2012

The middle of everything

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The middle of everything

by

Kathryn Sukalich

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Prologue:

This Is What I Remember

Mom called last week. She told me that Grandpa no longer knows what to do with a spoon. There was a moment of silence. He forgets to eat, she said. He pokes around at the food, but doesn’t eat anything.

I picture him sitting at his kitchen table on a chair with an extra cushion. He’s wearing a button-down plaid shirt and the faded blue jeans he’s owned for decades. The ones that are too solidly medium blue to look like real denim. A belt holds them up because he’s gotten smaller with age. He’s wearing slippers. He doesn’t notice the decorative plates hung on the wall above him, or the sun coming in through the wooden blinds, lighting up specks of dust, or my grandma going through the mail next to him. He just looks at the spoon and…and what? Does he ponder the curves? The metal? Does he wonder where it came from? I don’t know what it’s like. I don’t know what brain deterioration, what rogue betaamyloid proteins and amyloid plaques, what advanced Alzheimer’s disease feels like. I don’t know what it thinks like. I imagine the edges of the world slowly getting fuzzier, darker. As if memories are like bad vision, slowly getting worse.

I’ve had the image of that spoon, hovering purposelessly above a salad or soup or breakfast cereal, floating in and out of my head ever since. I’m on a trip from Iowa to South Dakota with the other new graduate students, and I can’t quite get rid of it. I think about it as I look out the window of our fifteen passenger van on Wednesday afternoon, watching the scenery go by to the music of U2. If you focus on the rows, the corn fields look like the thumbed pages of a book, flipping by too quickly to make out the words. The corn reminds me of the drive to visit my grandparents where they live outside of Milwaukee in
Washington County. I remember the drive down Highway K where we would pass a rusted-out street car in the middle of a farm field. We always wondered how it got there, many miles from a big city, and many decades from an era of street cars. The difference between those roads and these South Dakota ones is that these are still flat like Iowa. The roads near Hartford, Wisconsin, are hilly. My grandfather used to put my cousins and me in his old, navy blue station wagon and drive us through the hills, asking us if we felt the butterflies in our stomachs as we descended, riding over the rumble strips. “Ow-wa!” he would yell as the car shook. For years afterward I thought rumble strips had something to do with butterflies, the orange and black winged kind. Then Grandpa would look at the neighboring dairy farms and say, “Look! The cows are sitting down. It’s going to rain!”

Outside our van, somewhere in eastern South Dakota, fields of sunflowers surprise me. I’ve never seen fields of them before, and for some reason all of the flowers face east, uniformly waiting for the morning. I think of the movie version of *Everything is Illuminated* with Elijah Wood, when he stands out in the field of sunflowers, the vibrant yellow overwhelming the TV screen. In that scene he’s searching for evidence of his ancestors who were lost to World War II. In my scene, I’m headed west. I don’t know what I’m looking for.

***

I wake on Thursday in Badlands National Park to the sound of something scratching faintly against my tent. This is my first time sleeping in a tent since I was a child, and my lack of camping knowledge—not to mention lack of a Leatherman and hiking boots—makes me feel sheepish. The source of the scratching: a large, green grasshopper trapped in a bubble of moisture between the tent wall and the rain fly. It struggles to jump, but can only move its hind legs in slow motion, one at a time, fighting a losing battle against the forces of fabric
and water. A breeze rustles the tent walls, blowing the grasshopper back and forth. I wonder about the world from its perspective, paralyzed between green walls, and about its misfortune of landing in one of the few feet of humanity here when it had miles and miles of open space to land upon. I try to set it free from inside the tent, but it’s stuck. For a moment, I think of my grandfather, of the grasshoppers and crickets that populated the fields near his house, and of the stories he used to tell about fire ants eating limbs. He doesn’t tell stories like that anymore.

When I get up to search for food and coffee the campground and the surrounding hills of the Badlands are still coated in mist. The grasshopper is gone, perhaps freed by me rustling around in the tent. I feel more a part of the morning than I have in a long time. I feel more on the ground than I normally do, my feet more against the dirt. Maybe I’m just paying more attention.

“Do you want instant coffee?” one of our professors asks me.

“Definitely,” I say, pulling the hood of my sweatshirt up over my head and my sleeves down over my fists. “It was cold in that tent.”

Many of the other students have left to go hiking before breakfast even though it’s barely six o’clock. The rest of us sit around a picnic table.

“Did you sleep okay?” I ask the two people across from me.

“Not great. I’ve slept better,” one says, pulling a winter hat down over her eyebrows despite the fact that it’s only September.

The other student looks out across the campground.

“This fog is eerie,” she says.
The sun slowly burns off the cold and mist, and by mid-morning I’m hiking through hills covered in tall grasses, filled with luckier grasshoppers. They explode out of the grass like firecrackers, lit just before I step onto their patches of ground. Nowhere else would I have noticed this sea of insects, the different varieties—green, brown, some types smaller than others—populating what appears at first glance from a car window to be a vacant, desolate land.

***

I stand at the edge of the these orange, rigid hills, this jagged canyon in the Badlands, as the other graduate students pile out of our van to take pictures of a group of big horn sheep. From up top it looks like we’re standing at the edge of a wasteland. Nothing but rock and dirt. The peaks and ridges feel threatening. Their striations of color—tan, orange, red, brown—look alien, like something from the moon.

I picture that spoon.

The convolutions of the hills remind me of the convolutions of the brain, and I picture my twelfth grade psychology teacher—Mrs. Barkley-Jones—holding a brain in the cadaver lab at the medical college. The class was on a field trip to the lab because we’d been studying the parts of the brain. Mrs. Barkley-Jones brought the brain out in a pan and walked it around the room. It looked cold, rubbery, like a Halloween decoration. She held it up in my direction. Do you want to touch it? She poked one of the ridges, grinning a bit madly. She looked like the Penguin from Batman: short, overweight, with flyaway black hair. My stomach turned over. I said nothing. I tried not to breathe the formaldehyde.

Two students walk out into the canyon as far as they can, standing on rocks that jut over the abyss. One student opens her arms wide, embracing the space. The other student
stands still at the edge, looking. I picture my grandfather standing out there at the edge, arms at his sides, or in the pockets of a cardigan sweater, about to fall into the oblivion. Could you fall into an oblivion of thought, lost forever in your own mind? The hills erode. They wear down, even though plants still grow around them and animals roam through them. The brain erodes unnaturally even though blood is still pumping through it, the synapses slowly falling apart, the neurons withering. His isn’t soaked in formaldehyde. It still shouldn’t erode.

One student returns to the van and comments that it’s unusually hot for Labor Day weekend. She’s right. I try to imagine this orange land covered in snow. If it’s desolate now, it will certainly be desolate when frozen.

***

I have two childhood memories of my grandfather in winter. I’m not sure if either is true. This is what I remember: In the first memory, my cousins and I are back in Grandpa’s station wagon. It’s Christmas Eve, and he drives us around Milwaukee to look at holiday lights while Santa stops by my Aunt Patty’s house. My cousin Christopher and I fought for the third row of seats and won. His brother David gets the second row. The third row is the best because you get to sit backwards. This must have been before I started getting motion sick sitting backwards in trains and busses. Grandpa’s radar detector beeps and lights up on the dashboard. There must be a cop nearby. It’s the early nineties, and radar detectors are still popular.

“Look at that yard!” Grandpa yells, drawing our attention to a house displaying cutouts of Alvin and the Chipmunks singing carols. We press our faces up against the station wagon’s windows.

“Why did we have to leave the house?” Christopher asks.
“To see the lights, of course,” says Grandpa.

“The lights will still be here tomorrow.”

“But they’re brightest on Christmas Eve, you know.” Grandpa looks at us in the rearview mirror and grins. The windows get foggy from our breathing.

The second memory never felt very real. It may not have happened at all. My grandpa and I are the only ones in it. I’m still really young, maybe six or seven. It’s dark outside. He tells me we are going to see his sisters. He parks the station wagon in a cemetery. Years later I will see the cemetery on 76th Street just north of North Avenue and think it’s the same cemetery, but I don’t know if his sisters are actually buried there. We get out of the car and hike through the snow. We stand in front of two gravestones, each with red flowers placed on it as though someone else has just been to visit, too.

“These are my sisters,” he says. “We have to remember them.”

The memory ends abruptly, like someone switching off a TV mid-commercial.

***

Back in the van in South Dakota we see friendlier hills, colors dripping down them like melting popsicles, reddish-pink to orange to yellow. I’m a person who always feels better when I’m moving, even if my destination is ambiguous. We drive out of the Badlands to a town called Wall, and eventually on towards the Black Hills. I’ve never been to South Dakota before, despite the fact that my family used to travel when I was a kid. My dad made it his goal to visit as many national parks as possible during my childhood, and so we went to Yosemite, Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, Zion. Kings Canyon, Sequoia, Acadia, Arches, the Grand Tetons. Then we went to Mexico, Canada, Florida, Massachusetts, Washington, Europe. It was important to see things. To be there. To expand your mind. I have this feeling
of expansion as we drive west. I imagine my store of memories getting larger, a stockpile building up in my cerebral cortex, my understanding of the world expanding outward.

My parents inherited this need to travel from their parents. My grandparents traveled all over the world when they were young. The pyramids. The Great Wall of China. Machu Picchu. My grandma traveled with chopsticks in her purse, and my grandpa showed off his skills with them whenever we went to a Chinese restaurant. Grandpa liked to tell a story about how he ran in front of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. The story always charmed people. In college, I took a former boyfriend to have dinner with my parents and grandparents, and I’d warned him about how my grandfather can be a cranky conservative. But after hearing his travel stories, the boyfriend concluded that Grandpa was “cute.”

I listen to an NPR podcast as we head towards the Black Hills. The land is hillier, but it looks dry. Yellow and empty. The voice of Jad Abumrad informs me that the topic of this week’s Radiolab is the afterlife. But in a physical way, he says. What exactly happens to our bodies at the moment of death? When are we actually dead? Then what? He and his co-host Robert Krulwich discuss death through history. First a person was considered dead when breathing stopped. Then it was when the heart stopped. Now it’s when the brain stops. But then they interview a researcher who studied people in comas and vegetative states. If their brains were hooked up to some machinery and someone asked them to imagine playing tennis, the motor cortex would light up as if the person was running along the baseline and returning forehands. So what does that mean, they ask? So what does it mean if you are losing your grasp on your own brain, I wonder? What does being alive mean when your thoughts and memories and identity have left your brain? Are they still in there somewhere? ***
On Friday we arrive at a ranch in South Dakota. A ranch owned by a writer. She takes us up to the top of a hill on her property, a hill that overlooks miles and miles of hilly land. She tells us it’s located in the rain shadow, the area east of the Rocky Mountains that doesn’t get much rain. We sit in a circle on the rocky ground near a badger hole.

“The only way an artist can fail is to quit,” she says. My pen hovers over my notebook.

It’s windy at the top. I like the feeling of movement, the way the breeze grabs at my hair. If you look closely, the cumulus clouds slowly expand like marshmallows in a microwave. Up higher and higher into the stratosphere, hovering over the pine-covered hills like a man-o-war floating over the ocean. The wind is out of the west, hot, dry air blowing through the prairie grasses. Shade doesn’t exist here. Just sun and grass and sky. The sage is the color of mint and there are fields of alfalfa. The alfalfa flowers are purple, but different shades. Lighter, darker, more and less vibrant. The saturation turned up on some of them. Yellow butterflies hover around the blossoms. I have that feeling of expansion again. Of being out on the edge of something, facing something new and unknown. It’s like we go outward from where we come from, seeing and exploring as much of the world as we can, and then decades later we end up back at our kitchen tables, all of this acquired knowledge fading away. It’s all circular. Now that my grandfather has gotten back to the beginning, to the place he came from, he’s forgotten everywhere he’s been. I come out here to see. To experience. To breathe. But I’ll get to go back, and for now, take the images with me.

***

On Saturday night we drive through winding national park roads to a spot deep in the Black Hills. I get carsick. Buffalo and elk pass through our headlights. We are going to listen
to the elk bugle. On a normal day I would feel nervous about walking into the woods in the dark, only a small flashlight in hand. I turn out the flashlight, and we hike up a path through the trees. The only light is from the full moon. At the top of a ridge, we sit down and look out over the mist-covered hills. They are just fuzzy, dark shapes, and my eyes can’t quite focus on anything specific. I feel like I’m not wearing my glasses. The moon gives the scenery an eerie glow. Six of us sit in a row, waiting. Watching. We haven’t seen the Black Hills in the daylight yet. Earlier in the day I asked if the Black Hills are really black. Negative, I was told. They’re just covered in pines. Tonight we get to see the Black Hills when they’re actually black. The minutes pass by. This place feels so remote, so far away from my daily life. In the end we don’t hear the elk bugle, only the howls and cackles of coyotes.

We return to the Black Hills on Sunday, and spend the day climbing up Harney Peak. Most of the afternoon goes by as we hike to the top, past boulders and pine trees, over a dirt path sparkling with flakes of mica. Overhead the leaves of aspen trees rustle like confetti in the sunlight. The quiet of the forest is calming. My backpack sticks to my skin in the heat, and I envy the hikers going back down the path in shorts.

I stop at an overlook with four other students. We take turns snapping pictures of each other with a massive pine-covered hill behind us.

“Can you fit me and those trees in if you stand over there?” one of us asks. “What if I stand on this rock? Is that better?”

