on the news.”

In the wee hours of that morning, well before any of us had woken, a Floridian plane bound for Brazil crashed outside Rio de Janeiro. Of the twenty-some fatalities, ten had been tourists of Italian descent.

**Exhibit C (the kicker):** During a late lunch of omelets and toast in July 2007, Natalie suggested TV. Slim pickings between twelve and one o’clock on Saturdays, I think, but I humored her, flipping past sundry cooking shows (in which I have no interest) and soap operas (for which I haven’t the stomach). When we landed on an *Unsolved Mysteries* special detailing the disappearance of and mystery surrounding Amelia Earhart (a piece of American history about which we admittedly knew little), Natalie held up a hand. I paused. Equally fascinated, we cut our omelets in triangular bites and chewed only at breaks in Robert Stack’s eerie narration. During the first set of commercials, Natalie confessed that Fred Noonan, Earhart’s trusted co-pilot, looked awfully familiar to her.

According to then-current research, some experts believed that Earhart and Noonan were low on fuel and landed on Nikumaroro Island out of necessity. Once there, they may have survived for a number of days before succumbing to disease or starvation. Other researchers have interviewed elderly natives of local atolls including Nikumaroro, convinced that Asian military forces captured Earhart and Noonan and killed them, execution style, after learning that they hailed from the U.S. (this was 1937, a year of very bad blood). Some
simply argue that after failing to properly navigate Howland Island, the intended pitstop, Earhart ran completely out of fuel and crashed in the Pacific.

With respect to the third opinion, I remember saying casually, “That would explain why they’ve never found remains of either one of them.”

Natalie poked at her eggs with a single fork tine and shook her head. “They didn’t die in the water,” she said to me. “I can tell you that for sure.”
You may have heard the story about how a bird lighting in your window means you’re being visited by a lost loved one. It’s something like that, anyway: the bird represents grandma, the bird’s an actual embodiment of grandma, the bird’s a heavenly messenger delivering grandma’s essence to your troubled home, maybe. I’m not even sure if the myth requires a possessed bird to enter the house proper or simply to plant itself on the window ledge and proceed to gawk at you despite a sincere round of shoo-shoo’s, but I do know that in our family, cardinals are the avian variety to keep your eye on.

I’d wager that cardinals take center stage in McKinney and Stillwell and Clem oral traditions because they’re Indiana’s state bird, but skepticism and species specifics aside for the moment. If my family members past or present upheld karmic notions of Buddhism in any capacity, I could get behind the bird thing. No problem. Great-aunt Wilma, bless her chain-smoking, pearls-wearing heart, passes quietly on a Sunday afternoon, next day a “redbird” pecks on the windowpane while you’re washing dishes, bam! Spiritual experience, no effort on your part. I like that fine. I just don’t see how a superstition of this nature finds a niche in hard-nosed Nazarene or slightly less suffocating Methodist theology. Chew on a banana nut muffin and mull that over.

Our ancient black wood-burning stove in the Owensville house ranks more important still in my analysis of the ghost-bird matter. That square-ish stove boasted a flue curved like a brontosaurus’ neck and sat elevated from the carpet atop decorative brickwork that our home’s former owners had painstakingly installed, but we never burned wood in it. In the
nineteen years I lived there, we never so much as attempted to operate it. It housed dead birds instead.

Birds don’t always make the best judgment calls, I’ve learned, and when they flutter and coo too closely to a chimney’s rim and slide flapping and clanging down a stove’s flue, they can’t fly back out. We’ve had sparrows, swallows, robins, even puffy-chested pigeons get stuck, and the best we could do—thanks to a mother who refused any Wild-Kingdom-esque antics in her house—was watch them die slowly through the cross-hatched wire ovals on the stove’s doors.

I wondered if those birds counted. If the ovals in the doors counted as windows.

I distinctly remember an afternoon solely dedicated to cleaning out the stove. Mother and the twins, too scared to participate in the removal process, went to Princeton to shop, and with Daddy at work, that left me and Mamaw. Looking rail thin and athletic as always, Mamaw assumed a squatting position in front of the stove and tore several sheets of Bounty from a new roll. She folded them one over the other so they’d act as a glove, and when she felt confident in her handiwork, she beckoned me closer. I’d been standing in the doorway between the dining room and living room, balancing our powder blue wastecan against my legs, fixating on my grandmother’s salt-and-pepper perm to avoid catching a glimpse of anything else. But I did help, and I did eventually see. I held the wastecan while she lifted bodies—some intact and feathered, some beakless or footless, some nothing but bones. I knew no one but me would wonder who the birds came back as.
“God made the wild animals according to their kinds”

*Open Burial, 1997*

Film stars die with their eyes closed, poised, but rabbits die wide-eyed. This rabbit looked like it had already been stuffed by the world’s hastiest taxidermist besides: ears splayed like soft scissors, sprawled legs, open mouth stained bright red, and so stiff.

It was my job to toss the departed over the fence at the Owensville house (it’s empty property back there, closed off and rife with weeds and clumped vines, so things can decay naturally, undisturbed, as they should). Actually, I volunteered for the position. When Daddy was little he got a duckling for Easter—dyed some pastel color, I think—and he broke its neck trying to yank it through Grandma McKinney’s screen door. He was four, but this still bothers him. And in a way I didn’t mind doing the dirty work. Using the metal palm of a shovel to heft something so incredibly light. This rabbit was no pet. I didn’t check for gender. There was a hole under our backyard fence’s gate, splintery and small, so the creature must’ve popped under, already injured, searching for a haven with solid walls. These things happen.

It went like this, in late heat and low sun: Daddy and I stashed my cat Licorice in the porch, swung Grandpa Pamp’s old shovel down from its nail in the garage, found a blue and white Hammermill copy paper box, cornered the panting baby, and tried to scoop it or spook it into jumping into the cardboard shelter we’d scrounged. We suspected a coyote pup or feral cat had, in its inexperience, simply failed to make the kill, but bite marks are bite marks. We didn’t analyze too much. We barely breathed. The thin thing dragged a purple back leg the whole time, darting left, backtracking, and its chest grew and shrunk like an indecisive
balloon. Shovels aren’t even good coaxers, I thought, watching Daddy scramble heavy-footed to cut the escape angles. I held the box with both hands and almost hoped we couldn’t catch this dying bunny.

Because what then? You can’t stab blunt breathing holes in the top of a box lid and hold it steady on your lap for thirty-five miles in the car. You could, but our animal shelter doesn’t deal outside “domestics.” Raccoons equal rabies. Skunks can’t be more than their smells. Squirrels and lizards are for target practice. The year before, on the little kids’ playground, I’d seen a boy who couldn’t even shave yet launch a glue-colored toad against the brick wall of the school, right outside the gym entrance. This became a trend. If you wanted to play kickball, you stepped over bodies.

My stomach lurched when the rabbit collided with the edge of the box, right at its ribs. As it scrabbled about, scraping cardboard with claws, I noticed my hair was soaked through. Daddy’s orange Astros cap dripped sweat, too. We squinted hard at this rabbit thinking What the hell now?, but it saved us a decision in one rattling, coarse breath.

I’d never seen Daddy kneel like that. He doesn’t work on cars or do plumbing. He and I don’t pray. I asked him if he thought the little guy had been sick, and he shook his head no.

I carried the Hammermill box to the back fence and hoisted the baby over. Thud and rustle. No parting words.

We couldn’t reuse that box for anything because of the bloodstains, so I took it to the trashcans at the end of our gravel drive, and I couldn’t tell the difference in the before and the after of it. A dead rabbit in a box is weightless.
I fought the urge to use gloves and just picked up the trap by its edges, noting the new bloated weight, making sure the mouse’s bleeding eyes faced down even inside the box inside the trashbag. These tasks still, invariably, fall to me. I am the family undertaker.

Our triangular glue traps between the fridge and the wall held one cockroach and three spiders in miserable suspension and starved them, but the snap-trap answered our pleas. For five days we’d washed our hands twice before every meal, kept our feet on the furniture watching TV, and soaked all our dishes in scalding hot water in case the intruder had scurried across them, but we returned to routine in a matter of hours.

It’s crazy, but that night I flipped over to the Discovery Channel and watched a special on hordes. The producers banked on locusts as their show stoppers, concluding the program with a distanced shot of hundreds of millions of east African locusts clicking and humming, colliding with Maasai Mara park patrollers’ heads, blanketing grass meant for Thomson’s gazelles, and leaving land bare as they traveled. But the rodents hooked me. One Australian farmer, a stocky guy in a khaki number and hat, stood beneath a new moon and shone a flashlight along the edge of his pole barn to get the mice running in a wave of synchronized feet and coarse fur. He said poison worked fine but that he wished he had somewhere to dump all the bodies.

I couldn’t sleep that night because I was trying to figure how to make clear and concise the similarities between pests and people. A manifesto. Some get condolences, others sweet toxins, but we cringe from the emptiness on all their faces. I decided our world
is sick, and then I counted how many spiders and flies I’d drowned in blobs of liquid hand soap or squirted with Windex in my lifetime.
Operation Santa Claus

But then you’ve got more warm and fuzzy stuff, like when the average amount you were allowed to spend on an individual child in Operation Santa Claus was fifteen dollars, but your assigned kid had his eye on a Lego pirate ship set that cost $24.99 on sale at K-Mart and you splurged. David did.

My fiance was seventeen at the time, and he signed up for Operation Santa Claus through his church, a nondenominational but heavily Baptist-influenced congregation that resembled the Methodist churches I’d gone to as a child: potluck-style breakfasts, chili suppers, holiday pageants starring the Bible school class that met in the basement every Sunday morning to draw pictures of Jesus draping loving arms around kids of all ethnicities and to build Noah’s Ark and the whole damned menagerie from Popsicle sticks. As Hitchens-Dawkins-esque as he is now, David considered himself a strong believer in Christ before college, and he even wrote and delivered sermons to his church’s youth group on a regular basis as a teenager. The process he underwent to release himself from the constriction of religion was much more difficult than my gradual break with my mother’s more generic faith, and I won’t detail that here, but I will note that his beliefs never directed him toward fanaticism or conversion mentality. He valued compassion, understanding, empathy, charity, good will, and justice—he and I still value those things—and that deep motivation drew him to preaching and to community service and to Operation Santa Claus.

Right after Thanksgiving, David and his fellow Santas assembled in the church basement at long tables and sifted through a printed list of Ashland’s neediest families. The pastor assigned a single child to each Santa participating, and in addition, he provided
volunteers with a paragraph explaining what sorts of toys the children liked best: Barbies, stuffed animals, puzzles, coloring books, jump ropes, racecars, dinosaurs, paints. “Go out and make this the best Christmas these folks have ever had!” the pastor cheered. “They’ll never forget what you do for them.”

What David did was buy a Lego pirate set on sale at K-Mart for $24.99 and wrap that colorful box with bright green reindeer paper. On Christmas Eve he and his younger brother piled into the family Malibu and watched as their father dodged patches of ice on the drive to the Irving family’s trailer and their mother bit her fingernails to the quick the whole way. They’d all three bought gifts, too—David’s brother and parents—because the Irvings had four children, all boys ages three to ten, and the pastor liked to connect families to other families. Lego set for the ten-year-old, an animal-themed dominoes game for the eight-year-old, racetrack and two cars for the five-year-old, and a stuffed monkey for the toddler whose eyes grew exponentially when four of Santa’s commonplace helpers entered his home, wiping their snow-slushed boots on the paper-thin welcome mat.

One shepherd mix and two smaller dogs gathered at David’s and his clan’s feet in the cramped entryway, which smelled strongly of vinegar and a dried-out Glad Plug-In, and Mrs. Irving, dressed in thick purple sweatpants with elastic around the ankles, a plain gold top, and red socks, extended one slender hand to greet them individually. “‘Scuse my husband,” she began, tugging at the shepherd’s collar. “He’s still in bed. Came down with somethin’ day before yesterday. Probably the boys brought some bug home with ‘em from school, I’ll bet, but they’re fine. We’re so glad you come.”

David remembers the sheen on this woman’s large glasses as she grinned at him and his brother, but he more acutely remembers the face of the boy whose present he’d hand-
wrapped the previous night. I’ll call the child Taylor, and I’ll tell you that after Mrs. Irving led the Adamses into the longer-than-wide living room where a two-foot Christmas tree stood unlit and a thin gray cat chewed its hipbone on a floral-print sofa handed down from the mid ‘70s, Taylor grabbed the shirt collars of his smaller siblings and reigned them in close. He stared at David when everyone sat down—the Adamses on the sofa next to thin, gray, oblivious Annabelle, the Irvings packed in tight on a checkered loveseat, Mrs. Irving propped on its arm. The lighting in this space actually seemed to darken features. The longer you looked at a face or a patch of carpeting or a grimy wall outlet, the blurrier it became, which made you have to blink and then squint to secure a new focus.

“How long you known Pastor Jacobs?” Mrs. Irving asked, her voice suddenly tinny and shrill.

David’s mother Kathy piped up, always (and thank goodness) willing to break the ice. “Since he first started preaching here. Three years ago now, I think,” she added, looking to Jim for approval and getting a quiet smile and nod.

“Us too, us too. My husband knew him when he preached at United Methodist downtown, and he liked him then.”

“Oh, we like him real well.”

“Us too.”

“When we get our presents?” the toddler blurted. In a pair of puffy-bottomed overalls, he looked like a member of the Lollipop Guild or one of Wonka’s staff. Urgency punctuated his syllables.

“Shush up, you,” said Mrs. Irving. “Don’t you think we oughta have cookies and milk first? Just like Santy Claus would?”
And so came a shift in baby Irving’s mood, along with an aluminum pie plate filled to the brim with oatmeal raisin and peanut butter cookies. There wasn’t enough milk in the fridge for everyone to have a glass, so the adults drank black coffee and David drank water and Mrs. Irving explained, with relative success, that sometimes Santa’s helpers got hankerings for non-dairy.

Right before the kids were allowed to tear into their gifts, Mrs. Irving asked that they pray. Each person in the room clasped the hands nearest them, closed their eyes, and bowed their heads in reverence to the Lord who kept them low on grocery money but rich in faith. All except for David and Taylor. Instead of silently echoing Mrs. Irving’s sincere invocation, David pressed his lips together in a tight smile while Taylor swung a string of his pajama pants around and around until it cocooned his index finger and he had to start over, but in the opposite direction. Amen.

Watching strangers open presents in dim lighting, David tells me, is a phenomenon all its own. Nobody took pictures; a clunky looking Minolta sat on the living room end table next to a framed family photo and a pincushion and a mug with brown stains on its rim and handle, but Mrs. Irving never bothered to leave the loveseat arm to fetch it. She occasionally flicked at one of the dogs with the back of her hand, shooing it away from the shredded wrapping paper, but otherwise, she kept her ankles crossed, her fingers laced, and her eyes on her little ones as they squealed and shrieked. The youngest pronounced his new “monkey” as “muhn-tee” and dragged the creature by one arm across the length of the living room, through the kitchen, into the small back bedroom where Mr. Irving slept, and back again.

“I think he likes it pretty well,” Kathy said.

Mrs. Irving replied, “God bless you, ma’am.”
When the Adamses rose to depart a half-hour later, after having held and made approving comments about every toy train the baby and five-year-old owned, all four children clumped together in a tight circle again, Taylor wrangling them by their shirts. His eyes narrowed on David, and in a whisper softer than Annabelle’s incessant purring, he said, “I knew I been good this year. I asked Jesus how come not all good kids gets presents on Christmas, and he never answered me, so I knew there wasn’t no reason for it.” Those narrow eyes now twinkled as though he’d shared a secret no other living soul had ever thought to pursue. “Thanks a whole lot. I’ll play with this every day.”

David believes Taylor probably did play with the Lego pirate set every day until he realized he like girls and cars just as well or better. He’d be eighteen now. Who knows where.

When I think of church, I think of ticks and spilled Kool-Aid and Cat Heaven, and when my fiance thinks of church, he can, at least sometimes, think of muted, fair-skinned faces beaming wide at the sounds of milk pouring and reindeer paper peeling away.
Social Work

And then there are those who believe God calls them to and forgives them from the unspeakable, and they align themselves with the Irvings. The Santas and bake-sale chairpersons. That’s no system for me. That’s no kind of common good.

I never knew that Daddy and a co-worker killed a man until this past summer when the subject came up. Daddy didn’t actually kill him—he doesn’t have the stomach for that, in my opinion, even though he loves war history and blood-and-guts movies on the Chiller channel—but he stood right there and watched as his cop friend, a young deputy, extinguished another man’s life.

When Daddy worked for the IWD finding people gainful employment in our sorry-ass county, he sometimes accompanied on-call social workers to locations where clients weren’t making the best go of things. Maybe a Mr. Sullivan had applied for a job at the coal mine but failed to get clean—somebody found needles in a baggie in his locker and ratted him out, so counselors dropped by his apartment to set him straight. Maybe a teenage mom made it to the salad prep station in Ponderosa Steakhouse’s kitchen but forgot that having a job means finding a babysitter. Can’t leave little Johnny alone in his playpen, remember, they’d say.

The man they eventually killed hadn’t shown up to a single day’s work, and a neighbor had phoned the police station a week prior to their unannounced visit, claiming she’d seen the man choking his wife, pressing his forearm against her throat until her cheeks
turned blue. IWD sent Daddy, a social worker I’ll call Maureen, and one Princeton police officer to the man’s house to investigate the problem.

Outside: dead grass, several Playskool tricycles and four-wheeled contraptions collecting filth from the weather, a chain-link fence clumped with leaves, an empty gray dog house and water bowl, and a crumbling sidewalk leading the way to a sagging front porch whose steps were lined with frayed AstroTurf. Inside: T-shirts and sweatshirts and jeans littering the floors, cardboard boxes upside down for coffee tables, mice scurrying into cracks in the walls, dishes caked with cheese and sauce and stacked helter-skelter in and around the sink, a matted black terrier growling low in the corner and chained to a rattling radiator, and an enormous refrigerator stained brown and yellow and pulled out a little too far from the wall. The man stayed seated when his guests entered, a worn-out Bible open on his lap.

Maureen knew the guy who owned the house and choked his wife—she’d worked with him for months—so she stepped over a mound of clothing in the entryway, put her hands on her hips like a doting mother hen, and said, “What’s goin’ on, man? Your supervisor called me. Said you haven’t clocked in yet this week.”

“Nope.”

Daddy can’t tolerate disrespect, especially toward women, so I imagine at this point he had to take a deep breath and convince himself not to belt this slob in the mouth.

“Where’s Sadie?” he asked.

“School,” the man answered, rolling a cigarette with notably steady hands.

“Today’s Saturday, pal,” Daddy replied, and he motioned for the officer to come closer to the entrance of the house. “No school in session unless you’re Japanese, and you ain’t.”
The officer jumped in with a flash of his badge and a stern, “Deputy Camden, sir. Where’s your daughter this morning?”

That terrier kept on growling, and pretty soon Daddy and the others realized the hostility wasn’t directed toward them, but toward the off-kilter refrigerator. Camden asked the man to move the fridge out so they could see what was back there, and when he refused, Camden removed his gun from its holster and gave Daddy and Maureen explicit permission to move the appliance themselves. It screeched against the tile flooring, and the terrier charged them as far as he could before his chain pulled taut and the radiator whined.

Behind that mammoth fridge was a large wire cage, and inside that cage sat five-year-old Sadie, hair unkempt, barefoot, badly bruised, and naked from the waist down. Her eyes roamed wild when Maureen dragged her rusting shelter into the light, but she couldn’t focus on any one person in particular. On the back of the refrigerator unit, the words “Forgive me Father” were scrawled in permanent marker.

Daddy swallowed down vomit, he says, and erupted, “What the fuck are you doin’, you son-of-a-bitch? What the fuck are you doin’ to this little girl?”

The man inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and replied, “Same thing I’m gonna do to her tonight and tomorrow night and every night after that.”