We each take off our sunglasses and smile for the camera. We take a couple group shots. We take pictures of trees, distant hills, the path, though the camera flattens it out, making it look less steep. But we take them anyway. Maybe because pictures are tangible. We can take them home with us.
Up at the top, miles of hills lie before us. We’re up above everything. The peak is rocky, and hikers sit out on ledges, looking west. Someone says if you look west you can see Wyoming. There’s a breeze that makes the heat bearable. I take a picture of a sign that says this is the highest peak between the Rockies and the Pyrenees in Europe. I climb up one of the rocks and stand at its highest point. From the top everything is different. All of these people coming to this remote place. It’s like some sort of pilgrimage. There are even red, yellow, and white prayer flags tied to the few pines managing to grow out of this granite.

Two blonde children—siblings—run past on the rocks. The boy says, “This was a long hike. I’ll never forget it.”

“Me neither,” says his younger sister, hurrying after him.

When you are up here it seems like somehow the world will be different when you go back down, but then you will get back down and it will be mostly the same. You’ll get back in your van, drive back to your dinner, your bed. But I can’t completely forget…I won’t. I still know what to do with a spoon.

***

My great-grandparents immigrated to America from Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century. I found one of their names at Ellis Island when I visited last summer. Kuzma Knapke. Point of entry: New York, New York. They ended up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where my grandfather grew up. His two younger sisters died of ear infections as toddlers. I remember a black and white photograph of his mother kneeling next to their graves, looking like life had beaten her. In his early twenties, my grandpa joined the “service,” as he used to say, and spent time in the Philippines during World War II. He came home and married my grandmother. He worked at a company called Cutler-Hammer and got
his engineering degree. My grandma worked in a bank. They had three children, Paul Jr., Patricia, and Robert, my dad, and moved to a house on 72nd Street. It’s still there. It’s the white one with green shutters and a basketball hoop above the garage. The one with the big gardenia bush out front. I’m told my uncle Paul gave it to my grandma as a Mother’s Day gift decades ago.

My grandfather was Mr. Fix-It. He was always tinkering with things in the garage, and later with things in his boat house. No repairperson needed. He was the one who kept score at cards games. We used to play Golf, Hearts, and Poker with pennies. He almost always won. We always accused him of cheating since he was the scorekeeper, but he just chuckled. When we played Hearts he always “shot the moon,” getting all the hearts and the queen of spades, and sticking each of us with fifty points. “I just make sure I have all the cards accounted for,” he’d say.

***

My grandfather likes to tell a story. He and my grandmother were traveling in Spain. They had been staying on the southern coast for a few weeks with some friends. My grandpa rented a piso near the water. After leaving the coast they traveled north. Eventually they made it to Pamplona, where the annual Running of the Bulls, la corrida de toros, takes place. It was the 6th of July, the first day of the festival of San Fermin. He describes the narrow, brick streets and the six-story buildings built one right next to the other. The buildings painted slightly muted pinks and greens and oranges, the ones with the tiny metal balconies outside of every window. Then he moves on to how he ran through the streets of the city, past doorways and cafés and plazas. He pauses with raised eyebrows. He grins and says, “I ran in front of the bulls the day before the bulls ran. I was pretty far in front of those bulls.”
He chuckles to himself, straightens his glasses, and pats his pocket protector with the mechanical pencil in it for crosswords. The bulls start running through the streets everyday for eight days…beginning on July 7th. My grandfather liked to tell a story.

Alzheimer’s doesn’t have respect for your memories or your stories. It doesn’t have respect for your relationships. It doesn’t have respect for your hobbies. Your favorite TV shows. Your opinions. Your dedication and hard work. It has no respect for your well-groomed lawn, your garden, your car. It doesn’t respect your privacy. It will take away yesterday’s newspaper, the plots and characters on your bookshelf. It will take away your self-sufficiency. Your handiness. Your ability to remember that you put the phone in your sweatshirt pocket. It will take your card games and your recipes and your political affiliation. The names of your grandchildren. Your voice.

You become a child again. You are dependent on someone else to cook your meals, wash your clothes, give you your pills and vitamins. If left on your own, you forget to turn off the stove, you wear the same sweater every day, you forget to cut your fingernails. Your body gets smaller. You have to drink nutrition shakes like Ensure to get enough calories.

***

Grandpa sits in a rocking chair on a Sunday afternoon, surrounded by his wife, his children, and their children. He looks at the coffee table, not contributing to the conversation. He only responds when my grandma addresses him directly.

“We had a good time, didn’t we Paul?”

“Hmm?” he looks up, refocusing on the people around him.

“We had a good time at breakfast last week with Mrs. Hamilton?”
“Ah, yes. Good time.” He resumes his study of the coffee table, eyes blank. Grandma takes a deep breath and looks out the window.

She leans toward my mom and says, “I just hope the Lord takes us together. We need each other. It would be so lonesome.” Her voice is tight. She looks back out the window at the finches on her bird feeder. I try to imagine how it feels when your spouse is no longer able to remember much of your sixty-plus years together.

“I asked him to pull the weeds out of the flower boxes the other day. He started pulling up all my onions.”

***

I sit in the last row of our fifteen-passenger van reading about pedagogy for the freshman composition course I teach. The radio is turned up too loud, the host of a talk show yelling about the president. The station is abruptly switched, and the sound of Native American drumming overwhelms the backseat. I have a round-trip ticket in this bumpy van, and it’s taking me back to central Iowa.

Had he known he wouldn’t remember any of it, would my grandfather have bothered going? Would he have tried to climb up one of the pyramids and got yelled at by Egyptian guards? Would he have stood at the Great Wall, in awe that it still stands so many hundreds of years later? Would he have visited the Tower of London and seen the Crown Jewels? I think he would have. He doesn’t say much now, but I think he would say go. Go and see as much as you can. We can’t become stuck before we have to be. We can’t be like the grasshopper on my tent, fruitlessly struggling against forces too large. Maybe one day we will suddenly find ourselves trapped between two walls, unable to move outside of our
shrunken world. But not yet. As Grandpa used to say, no matter what his cards were, “Ow-wa! I’m shooting the moon!”

As the van heads east towards Minnesota I recall a moment from a day or two ago. I was sitting on the front steps of the house we stayed at on the ranch, shucking corn. I pulled the green leaves off. Then I pulled off the silky, white strings covering each ear. The air was calm, and I looked out over fields where cattle and pronghorns grazed. I remembered Saturdays in summer as a small child when we would go to my grandparents’ house. It was my job to shuck the corn. I remembered a home video filmed circa 1990. In it my cousins and I, just toddlers and grade-schoolers, run around the house, bouncing in front of the camera. My Aunt Sue and Uncle Paul are there, and their three daughters. They haven’t moved to Ohio yet. My Aunt Patty and Uncle Chris are there. They’re still married. My parents are there, my dad holding the camera, my mom trying to stay out of the frame. Everyone looks younger, and many people have more hair. My grandpa dances around the living room with my brother and me, while I pretend to be a rabbit, jumping up and down. There are neighbors whose names I don’t know sitting at the kitchen table, laughing with my grandma. Her brother is there, too. Someone is out front grilling on the newly built deck. It’s the middle of July in Wisconsin. Soon someone will go out to water ski or use the paddle boat.

I think about moments like this. Moments when it’s okay. People are together and at least for this moment everyone is happy. We’ll go outside and light fireworks off the pier. The kids will run around with sparklers. Maybe it’s not perfect, but it’s pretty good. Despite the video camera, you can’t really freeze moments.
We finally reach the Iowa border after nine or ten hours in the van. I think about memories, about the way they slowly fade, and about how they take on new shapes as we relive them. I think about the way they sometimes deteriorate beyond repair, broken synapses in a broken brain. I picture being at the top of Harney Peak. That feeling of being up at the top. I want to hang on to that memory until I’m forced to let go. I’ll write it down, just like I write my memories of my grandpa down. I want to remember. And I want to keep climbing.
Section I:
Being Better, That’s All

Your dad used to work at the Kohl’s on Bluemound Road when he was a teenager. He unloaded the trucks after school. Took all the boxes out and put them on the loading dock. Boxes of tomatoes, boxes of bananas, boxes of boxed cakes. Everything. He was a hard-working teenager, never complained. Grandma flips to the next page of her Taste of Home cooking magazine.

It’s not a Kohl’s anymore, Grandpa says. He squints at the TV listings in the newspaper. What’s that new grocery store? A Pick ‘n’ Save? I think it’s a Pick ‘n’ Save.

What a shame, Grandma says. The workers at Kohl’s were always so nice. And the store had nice produce.

What’s the difference? Grandpa asks. He points the remote at the TV. Those stores are all the same anyway.

I just remember the Kohl’s being better, that’s all.

If you say so. Grandpa shrugs and smiles.

Grandma turns another page in her magazine.
Cooking Without Recipes, Shopping Without Lists

“This place is massive,” John said. He shaded his eyes from the Arizona sun and gazed toward the automatic sliding doors of Lee Lee’s Oriental Market.

“No kidding,” I said. “I’ve never seen an Asian grocery store like this. They’re always small and hidden so you barely notice.”

“Yeah, like the ones in Ames. Little hole-in-the-wall places.”

Rows and rows of parked cars and runaway shopping carts led up to a large building that looked more like a Target. The words “Lee Lee” in big block letters towered over us as we hurried across the pavement. The sun beat on the blacktop, and I could practically see the heat radiating up at us. Since this was my first visit to Arizona in the summer, I’d never experienced the feeling of being baked by the air before. In the Midwest where I’m from, we try to park close to buildings in the winter so we don’t freeze on the way in. In Arizona, residents do the same thing, except in the summer, so they don’t melt.

“How did you find this place?” John asked.

“Google. Popped up when I searched for Indian grocery stores,” I said.

“I’m not surprised.”

We stopped to let a man wearing one of those straw hats I imagine people wear in rural China push a stack of shopping carts into the store. Half a dozen people darted around him, in or out of the air conditioning spilling out onto the sidewalk.

I found Lee Lee because I wanted to buy garam masala, a spice mixture used in a lot of Indian cooking, specifically in samosas—a fried appetizer sort of like a dumpling filled with potatoes and peas—which I was learning to make. Well, more specifically I was
learning to make samosa filling; making dough and then frying the samosas sounded like a pain, and the filling tasted good on its own.

Cooking had become my new hobby, in part because I felt like my culinary skills were lacking. Plus, my boyfriend John liked to cook, so I was learning more about food from him. Previously, I’d been one of those people who always followed recipes when I cooked. I was too afraid not to. I measured out teaspoons and tablespoons and quarter cups, while he laughed and said I thought too much. Just eyeball it, he said. For a while I couldn’t do it. I’m the kind of person who feels obligated to follow instructions. They exist for a reason, after all. But then I discovered worrying about a recipe can be stressful. I tried to make Pad Thai from scratch, but while attempting to double the recipe kept getting the measurements confused. John eventually just started dumping in more salt or oil or tamarind sauce. He managed to improve what I’d done, and the mass of noodles turned out edible, but not great.

At any rate, samosas were one of the things I’d been messing around with, not following a recipe at all, just trying to replicate what I once watched someone else do. So I told John I’d make him my samosas. Okay, he’d said. Sounds good. But I’d caught a glimpse of the smirk on his face, the raised eyebrows. John liked to turn things into challenges, or at least I believed he did. So I needed to prove I could make foreign food, and to do that I needed to find the right spices in this warehouse-sized spice depot.

Inside, the grocery store had a high ceiling and fifteen or so aisles labeled according to the country the aisle’s contents pertained to. A dozen cash registers—surprisingly all open and with lines of people waiting to pay—stood between us and the aisles. It was a Sunday, but the amount of people at Lee Lee still surprised me. To the far right, a portion of the store was dedicated to art and furniture: framed paintings and mirrors and table lamps. The air
smelled like fish, which made both John and me wrinkle our noses and breathe through our mouths.

“Wow. You think they sell spices?” I joked.

“Probably every spice you can imagine.” John put his hands on his hips. I had a feeling we were about to shop systematically. Go up and down every aisle to get the lay of the land. See what the store had to offer. Chart uncharted territory. That’s the way John took in new things.

“Probably sold in bulk, too. Cheaper than at the Albertsons.” I’d checked for curry powder at the grocery store near John’s apartment, and an ounce of curry powder cost more than five dollars.

I turned left to head toward the aisle labeled “India,” but as expected John grabbed my arm.

“We have to start at the produce. Then we’ll go down the aisles.” He grinned. We turned to the right and headed toward the produce where a handwritten sign with an arrow on it read “MANGOES.”

Even though I wanted to know right away that I would be able to get the spices I needed, John’s method usually had its merits. New places introduce people to new ideas, new ways of thinking. I always ended up seeing more with him than I might have otherwise.

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The surprising thing to me about grocery stores in Arizona is that the first thing you see in the produce section—at least in the summer—are mangoes. A display of mangos, usually next to a display of avocados or berries, always comes first, a colorful mountain of fruit.
Besides that, though, the Albertsons grocery store in Phoenix did not differ much from the Hy-Vee grocery stores I shopped at in Iowa or the Pick ‘n’ Saves in Wisconsin where I grew up. American grocery stores are expansive, bathed in fluorescent light, and play a mix of slightly outdated pop music on repeat. Those stores require elaborate planning, down to the minute details. That music is chosen because of its tempo. It slows down the average person’s rate of blinking, putting them into a trance-like state, consequently slowing down the average cart’s pace and increasing sales. And the stores are purposefully organized. The produce section always comes first so customers have a feeling of freshness and health; if you buy broccoli and brussels sprouts on your way into the store, you’re more likely to justify purchasing sugary cereal and potato chips later on. The milk resides way at the back of the store, as does the pharmacy, so that even if you’re only stopping in for one or two items, you’ll still have to see all the other options and will be more likely to splurge on them. For the same reason, popular brands are placed in the middle of aisles, so customers have to do more searching to find them. Most people don’t bring shopping lists, but because of the store’s arrangement, even those who do usually end up making unintended purchases. The average grocery store has more than 30,000 items on its shelves, and companies fight for the best spots—51-53 inches off the floor, which is the average person’s eye height—paying between $5,000 and $20,000 for prime spaces.

If you go to a health food store, something like a Whole Foods or a Trader Joe’s, there might be some differences, but on the whole, American grocery stores are American grocery stores. Large, and built to make you buy. The only regional differences seem to be what produce gets showcased. You might also note the differences in off-brand foods (the ones usually located on the bottom shelves). In Wisconsin, for example, Roundy’s makes the
“generic” food, while in Arizona if you don’t want to buy the more expensive brands, you might buy Safeway Select or Jewel.

In Milwaukee where I spent my childhood, the most common grocery stores are Pick ‘n’ Save and Sentry. Kohl’s Foods also used to populate many street corners until I was in my late teens, but eventually closed when the company decided to focus on their clothing stores. My high school was located near a Kohl’s where Paul, my boyfriend at the time, worked. My friend Jess and I used to walk to the store during his shifts and buy candy or Snapple. Paul had to wear a button down shirt with bright aqua and orange stripes and a big red and white name tag clipped to his pocket. I probably still have that name tag in a box somewhere along with other tokens of my adolescence.

“How’s it going, Pauly?” Jess and I would say as we thumped our purchases onto the belt at the checkout.

“It’s going. Only two more hours until my shift is over.” He took his time putting our drinks in front of the scanner. He caught the eye of the cashier at the next checkout lane, grinned, and nodded.

“Good thing you came to my lane,” he said. “Andy and I still have our goofy game going where we count to see who gets more good-looking girls to come to our register during our shift.”

“Who’s winning?” Jess asked. She smoothed her skirt. Jess always wore skirts, but not the way girly girls wore skirts. She often bought hers at the thrift store or made them herself. She said she just didn’t like wearing pants.

“I am. By five now.” He gave Andy a friendly wave. Andy smirked and shook his head.
In college a few years later, when I lived on Marquette University’s campus in downtown Milwaukee, there wasn’t a grocery store nearby, so we either had to take the bus to the Pick ‘n’ Save on the city’s east side or convince someone they wanted to give us a ride. My friends and I started out shopping at Pick ‘n’ Save’s Metro Market location, an upscale version of its regular stores, which offered an extensive cheese and baked good selection, and where the young professional East Siders supposedly shopped. The East Side was the part of town you lived in if you were in your twenties, trendy, and didn’t want to live in the suburbs like your parents. At the Metro Market, people supposedly met other yuppies in the making and could buy food to reflect their status. The store even had an olive bar, where patrons could select which olives they wanted from a dozen options. A year or two later we discovered Pick ‘n’ Save had another location only a couple blocks away, hidden from Van Buren, a main street, by a bunch of apartment buildings. We called it the Budget Save because most things were cheaper than at the Metro Market.

Pick ‘n’ Save used to have a discount card that I had attached to my keys. Special items were on sale for members—which meant little because you didn’t have to pay for the card, just fill out a form with your name and address—so when the cashier scanned your card after he or she rung up all your purchases, the machine went beep beep beep and dollars disappeared off your bill. I found it amusing that when my card was scanned it wasn’t even tied to me. Paul had filled out the form for the cards when we were in high school, and I still used that card for groceries through college until the store finally cancelled the program when we graduated. Perhaps the oddest part of all is that if I dug my keys out of my purse, they’d still have an old, worn Pick ‘n’ Save card attached to them, bent and faded next to a
card for another grocery store or pharmacy. Like the blue dinosaur keychain beside them, I have never gotten around to taking it off.

Grocery stores aren’t places we spend much time thinking about, unless we try to plan the quickest route through the store or find the shortest checkout line or get the most free samples of cheese and frozen chicken breast on Sundays. They’re the kinds of places we’re used to because we visit them all the time. We’re used to purchasing the items and brands we want and finding them in specific places. The peanut butter is by the bread. The hair care products are by the pharmacy. The spices are in the baking aisle next to the boxed cakes next to the cupcake pans next to the powdered sugar. American supermarkets are about neatness and classification and order. (And on another level, they’re about monitoring you, seeing how long you stand in the cereal aisle, whether you’re more likely to buy off-brand or regular, sale items or full-price. They’re about enticing you to spend money within their walls.) Buying groceries obviously wasn’t always like this—a huge commercial production—but now it’s what we’re used to. Trying to buy groceries somewhere else can be overwhelming. It takes adaptation, just like cooking without a recipe.

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“Whoa, what are these?” John picked up what looked like a small, green, spiny cucumber. I didn’t know whether it was a fruit or a vegetable. It looked more like a sea urchin, like something you’d find on the bottom of the ocean, than something you’d want to eat.

“The sign says it’s a bitter melon,” I said. “Whatever that is.”

“I kind of want to buy one just because it’s so weird looking. I want to know what the middle of it looks like.”
“How about these?” I pointed to a pile of pink, prickly circular fruits the size of large grapes. “I ate one of those in Mexico. Adán, the man whose house I lived in, took me to the market, cut one open, and told me to eat it. It’s white inside, the consistency of a grape.”

“Yeah, I’ve had those before, too. I forget what they’re called,” John said. “There’s a big pit in the middle you have to watch out for.”

“I remember it tasting sweet, but looking kind of like an eyeball. You know, the white fleshy part surrounding a dark pit in the middle.” I remembered giving Adán a skeptical look as he said *eat it! eat it!* I knew I couldn’t refuse.

“Gross,” John said.

I stepped to the side to see what the fruit’s container said, but couldn’t find a label. The whole produce section was filled with items like this, objects we couldn’t identify. Bins of herbs and roots and leafy lettuces. Piles of bok choy. A mound of coconuts with their brown hairy surface peeled off. A box of plantains in many stages of ripeness: green, yellow, brown. Another bin contained what looked like oversized cucumbers, two or three times the size of a normal one. This store’s system and contents were unfamiliar to me, and for a moment I worried I might not be able to find what I was looking for. All around us people pushed carts and grabbed fruits and vegetables, clearly knowing which ones they wanted and what they were for. Part of me wanted to ask what they planned to do with those prickly fruits or massive roots, but I kept my mouth shut. I felt out of place as it was, and confirming that by asking what to do didn’t seem like a good option. Better to pretend to fit in, even if it was clear I did not.

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When we were undergraduates, one of my college roommates worked in the International Office on campus where foreign study abroad students filled out paperwork and participated in cultural immersion activities. She got to know a number of foreign students this way and reported that when some employees took a group of Spanish students to the Pick ‘n’ Save for groceries, the students stood at the front of the store with their mouths open, baffled by the size of the place. Spanish grocery stores, my roommate said, were tiny by comparison and had many fewer options. Apparently the students stood in the cereal aisle for ten minutes, overwhelmed by the dozens of boxes of Lucky Charms and Frosted Flakes and Cheerios. On the way home, one student declared that American supermarkets offer way too many options. It’s simpler when you only have to choose between a few, she said. American grocery stores typically house 150 cereal brands on their shelves, so it was no surprise the Spanish students were overwhelmed. I often find the cereal overwhelming, walking up and now the aisle twice just trying to find the type of cereal I already know I want to buy. Additionally, stores try to complicate the decision process by organizing cereal by brand rather than by type, making it more difficult to compare prices for similar options.

I studied abroad in Madrid, Spain, the following year with my roommate, Paul, and a few of our other friends. That was the first time I really experienced grocery shopping in another country. The first time any of us realized what an obscene amount of choices we have in an American grocery store and how commercial the purchasing process has become. Everything we buy in a store at home we’ve seen advertisements for. Billboards for Gatorade. Commercials for Raisin Bran. We go in the store knowing exactly what to expect and exactly what we want.
When I entered the Caprabo, the local grocery store in my neighborhood in Madrid, I felt foreign. The store was more the size of your average Walgreen’s, but felt even smaller because the ceiling was low. The aisles were smaller and closer together. None of the brands were recognizable. The produce either came shrink-wrapped in bunches or was handed to you by a man wearing a white coat and gloves. You pointed at the apple or orange you desired and he picked it up and handed it to you. No touching the fruit allowed. Caprabo’s logo was a white Pacman shape with a mouth, poised next to the lettering and about to eat the store’s name, and I imagined the Caprabo Pacman biting me if I attempted to see which plums were ripe.

I went to the store with the two American girls who lived in my apartment. The three of us were placed with the same Spanish family because we were all vegetarians, something the Spanish generally don’t understand, especially older Spaniards. Mercedes, our host, housed students from all over the world, and often had a half dozen of them living with her and her daughters at a time. Because of our numbers, Mercedes didn’t want to be troubled with cooking for all of us, especially with our special “American girl” diets, so we were supposed to grocery shop for ourselves and use the kitchen when someone else wasn’t busy cooking or doing laundry.

Cherise, Maia, and I didn’t really know where to start in the Caprabo, so we moved as a pack, one of us finding pasta sauce or cereal, and then the others deciding yes, that’s probably a good thing to buy. I felt exposed in the store for the foreigner I was. Not only did I look like I didn’t belong—I may have brown hair, but I’m way too pale to pass for Spanish—I didn’t know what to buy. I looked left and right, thinking the old woman by the
bananas or the young guy by the lettuce might be glancing at me as I tried to figure out if the box I held labeled “muesli” might contain something like granola.

“Do you guys drink milk? Do you think we should get one to share? For cereal?” Maia asked, holding up a container that said “sin grasa.”

“Yeah, we should do that,” I said.

“Is this the right one? What’s grasa?” Maia and Cherise both turned to me; over the previous few days we had discovered my Spanish was the best.

“I think that one’s fat free. Probably like skim.”

“Okay, good.” Maia put the milk in her shopping cart, which was a cross between a cart and a basket. It was slightly larger than a basket you would find at an American grocery store and it sat on the floor. You pulled it with a long handle.

We ended up with a hodgepodge of items that didn’t add up to great meals. Pasta and broccoli and yogurt. Things that would be easy to cook because Mercedes said the oven didn’t work. We either had to use the microwave or the gas stove, which Cherise was afraid of because there were no built-in pilot lights and we had to ignite the burners with a lighter.

Eventually we got better at shopping. I figured out which types of yogurt were the good ones. I settled on a brand of bread. Peanut butter was hard to find in Spain, but I had heard this ahead of time, and my mom, who likes to send packages, mailed some to me. Maia and I discovered that Maria cookies—which are round, say “Maria” on them, and are a cross between a cookie and a cracker—are cheap and delicious and often labeled “digestive.” We got better at knowing ahead of time what we wanted to buy, but probably never appeared comfortable in the store or bought the really good stuff.
We did also discover El Corte Inglés, a grocery store combined with a department store, not too far from our piso at the Nuevos Ministerios metro stop. In El Corte Inglés, the brands were still all different, but the number of options increased exponentially. Large, brightly lit aisles offered chips and specialty candies and frozen meats. The thing about Spain, though, is that you can only buy a) as much as you can carry home, since no one drives a car, and b) as much as you can fit in your limited refrigerator space. We saw lots of little old women towing grocery carts, always decorated with colorful plaid fabrics, around the city. Mercedes had a grocery cart, but we didn’t, so we had to buy what we could carry in two hands. El Corte Inglés had more offerings, but also meant we had to be pickier. We ended up deciding Caprabo was the easier option.

Paul lived across the city from me with a woman named Gloria who cooked his meals for him, so he didn’t have as much of a grocery issue. He was the kind of person who liked to explore, though, so he often stopped at the Carrefour—pretty similar to our Caprabo—on his way home from the university. Gloria told Paul I could come over in the evenings when she was out, so one afternoon I rode the purple train with him all the way to his neighborhood, Vinateros. Vinateros was still full of tall apartment buildings and corner stores, but seemed a bit more open. A place where it was a little easier to exhale. Madrid was a city with a clear center—there was a marker in one of the downtown plazas that pointed out the exact geographical center of the city—and all streets led to that plaza, Sol, the sun. The center bustled and the old buildings pressed up against the narrow streets. Much of Madrid felt like this, but as you got out toward the edges, like Vinateros, it began to feel less cramped.

The two of us walked through the Carrefour’s front doors and a woman wearing a security guard’s uniform gestured toward a wall of lockers.
“We have to put our bags in those,” Paul said. “You have a Euro coin? We need one as a deposit for the locker.” He unzipped his backpack and dug around for a coin.

“I’ve got one,” I said and pulled a shiny gold and silver Euro out of my pocket.

“Change from the cafeteria this morning. I need to stop drinking those café con leches or I’m going to become a coffee drinker when we get back home.” Normally I didn’t drink coffee, but coffee in Spain was basically a shot of espresso, milk, and two huge sugar packets. It tasted good, so it was becoming a bad habit.

“I need to stop eating all those pastries, those neapolitanos, or I’m going to be fat when we get home.”

I laughed and shoved my bag into the tiny locker.