Deputy Camden pulled the trigger without hesitation. One bullet driven cleanly through the skull and through the upholstery of the disgusting recliner he lounged in. Everyone agreed there’d been provocation. Just cause. Daddy opened the cage door with his bare hands while Maureen untied the dog and Camden filed an initial report over his walkie-talkie. Sadie wasn’t underweight. She didn’t cry when Daddy lifted her into his arms and called back to Maureen, “There is no God.”
Part Six: Classic
Sisters

We’re not the sisters who French-braided one another’s hair at the foot of the bed or pinched cotton balls between our toes to let Razzle-Dazzle Rose polish dry or giggled in front of the hall mirror trying on skirts with slits up the sides. We’re not the sisters who played much Barbie, either, nor did we find any allure in jewelry, eye liner, or talking to your best friend while lying on your back on the floor, feet raised and propped against a doorframe, twirling the old-fashioned cord around and around your delicate index finger. What best friend, really, was the question. We had each other. Sure, I was three-and-some years older, but it only felt like it in so far as I could reach into higher kitchen cabinets, could answer phone calls if Mother was out at Wal-Mart or Joe’s Red & White, would get my period sooner, would probably get married first. I suppose I manipulated her like an underling sometimes, easily convincing her through flattery to trade stuffed animals with me if it turned out I preferred the one she purchased once we got home and kicked off our shoes and examined our new, button-eyed treasures. But we talked about outer space together and about what it meant to die, really. When we baked homemade brownies from scratch, we defaulted to the recipe she got from her third grade teacher, not to guidelines I cooked up. If we jumped on the beds when no parents were around, I trusted her not to spill the beans. Fully believed she’d have my back. I never thought of my kid sister as a kid at all. We were both, in our minds, miniaturized adults play-acting as pharmacists and pageant models and stay-at-home-moms and kindergarten teachers until it was time to enter the big world proper.

I don’t think of Natalie like I think of any of the other women in the family, frankly. She’s not anxious and ticky in the same ways we are. As a small child she worried
constantly—remember those nights when Jesus came to the rescue?—but she cried the fears out rather than bottling for so long she’d need intense therapy when the going got roughest. She’s never given a shit about saving money—as kids we had these matching toy bank vaults complete with coin sorters and a tray for cash, and Natalie’s would run dry three times quicker than mine or Nathan’s. She wanted things—glitter-studded jelly shoes, purples dresses, hoola-hoops, jump ropes, Polly Pockets, Pet Shops, Furbies, inflatable swimming pools—and she never saw any point to sitting on your funds for so long you forgot about them. Maybe most striking, though, is that she doesn’t mother-hen you with gems like “That string hanging off your pajama pants is too close to the electrical outlet!” or “If you jump from that porch step you’ll twist your ankle” or “Keep that away from your face, for God’s sake. You’ll cut yourself and scar.” If two people are throwing a football in the house, I’ll count all the ways they could injure themselves or all the valuables they could shatter, including the cost of doctor’s visit or item replacement. If a baby’s crawling along the carpet in the direction of a coffee table, I’ll alert someone to snatch it before it pokes its eye out on the corner. I fret when people take buses across town if they’ve never taken that bus before—what if they miss their stop? Not Natalie. Once, when she was around nine years old, she responded to a complaint of our mother’s with, “The way life is is the way life is.” That’s my pal for you.

We like to imagine that we’re really the same person—I’m the cautious half and she’s the joy-seeking half, and when you fuse those sides together in a futuristic medical lab complete with sizzling beakers of carbonated purple ooze and cackling mad scientists

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85 When we had to move out of the house in December 2007, we found all three banks and remembered their combinations without consulting the cheat-stickers on the backs. Nathan and I had a combined twenty-plus dollars in change sitting inside, and Natalie’s was as empty as a tomb.
wearing disheveled white coats, you get the single woman we were supposed to have been.
Our compilation’s got long dark hair, shifty hazel eyes, fair skin, piano-playing hands, legs
that don’t like much more than moderate exercise, the kind of crooked teeth unsuitable for
braces but noticeably slanted, a soft but slim figure, an oval face, a smirk most always, a
jaunty sense of humor (i.e.—she’s a girl, but she’ll watch Monty Python’s *Quest for the Holy
Grail* any chance she gets). We think this girl would’ve better handled Owensville
Community School since she could’ve carefully avoided bullies but sassed them straight to
hell if needs be. We know this girl would’ve had more boyfriends at Gibson Southern since
she wouldn’t have used her glasses and thick bangs and sad scowls as hiding places, nor
would she have been crippled by a nature so casual she’d have let cute Justins or Connors or
Logans pass her by. She’s got the gumption to challenge a room full of mission volunteers
*and* the insight to see that when those same zealots build a one-storey home for a single
mother in Guatemala whose modest floral-print dress tells you she’s as dignified as she is
determined, they’re mostly helping. She is no extreme dreamer. She takes no medication.
She’s mindful in Buddha’s way.

At age four Natalie tried to make a play-dress for herself out of the violet-colored cellophane
Karen Flynn gave to Mother for free after one of my Brownie troupe-meets. Equipped with
the scissors Mother always used to trim our hair over newspapers in the kitchen, my sister
dragged her supplies to the upstairs bathroom and commenced cutting, and what she ended
up with after thirty minutes was one side of “material” large enough to fit our biggest baby
doll at best. Problem was she’d wasted fifty percent of the cellophane available, and in the
frustration only a fashion designer in training can feel, she started to blubber. Nathan and I,
busy drawing the likenesses of animals from Audubon Society Field Guides we got from Barnes & Noble in Evansville, tried to ignore the wailing, but human ears can only handle so much.

By the time I popped open the bathroom door and peered inside, nothing remained of the failed project. Shreds of purple the size of confetti squares dotted the white tile flooring, and Natalie sat with her back against the wicker-doored sink, her eyes puffy, chest heaving, heart broken.

“This is a mess,” I said to her, wondering if Mother would make me help clean it up like she did when we cut our only Barbies’ hair shoulder-length and forgot to put down the ever-important newspaper layers.

“Shut up,” Natalie whispered.

“I’m not being mean, I’m just telling you. Where’s the dress?”

“Gone.”

“You tore it up?”

“It was ugly.”

“Fine. Whadda you wanna do with all this now?” At her long pause punctuated by sobs, I suggested, “What if we threw it all away before Mother even sees it?”

Through a thick coating of tears, her enormous eyes smiled, so we set off to collecting all her scraps. An entire trash can’s worth, when all was said and done, but it didn’t take as long as you’d think. Not with the way we work, agreeing on whose tasks are whose without so much as a word exchanged.
Fast-forward five years and we’re sitting motionless as dummies in the brown Oldsmobile, both of us on the verge of tears because the car’s died in the middle of merging onto Highway-41 and Daddy’s outside hunkered over the open hood poking around at parts he can’t even name. Just an hour earlier we’d been shopping for Tomagotchi Oceans—digital pets of the marine variety whose mouths you fed and feces you shoveled with the push of a button—at the Wal-Mart in Vincennes, forty-some miles north of home. Princeton’s Wal-Mart wasn’t carrying the ocean kind, and Daddy, unable to see his daughters depressed, said, “Hop in the car and we’ll get you some of those Tomagoochies. On the way you can tell me what they are.”

We grab the Oceans, a white and pink one for Natalie and a turquoise and purple one for me, and clamber into the cold car some fifteen minutes later, and as Daddy’s gunning it to snag a spot between a Toyota Corolla and a rickety horse trailer, we hear massive sputtering. The floorboard jiggles. The engine cuts to silence.

“Nobody behind us,” Daddy says right off the bat, unbuckling his seatbelt and fumbling for a flashlight in the glove compartment (and believe you me, we’ve never kept one there). “Don’t panic.”

We watch our father zip up his two-decade-old, baby blue Princeton baseball jacket, slam the driver’s side door, look behind himself a couple of times to make sure no other motorists are on the move, and lift the Oldsmobile’s hood with a creak. It’s pitch black out. One of those nights when all that’s there to mark your path are the orange glows of streetlamps and the bright white ones of gas stations and car dealerships. For a minute I pretend I’m alone and will have to start walking and begging people for just enough money to use a pay-phone at the Sunoco. Maybe some extra for a doughnut, too, if they’ve got
chocolate-covered. I can feel the scrape of my tennis shoes against icy-wet pavement. That feeling creeps over my shoulders—the one you get when you’ve just woken up from a nightmare that stars you running from the bad guys, but you’re slower than hell and they get their hands on you no matter what—so blink back my daydream and turn around to face Natalie. She’s in the backseat as always, and she’s got our new toys clutched like they’re precious gemstones. Half her face is obscured by shadows, but the other half is bathed in the light of the Guest Inn parking lot just to the right of the exit ramp we’re stuck on.

“I don’t think anybody else at school has these yet,” I say, ignoring the fact that I hear no tinkering from under the hood and know that I ought to. “What’re you gonna name yours?”

Natalie shifts in her seat and dabs beneath her eyes with a gloved hand. “I don’t care.”

“Since when? You always want to name everything.”

After a few beats she asks, “How’re we gonna get home?”

“Daddy’ll fix it. Don’t worry.”

“But he doesn’t know how to fix it. Remember? He says Grandpa Dave used to tell him, ‘Duke, get away from that wheelbarrow—’”

“‘You don’t know nothin’ ‘bout machinery!’”

We giggle to the point that we’re shaking the car, and the next thing we know Daddy’s back inside. We sober up and ask at the same time, “So?”

“So let’s try her again. She’ll either move or she won’t.”

That engine starts purring like it never shut off, and we make it all the way back to Owensville as if we’re riding in a brand new Mercedes. We wrap our coats tightly around us
as we run from the well-lit garage down the sidewalk and into the darkened back porch. We show Mother and Nathan our purchases but agree to remove them from their plastic cases in the morning. Later, in the bedroom we share, Natalie whispers, “What do you think of ‘Jasmine?’”

“That’s good. How about ‘Sasha’ for mine?”

“Cool.”

“Hey, Natalie?”

“Yeah?”

“You know he didn’t fix it, right? You know we just got lucky.”

I hear her shift under the covers and flip her long hair out from under her. “I saw the look on your face. I’m not stupid.”

“Oh, I know you’re not. Good night.”

I got my period at thirteen during the episode of *Mama’s Family* where Vicki Lawrence’s daughter-in-law gets amnesia. This was the day right before Daddy had his gallbladder removed and Mamaw came over to make us ham sandwiches and potato salad because Mother would be with him all day at the hospital. I didn’t eat as much as usual and declined to play cards with everybody; after three rounds of Go Fish!, Natalie took my hand, led me to the bottom of the stairwell, and said, “That thing happened to you, didn’t it.”

“How did you know?”