“Not kidding,” Paul said. He stuffed his bag in after mine and shut the locker door. “Okay, let’s go find some Pascual.”

Paul and I discovered Pascual one of our first days in Madrid because it was sold out of the vending machine at Hostal Marlasca, the hostel we stayed at when we first arrived. Pascual combined juice—usually orange or pineapple or mango—with milk. At first this sounded weird, but it tasted great. It came in an oversized juice box with a foil wrapper. Thirsty and not knowledgeable about the area, we caved and bought them. Now we bought them all the time.

I followed Paul past the produce, through a narrow aisle filled with cookies, to an aisle of bottled drinks. We chose to ignore the fact that it was strange that Pascual didn’t require refrigeration even though it contained milk.

“Ah-ha! They have pineapple. They were out the other day.” He grabbed two. “One for now, one for later.”
I took a couple Pascuals, too, and we headed through the frozen foods section.

“Hey,” Paul said. “You want to get a frozen pizza? Gloria will be out for dinner, and she probably put out some leftover squash or something. I can eat that tomorrow for lunch.”

“Yeah, that would be awesome. I miss pizza.”

Next to us, a freezer offered a few varieties of frozen pizza, most of them containing meat. Paul opened the door and automatically reached for the five cheese variety.

Having Paul with me in Spain made things easier, not only because it gave me English-speaking company and knew my eating habits, but because he provided familiarity. That may or may not have been the greatest thing to have in a foreign country, since you probably learn a lot more—about speaking a foreign language, navigating the cities, exploring the grocery store—when you’re on your own. But having a frozen pizza with Paul, even if it wasn’t Jack’s or Tombstone, was nice. It was nice to be together and foreign instead of alone and foreign.

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After the produce section at Lee Lee’s—where John and I picked out some bananas—came the seafood section. By that point we had adapted to the store’s fishy smell, but the odor in the fish and meat section was overwhelming. Tanks of live lobsters, crabs, and eight-inch-long tilapia stood in front of us. The fish opened and closed their mouths and swam against a nonexistent current. Three kids pressed their hands and faces to the glass, trying to catch the attention of the doomed fish. A butcher’s counter was next to the tanks on the left, and people gestured and shouted out orders. A freezer contained trays of shrimp and sardines and cuts of meat.

“Uck,” I said. “The smell’s too much.”
“Agreed,” John said. “I’m not big on fish, but apparently Asia is.”

We hurried out of the seafood department to the nearest aisle, which contained baked goods. We quickly discovered most packaged items in the store were only labeled in foreign languages with alphabets we had no chance of deciphering. In Spanish-speaking countries, at least I could usually read the packaging. In the candy aisle, we picked up packages of hard candies, cubes of jelly, chunks of sugar based on their colors and the cartoons decorating their containers.

“I had these gummy cubes in Japan,” John said. “They’re pretty good.”

“Are they vegetarian?” I asked. I turned the package over to look for gelatin in the ingredient list, but the contents were listed only in Japanese.

In the beverage aisle John picked up a grape soda and I got a root beer. We passed cans of Thai iced tea—one of my favorite drinks to get at a Thai restaurant—and juices that came in unusual flavors like papaya and jackfruit.

We roamed up and down each aisle, which after the beverages were organized by country. Products from Korea were in one aisle, followed by China and Vietnam, followed by India and Laos, followed by Thailand and others. More than twenty countries were represented in the store. There were even products from South America and the Caribbean, too. Some products seemed to repeat themselves—rice noodles appeared in numerous aisles, as did spices and sauces—but we were able to find what we were looking for, as well as things we weren’t. While it’s nearly impossible to find garam masala, a spice mixture containing pepper, cloves, cumin, cardamom, cinnamon, and other things, in any other kind of grocery store, I should not have been worried because at Lee Lee I had my pick from half a dozen brands. I chose one that was a decent price (less than four dollars for a good-sized
bottle) and looked like it hadn’t been on the shelf forever; in past experiences, small Asian markets didn’t seem to have much regard for expiration dates. Curry powder was on a shelf in almost every aisle, so I picked out a container that would probably last me years for under three dollars.

“Let’s look at the frozen stuff,” I said after I found my spices. “I bet they have good ice cream.”

“We’ve got two more aisles first,” John said, heading down another aisle of spices and sauces. I smiled at John’s habits, at the way he tried to understand everything.

When we finally got to the frozen foods we gazed at the surprisingly limited ice cream section.

“They have mango ice cream,” I said. “And mochi, like they have at back in Ames.” Shogun was the sushi restaurant in the town where I attended graduate school and where John and I met. A friend of mine waitressed at the restaurant. Because of me and our other vegetarian friends, Shogun had many more vegetarian options than your typical sushi bar.

“Let’s get the mochi,” John said. “Taro is a good flavor. The pink box.”

An Asian woman pushed her cart up next to us, opened the freezer door, and grabbed a box of the taro mochi. She threw it in her cart and sped off down the aisle without looking at us.

“See, I told you that’s the good flavor.” John grinned and reached for the mochi.

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When I taught English in Querétaro, Mexico, one summer during graduate school, I learned that Mexican grocery stores are not like Spanish grocery stores. The Soriana I visited regularly was much more like an American grocery store: spacious, high ceilings, dozens of
aisles. The store had its own pharmacy, which is something that doesn’t happen in Spain where pharmacies are scattered throughout the neighborhoods, marked by green crosses, and keep everything, even Advil and tampons, behind the counter. Soriana even had a savings card like the one I used to have for Pick ‘n’ Save. The strange thing was that even though the store was huge, they hated making change, just like every other store in Mexico. I tried to buy twelve dollars worth of food with the equivalent of a twenty dollar billed and was asked if I had anything smaller.

I got the sense, though, that maybe I was not in the place everyone shopped. The family I lived with shopped primarily at the local outdoor market for all of their produce—everything from melon to squash flowers—and I got the sense most other Mexicans did, too. Erin—the other intern who worked with me—and I visited the market on many occasions, but usually bought things at the Soriana. Maybe just because the place felt more familiar to us.

We stood out even more in the Soriana than I had at the Caprabo in Madrid. At least in Spain I could usually pass as European; in Mexico, I was clearly a gringa. But I also had to do much less grocery shopping in Mexico than I did in Spain because the couple we lived with, Adán and Conchita, cooked all of our meals (and had no problem accommodating a vegetarian!). So we usually went to the store for something specific. One of us needed shampoo or wanted some granola bars to keep on hand during the day. The food was easy enough to navigate, but the pharmacy items usually proved more difficult to find.

“Do you see it by the lotion?” Erin called from the next aisle.

“No luck,” I called back. I scanned the bottles of hand lotion and sunscreen, but saw no aloe vera gel.
Erin and I had gone on a trip into the nearby mountains that involved wearing a bathing suit more than usual, and Erin returned bright red. I assumed finding some after-sun gel or lotion would be easy, but apparently it’s not as common in central Mexico as it is at vacation destinations where tourists burn themselves on a regular basis.

“I can’t find it by the anti-itch medicines either. Damn, my shoulders hurt whenever I move.”

I joined her in the neighboring aisle where she was trying to find a place to put the weight of her shoulder bag that didn’t cause pain.

“We could try the Walmart. Or that grocery store on Juarez Street on the way home.”

When I lived in Madrid I was often unsettled in my surroundings even though I had friends with me. When I spent the summer in Mexico, I was for some reason less concerned. Maybe it was because I felt like I had done the living abroad thing before, or maybe because my Spanish was already passable, even if I had lost my ability to conjugate complex verb tenses in the previous few years.

Sometimes Erin and I wandered around the Soriana just to see what unusual items we could find. We wanted to bring back Mexican candy with us when we returned home, so we started collecting the candy that looked good or amusing. We bought chewy strips of tamarind and chocolate made with tequila. We bought chocolate bars made by Nestle called “Carlos V” that led me to wonder if I should know why Charles the 5th had been important. We saw men selling what looked like giant communion hosts in bright colors on the streets, so we bought some of those, too. (They did end up tasting like communion hosts. We wondered what the appeal was.) One day we found a pink box of chocolate with the picture of a cat on it labeled “lenguas de gato.”
“I’m confused,” Erin said, holding up the box.

“So am I. It says ‘cat tongues.'”

“Seriously? We have to buy them. They’re too weird not to buy.” Erin laughed and put the chocolates in her shopping basket.

“They’re bizarre. Why would they make chocolate shaped like cat tongues? Is there some joke we’re missing? Is there a Mexican tradition of eating cat tongue?” I picked up another box and flipped it over to read the ingredients. I was half concerned they were meant for cats even though they were in the candy aisle next to the Mazapan peanut candy and the Obleas, sandwiches made of the host-like candy and caramel prepared from goat’s milk.

The cat tongues did end up being just chocolate, and we concluded it was not high quality chocolate. The tongues were made of the cheap, waxy stuff used in Crunch bars. But as a quick search of the internet reveals, it turns out that cat tongue chocolate is not even specific to Mexico. Apparently it’s common in Europe and can also be purchased in Japan. Erin and I were baffled we had never encountered it before, but perhaps more baffled cat tongues existed in the first place. Who were the weird ones? Us or everyone else?

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John and I picked a checkout at Lee Lee’s with a fairly short line and began putting our purchases onto the conveyor belt. We took soda, ice cream, bananas, some candy, and my spices out of our basket and they slid away from us before stopping closer to the register, the grape soda toppling over.

“Man, we made really American choices, didn’t we?” John said, shaking his head.

“Yeah, I guess we did.”
The middle-aged couple in front of us, who looked like they could have been vacationers from up north had made more interesting choices than us. They had boxes and boxes of some kind of frozen fish, cans of sauces, packages of either dried fruits or meats—unable to read the label, I couldn’t be sure—and a giant, spiky something from the produce department inside a net, which was presumably for picking it up without stabbing yourself.

“Whoa,” John whispered. “I want to know what that is.”

“I’d guess a fruit?”

The supposed fruit was the couple’s last item on the conveyor belt, and it inched closer to the scanner, wobbling back and forth.

“Let’s see what the screen says when it gets scanned.”

In front of us, the man smiled at the cashier, an Asian boy in his teens.

“Working hard or hardly working?” he asked.

The boy smiled and nodded, clearly not understanding the question. The man asked it again, and the boy nodded again, so the man gave up. The prickly asteroid finally reached the scanner.

“A durian?” I said, reading the screen.

“That thing’s pricey. Thirteen bucks. We’ll have to Google it later.”

The cashier began ringing up our purchases and my eyes settled on the garam masala. *At least I’m trying to do something new,* I thought. *Something not American.* But then I wondered if that just made me look even sillier. A white girl trying to make a food that would probably never resemble an authentic samosa. Plus, what could be more mundane than buying curry? Every white person in that store probably bought curry powder. I couldn’t tell
by looking at the cashier’s face whether he had an opinion one way or the other. The paranoia was probably mostly in my head.

“We could shop at this store for the rest of our lives and still never know what’s good and how to cook it,” John said. He shifted the bag with our sodas and bananas in it to his other hand.

“No kidding. We’d need someone to show us what to buy. Otherwise we could just buy sauce after sauce and try to do something with them and still never get it right.” I hoped later on I would be able to cook something decent-tasting with my new spices. I glanced at John, but he gazed through the sliding doors to the parking lot.

Later, when we Googled the durian, we learned it’s a fruit from southeast Asia with a yellow or red interior (depending on the type) that many people think has a terrible odor, described by some as dirty socks or rotten vegetables. Our search revealed nothing about what the couple in front of us in line actually planned to do with the fruit. They must have known something we didn’t. Maybe they had been world travelers or chefs or shopped at Lee Lee for years.

When Paul worked at Kohl’s he used to say you could tell a lot about somebody by the things they buy at the grocery store. Some people always bought the stuff that was on sale. Some people only bought health food. Some bought Roundy’s brand. Some bought dozens of tins of cat food and a head of lettuce. Some bought nothing but frozen pizzas and cocoa puffs. Even when he couldn’t figure his customers out, Paul said their purchases at the very least made him ask questions. Why, for instance, would someone need nothing but cat food and lettuce? It made you think, he said.
I think, too, that the way we shop says something about us as a society. In the United States we like everything big, bright, and over-the-top. People don’t think like that everywhere. And when we end up in other places trying to navigate the ways other people consume, we feel out of place, foreign, uncertain whether what we are holding contains cereal or something else. Learning to operate in a place you don’t normally go is like learning to speak another language. The language of wanting, making choices, buying. The language of not touching the fruit, whether chocolate cat tongues are a joke, and what to do with a spiny, smelly fruit you don’t know how to crack open. You have to know the language to fit in, but like any language, learning it is a process.

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Back at John’s apartment, I dumped spicy-smelling powders onto a frying pan of chopped onions and potatoes. Then I poured some tamarind sauce over the mixture.

“Is that in the original recipe?” John asked. He peered into the pan and squinted.

“No. But I’ve never seen the original recipe. I just watched someone else make this once. But I figure tamarind sauce is often put on top of samosas. At least that’s what I’ve done in Indian restaurants. So I figure why not put it right on the vegetables?” I stirred the mixture with a wooden spoon.

“Smells good.”

“It’s spicy.”

“Good. Remember when you used to worry about recipes?” John grinned, opened the refrigerator, and pulled out the grape soda he bought.

“Oh, ha ha.” I rolled my eyes. “Plans are overrated. I’m adjusting this as I go.”
“Good, that’s good for you,” John said, downing a third of the soda in one gulp.