But what a ridiculous question. Of course she knew. She knew which Backstreet Boys and which student-teachers I had crushes on and which folders or flip-flops or low-rise jeans I’d want when school started in August. She knew the difference between me refusing
a piece of blueberry pie because I wasn’t hungry and me refusing a piece because I craved
the small sense of martyrdom achieved by sacrificing my own appetite for others. She could
sniff out my lies in seconds, and I’m the best in the business.

When she got her period at eleven during an AMC airing of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, I warned her in time not to look at the part where Bette Davis’ character kicks her paralyzed sister down the stairs, and afterwards, I microwaved a plate of Papa John’s pizza for us and let her have all the garlic butter left in the fridge.

There are no existing transcripts for the many times my sister tried to break me of the Nose Drop habit, but once, when I was sixteen and she was thirteen, she took the spray bottle of Afrin from underneath my pillow and threw it in the trashcan in the upstairs bathroom. I saw it lying in there, partially obscured by unused tissues she’d balled up as cover, so I dug it out and confronted her in our parents’ yellow-carpeted bedroom, shaking the bottle inches from her face. “You have no right,” I said. “I’m the oldest, and you can’t tell me what to do. I can’t breathe at night, and that’s my business. *Mine.*”

She didn’t budge. “I don’t want you using them anymore. Remember the story Mother told us about when she used these every night when she was younger and they gave her those nosebleeds?”

“Well like mother like daughter then! She’s got no room to talk.”

“It could *kill* you.”

“And what if I don’t *care*?”

That’s when she shoved me to the floor so hard my spine rang in my ears, and she wrestled the bottle from my grip to the point that her nails left crescent-moon prints in my
fingers and palm. I propped myself up on my elbows to face her, and by that time she was standing. No remorse settled in her eyes like it used to when she’d play with one of my animal figurines or dolls while I was at school and then feel guilty about it and confess. “Somebody’s gotta tell you what’s real,” she said.

I went for nine months without the stuff. My longest stretch of sobriety until I asked her, two years later, to help me quit for good.

I bought a $600 wedding gown on sale for $99 this past November—floor-length and pure white with crystal beading in vertical lines down the bodice—and if Natalie hadn’t liked it, I wouldn’t have made the purchase. I tried on three dresses total, and each one she zipped for me. “Turn to the side,” she’d say. “Now try walking in it. You’ll be walking a lot at the reception. And don’t forget to sit down while we’re here. You’ll be sitting in the car on the way to the mayor’s office, then from there to the reception, and then again from there to your hotel.”

The fitting room was the size of my parents’ apartment and filled with plush wooden-legged chairs of various pastel hues, and I paced its length several times in each gown, memorizing my profile in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors, checking to make sure no skin got pinched by material, wondering what kind of shoes I’d buy because David’s only a fourth of an inch taller than me.

“I like the third one,” Natalie announced. “I’ll bring the boy in and see what he thinks.”

It’s one of only three times I’ve ever seen David get a little teary, but if I’m being honest with myself, I didn’t choose the beaded-bodice because his lower lip quivered when
he pulled back the fitting room curtain and took both my hands in his. I put the dent in my
Discover Card because my sister stood next to me at first serious as a nun, then assumed the
voice of Randy from TLC’s *Say Yes to the Dress* and said with a grin, “This one’s got the
Wow Factor.”

About six or seven years ago, Natalie and I started calling certain things “classic”—watching
the pilot episode of *The Wonder Years* while eating a cooked meal of baked pork and mashed
potatoes and corn and cabbage in the living room, no placemats; waking bleary-eyed to an
earthquake at two o’clock in the morning, just three hours before you’re supposed to get
ready for your first college campus visit, and saying, “No way this is a train!”; singing a
Kelly Clarkson song stuck in your head since yesterday—the only way to unstick it is to hear
it out loud—and getting caught by the pest control guy as he checks out your basement for
termites; your car battery dying the day you’ve got a job interview. Small things, life-
changing things, so-called blessings, and tragedies can all be “classic.” The term merely
refers to a specific event, situation, or behavior that, in all its shining moments and
imperfections, either epitomizes or pleasantly contradicts the essence of your relationship
with that time, place, person, or group.

If that’s still unclear, check this out: your Great-uncle Ted has a bad back, and every
so often, your Great-aunt Lois calls your mother to tell her how Ted’s doing. Lortabs twice a
day. Appointment with that neurosurgeon Fitzpatrick on Monday at nine. Can’t sleep a
wink in the bed even though it’s one of those Sleep-Numbers Lindsay Wagner loves so
much, so he tries the recliner most nights. And then Thanksgiving rolls around, and Ted shows up wearing something bulky under his baby-blue-striped polo shirt that always smells faintly of cigarette smoke. “Got me a back brace,” he says proudly, puffing out his chest and then raising his arms high and dancing a short jig on the kitchen linoleum to prove he’s not feeling down. That’s “classic” because (a.) Great-Uncle Ted’s shirt always smells of tobacco, and today is no different (b.) Great-Aunt Lois is standing next to him, nodding to the rest of the family as if to say, “We’ve finally figured this out,” and she’s a sucker for relaying news (c.) never before has Ted worn a back brace to the holiday gathering, so maybe this time he’ll stay longer, have an extra piece of walnut pie to satisfy his sweet tooth, tell you the story of how he and Lois met in a bar, of all places, or help decorate the Christmas tree after the dishes are done. Will he hang the hand-sewn mailbox ornaments from family-friend Frances, or will it be the puzzle-piece-picture-frame beauty you glued together in first grade? Which one of you will he nudge elbows with the most when he teases your mother? The possibilities are endless, and that makes for memories.

Memories—the act of remembering, too—sustain my sister and me. I don’t know if it’s because we were robbed of a grandmother whose face I share and whose name Natalie carries sandwiched between first and last, if it’s because we still fear the infinity of the universe and need something solid for comfort, if it’s a gift to potential progeny, or if it’s another impulse entirely. We’ve started keeping daily journals just like Mamaw’s done for decades, and we include everything from the titles of the books we ordered for Spring 86 Those kinds of commercials are the greatest—Sleep-Number Beds, the Scooter Store Power Chairs, Liberty Medical’s Diabetes Testing Supply Kit, Life Alert, that Ped-Egg thing designed to scrape the calluses off your heels. The voice-overs haven’t changed since the ‘80s, and the quality of the video is just poor enough to look cheaply-rendered. No HD resolution for these people, and I respect that. You don’t need to see every fiber of Lindsay Wagner’s sweater to understand that sleepless nights call for action. I wish they sold this stuff on DVD.
semester to the composition of the midday Christmas meal to the number of ladybugs we set free when they hatched in the upstairs bathroom window.

Important for initiating world peace? Hardly. But it’s what we have. We have a constant movie reel of playing Restaurant with Grandma Beth’s pewter set and reading Ranger Rick magazines on the couch and mixing sour cream and mild Ortega sauce to make white trash “taco dip” and watching Mamaw sew the ears back on our stuffed animals and rewinding NSYNC: Live in Madison Square Garden so many times the VCR malfunctions and giggling in the foyer watching Daddy scare trick-or-treaters away with an unloaded shotgun and dunking Oreos in milk for fifty seconds exactly and spilling so much Sand-Art in the dining room carpet that we still found granules years later and making a list in July of all the pie flavors we’ll have at Thanksgiving and passing up the homeless man on Highway-41 because we planned to swing past Golden Corral and didn’t want to feel guilty and slogging through snow-slush in tennis shoes outside the Casey convenience store in western Illinois to load up on snacks for the remainder of the Iowa trip and continuing our badminton tournaments until well after the fireflies came out and entering the kitchen in the middle of summer greeted by the sizzling of pork chops on Mother’s flat silver skillet and watching reruns of WKRP at eleven thirty at night when we’ve gotten strep throat for the second time in one January and cutting our lasagna into extra-tiny bites because we’re at J.F. San Filipo’s in St. Louis and won’t eat this ritzy again any time soon and re-straightening our hair on the morning it rained buckets while we packed luggage in the rented Jeep Laredo and singing along with Alanis Morissette in the crappy Dodge and bringing Daddy a cold washcloth when his sugar dropped too low that August he was unemployed and sitting next to total strangers waiting for an appointment at Done with Mirrors and riding the merry-go-round
five additional times free of charge at the Watermelon Festival and having miniature ham
sandwiches for lunch for a week after Grandpa Pamp died because nobody else from the
service would take home leftovers and having the theme song of Owensville School’s
Spotlight News broadcast\textsuperscript{87} stuck in our heads years after the fact and kissing our dog Jake on
the nose one last time before our neighbor Buford drove him to Dr. Thomas’ office to be put
to sleep\textsuperscript{88} and pausing in the middle of the sidewalks at Mesker Zoo every few seconds to sip
Sprite because it’s not smart to drink from a can while you’re walking\textsuperscript{89} and mournfully
missing LeVar Burton’s \textit{Reading Rainbow} in our mid twenties because they don’t make ‘em
like they used to. No other people have had it like this.

\textsuperscript{87} It’s that instrumental number by the Allman Brothers that goes on and on for about an hour and a half. No
words, but it’s one of those melodies you don’t forget.

\textsuperscript{88} We got him from a shady breeder in Bedford, Indiana, and thought we could save him, but sarcoptic mange is
a brutal disease that costs as much as your human family’s medication.

\textsuperscript{89} One of our parents’ many bizarre, specific rules: don’t drink from a can while walking, always push your
vegetables back to the center of the plate if you scatter them, always tell someone when you’re standing behind
them because they might step back and knock you over or poke an elbow in your eye, never snap rubber bands
on people, don’t stare, don’t take a beverage from someone’s refrigerator if you’re a guest in their home—wait
for them to offer. It makes sense that we’re a little neurotic.
These You Wouldn’t Trade for the World

Three steps to climb from Grandpa’s garage to his tiny, dim kitchen, one kiss to plant on his smooth cheek, both of your hands to accept the plastic-wrapped Little Debbie Oatmeal Crème Pie he provides on every visit, and ten or so enthusiastic bounds to reach his easy chair and wait for the popcorn to pop. When he arrives holding a mixing bowl filled to the brim with perfect yellow-brushed kernels, you hop up, let him sit, and then settle on his lap. You feel the coolness of the ballpoint pen he always keeps in his flannel shirt’s breast pocket as it presses against your shoulder. You wonder, as deeply as five-year-olds can, if this WWE smack-down you’re watching is real. Daddy says no, but Grandpa says absolutely. Daddy can’t be right all the time. Grab a whole fistful of popcorn and cheer for the smaller guy with the cobra tattoo. You and Grandpa like underdogs.

The morning you wake up as usual at 6:00 a.m., head downstairs, pour a little apple juice into the mug with your name painted on it, and walk heavy-footed, socks twisted, to that spot in the living room where you stand to see your school corporation’s name slide across the red ticker at the bottom of the TV screen. Three inches of snow, and for Southern Indiana, that means nobody’s chancing it. Raise both your arms in the air and whisper “YES!” because your siblings are still sleeping. Finish that juice in two choking gulps, but don’t go back to bed. It’s too easy. Make a place in the recliner—covers, a pillow from the couch to prop up on—and be ready to announce the good fortune as though you bribed the superintendent yourself.
The time you’ve got an appointment with Dr. Walters—he’s going to see if the spot on your front left incisor is a cavity or just a stain from all that juice you drink—and neither of your siblings has to go this time. You’ll walk in with a jumpy stomach, you’ll sit in the stiff blue waiting room chair for less than thirty seconds before the hygienist with ‘80s bangs calls you back, you’ll be led to one of the brown leather chairs already set to horizontal, and you’ll get a paper bag full of ice cream scratch-n-sniff stickers and sugarless pink Trident and a brochure about flossing regularly. You will not share.

Fielding the phone call where your aunt, just sixteen years your senior, lets you know in hurried breaths that your cousin (three, four, five years old) managed to eat half a buttered waffle at noon. That’s the first thing besides Mountain Dew he’s been able to keep down since Wednesday when nurses pried him from her arms in the ER and hooked him up to fluids, so you smile into the receiver, give your siblings an all-knowing glance, and say, “Awesome. Keep us posted.” You wonder in that moment if you’ll ever have a son and what his feel-better-food will be.

The time your cat gets spooked by the stick your sister absently waves like a baton in the yard; her yellow eyes bulge and she crawls up your body, leaving four garnet puncture marks on your collarbone. You’re not crying because you’re hurt. You just don’t want Daddy to get rid of her because she scratched you and hasn’t had her rabies shot.

It’s 7:30 p.m., approximately, and you’ve just finished dinner with the Jines family at Gemeca Inn—amazing steaks and combination salads for the adults, mozzarella sticks and
hot rolls and those rock-hard breadstick crackers for the kids. The lighting’s been low in there because it’s cloth-napkin fancy, so your eyes don’t need to adjust to the night sky, which is of course a perfect black and starless. The Jineses walk to their Toyota, waving at their sides without looking back, and you and your group trot to your Oldsmobile because you’ve just noticed the chill in the air and can’t say it’s exactly welcoming. The women’s heels clack on the pavement. Standing next to the car, somebody misunderstands someone else’s offhand comment, and that’s hilarious. “Great-grandma Ricketts,” say, becomes “Great Grunting Raccoon.” Someone farts once you’ve all piled inside, and that only supercharges the laughter. The kind where the muscles in your abdomen and throat and neck actually ache with every breath. Good exercise.

The step-grandmother you like least is coming over on short notice, so you and your sister become the Clean Squad, stuffing drawings into dining room drawers and tossing the TV listings under the Lay-Z-Boy and piling freshly-laundered clothes back into the dryer because there’s no time to fold them. You even put a few Good Housekeeping in the dryer, too, and remind each other to remember that nobody should turn the thing on with paper in there. Also, the irony isn’t lost on you: Good Housekeeping shoved in the dryer when that’s not at all the way to keep house. “But our home’s lived in,” you’ll say, and your sister will high-five you hard enough to sting. Mission accomplished.

After a pitstop at Sandy’s Pizza—four thick slices of the roasted red pepper and stromboli crumb for you because you haven’t eaten since last night’s supper—you accompany the rest of your senior class, by bus, to the Crestwood Convalescent Home’s lobby. You repeat the
phrase “Mrs. Redman? Mrs. Louise Redman?” so many times you think your lungs will collapse in a slow fashion similar to those of Mr. Heinemann, the trucker-capped eighty-something breathing fiercely into an oxygen mask right next to you. Mrs. Redman’s caretaker finally wheels her your direction, and together you pick an unoccupied cafeteria table suitable for conducting the interview. “When were you born?” you ask Mrs. Redman, and “Did you have any pets when you were a girl?” She’s got Parkinson’s, so as she answers you with unrelated anecdotes about her best friend Mary and the time they had to run across the wheat field barefooted, her hand gestures create enough momentum to wheel her backward a few inches. Halfway through this mandatory composition project research, your elderly partner is a foot from the table. You lean out and drag her back by the seatbelt. Apologize as you notice she smells stale. Hope she doesn’t ask, like you’ve overheard some of the others do, whether or not you’ll come back to see her. When she tells you the mashed potatoes here never have lumps, ever, you write that down and put an asterisk by it.

More than a decade after *Jurassic Park* hits theatres, you and your siblings can still mute the TV and provide the script yourselves. You play Dr. Sattler and Jeff Goldblum’s snarky character, your sister handles Lex and Hammond, and your brother plays Grant and “the blood-sucking lawyer” who abandons the kids in the Jeep when the Rex breaks free. Afterwards, mouths dry, you say almost in unison, “Do other people do this kinda stuff?”

You’re locked out. First thing Laurie told you before she left for California and entrusted you and your sister with watching her cats was to make sure you didn’t shut the front door all the way if you were outside, and you’ve minded that rule carefully all week. But your
brother wasn’t in on the deal until today. He held the hamburger-baked-bean casserole and macaroni and brownies—welcome-home presents for Laurie and Gary after such a long plane ride—while your mother drove, and even before you let them in through the back way and cleaned the litter boxes upstairs and down one more time, something didn’t feel right. You followed your mother out to water the hanging ferns on the deck, and like well-behaved ducklings, your siblings followed you. You heard the door click and couldn’t turn around in time to say, “No! Wait,” and now you’re locked out in ninety-two-degree weather with nothing but the clothes on your back and the shoes on your feet. Neighbors’ large-breed dogs growl while you pace, and they’re not on chains. You decide, in a flash, to hoof it to Gary’s parents’ split-level home up the road, and there, sweating, you use their phone to call your grandmother, who promptly arrives in the white Malibu, chauffeurs you home, and asks with amusement, “What’ll they think when they see a rental car with Kentucky plates just sittin’ there?” Call Laurie’s cell and get nothing. Call her daughter Courtney’s cell and get voicemail. Blurt, “Tell your mom not to be scared when she sees a blue Focus in the driveway. We’ll explain everything. Beans in the fridge.”

After a supper of that same hamburger-bean conglomeration—your mother makes everything in bulk—start calling this incident “Lock-Out 2009,” and as you lean back in your chair with your hands over your stomach and let the meal settle, remind your brother no fewer than ten casual times that when he tags along for the ride, he should stay in the car.

Headed home for Christmas Break, for your wedding, you and your fiance run into whiteout conditions, can’t see the taillights in front of you, swerve into the passing lane in Peoria because they haven’t done shit to pre-treat this highway, call 9-1-1 when you see a multi-
semi wreck in Mahomet and know that you’re sounding like a terrified four-year-old in the ears of the operator, follow the first exit ramp you half-see, pull into the lot of a Heritage Inn motel and use cash because they won’t accept Discover, fling your bags onto the bed closer to the door, secure your toboggans, brave the weather again for Arby’s beef and cheddar melts, and spend the rest of the night watching The Weather Channel in the dark and listening to the adjacent room’s toilet flush every five minutes because the plumbing’s on the fritz. In the morning when the sun’s out and the ice is glaring and he’s still asleep on the very edge of the bed, hair mussed, take your journal from the smallest suitcase and write under yesterday’s date, “We’re alive.”
Part Seven: Sanctuary
If There Were a Fire

Crawl into your bed and close your eyes. It’s preferable if the lights are off, if it’s storming, or if it’s night, but daytime attempts work when you don’t cheat. Burrow in. Now make believe the smoke detectors have sounded or you’ve smelled something you know isn’t the neighbors’ woodsmoke or their edgy cooking. This is not a drill. Keep those eyes shut tight, hit the floor belly-down, and make your way out of your house on elbows and knees without bumping into a single doorframe or magazine rack or ceramic cocker spaniel. If you can’t do that, then this place you call home might not be for you.
It’s kind of fun to pretend that the barbeque grill collecting cobwebs in the garage next to the Oldsmobile is a demon that only comes to life if you don’t announce yourself before entering his domain. It’s amusing to let your cat lick the last bite of your strawberry Flavor-Ice and watch her tongue double-curl from what must be the feline version of brain freeze. Not bad, either, to squirt down wasps’ nests with orange-barreled super-soakers from Wal-Mart or to knock the empty husks of cicadas from the back fence with sizable sticks or to keep panting through a round of tag right up until thunder claps are seconds apart and shake the decades-old windows of your house. But as you age—as your limbs grow longer, your middle slimmer, your face takes on the shape of those who came before you, and you scrutinize all things—you marvel at how this makeshift childhood, this life spent in seclusion, was joy.

Clocks don’t tick during Gibson County summers when you’re young. May and June start soft, warming the earth in waves, coaxing bright petals from bulbs. You go walking on Monday and your shoes crunch tan grass, but by Thursday when you’ve run out of two-percent milk and decide to make the journey on foot to Joe’s Red & White, you see daffodils in some neighbor’s garden. The mutts that once shivered, legs bowed, next to their doghouses as they watched you pass now romp to the edge of the chain-link fencing that contains them, wiggle, and yip eager greetings. They can feel the change in their toes. Pretty soon the men start working on their cars. No matter the expanse of their bellies, their age, or their level of physical strength, they dress in tight blue jeans, brown shoes, and thin muscle shirts, and they saunter from their front porches in that glimmer of early morning light with a
toolbox in one hand and an old washcloth in the other. Low-slung jalopies and high-set pick-ups nobody’s seen since last August because they shake too badly when they idle in winter are dragged out into driveways, and though they gurgle, growl, and leak oil, they usually start. The women don’t care for this restoration process. They want the cars to run, yes, because there’s lovely reassurance in having back-up, but the coughing and choking of exhaust pipes makes their female neighbors, their kids’ classmates’ mothers, poke their heads outside and huff. Some even call the Owensville police station to complain about the noise—Isn’t there some ordinance saying they can’t fuss with that thing all hours of the day?—but the officers, who know every woman and her husband by first name, have jalopies in their garages, too. ‘Fraid not, Helen. This here’s a free country.