“Man, grape soda is still delicious.”

In the end, dinner turned out pretty well. A small success experimenting with new food. Perhaps that’s the most I could ask for, since it’s impossible to be great at everything right away, to learn everything you need to know at once.

John smiled as he coughed and downed a glass of water.

“It’s spicy,” he said.

“Good,” I said. “That’s what I was going for.”
2.

*No es Tan Simple*

My first day as a volunteer English tutor during my sophomore year of college, I piled into an old Chevy Cavalier with a few others and ended up at the glass front door of what I hoped was Good Shepherd Christian Church’s activity center. The church building to our left was old and brick with a large stained-glass window facing the street. The activity center’s door mimicked the arched shape of the stained-glass window. A piece of paper taped to the door’s glass read: English Classes begin September 14th, 6pm / Clases de inglés empiezan el 14 de septiembre a las 7.

I had signed up to volunteer as part of a Spanish class at this church located on Milwaukee’s South Side, a community populated mostly by recent immigrants from Latin America. I grew up in Milwaukee, but hadn’t spent much time in that neighborhood aside from trips to some of the Mexican restaurants—La Perla, La Fuente—or the Lopez Bakery where we went on elementary school field trips to practice our Spanish by ordering galletas. So I had never thought much about the South Side—or the people who lived there—before.

The Chevy, which we’d borrowed from my boyfriend Paul’s roommate—Paul volunteered at the church, too—was parked on the street nearby. I glanced back at it, thinking it was probably good we brought that particular car—one of its windows was held together with duct tape because Paul’s roommate had locked his keys in the car and punched in the tiny triangular window to retrieve them. The church’s neighborhood wasn’t the greatest, and I imagined it might be dangerous. Our eyes darted left and right as we hurried across the street.
On the activity center’s front steps, I rocked back and forth from my toes to my heels and stuffed my hands in my jacket pockets. I caught myself biting my lip, one of my bad habits.

A petite, middle-aged woman with thin, chin-length brown hair answered the door.

“Hi, you must be the students from the university.” She smiled and fiddled with one of the buttons on her cardigan sweater. She had a very quiet voice and spoke as if someone might be sleeping in the next room.

“Yes,” I said. She pulled the glass door back as far as it could go, and the other students shuffled in behind me.

“I’m Lynn. My husband Douglas is the pastor here. I’m in charge of the classes.”

Lynn’s face was pale. Even her eyebrows and her blue irises looked too light. She reminded me of a sparrow, fragile and careful in her movements. Her personality—quiet, calm, slightly distant—seemed to match her physical attributes. Later I would find out, though, that she couldn’t have been all that introverted, since she and her husband had spent years living and working at a church in Mexico where they learned to speak Spanish. They’d headed south, showed up on the doorstep of an old adobe building, and with limited language abilities beyond buenos días and gracias, started helping out. They coordinated community outreach, ate tamales and enchiladas with townspeople, and Douglas even learned how to fix busted car engines. When they returned to the United States they decided they wanted to live in a city and work with recent immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin American. This church needed someone to step in and take charge, and Lynn and Douglas decided it was a job for them. This I would gather from short conversations with Lynn mostly. They didn’t talk about it a lot. This is our work, was all Lynn would say. This is what we do.
The clock on the beige wall behind Lynn made a humming sound as the hour hand crept toward the six. The overhead lights emitted a muted glow, giving the tile hallway a yellow hue. A city map and some kids’ drawings were pinned up on a bulletin board. A small boy wearing a red and green striped shirt came bounding around a corner and smashed into the back of Lynn’s legs.

“Lynn!” he yelled. He peered up at us. I played with the zipper of my jacket. For a moment I wished I had someone’s legs to hide behind. Now that I was actually at the church, I felt unqualified to teach anyone anything.

“And this is Raúl,” she said, prying his fingers off her corduroys and taking his hand. “His mother will be in the class tonight. Let me show you where the classes will be.”

We followed Lynn past what looked like the main office. On a wooden crucifix hanging next to the office door, Jesus’ crown was sunflower yellow and his eyes were closed.

“Oh, let me introduce you to Manuel.” She waved to a man standing at a photocopier and he came over.

“Manuel, these are the new university students who are going to help out with the English classes. This is Paul and Courtney and Sam and, I’m sorry, I forgot your name.”

“Katie,” I said.

“Fantastic,” Manuel said with a slight accent. He had neatly cut black hair, wore glasses with thick plastic rims, and was probably in his thirties. “We are excited you are here.”

Raúl waved at Manuel.

“Ah, Raúl! Give me five!” Raúl ran over and gave Manuel a high five, laughing.
“Manuel works with the kids and helps out with technology,” Lynn said. “The kids love him.”

“Oh, and there’s Douglas, our pastor.” A man wearing all black grinned as he walked down the hall toward us. I guessed that he and Lynn were probably in their late forties or early fifties. The first word that popped into my head as Pastor Douglas approached was “jolly”; he strode with a bounce in his step and he smiled with his eyes.

“Welcome,” he said. Behind him hung a series of portraits of the church’s former pastors. They absurdly reminded me of the Harry Potter books where the portraits of former schoolmasters hang in the current headmaster’s office. I wondered how different this place had been—this church, this neighborhood—when some of the men in the oldest portraits were in charge, back when the church was built in the 1920s.

“Hi,” I said. I reminded myself to meet his gaze. The skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled.


The others nodded.

“I’ve got to run since we’ve got a service starting in a few minutes, but we’re glad you could make it.” Pastor Douglas hurried past us down the hall. The paint on the walls peeled along the edges. From far away the sound of a piano drifted toward us.

“Alright, yes, I’ll show you the room,” Lynn said.

Further up the corridor Lynn took us into the “conference room,” which had a few large tables pushed together in the center, a white board, and a coffee pot. The room smelled like elementary school, like old paper and 409 cleaning spray and chalk.
“I’ll leave you all here for a minute while we wait for everyone to arrive. The books we’ll be using are on the table. Feel free to have a seat.” The doorbell rang as she hurried off. The four of us looked at each other. Paul raised his eyebrows at me.

I touched the top book on the stack of textbooks. It was blue and had cartoon pictures of a blackboard and the letters of the alphabet on it. “Learn English!” it said. It looked more like a coloring book than a textbook, and I wondered if adults would find it patronizing. My palms were sweating and I wiped them on my jeans. I’d meant to ask how much experience we were expected to have with teaching. In general, I thought real-world experience like this sounded like a good idea until I was in the experience trying to not look foolish. I’d learned almost everything from books as a child, back when I spent my summers checking out a dozen at the library every week. I carried stacks of Nancy Drew and The Boxcar Children home and sat in a rocking chair devouring them; when I finished one book, I grabbed another from my pile and kept reading. I was more comfortable expanding my horizons through text on paper.

I pulled out one of the metal chairs, and its legs screeched on the tile floor.

“I wish she’d told us what exactly we’ll be doing,” Courtney said, peering at the radiator, which made a clanking noise.

“Should we have told her our Spanish isn’t that great?” Sam asked.

“We’ll be okay,” Paul said, more to me than to the others.

I bit my lip as I held his gaze.

***

“Today we’re going to learn how to introduce ourselves in English, okay?” Lynn smiled, her head bouncing in a continuous nod.
That first class, the lecture was basic. Everyone followed along in the flimsy, blue book as Lynn described how to introduce yourself, how to tell someone where you are from, and how to say your phone number and address.

I sat on a folding chair next to a woman named Irma who spoke little English. Irma couldn’t have been much older than I was, probably in her mid-twenties. Her black hair was held back by a barrette at the base of her neck and she wore a black jacket over a hooded sweatshirt. I would later learn she had a husband and young daughter. After Lynn’s lecture, I tried to help her with the exercises in the textbook.

“My address is 1-2-2-4-1 sixteen street,” Irma said, slowly pronouncing each number. She pronounced her I’s like long E’s. I thought about trying to explain the sounds, but then there was the issue of long versus short vowels, and I decided to drop it for the time being. Pronunciation is never simple, even with words in your own language. As a kid, I’d made a list in a notebook of the words I didn’t know that I came across in the books I read. But rather than look them up in the dictionary, I studied their letters, imagining their pronunciations. Consequently, for months the word “discipline” was a mystery to me, and I imagined the stress on the second syllable and the word’s ending sounding like the word “line.” *DiscIpline.*

Irma raised her eyebrows at me.

“Good,” I said. “Very good. Now, where are you from?” Irma ran her finger from left to right underneath the words in the book.

“I am from Oaxaca, Mexico,” she said, pronouncing the names of the city and country the non-Anglicized way, the way that made them sound softer.
“Good,” I said again. I wasn’t sure if I should speak to her in English or Spanish. I wasn’t sure how much English she knew. When Lynn had asked her if she spoke much English she just shook her head.

Behind Irma, a series of framed drawings of Milwaukee’s neighborhoods hung on the wall. Sherman Park, Mitchell Street, Walker’s Point, University Hill, Avenues West. The drawings looked old, like an art style that had long passed. All the buildings had defined black edges filled in with solid colors. Those images seemed to represent a Milwaukee of the past when the neighborhoods looked different, had different characters, different people.

“And your phone number?” I pointed at the textbook. Irma opened her mouth, then closed it. “What is your phone number?” I mimicked holding a phone.

“Ah. 2-2-4-6-7-7-3 my phone number.”

“Good,” I said again. “Good.”

I scanned the room, briefly studying the face of each student. A pair of young men scrunched up their foreheads, staring at their books. A middle-aged woman moved her lips silently. An old, blind man with a cane sat next to his wife, who read aloud to him from the textbook. He repeated words back to her in surprisingly good English. I knew many people lived in Milwaukee who did not speak English, but I hadn’t found myself in a place filled with them before. Here, I was in the minority, one of the few white native-English speakers, yet the students kept deferring to us for answers. I sat on the edge of my chair and tapped my feet against the floor.

At the end of the evening, back on the sidewalk in front of the car, I blew out my breath, relieved to be going home. A radio played Latin dance music somewhere nearby. We hurried to pile into the car and shut the doors.
A couple weeks later, the dim fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling buzzed as I gazed at the eight students in front of me. They sat at a long foldout table because the church basement—which we occupied because there was a meeting upstairs in the conference room—didn’t have any desks. Their brown eyes all looked back at me, except for the blind man’s in the corner whose were closed. He gripped a cane in his right hand and used it for leverage to shift his weight and sit up in his chair.

I wrote on a white board with a blue marker:

* * *

Yo he hecho la tarea. I have done the homework.

Yo había hecho la tarea. I had done the homework.

Yo habría hecho la tarea. I would have done the homework.

I’d never given complex past tenses like the conditional and past perfect a second thought until I had to regurgitate their conjugations on a quiz in high school or college, but usually I promptly forgot the names of those tenses after handing the half-sheet of paper to my teacher. Now I had to differentiate between them for others, so I needed to understand them better. The Spanish on the left had to equal the English on the right. The words and meanings had to match up, had to align. X needed to equal Y. Learning a language was not simple. (In Spanish, even the word “language” was complex; it had three possible translations: lengua, lenguaje, idioma. Each meant something slightly different. Then try flipping that around, explaining that in English the word “language” covers all of those things.)

An older woman sitting near the door squinted at the board, mouth open. She was so short her feet didn’t touch the floor. She’d tied her dark brown hair back in a bun, but a few
unruly gray strands escaped. I had only just met the woman that evening. (Was her name Rosa? Sara? I couldn’t remember.)

“I no understand,” she said. “¿Hay una clase más fácil?”

“Umm, yes,” I said. I sighed and pressed my lips together. “There’s a more basic class. Down the hall, to the left.” I pointed in the direction of a classroom where other tutors worked with lower-level students. Lynn had to participate in the meeting upstairs, so she had sent the more advanced students with me.

The woman stood, nodded, and shuffled toward the door.

“Good night,” she said, clutching her textbook to her chest.

I smiled at her—a sad smile most likely, the smile of someone who was used to succeeding at most of what she did, but suddenly didn’t know the key to success—before the woman turned and left.

Pastor Douglas popped his head into the room. He smiled, waved, then disappeared again, which I had already come to consider expected behavior from him. I could hear him speaking rapid Spanish to someone in the hallway, and for some reason his language abilities surprised me.

“I think I understand these,” a middle-aged man said, bringing me back to the lesson. I wondered if he was just trying to make me feel better.

“The English is similar to the Spanish, no?” the man asked.

“Yes, these verb tenses actually translate fairly easily,” I said.

“Hecho is ‘I have’ and había hecho is ‘I had,’” he said, eyes on the board. “That is logical. ‘Had’ is, um, más pasado, no?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s more past. Further in the past. Does that make any sense?”
A couple students nodded. Most squinted at me. The wall clock’s hands moved closer
to the eight. *We are learning complex tenses,* I thought. *We have learned complex tenses. We
had learned complex tenses. Class is ending. Class has ended. Class is over.*

***

After teaching classes for a while—and after I’d become slightly more comfortable—
students began asking us for help.

“My car *está roto.* I can’t drive it,” a young woman named Elena said. Her hair was
dyed an orangey-blond color, but the roots grew in brown.

“What’s wrong with it?” Paul asked. He had a fat Spanish-English dictionary in his
left hand, ready to translate away the problem.

Elena explained in Spanish the noise her car made and her theory of what needed to
be fixed. I was doubly confused because not only did I not know the Spanish words for the
parts of a car, I barely knew the terminology in English. Three of us flipped through our
pocket dictionaries as Elena spoke.