No curfews for youth in the summers, either, speaking of free. Only on Halloween night and the night right before it do Owensville deputies patrol the streets looking for teenagers to send home with hang-dog expressions. At seventy degrees the kingdom is yours: swim, shoot hoops like you’re auditioning for a spot with the Pacers, travel in packs of four or more down Main Street at dusk, grab Sour Punch Straws from Get-n-Go, and then loop back around to rent a video from Pat’s Place.

There’s always a basketball, often deprived of proper air, thunking concrete within earshot, but the swimming’s what you can hear from blocks away. We didn’t learn to swim as kids because lessons are expensive and we each harbored a fear of water wildly

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90 Some use these washrags for wiping sweat from their brows, and others use them for sopping up excess fluids that drain from their sorry-ass vehicles as they plead with them to turn over just one more year. All depends on the guy.

91 I guess kids probably rent DVDs from Pat’s now, but when I was in middle school, occasionally accompanying my friends Ashlee, Melinda, and Taran on candy runs, there were no DVDs. I can’t even picture them on Pat’s shelves. They’d look so slight next to red metal racks of Snowballs and Twinkies and Twix bars and bright blue bags of Hot Fries.
disproportionate to its actual level of danger, so instead of splashing along, we listened and took mental notes. Only certain families who live out past the Stansberrys and the convalescent home have in-ground pools, so most people you’ll see clean their above-ground monstrosities with mops and generic disinfectant of a morning and then fill them just before lunch so the cold water has time to kick back a few notches to Pleasantly Cool. Afternoons, then, bring the aquatic neighbors out wearing hideous bikinis or trunks and holding either taller-than-wide glasses of sweet tea or Capri Sun in silver pouches that glint in the light. If you’re a girl under twelve, you wear a floral or polka-dotted one-piece and spend most of your time squealing and watching your legs flounce and glide underwater, and if you’re a teen, you buy a solid-color two-piece and float on your back for three plus hours because how else will you tan? Young boys practice holding their breaths submerged, and after each attempt, the person keeping track with a stopwatch must announce the new record; older boys abandon swimming altogether in favor of skateboarding solo or walking in pairs down our wide, cracked streets wearing loose T-shirts with band names printed across the chests in unfocused font.

Having a fence like we did works in two ways. It keeps people from seeing you play volleyball and badminton pitifully and without a net and then using that knowledge to tear you down when school’s back in session, but it also contains in its shabby wood planks small holes through which you can spy on others. We’d spend whole late afternoons with our faces pressed against the panels getting mosquito-bitten and watching couples we didn’t know stroll their slobbering infants down Second Street. An older lady who always wore a white sun visor and huge tinted glasses that made you assume at first she was blind walked her shih tzu on a thin chain every single evening until the humidity rose in early July. The man we
called Homerun—a sixty-something gentleman who wore blue chambray button fronts and a trucker cap, bicycled everywhere he went, and would shout “Homerun, kiddos!” if one of us hit Nathan’s softball over the fence and into the street he pedaled down—was our favorite regular, and sometimes when retrieving our lost ball, we’d wave at him. But if we saw classmates we hated shuffle down our block, we’d do voice-overs for them that sounded like a cross between Fat Albert and the dim-witted Masked Marauder from that exquisite Bugs Bunny cartoon. Occasionally we’d even launch rocks at them, and although we mostly missed our targets, we took action. Our street, our yard, our house, our rules.

Maybe it was because our two-storey yellow house sat on the corner, elevated on a small hill and thus taller than every other home for as far as the eye could see, that we considered the town ours to claim. By the time July surfaces sluggishly, bearing down on Owensvillians with a stickiness equal to the kind achieved by running a 10K, pedestrians walk with strain. They spend more time studying their surroundings, and when we lived there, they studied our home. Some would stop dead in their tennis-shoed tracks and gaze up at the deep red roof, shake their heads at the fence boards arranged liked snaggled teeth, admire the craftsmanship of the diamond window in our foyer, or watch our black cat Licorice stalk the property line like a loyal palace guard. Most of the kids from Owensville School thought we lived in a mansion, and they convinced us of the same. Most of the adults knew we were in over our heads financially, because instead of standing rapt in the height of the place, they saw shingles askew and porch beams splitting and windows with cracks and bills like black clouds hanging over us.

Some people actually thought our property was abandoned because of the shaggy grass and general disarray of the shrubs and siding and weatherbeaten shutters. The first
night we moved to Owensville in 1988, in fact, Mother caught a young couple having sex on our side porch. At that time you could still pry the windows open, so she closed her robe tighter, raised the glass with a squeak, and yelled, “What on earth do you think you’re doing? Don’t you know this is private property? I’ve got kids in here.”

Well your kids picked up your habits, Mother, and then some. During the hottest parts of summer—late July through late August—the three of us would watch from indoors as teens and elementary schoolers and even some adults would trespass onto our property line. The crumbling, uneven sidewalk that created a perimeter around our embankment was for public use, but the moment someone’s shoe bent our front yard’s bluegrass or crunched our driveway’s gravel, we shot out of the house like shrapnel and accosted the perpetrators with daring stares and chins held high, arms crossed. “This is private property, you know,” I would say, trying to keep my voice from shaking in the combination of fear and exhilaration. “It’s illegal to be on someone else’s property.”

More often than not, the youngest offenders would run for it, the teens would flip us off or pull out cigarettes as though smoking activated some cloaking device, and the adults would snicker and whisper about what strange kids we were as they walked calmly away, back to their grilled burgers and pool floaties and the blue glows of their televisions. We didn’t have accessories for a pool, but we had better burgers by far and watched Nick at Nite’s Block Party Summer on Monkee Mondays, Lucy Tuesdays, Bewitched Be-Wednesdays, and Happy Days Fridays, and that beats any baseball game or Fox News broadcast these lawbreakers tuned in for.

\[92\] They played I Dream of Jeannie on Thursday nights, and that show never appealed to us. Maybe it’s because I share a first name with her, but I always thought Samantha Stevens could nose-twitch her way out of trouble a lot quicker than Jeannie could perform the whole arms-crossed-and-blink routine.
There’s comfort in Block Party Summer’s line-up. There’s comfort in taking a bath upstairs because the first floor shower barely drips and then, once you’re toweled off and dressed in a long T-shirt and underwear, bounding down your home’s eighteen brown-carpeted steps and counting each one, knowing the eleventh will creak beneath your weight. You don’t focus so much on the drippy showerhead and the porch sex and the cigarette butts in your unkempt rock garden out front as you do on the step that moans as it carries you. It’s like enjoying the itch of mosquito bites because the bites mean you’ve done something that lasted well into the dark. It’s like sweating in your bed even under a single sheet but not climbing out to adjust the ceiling fan’s spin. You hear the neighbor kids diving into refreshing turquoise water, and you’re happy enough bird-watching with dull-yellow lensed binoculars Grandpa Pamp had kept stashed in a suitcase he never took anywhere.
Across from our house on Second Street, there used to be a silver maple whose middlemost branches looked like a giant praying mantis. You couldn’t see him during warmer months because the leaves blocked every access point, but during the winter, his heart-shaped head, slender torso, and enormous front legs, forever bent in reverence, watched over our yard.

Seemed like all the trees in Owensville looked like something, though: dinosaurs, dogs, Mardi Gras headdresses, open hands, characters from the Muppets. One poplar near the public library looked like it had an old cowboy sitting in it, kind of like the yard ornament silhouette of the guy in spurs and a ten-gallon hat leaning against a fencepost. When the cold crept over us, forcing residents into puffy marshmallow coats and earmuffs whose plastic grips pinch the skin around your temples, these trees rattled in one continuous chorus. Melon workers, some of whom were migrant laborers from Mexico, found themselves unemployed and turned to snow removal—a hit or miss job because of our unpredictable precipitation totals—or pothole patching if they had the finances to stay put. Tacky inflatable snowmen and snow globes and Grinches in Santa suits popped up in yards amidst dead leaves unraked and lawn furniture uncared-for. The elderly began hoarding canned vegetables to the point that no corn of any variety stayed long on the Red & White’s shelves.

I love the silence that holds you close when snow falls, and I enjoy bundling up in a brand new peacoat and scarf as much as the next person, but during my teenage years, I started noticing how gray Gibson County looks in December. The roads appear wet whether it’s rained or snowed or not. The town’s spent its budget on revamping the rec center and can’t afford to pour new concrete for the public sidewalks, so kindergartners show up to

Winter
school with gashes in their hands from tripping on jagged spots on the way to the bus. Cars start with wheezes when they start at all. Old women who live in trailers with their matted Pomeranians eat Kraft macaroni and cheese on Christmas Eve because it’s cheap and they remember how to make it. And that’s the main thing for me. The trailer parks. We’ve got so many, and each one’s arranged in limp yellow grass and dark mud and the kids who live there play outside with no coats on and their fingers turn red from wind burn. I once saw an English pointer frozen dead, still tied to its doghouse with frayed rope because the trailer’s owners ran a meth lab and, upon getting busted, didn’t think to tell the officers they had an animal out back. But I blame people like me who pass by and avert their eyes because they don’t want to believe they live in a place composed of decay.

Not until the Christmas of my sophomore year in college did I realize my house—the whole town—was just a grander version of potential squalor. First it’s the ripped-up Burger King and nursing home and anti-abortion billboards on the highway, and then you come to the auto shops without customers and the roadside stands selling “Smokes, Dirt Cheap,” and you think as you stare out the passenger’s side window, “How do we make it here? How have we made it here for so long?” Daddy pulled slowly into the driveway that winter of 2005, and as I wrenched my backpack from the tightly-packed trunk of our first rental car of many, I watched the globe of our back steps’ lamppost fall to the sidewalk and shatter into innumerable golden shards. Age wore it down. It couldn’t even withstand a breeze anymore. We used Pam’s old shovel to collect the pieces and dump them into a double-layered paper grocery sack for eventual disposal.

And what was the difference between those shredded billboards and our front room? The ceiling in the foyer, its unseen interior beams occupied by roosting pigeons, hung down
like the jowls of a bloodhound, saturated with rainwater and snowmelt and bad paint. 