“Ah-ha!” I said.

I had lucked out and discovered that *catalizador* meant catalytic converter, and
although I had little idea what that part of a car did, it allowed us to script for Elena what she
should say to a mechanic. Paul jotted down notes for Elena to take with her. I felt like giving
someone a high five because we’d tangibly helped someone out, even if our assistance was
only a small thing. Elena kept smiling and nodding, saying “thank you” over and over.

Another woman named Alma—her accent slightly different, her words more
connected to each other, as if she came from a different part of Mexico—worked at a hotel
and couldn’t figure out what someone had been telling her at work that day.
“There was this word she said,” Alma waved her hands up and down, exasperated. “I did not know what she mean.”

“Well, what was going on? What was the situation?” I asked. I clicked and unclicked the pen I held in my hand, one of the red and blue ones I got when I worked at the college bookstore the year before.

“She pointed at the trash and say the word, and I say yes, I will take it when I clean the room.” Alma pointed at the trash can in the conference room. “But she just keep saying it.”

“What was her tone? Was she angry?”

“Yes, very angry. She say it over and over.”

“What did it sound like?”

“It started with a B, I think. Like ‘busting’ or ‘busing.’” She looked at me like she expected me to miraculously know the word she meant.

“Well,” I said, “‘busting’ could mean, like, breaking. Did the trash bag break?” This seemed unlikely even as I said it, but gave it a shot anyway.

“No, it did not break.” Alma put her hand on her hip. Her English sounded formal; English-language learners often avoid contractions.

“Well, I don’t think she said ‘busing,’ since that would mean something having to do with a bus, an autobus.” I twirled a strand of my wavy brown hair around my index finger.

“Oh.” Alma put her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. “No sé, Katie. It sound like that. Like busting.”

“I don’t know, either. I’m sorry.” And I was. I wanted to figure it out. I’d begun to care about these language problems. They were becoming my problems, our problems, not
just the students’ problems. I put my chin in my hand, too, sighed, and flipped to the next page in the textbook. If Alma’s employer saw how hard she worked to learn English so she could communicate at her job, I hoped he or she would be impressed. But I doubted her boss had any idea.

At class the next week, Alma told another story about how the word had come up again, except this time someone had been talking about the tacos they ate for lunch. This finally allowed us to deduce that the mystery word was “disgusting,” and that the woman from the original story had just wanted her trash taken out right away.

At the end of class, Alma took a foil-covered glass dish out of the canvas shopping bag she used as a purse. For a brief second I worried the food it contained wouldn’t be vegetarian friendly and I would have to decline to eat it.

“I brought a gift for you,” she gestured to all of the tutors and nodded. “It is a, how do you say, un postre?”

“A dessert?” Paul asked.

“Yes, that. For you.” Alma removed the foil and handed the dessert, which most closely resembled a pie with a flaky crust, to Paul.

Lynn smiled from the back of the classroom, left, and then returned with paper plates and plastic forks. Pastor Douglas came in behind her, grinning as usual.

“We can eat it now if everyone has a few minutes,” Lynn said. “I bet it’s chocolate. Alma usually makes chocolate, right?”

Lynn took the dish from Paul and began cutting the pie into slices like a mother taking charge at a birthday party. It occurred to me that Lynn knew these people well, much better than I ever would.
“Sí, tiene chocolate,” Alma said. And we all left class that day with chocolate on our lips.

***

A month later, I learned that having a common goal could not permanently surmount all barriers.

Alberto, a new student with good English skills, moved his finger from one word to the next on a newspaper’s front page, like a kindergartener learning to read. The result was a series of sentences that emerged like staccato music notes, interrupted by unnatural pauses.

Across the table from us, students studied their textbooks and filled in the mundane answers required by their workbooks. **Q. Where does Mr. Jones work? A. He works at the bank. Q. How does Mrs. Miller get home from school? A. She takes the bus.** The workbook overflowed with generic American names belonging to cartoon characters doing generic things. The conference room glowed yellow with fluorescent light. The wood-paneling of the wall behind the students reminded me of a 1970s basement. Although only 5:30, it was already dark outside, and through the window I could only see night’s gray-blackness.

“What is this word?” Alberto asked. He caught me gazing at the window. His finger wobbled underneath the small text.

“Perpetrator,” I said. “It means someone who commits a crime.”

I sat up straighter in my chair, realizing if the news story Alberto read had a perpetrator in it, I hadn’t been paying very much attention.

“Ahh. So he is the man with the gun?”
“Yeah,” I said, then quickly scanned the article, looking for reference to a firearm and hoping I hadn’t just said something untrue. Then I found it. “This guy they describe as a twenty-year-old black male wearing a gray jacket.”

“He is the per-, the perpetrator?” Alberto shook his head.

“Yes, he’s the perpetrator.”

“Ahh.” Alberto leaned back in his seat and then continued reading the sentence.

Next to me, two brothers, Julio and Ramón, flipped through packets of paper intended to help them study for their citizenship tests, which they would take in a couple weeks. Julio was slightly younger than Ramón, probably in his early thirties, and quietly hit the table over and over with his hand as he read. Ramón read with his face very close to the fold-out table’s surface. He had a mustache and hair combed back.

“Do you have time to help us with our writing?” Julio asked me.

I motioned to Alberto to continue reading the news article and turned to Julio.

“Sure, I can help you guys out. What are you studying?”

Julio held out the book. A series of multiple choice questions covered the page he had been reading. Q. How are Supreme Court Justices chosen? Q. How many representatives does each state have in Congress? Q. What historical figure is famous for saying “Give me liberty or give me death?” I raised my eyebrows. Part of me wanted to laugh because the questions seemed like they came out of a textbook for a high school civics class, probably smashed between a diagram of the three branches of the U.S. government and a list of the amendments to the Constitution. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I could have explained exactly how Justices were chosen.

“These are really specific questions,” I said. “Some of them seem kind of odd.”
“We know the answers,” Julio said. “We studied them. Each state has two senators and then more congressmen depending on the state’s population. What I worry about is the written part of the test.”

I flipped to the next page of the packet, and the image of a girl from my sophomore American Government class in high school flashed through my head; she misidentified Colorado as Delaware on a map quiz and claimed that didn’t make her a dumb blond. These guys probably knew the details of the U.S. government better than many citizens who’d grown up in this country.

“What will you need to write about?” I asked.

Behind Julio, Ramón turned to look at us. He reminded me of someone you’d encounter casting a fishing line into a lake up north somewhere, sitting on the end of a pier. A plaid button-down shirt peeked out from beneath a puffy winter coat. For a moment, I wondered what he would be doing if he were still in Mexico. I imagined the sun beating down as he dropped a fishing line into turquoise-colored water, then realized that his Mexico probably looked nothing like the picture of Mexico in my head.

“There will be questions like this, about the government and the country, and we will need to write paragraphs,” Ramón said. He scrunched his forehead.

“What will you need to write about?” I asked.

“Do you know specifics?” Julio raised an eyebrow as he spoke. The word came out sounding like “especifics.” Although the letter S is pronounced the same way in both English and Spanish, native Spanish speakers often add an extra syllable to the beginnings of words starting with S followed by another consonant.

“Do you know what the question will be?”
“No, and—”

Everyone looked up as two young men entered the classroom. They carried the cold from outside with them. The chill clung to their jackets. One man held up a stack of fliers.

“Excuse me,” he said and then began speaking in Spanish.

I scanned the faces of the students as I tried to take in his words. Most of them appeared to listen intently, their eyes on the man speaking, but none of them displayed much of a reaction. They looked serious, their lips pressed together. From what I could gather, some sort of meeting would be held to discuss proposed legislation that would make it impossible for undocumented immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses. The man waved the fliers in the air again, then put a stack of them down on the table. His partner nodded gravely, but did not speak. A few of the students nodded in return. Irma and Alma sat at the far end of the table and remained still. Alma’s fingers were laced together as if in prayer. Irma balled her hands up in her sweater sleeves. Then the speaker said, “Gracias. Buenas noches,” and the two men left the room.

A silence hung in the space where the men had stood, interrupted only by the clacking radiator in the corner. The students turned back to their books. I caught the glances of several other tutors, but they all just shrugged, confused. On the other side of the room, Paul’s dark eyebrows were lowered.

Next to me, Julio shook his head. I didn’t know if I should ask about what had just happened. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to understand. I worried it might even be better if I didn’t understand; perhaps the students could implicate themselves as undocumented immigrants by expressing interest in the meeting in our presence. A minute ago we were all
on the same side, trying to learn to communicate, and now some of us were outsiders, though I wasn’t sure which group were the outsiders, the tutors or the students.

“We need practice writing sentences,” Julio said. “So we can write sentences on our exams.”

“Okay,” I said. “Why don’t you try writing a story. About anything. Just a short one. You could write about your day. Then we can look at the sentences.”

Julio sat back in his chair, then nodded.

Later, as the students filed out of the classroom, Lynn came in and dumped a stack of papers on the table. She reached out and caught the pile of what looked like memos and sheet music just as it was about to spill out over the table’s surface.

“Did two men come in here before? Talking about a meeting?” she asked.

“Yeah, they did,” I said. The other tutors nodded. I suspected many of them didn’t really know what had happened; a number of them spoke pretty limited Spanish.

Lynn sighed and looked at the table. “There’s some controversial legislation in the works.”

I pictured the hard looks on the students’ faces as the two men had spoken. I thought about how a language barrier took away many of the students’ voices, their political and economic power. I wondered if for some of them, it would lead to the taking away of their driver’s licenses, too.

“Well, have a good night, everyone,” Lynn said.

And that was the last we heard of it.

Later on, I would ask Paul what he thought of the incident.
“I think they appreciate our help, even if situations like that are awkward. I wanted to ask them about it, but was afraid of causing more trouble. What if many of them are illegal?” His pocket jingled as he played with his keys.

“That’s how I felt, too. Maybe you’re right, though, that they’re glad we come. Remember that time Alma brought a pie for us?”

“That was a good pie. Chocolate something or other.” His eyes looked distant for a moment, as if he were remembering the pie. I thought if anyone deserved a pie, he did. Paul had natural teaching ability, and he practiced so his accent sounded less pronounced.

“I wonder if we should ask Lynn more about it.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Then again, maybe not.”

***

“I have no one to speak English with,” Patricia said, shaking her head and crossing her arms across her chest. “All day long at the hardware store I speak to customers in Spanish. I have no time to practice.”

Patricia was a woman in her forties. She wore boot cut jeans and a fake leather jacket. Her hair was dyed partially blond. She radiated energy. I liked her. She was the kind of student teachers enjoy because she improved the mood of the class.

“Can you speak English with your daughters?” Patricia mentioned her teenage daughters often, and I’d met one of them briefly after class once.

“They have no, how do you say, paciencia?” She clicked her pen against the conference room table. At the front of the room, Lynn wrote a list of vocabulary words on the white board in green marker.

“Patience?”
“Patience. Okay. My daughters have no patience for me. They already know English from school. They speak so quickly and hurry off to see their friends.” She blew out her breath.

“At work I can speak no English. So I only can practice here.” She paused between many of her words, looking up at the ceiling as she tried to pronounce them. When she finished the sentence she smiled and nodded, looking exhausted as if the English words had taken away all of her energy.

Patricia gazed past me, her eyes unfocused.

“Bueno,” she said. “My daughters help me sometimes, but I can see they get bored. I am just their mother, and I do not know enough.” She shrugged and shook her head in a you-know-how-teenagers-are way.

“Have you tried watching TV in English?” I asked. “That obviously doesn’t help much with speaking, but it helps with comprehension.”

Patricia’s eyes narrowed, trying to make sense of what I said. I kept forgetting to use basic vocabulary.

“It helps you understand English. Listening helps you understand.”

“Ahh, sí, yes. I watch TV sometimes.” In Spanish the letter V sounds like the English B, so when Patricia said TV it sounded like TB. She focused on something behind me again and then said, “I watch some, how do you say, shows?”

“Yes, shows. You watch some TV show.” I always found myself repeating things over and over. “Which shows do you watch?”

“The other day I watch the show with the wheel. It is a game. Wheel of something. You know it?” She raised her eyebrows at me.
“Yes, Wheel of Fortune. I used to watch that show.” I smiled and pictured Pat Sajak, white haired and wearing a suit, telling a contestant to spin the multi-colored wheel. As a kid, I liked the show because it was about words. I came home from school and turned on NBC so I could try to fill in the blanks. In the final round of the game, the contestant with the highest score went to a bonus round where he or she tried to solve a puzzle alone. The letters R, S, T, L, N, and E were filled in already, and the contestant got four additional guesses: three consonants and one vowel. My response, had I been a contestant, would have been C, D, M, and A.

“Sometimes I watch other shows. Like *House* or news,” Patricia said.

“That’s good for you,” I said. “I try to watch telenovelas sometimes to improve my Spanish. Like *La fea más bella*.”

Patricia laughed.

“They are no good, no?” She grinned and shook her head. “Lots of drama. *La fea más bella*”—(the Mexican version of *Ugly Betty*)—“is not so good. Very silly.”

Patricia’s cell phone rang and she dug it out of her purse.

“Ahh, my daughter.” She smiled and held up the phone. “I be right back, okay?”

“Sure, that’s fine,” I said.

The minute hand on the wall clock—in general, I had a habit of checking the time too frequently, as evidenced by the fact that I always wore a watch—ticked toward 7:15. Class was already almost over. I realized how little time the students could dedicate to learning English. It wasn’t uncommon for them to work twelve or more hours a day, so I was impressed they attended English classes on a regular basis. Plus, the South Side proved pretty insular; many of those living near the Mitchell Street neighborhood didn’t need to use
English to get by on a day-to-day basis. So learning a language got crammed into a few hours a week, and as I knew from my own experience, you couldn’t become proficient in a language by studying a textbook once in a while.

After meeting students like Patricia, it drove me nuts when people said “we need to make English the official language of the United States” or “everyone in this country should know English” or “you shouldn’t be allowed to get a job if you can’t speak English.” When I heard these things I fumed. People didn’t understand the struggles of others, the reasons why learning a language wasn’t as simple as going to the store and picking up a dictionary. People thought in abstract concepts—immigrants, Spanish-speakers, the unemployment rate—and not in people.

Patricia returned and sat down in her metal folding chair.

“I have to go soon,” she said. “I need to pick up my daughter at cheerleading.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Will you be here next week?”

“I not sure,” she said. She glanced at Lynn, who was now talking with another student in the corner. “I hope to be here, but work is busy.”

“I understand,” I said. I smiled at her, a little sad at the prospect of her absence. When she wasn’t there, classes were less lively, quieter and more awkward. People like Patricia made life easier for everyone.

When we all walked down the church’s front steps and scattered into the night, Patricia waved goodbye enthusiastically. Julio and Ramón, the two brothers, waved, too. **Buenas noches, we all said. Hasta luego.** I watched Irma get into an idling station wagon. The voices of laughing kids—maybe one of them was Raúl—floated out of the activity
I dug the car keys out of my purse and glanced up and down the street. At that moment, the neighborhood didn’t feel dangerous.

***

I returned to the church to help teach classes for two-and-a-half more years until I graduated from college. Eventually attendance petered out. People got busy. The church couldn’t afford to hold the classes anymore. Those years of exchanging language, of trading English and Spanish vocabulary words, of helping students practice for job interviews, of students helping me with my Spanish pronunciation and recommending the best restaurants for tacos, existed only for that short while. I hope those years made a difference for the students somehow.

Those years made a difference for me because I learned to see past the challenges—of language, difference, culture—to people. So now, when people make comments about the problems with immigration, the need for English-only schools and workplaces and states, I get angry. I have something to say. I can look them in the eye and ask them when they last tried to memorize the conjugations for irregular verbs in the past perfect. When they last worked twelve-hour days at low-paying jobs and then spent two hours studying English in the evenings. I can look at those people and say, yes, that’s right, no es tan simple. It’s not that simple.

Years later, I taught English at a university in Mexico. One of the first days after I arrived, I walked down a busy street from the house I roomed in to the city’s center. The day was hot and the air smelled like the pastries from a nearby bakery. I stepped carefully over cracks in the sidewalk and moved to the side as people passed walking in the opposite direction. I pressed myself up against a dusty building to let a city employee with a broom
and cart sweep the sidewalk. A few blocks further down, I waited at the corner of a major
intersection for the light to change. Palm trees—I wondered if they could possibly be native;
the city was on a plateau hundreds of miles from the ocean—lined the median. A man
walked by heading back north, then turned around and returned to where I stood.

“You are American,” he said in English. I wasn’t sure if it was a question or a
statement.

“Yes,” I said. “Sí.” I didn’t know which language to speak in.

“I am wondering, what do you think of the new law in Arizona?” He pushed his hair
out of his eyes and readjusted the straps of his backpack.

Arizona had recently passed controversial legislation allowing law enforcement
officers to ask for proof of citizenship during traffic stops. Many considered this legal
discrimination, since it essentially enabled racial profiling. I had wondered if anyone in
Mexico would ask me about it. For a moment I pictured Julio and Ramón in the conference
room at the church. I saw the expressions on their faces as we listened to the two younger
men discuss Wisconsin’s driver’s license legislation.

“I think it’s bad,” I said in Spanish. “It’s unfair. Not everyone in the U.S. agrees with
it.” Then I paused, my brain tripped up by my rusty Spanish.

“You can speak in English. People often speak English here. I know English well.
Americans do not know it, but many of us learn other languages.” He crossed his arms.

“That’s true,” I said, this time in English. “You do speak good English, and I know
many people learn it.”

The man appeared unconvinced he should believe me.
“I am glad not all Americans think that law is a good idea,” he said. “Here, we do not agree with it.”

“No, neither do I. The law oversimplifies things. The law allows discrimination.” I moved to the side again, this time to let a woman walking a fluffy, white dog pass.

The man nodded and turned to walk up the street.

“Goodbye,” he called over his shoulder.

“Hasta luego,” I said, but by then he had been sucked into the stream of pedestrians, and he may not have heard.
3.

Throwing Like a Girl in Pulaski Park

The Unishippers lost. Again. It’s what they were good at. They showed up at Pulaski Park in their matching green t-shirts, they tossed the ball back and forth, catching it in their secondhand mitts—or brand new ones, too stiff to be effective—they practiced batting. Sometimes the metal bat made a high-pitched noise, sending the ball into the outfield. Most of the time it didn’t. Then the other team scored an absurd number of runs against them (upwards of ten or fifteen), the umpire looked embarrassed, and the game was over. At least they were consistent.

I held up my hand to shade my eyes from the sun. The cold of the bleachers had a way of seeping into your jeans like water even though it was a sunny evening. I ran my finger along one of the lines in the metal. Dust hovered in the air around the baseball diamond as the opposing team—a group of middle-aged men whose wives and children sat on the neighboring set of bleachers—gave each other high fives. Someone threw a crushed beer can into the metal trash bin next to me, its crash startling us. I sat on the end of a row of bleachers next to a handful of other girls all bundled up in scarves and sweatshirts to cheer on the Unishippers, a baseball team made up of many of our male college friends.

Most of the Unishippers wandered off the diamond towards us. Matt scowled and refused to look at anyone. This was not shocking; Matt took athletics seriously. He was once identified in the school paper as “the sweaty guy on the elliptical machine at the gym.” He shoved his glove into his gym bag without comment. Marino did the same. He had a competitive streak, was one of the only guys to show up wearing real baseball pants, so he
was best avoided after any kind of loss. Pat grinned because he always grinned, like a younger version of Santa Claus. He used to want to be a priest until he met his girlfriend.

“Well, that’s too bad.” He hit his glove with his fist. “Maybe next time.”

Matt grumbled something indistinguishable.

“What’s that Matty?”

“I’ve gotta go.” Matt slung his bag over his shoulder. “It’s just a game. I could care less.”

“You need a ride?”

“No, I’m good.”

He wandered off toward the parking lot across the street, kicking up dust as he went.

It felt almost cold enough to see my breath, but I couldn’t. I wondered if the grass would frost over that night.

“You ladies want to toss some balls around? Practice batting?” Pat mimed pitching a ball.

“Hmm,” I said. “It’ll probably get dark soon, don’t you think?”

Paul, my boyfriend at the time, approached us, drinking water out of a reused plastic bottle. Its label was torn off, but the sticky adhesive held on to little bits of paper.

“Sure, they want to play catch for a while.” He raised his eyebrows at me. “Right?”

I laughed. Paul used to play volleyball in high school, but baseball wasn’t exactly his thing. So far, he’d been a good sport about joining the team, though. He and Pat had a history—they went to grade school together—and now they were college roommates, so he couldn’t say no when Pat asked him to play for the Unishippers. Plus, it was generally difficult to say no to Pat. I had known both Paul and Pat since high school, and over the years
Pat roped me in to playing for intramural volleyball teams, attending fundraisers, and helping him run for student government positions many times.

“Riiight.” I stood up and crossed my arms, trying to stay warm. “Lauren, you’re coming with me.”

Lauren sat next to me and looked up from a conversation she was having with Jenny, another one of our friends.

“Nah, that’s okay. I’ll stay here. Jenny will go with you.” She grinned at Jenny, whose jacket was zipped up to her neck. Jenny caught my eye, her mouth half-open.

“Well, okay.”

We got up off the bleachers and headed back to the diamond with the two boys. Lauren gave us an exaggerated wave and smile.

I never played softball or baseball or even tee-ball as a kid, so catch was not my strong suit. My dad taught me to throw a decent spiral with a football, but with a baseball I probably threw like a girl at best. The four of us spread out over right field—which I’d recently learned is where you put the not-so-good players since right field gets the least action of all the positions in the outfield—and Pat threw the ball to Paul. The sound of a baseball glove catching a ball is a satisfying one somehow, a thump noise that says “I caught it.”

“Katie, I’m throwing it to you!” Paul nodded in my direction.

“Okay,” I said. I set my feet in the grass as if I was going to hit a volleyball. Even though I had no glove, I caught the ball. My fingers stung; the blood felt like it was beating through my skin. “Alright, Pat, this one’s to you.”
I threw the ball to him—it went in his general direction—and he leapt out to the left and caught it.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Paul said. “Like a girl, but better than Anthony.” Anthony was the guy they put in right field.

“Oh, ha ha.” I squinted at him.

“No, he’s right,” Pat said. He looked right and left, apparently making sure Anthony wasn’t anywhere in the immediate vicinity. “You’re better than Tony. But we should teach you how to throw. Here.” He tossed me the ball again.

“I can throw a football, I swear.”

“Well, it’s not that different. Let’s teach you to throw a baseball.”

***

The Unishippers were an assortment of my male friends during college, organized by Pat and Matt so the guys could do something athletic during the spring and summer. The team had about fifteen guys on it. Some of them knew each other better than others. Some of them had been rounded up by friends of friends so they had enough players for a game each week. They joined one of the Rec Department’s leagues, which were largely populated by middle-aged men who had been playing in the Rec leagues for at least a decade. Perhaps if the guys had realized this ahead of time they would have chosen a different sport. Very few of them had played baseball before, and I’d guess some of them didn’t even know the baseball terminology. RBIs and batting averages and pinch hitters were terms that some team members only possessed a fuzzy understanding of. Team practices and a lesson in the rules of baseball might have gone a long way.
The team’s name came from somebody’s dad’s company. I can’t quite remember the details. The Unishippers—outside of Rec Department baseball—were a shipping company, and I think the story went something like the company had donated the money to join the league or the money to make the t-shirts. Maybe it was a bad sign that instead of getting matching button-down baseball shirts, the team ordered matching bright green t-shirts with the name Unishippers screen-printed on the fronts. Some of the guys were skeptical of the name, but Pat always managed to get people behind an idea. Some of the guys probably didn’t even know where the name came from. That probably wasn’t their biggest problem, anyway.

The real problem? They were a bunch of guys in their early twenties who hadn’t been playing baseball together in Milwaukee for years, and some of them hadn’t been playing baseball anywhere at all. Their opponents were guys who never missed a pitch, who had strategies in the outfield, and who had half a dozen players who could have been the pitcher. They were guys who knew how this thing worked. They were the guys who really owned these parks. We didn’t.

***

I grew up spending time in Milwaukee’s parks, but until recently, when the parks began to look run down—filling with weeds and trash—I didn’t give the reasons for their existence much thought. In his book *The Making of Milwaukee*, historian John Gurda describes Milwaukee’s park system as fairly extensive, thanks in large part to its socialist government during the early twentieth century. Milwaukee County’s Park Commission was organized in 1907, and by the 1920s the development of the parks was in full swing. The chief architect of the project, Charles Whitnall, was a horticulturalist who envisioned the
park system as the “lungs of the city,” as essential to the health and happiness of residents. He designed winding parkways along the rivers and neighborhood parks within the city.

I remember traveling along the Root River Parkway as a kid in the southern part of Milwaukee. My dad used to drive my brother and me through Whitnall Park, named after its designer, so that we could count deer and woodchucks. The street wound through an open green space—neatly trimmed lawns along the edge of forest—and we peered out the windows of my dad’s Mercury Sable, squinting to see the woodchucks burrowing in the grass. We always saw the most animals at dusk. My brother would yell and point when he saw one. Then he’d recite in a sing-song voice: *How much wood could a woodchuck chuck*...

As a kid I didn’t know much about Charles Whitnall. I only vaguely knew that he had something to do with the parks.

I remember running through the parkways, too, at high school cross country practice. We ran along Honey Creek Parkway near our school. The road is divided from the river by a band of trees, and sometimes our coach made us run the trail through the woods. Mosquitoes hovered in the air during the warm weather, so you had to learn to breathe through your nose so you didn’t swallow any bugs. Then you had to watch where you stepped to avoid fallen branches and puddles of mud.

During the 1920s, some of the most prominent parks in the city were the Mitchell Park Conservatory, the Washington Park Zoo, and Lincoln Memorial Drive. None exists now in the same form as it did then, but those parks are still around. The Conservatory was a large glass building filled with plants. Gardens spread out over the space in front of the building. Today, the original Conservatory building no longer stands, but three glass domes take its place. They look like the top halves of eggs built out of geometric glass panels. The first one
has a tropical climate, the second a desert climate, and the third rotates with the season, housing poinsettias in the winter or tulips and roses in the spring. When we were little, my mom used to take my brother and me there on Mondays when park access was free to county residents. I breathed the humidity in the jungle and picked up bright pink fallen flower petals. My mom told me to leave them, that they weren’t for us to take. She once bought me a cactus instead that sat on the windowsill in our kitchen for years. The Washington Park Zoo was another attraction during Charles Whitnall’s time, but it’s no longer a zoo. The park is still there, but the zoo eventually moved west when the Washington Park facility became rundown. Whitnall also contributed to the planning of the park along Lincoln Memorial Drive, which runs along Milwaukee’s lakefront on the western edge of Lake Michigan. The space had originally been used as a landfill, but became a place for gathering. Now the lakefront’s beaches are used for recreation like sand volleyball and kite flying, the Summerfest grounds are popular for concerts every summer, and the city’s science and art museums jut out over the water. The art museum, designed by the famous Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, has what look like two white metal wings that can be raised up and down and make the building look like it might fly out over the lake.