Mother’d placed buckets and plastic tubs on the floor below to keep the drips from further ruining the wood finish, and every so often, doing my homework at the dining table, I’d hear a ker-plunk more unnerving than the kind that fall from leaky sink faucets. And we had those, too. Every sink in the house. Cold weather also seemed to convince the toilets not to work properly, and because our handy-man Charlie Craig was also the most sought-after HVAC repairman in the county, we sometimes had to reach barehanded into the upstairs toilet’s tank and lift the flush chain ourselves. There’s nothing quite like being elbow-deep in rusted, ice cold tank water when your arms already have goosebumps dotting their lengths and you’ve got a scratchy throat and dry nasal passages and pink, chapped skin because there aren’t enough Vicks Vaporizers in the world to keep the air in this house from ravaging the human body.

I’m reminded of women who stay with their husbands even though these men slug them so hard their glasses fly off. Those parents who believe God will cure their baby boy’s brain cancer if they only pray hard enough, so they don’t take him to the hospital, instead watching him wither in his crib. Hoarders with eighty cats who can’t see the filth or smell the stench or feel their pocketbooks emptying. No clarity, no control, no feasible way out save sacrificing something you love. Our story’s not so different.

That last winter we spent in the Owensville house, now three years ago, almost no heat reached the west-facing bedroom Natalie and I shared, and we slept under six blankets apiece most nights. If the outside temperature dropped into the teens, we had to sleep downstairs. I took the sofa and she took the recliner, which is the opposite of what we used to do when
both of us were sick with strep or the stomach flu. No clue why we made the switch all of a sudden, but we agreed the new arrangement was classic because we could now view the Christmas tree from entirely new vantage points as we drifted in and out of sleep. It’s the most viscerally delightful feeling I know exists, staring at a colored-lights Christmas tree with sleepy, squinted eyes. Blues and reds and golds and greens bleed together, and if you’ve got vision poorer than a bat’s, like me, each colored bulb looks fuzzy and larger because it has no defined perimeter. You see a tree made solely of light.

Christmas tried to save us that year. Not a Jesus miracle, mind you, bestowed upon a lower-class working family like ours because that’s what the newspapers and the audience in heaven like to see, but the ritual of preparing for the holidays. The day after Thanksgiving’s when we always assemble the fake tree we purchased from K-Mart for $24.00 in January 1999, and we held fast to that rule in 2007, just a month before we began packing our belongings in boxes with “EGGS” printed in bold letters across the sides. Piece of pie for breakfast, leftovers re-heated on individual plates in the microwave for lunch, let dishes soak, sort branches with Mamaw, spread and twist those branches’ wire limbs so they look as full and foresty as possible, string lights (just Mother and me), re-string lights with Mother because the first time we talk during it and run out of bulbs by the time we reach the topper, divide ornaments equally among all participants, hang ornaments (use hand-crocheted ones and those with faded eyeballs or paint jobs for filling space in the back of the tree), hook up the star and watch it droop for thirty minutes before somebody, anybody, sets it straight, fold a white sheet at the tree’s metal trunk to look like fallen snow, cut another slice of pie (different flavor from the one at breakfast), take pictures. All that stayed the same.
It’s just that during our last viewing of *One Special Night* on Christmas afternoon, right at the place where Julie Andrews sits in the diner eating chocolate chip pancakes alone because she thinks James Garner has stood her up, the sun made a glare on the TV screen. We’d already taken the curtains down and packed them into cardboard boxes, so Mother stripped a green sheet from Nathan’s bed and hung it from the rod above the family room window. Sometimes I like to watch certain people watch certain parts of certain movies, and as I watched Mamaw see a little bit of Papaw in James Garner and watched Mother’s eyes glisten when the pregnant sister tells the hippie sister that their mother won’t ever know her favorite bowl’s broken because she’s got Alzheimer’s, I was disturbed. Our faces were green. We all looked ghastly, sickly, gathered together in a dusty room using a sheet for a curtain and clinging to James and Julie like they were relatives we couldn’t stand to see leave.

I wasn’t there for the actual move, and I didn’t see the new apartment before furniture covered its imperfections. I brought Licorice inside with me on my last day at home, and she curled silent on the couch and watched me pack boxes with VHS tapes and old scrapbooks and a few select toys I thought might make the cut if any of us ever had children of our own. Then I packed my suitcases and backpack and left for school the next day in a rented Impala. When I buckled myself in, I glanced over at the spot where the mantis tree used to be. The Owensville city department cut that tree down when I was twelve years old because lightning

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93 So too does the fictional Lorelai Gilmore, and my phrasing is borrowed from her no-nonsense character’s creator, genius-writer Amy Sherman Palladino.
had struck it that summer and left it blackened and dying on one side. I’d never noticed before just what vast open space our guardian’s long absence left behind.
**Ghost House**

In our old house, books would fly out of bookshelves. They didn’t fall, they flew. John Jakes’ *North and South* once leapt from Mother’s and Daddy’s bookcase and halfway across their yellow-carpeted bedroom in all its dilapidated glory (Mother’s a bathtub reader and doesn’t mind when pages bloat to make books three times their original sizes). Between that same bookcase and the part of the chimney that ran up the west wall’s height in their room, Mother kept a velvet-bound collection of Shakespeare’s complete works, her five copies of *Gone with the Wind*, and several historical fiction novels about Poland, the Romanovs, the Confederacy, and Victorian England. While I combed through Mother’s jewelry box on the night of my senior prom in search of Beth’s black onyx necklace, every one of those books collapsed in a heap without any provocation. My personal copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* once broke the ear off of Mother’s gray ceramic kitten on its way to the floor.

Between our upstairs bathroom and the upstairs den, there was a short hallway used for storing things like Christmas wrapping paper, gift boxes, bags of bows, boxes filled to the brim with our old spelling tests and multiplication worksheets, pastel Easter baskets and the accompanying cellophane grass, and old magazines we simply had to keep. On more than one occasion, Natalie and I have been watching Comedy Central or *I Love Lucy* or *Gilmore Girls* in the den and jumped clear out of our skins at a crashing sound. Sometimes the mess of easily-bent shirt boxes and sticks-to-your-socks Easter grass has been so explosive that

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94 They might’ve contained unusual recipes for cobbler, landscape photographs of Montana or Sweden or the Gobi Desert, articles and accompanying pictures of the coal stoves in one-room school houses, or exposes on celebrities like Richard Gere or Tony Danza. Who knows. Bottom line is, you don’t get rid of something if it once meant something.
we’ve had to practically dig our way out. Our toilets sometimes flushed on their own.
Dishes stacked secure regularly toppled into the sink and broke. Our stairs popped and
creaked almost nightly. Just the house settling, we all said. A mantra to ward away less
logical alternatives.

The Man in the White Shirt appeared round-abouts 1996 or ’97, and he stayed with us
through adolescence, through graduation, and through the bankruptcy of 2007. He’s a
figment of the imagination, be assured, but reoccurring figments of his make and model do
disconcert a person. The Man in the White Shirt swishes past your periphery when you’re
occupied with Pre-Calculus homework, with playing Beatles CDs in the living room, with
dusting between the slats of the blinds, or with eating omelets during Unsolved Mysteries.
I’m not sure what science would call our sightings. Ocular irregularities? Momentary
hallucinations caused by the house’s traces of toxic building materials or by the bird
infestations in our woodstove and the roof? The hope for haunting, perhaps, that people who
live in hundred-plus-year-old homes often exhibit? In any case, all five of us reported to one
another that the flash of movement, the sudden streak of white, looked less like light than it
did a male human form. We all said he wore a white T-shirt. Not a button-down, not
something long-sleeved, but a T-shirt specifically.

I wonder if he’s still there, swishing past the family who bought our house on a whim,
sight unseen, after it failed to sell in the sheriff’s auction. These people are down-home
folks—they’re cousins of the man who used to mow our yard in the summers, and they’re not
wealthy by any stretch of the imagination. They won’t be able to fix the place, I’m guessing.
I’ll bet the upstairs bathroom’s sink was collapsed in the dining room when they arrived for
initial inspection. I’ll bet the foyer ceiling finally cracked open and let roosting pigeons loose at last.

It’s not our mess to clean up anymore, but I can’t leave it alone. At least not in my head. I haven’t been back since the January day Mother and I returned to the property to dump the last of the cat litter and hand-lock the back porch storm door, and though hesitant, I walked the squeaky floors one last time, surveying rooms empty of everything but the furniture we couldn’t afford to store and had no space to keep with us (a curio cabinet, an octagonal game table for card-playing, a bookcase that used to display Daddy’s countless, shining gold baseball trophies). I walked on cautious, reluctant feet because this place was my safe haven from tornadoes, from July mosquitoes, from school, from incessant ridicule inflicted by my peers. This house was me. It was Robinson. And I’m terrible with good-byes. I wish I believed in ghosts—honestly believed—because then somebody’d be there who’d remember *Jurassic Park* and fried puh-tay-tuhs and the time Mother tried making homemade Chinese food while the preacher was over and wound up setting the stove on fire. Somebody else would remember us as we were.

Buddhists in China, Thailand, and some parts of Vietnam celebrate The Festival of Hungry Ghosts every August fifteenth—the seventh lunar month of their calendar. During this time ancestral spirits and other deceased humans and animals are said to return to Earth from the lower realm to visit their living relatives and their homes. Hungry Ghosts, one must note, are those souls who have not yet extricated themselves from the karmic cycle of *samsara* (the Buddhist term for reincarnation). When the realms of Heaven and Hell split open mid-August, Hungry Ghosts swarm the material world in search of offerings to quench their
desire for nirvana—literally, “to blow out, extinguish;” colloquially, the end of suffering. All Hungry Ghosts are homeless on this day, and with thin necks protruding, ancient mouths held open, they are said to relish the heavy-sweet scent of incense, the burning of traditional joss paper, and the aromas of elaborate feasts prepared by surviving family members and other villagers. Some locales even go so far as to arrange burlesque-type stage performances open to the public, and at these events, the first two rows of chairs remain open for Hungry Ghosts who choose to attend. In the evenings, in late bluing light, old and young alike release small paper boats and vibrantly-colored papier-mâché lanterns across the surface of lakes or ponds, and this practice gives direction to ghosts trapped in the endless cycle of birth, wandering, death, and rebirth.

Sometimes we think we feel the presence of our grandparents and great-grandparents just behind us, seated near us, watching us graduate or give birth or battle cancer with gusto, so I like the concept of Hungry Ghosts. I’m not especially fond of the samsaric entrapment part, but this is not my tradition and I have no right to pick from it what I like and throw the rest away.

One component I’m obsessing over lately, though, is the Ghost House tradition practiced primarily in Thailand. The Ghost House ritual requires Thai Buddhists to place enlarged photographs of their houses in their front yards. Practitioners erect these photographs not for the benevolent, lost ancestral spirits, but for Hungry Ghosts with malice in their hearts or accompanying revenge to inflict upon those they’ve left behind. According to custom, photographs confuse malevolent Hungry Ghosts. They inhabit and haunt the picture house instead of haunting your actual home.
Natalie made enemies when she started middle school—as was my gift and curse, she studied when necessary, read books for fun, helped people when she could, wore glasses, brought her lunch from home rather than eating cafeteria BBQ patties or processed chicken nuggets, spoke softly, and tried her hardest not to participate in P.E. Not mockable by any human standard, but most adolescent girls don’t often resemble human. On Halloween there was a fight in the gym locker room; Natalie kicked Nikki Reavis in the shins for making fun of her long hair (very pretty, chestnut brown long hair, as it were). That night, just after dark, Nikki and her friends Kaisha and Ashley stalked the perimeter of our house tapping on windows and giggling. We ignored them at first, but after fifteen minutes, I’d had enough. I heard them on our side porch, so I flipped off the overhead dining room light in hopes of catching them in an act of vandalism. Spooked, they sprung from the porch in single, clumsy leaps and threw an entire blue bar of Lever 2000 soap against our siding. If they’d hit the glass of one of the windows, they could well have broken it. That would’ve been a good time to have a Ghost House.

We’re not the type of family that always answers the phone when it rings or the door when somebody knocks. Lynnvillian and Oatsvillian hospitality doesn’t pass through genes, apparently, because when we were kids, Mother and Daddy firmly impressed upon us the notion that your house is your house and you open it up only to those you want visiting, when you want them. If classmates of ours bicycled over selling Girl Scout cookies or Boy Scout popcorn or Paragon white-chocolate-covered pretzels and Christmas-themed tins to store them in, we’d keep perfectly still and silent in the family room and turn the TV volume to zero until they got tired and rode off. I remember mouthing “No, no, no” and crossing my
fingers in front of my face in X shapes when Mother would hand me the phone and say it was my friend Janelle calling (I wanted school life separate from home life). In December 2007, just weeks before the chaotic move to our apartment, we lied to our close friends the Grahams, telling them that they couldn’t stop by to purchase our living room sofa because we had company in from Tennessee. Truth was, we were spending the afternoon watching *The Muppet Christmas Carol* and *Mr. Magoo’s Christmas Carol* back to back for the sixth consecutive year, and classic things like that don’t get interrupted. I want a Ghost House to trick unwanted visitors. If the photo is up, then our door isn’t open.

Creditors sound like you’d expect hungry ghosts to sound. They rasp over the receiver. Their voices crackle when they leave messages. I picture a large, jagged, collective maw open wide to swallow the cars and college funds and reputations of good people. We lost our only vehicle in Spring 2006, and Laurie Jines, Mother’s best friend since junior high, sold us her deceased mother’s dark red Buick Le Sabre for eight hundred dollars. Marsha’s car hadn’t been driven in fifteen years, though, we discovered, and the repairs would cost more than eight hundred in and of themselves. Jim Farmer, the man who mowed our lawn since I was five years old, gave us his 1980-something gray-blue Grand Am for free, but it died on trips longer than thirty miles. We’ve got a white 1996 Dodge Intrepid with a scratch down the side and a broken radio now, thanks to Mother’s pastor Mark Fernihough, and although it shakes when you yield or stop, it can get you as far as Evansville if you need to shop for decent clothes.
Grandma McKinney and Grandpa Pamp left Nathan, Natalie, and I thousands of dollars apiece meant for school, but we’ve had to use that money to pay for groceries, electric bills, and rental cars and gasoline for trips to and from our respective campuses.

Mother won’t drive the old Dodge any place but Wal-Mart or Holiday Foods grocery store in Ft. Branch. She works at the local high school that both my siblings and I attended, and she asks Daddy to drop her off at the back entrance and pick her up there after the buses depart.

I’d heard the creditors’ voices long before the foreclosure, but I wasn’t in the house when Cinergy shut off our power. Some states have laws requiring power companies to keep the electricity on during winter months regardless of a resident’s inability to pay, but Indiana is not one of those states. Natalie called me in my toasty warm Transylvania University dorm room and told me the news, and I pictured it going like this:

Mother unlocked the light blue back door that answers to a strong push as well as a key. She and my two siblings tumbled in, but not Daddy, gone at work. Two purses clacked on the counter, shoes flopped still tied in the shoe corner of the kitchen, bookbags thumped carpet, and then, the first attempt. Maybe the breaker’d blown. It was December. It was our luck. So Mother braved the basement, flashlight in hand, avoiding the translucent brown bodies of paper-thin camel crickets on crooked, slatted steps. We couldn’t get rid of them, even with spray. She met eager faces on her way back up, but she disappointed them. Breaker was fine. Start your homework, she might have said. She knew what had happened but wouldn’t tell why, and I guess that’s not wrong. I’ve never had children, owned space I couldn’t heat, or paid an overdue bill six months too late.
I didn’t want to fume or cry or hit something all by myself, so I switched up the scenario to one I’d seen and loved so many times before:

*Daddy pushed open the light blue back door, hair windswept and soggy, and told us it wasn’t as bad as they’d said. Just a funnel cloud sighting, no touchdown, a few wet-black branches scarring neighbors’ yards. I silenced Wayne Hart on the radio. My brother and sister snatched lukewarm sodas to celebrate our relief, and then Mother handed Daddy the newsprint TV guide. He fanned us with it, grinning broadly, wearing his old pitching T-shirt and a pair of dark jeans. We were all far too warm in a house with no power, but we had cool, bright aluminum glasses to drink from, and the men in hard hats who drive white repair trucks would no doubt hit our block just as soon as they could.*

It’s ridiculous—beyond unreasonable—but I wish we’d begun as Buddhists rather than Christians so I could’ve tried the Ghost House precaution. Instead of dialing our number, First National could’ve dialed our number from a parallel realm and left disapproving messages that would’ve echoed against photo paper instead of echoed in our ears. In fact, our Ghost House could’ve kept the rotting columns and sagging porch roof and broken-down fence and leaking faucets to itself. Absorbed decay on behalf of its twin shelter. Our house actually had a twin—an identical yellow-sided home with red roof and powder-blue shutters and a diamond-shaped window in the foyer. Grandpa Pamp lived in that house as a young boy before moving back to Lynnville after his father’s death, and some years later, around the start of the first World War, that twin house burnt to the ground, cause unknown. For some equally unknown reason, a work crew lifted our house—the surviving sibling—off of
its foundation and placed it on the spot where the burned-down house once stood. No one could tell the difference.

I hope Jim Farmer’s cousins do their best to fix up my home, but I hope they don’t tear down the garage or clear the wild-growing weeds behind it. When my black cat Licorice, my best friend for sixteen years, passed away two Novembers ago in my absence, I asked Mother to scatter her ashes in the garage’s windowbox (where she basked in the sun) and in the tangled foliage behind the structure (where she hunted). That’s following a finely-honed spiritual tradition that blankets and in some ways blinds our region, our towns, and my family, but I didn’t ask her to do it for tradition’s sake or for the sake of Licorice’s soul. I do believe in making your mark on things. Carving space for yourself where you feel you belong. Leaving footprints or fingerprints, or initials if you can.
Epilogue
Vaughn came to my December wedding reception dressed in a black toboggan and a mouse-gray electrician’s uniform with a sewed-on nametag at the breast pocket. He showed up at the Ft. Branch Senior Center’s side door and waved, and in my floor-length A-line gown with beaded bodice, I floated across the floor to let him in. “You came,” I said, and when I lifted my arms to hug him around the neck, he said, “Careful, now. I don’t wanna get your dress dirty.” Damn the dress. Goddamn this whole party with its fake red rose petals and clear fishbowls filled with sparkling silver glitter and single candles and catered barbeque and potato salad and Christmas tree and Kentucky cranberry wine. My big brother’s here. Make space at the table.

And another thing. Daddy’s got this new job working security at the Toyota plant a few miles from our apartment complex. From ten at night to six in the morning, he sits inside a glassed-in checkpoint booth wearing a neon yellow fluorescent jacket and black gloves and allowing or denying tractor-trailers passage, and occasionally, if one of the drivers has a canine companion with him on his run, Daddy will feed part of his ham sandwich to the dog and rub it hard between the ears like he would his own pet.

A few weeks ago, a female driver rolled up to the checkpoint, blew warm air into her bare hands, leaned out her semi’s window into the darkness, and said, “Cold evenin’, i’nt it.”

“It is that, ma’am,” Daddy agreed, handing the woman all the necessary paperwork for entering the north gate. “Where you from?”

“I’m comin’ outta Terre Haute, but I grew up around here. You know Lynnville?”

I can picture Daddy grinning wide in the white lighting of his booth and chuckling as he told her, “I should hope so. I was raised there.”
“No kiddin’?”

“No ma’am. Born in ’51, only moved to Princeton to go to high school in ’66. Grandparents and great-grandparents and all the rest lived there until the day they died.”

Daddy says the woman paused, pinched her chin with two fingers and a thumb, and stared heavenward for a moment, her eyes hard-set in concentration. “Born in 1951, huh? Then you must’a known my great-great-uncle Freeze-Off.”

Holy smokes, I say. Holy shit. Freeze-Off is as real as you or me. We’ve got outside sources who required no prompting, and not only that, but our giant’s got progeny. Maybe more kindly loners can hold mules like they’re babies. Who knows.

Daddy wasn’t stunned to hear the news, though, because he did know Freeze-Off Bass. He watched him pick blackberries in the heat and tip a hat to Lynnville’s mothers and grandmothers on Sundays and walk, always barefoot, every day of every year. Daddy gave the side of the woman’s vehicle a sturdy pat, and while co-signing her paperwork with thin, choppy cursive I can see in my sleep, he replied, “Oh yes. Absolutely. Nicest son-of-a-gun you ever met in your life.”