The current park system includes well over one hundred parks, many which were established during Whitnall’s project. Not all of them are in great condition anymore. The county, which maintains the parks, has cut back funding for many of them. It’s not uncommon to find trash scattered around or blown up against fences by the wind. Lawns aren’t mowed as regularly as they used to be. Many of the pools where kids used to go swimming sit empty in the summer, their bottoms collecting dead leaves and candy wrappers.
Despite their continuous losses, most of the Unishippers showed up each week for their game. And for some reason—perhaps loyalty, perhaps a reason to go outside and hang out away from Marquette University’s campus—many of my friends and I continued to show up to watch. We rode the number nineteen bus south for twenty to thirty minutes, past the Mexican bakery and the Forest Home Cemetery, so that we could see them. One Friday night in June, the Unishippers played a team that they had played earlier in the season and that beat them by an obscene number of runs, so many that the game was called off by the umpire in the seventh inning because it was termed a blow out.

The guys had grimaces on their faces through most of the game. They stood behind the metal fence of the dugout waiting to bat, cringing when another player struck out or didn’t make it to first base before the ball went speeding toward the first baseman. Even Pat was frustrated, kicking at the dirt, arms crossed, yelling “Come on!” when the other team got yet another out. Even on the bleachers we felt uncomfortable; the fans for the other team looked at our cheering section every once in a while, wondering if we were associated with the twenty-somethings who couldn’t play baseball. Though I’ll admit, when two of our guys nearly collided while trying to make a catch, I couldn’t help but laugh and shake my head, too.

To their credit, the other team was organized. They’d been doing this for a while. They wore matching black and purple baseball shirts. They lined up for batting practice before the game began and every single one of them sent the ball flying into the outfield. They were older, wiser, and probably long-time Milwaukee residents. Those of us in the bleachers decided that Pants explained perfectly—without having to say a word—why the
other team was superior. Pants, a nickname of our invention during the first match up between these two teams, was a man, probably in his fifties, who wore vertically striped purple and black baseball pants to match his team top. Before the game he paced the baseline, swinging a metal bat around in circles. When he got to first base he’d stop, turn around, swing the bat hard, and march back to home plate. His expression was serious—mouth in a straight line, eyebrows lowered—and he didn’t speak to anyone. This man was hardcore.

This night wasn’t cold like some of the others. June can be hit or miss weather-wise, but the evening was warm—in the seventies—and people in the crowd wore shorts. The sun was just starting to go down, and bugs began to swarm around the street lights. Having just turned on, they still glowed more orange than yellow. Kids ran around throwing balls of their own and chasing after each other. Adults stood near the chain link fence or sat on the lawn talking and snacking. A few men smoked cigars. This kind of Milwaukee summer night is the reason many people bother to live there at all, the reason they bring up in answer to the question Why do you live here? in the middle of winter.

The umpire blew his whistle and raised his arms to end the game. He spoke to the captains of both teams and they shook hands. By this point, the losses were starting to add up, and the team looked dejected. They were like a group of boys playing ball in elementary school, the boys who ended up on the wrong team, the losing one with the kids who hadn’t had growth spurts yet and whose coach didn’t have enough time to dedicate to team practices.
The team trickled off the field, this time in a daze, their eyes wandering into the distance or staring at the ground. I sighed and pressed my lips together. Paul approached me where I sat in the first row of bleachers.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said. He stopped in front of me with his hands on his hips. He turned his head to wipe his face on the shoulder of his t-shirt.

“I’m not in the mood. Plus, swings make me sick. You know that.”

“I didn’t pass the test, but I could care less.”
She said she won’t go out with me, but I could care less.

My brother couldn’t make it home for my birthday, but I could care less.

It’s strange because it’s wrong. What they mean is that they couldn’t care less, but for some reason the error sticks, so people end up saying the exact opposite of what they actually mean. Paul could care less about the Unishippers’ loss? Of course he could care less. It bothered him. He cared about it. But that’s not what he intended to say. He wanted me to think that it was just a stupid baseball game, that it didn’t matter, even if he was aware I would know how he felt without having to say anything. It’s funny. Just the need to say it demonstrates the speakers care. The way they structure the sentence makes them care. It doesn’t allow them to not care. And they don’t even realize it.

My college friends may have been pretty laid back people, but losing to a bunch of guys twice their age wasn’t something they just brushed off. They hadn’t earned their place in the Rec League yet, and they cared.

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As a kid I climbed the crabapple trees at the park by my grandparents’ house near 88th and Center Street. Those were some of the only trees I climbed because the limbs were low enough for me to reach. Their wood was hardened and smooth from kids touching it so frequently. At that park in the 1990s, the jungle gym was still metal. The swings were old, rusted, and shaped like horses, and when you swung back and forth they made a high-pitched screech, almost like a pained neigh. The ground was covered in wood chips, and kids ran in and out of a wading pool. Years later, that park’s wood chips turned into foam, its jungle gym into plastic, and the old horses were replaced with new swings whose chains were coated in some kind of rubber. The pool disappeared after many years of sitting empty each
summer. I met Paul in that park at a gathering of high school friends. We sat on the swings, one of us facing east and the other west, and we gave each other high fives as we swung.

“I’m kind of a nerd,” he said as he flew past me.

“Me too,” I said. My hair blew back off my face as I swung forward. “What kind are you?”

“Computer, mostly. You?”

“Books, mostly.”

I spent many summer nights with my friends at city parks when we were teenagers. The layouts are usually pretty similar in the city parks. There’s a jungle gym, some swings, a few benches and trees, a water fountain. The smaller parks we usually loitered in were the size of a city block or two. We sat on top of the monkey bars or on the swings. We stayed until the park “closed” at ten. We used to laugh about that, imagining a fence rising up out of the grass to shut the park and keep us out late at night.

“Katie, you could swing on the swings forever, couldn’t you?” Paul used to ask as he sat on the swing next to me, motionless. He wasn’t kidding; after a while the swings did make him sick.

I swung back and forth, leaning back and looking up at the light-polluted sky, at my feet up over my head.

“Probably.” I let my feet drag on the wood chips, into the dirt below. “I like swings. I loved them as a kid.”

“I know,” he said.
Years later, I stumbled upon a postcard on the internet with a photo of swings on it. Across the image someone had written: “I would take swinging on the swings over money, sex, and/or power…any day.” It made me laugh.

In high school, my cross country meets occurred at many of the city’s larger parks, at Grant Park along Lake Michigan, at McCarty on the city’s west side, at Dretzka, at Nagawaukee, at Washington. I remember those parks as they looked in the early mornings when we got up, had our parents drop us off, and jogged the frosted course in our warm-ups. The mornings were still and cold and our shoes got wet. In those parks I remember the swishing sound of wind pants and the intake of breath. The rhythmic beating of feet on dirt.

In college, Paul and I ran down the hill at Veteran’s Park—where the land abruptly drops off, a bluff on the edge of the lake—to the lakefront. We ran around the artificial pond between Lincoln Memorial Drive and the edge of Lake Michigan on the path filled with bikers and joggers and rollerbladers. Then we ran out on the breakwater, the cement pier that juts out into the lake. At the end are giant white rocks. We climbed out on them, stepping carefully because they are jagged, and sat to look back at the city. The wind blows hard out on the water, so the air always feels a little colder. It made our sweat evaporate.

“It’s good to be outside,” I said.

“It is. Thank god winter’s over.” Paul’s hair was whipped back by the breeze, then forward over his face.

“Agreed.”

***

I am a strong believer in Vitamin D. Things feel better if you get outside for a while and get some sun. I notice it especially in the winter; if I go for a walk, even if it’s really
cold, I end up feeling better. I notice it, too, on the first warm days in spring. The teaser days, the ones when people bust out shorts and t-shirts, even though we all know it’ll probably be cold again the next day, even if we don’t want to believe it. Peoples’ moods improve on those days.

Because I’m a strong believer in going outside, I guess that makes me a strong believer in green space. I love cities. I will probably move back to one soon. But the concrete of cities doesn’t necessarily make people happy. Buildings and narrow streets and highways can make you claustrophobic, their windows and beams pressing in on you, the weight of all that stuff. I agree with Charles Whitnall that there needs to be space for people to go outside. Scientific evidence supports this perspective; an article in the magazine Wired called “The Psychology of Nature” explains a study in which participants were told to either spend time walking through an arboretum or through the city streets of an urban area. Then these people were subjected to a series of psychological tests. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who had just taken a stroll among the trees scored better.

An attitude exists, though, that suggests the parks aren’t that important. That the money can be cut, that it needs to go elsewhere, to the highways or the police or to urban renewal. When people look at the parks in their neighborhoods they sigh and say, That’s really too bad about the parks, but there are more important things. When it really comes down to it, I could care less.

When people say that, I’m not sure what to say.

What I think is that people need to care. That people like the guys at Pulaski Park need to keep hitting home runs and that my friends need to keep showing up to play them. I think people need to reclaim the spaces that matter to us because if we don’t they’ll continue
to deteriorate. It’s good that Paul or Matt or any of the guys could care less because they need to care. If they don’t, if we don’t, no one will.

***

Paul and I waited at the stoplight on 16th Street and National Avenue. I rolled my window down and stuck my arm out. A truck selling tacos and popsicles was parked at the curb, a line of people waiting to place orders standing in front of it. The smell of onions and fried food drifted in. A man zoomed by on a bike. I jumped, startled, and pulled my arm back in.

“You have another game next week?” I asked.

Paul sighed.

“Yeah.” He squinted through the windshield, through the glare of the setting sun.

“You going to go?”

Another sigh.

“Yeah.”

“Good,” I said and smiled. “Somebody has to show up.
4.

Reasons to Stay Home

In Madrid, Spain, the ultra-modern airport is named Barajas. In Spanish, the verb *barajar* means to shuffle (a deck of cards, for example), or to jumble things or people together. This name seems appropriate; as a place where people are all shoved together, transported to other places, and spit out at their destinations, an airport does exactly that. It shuffles people. Everyone comes together in one place and then fans out in different directions over the rest of the country, the rest of Europe, the rest of the planet.

Three of my college friends—Lauren, Jenny, and Paul, my boyfriend at the time—and I studied abroad together in Madrid during our junior year. For spring break we planned a budget trip to Italy, Austria, and Germany, and this trip took us through Barajas on our way to northern Italy. The international terminal at Barajas, T4, is the farthest terminal from the city by metro, and it’s also the newest. Bright yellow beams that look more like sculpture than architecture hold up the wall-to-ceiling windows. Benches, moving walkways and coffee carts are all perfect and shiny. Barajas feels like a place of beginnings.

Before our trip Paul and I went to El Corte Inglés, Madrid’s major everything store—it was like an American department store, plus a grocery store, a Barnes and Noble, a travel agency, a pharmacy, and a toy store—to buy maps and guidebooks for all the cities we would visit on our trip. Paul and I both liked to plan ahead, so we tried to be as organized as possible before we traveled anywhere new, figuring out how to get from the airport to the metro station to the hostel. We paged through books about Milan and Venice, and then about Salzburg and Munich, circling the tourist attractions we thought we ought to visit.
I loved the idea of travel, of seeing new places, of going beyond my ordinary existence on a college campus in the American Midwest. Travel rarely goes smoothly, though, and in addition to being shuffled to our next destination—and then the next and the next—our plans got shuffled as well. Because there are things other than people that can travel, too. Things that unbeknownst to us quietly get shuffled into our plans and make a mess of our itinerary and our intentions.

***

Our trip began in a tram—a streetcar for the above-ground subway system—in Milan, Italy. Our few months as foreigners had taught us to begin in the plaza, the center of nearly every European metropolis, so the four of us ventured out in search of al centro.

“I think there’s a spider in our room,” Jenny said. She took off her blue scarf to scratch at two red welts on her neck. Static caught a few strands of hair, and they floated toward the ceiling.

Lauren leaned over from across the tram car.

“Gross. Yeah, looks like it could be a spider. They bite in pairs, right? Like multiple bites?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Paul said. He sat next to Lauren and rested his head against the tram’s windows. When the car jerked his head flew forward and then smacked back into the window. The entire car—windows, floor, ceiling, seats—was covered with graffiti. Not skilled at reading graffiti or Italian, I couldn’t tell what any of it said. Graffiti was not part of my mental picture of Italy. I imagined something much more polished with neat cobblestoned plazas and buildings with pillars. My image of Italy, however, probably came
from the glossy photos of a travel guidebook or from Italy’s portrayal in movies. Nothing is ever as clean and polished in real life.

“You guys should pose for a picture.” I dug around in my purse for my camera, grinning. “You look really intimidating with all that graffiti behind you.”

“Ha, right,” Lauren let her bangs fall in front of her eyes, emo-style. Then she and Paul crossed their arms and squinted at the camera as I took the shot. Paul was six-foot-two, and even sitting down he was a whole head taller than Lauren, who insisted she was five-two.

“Damn flash.” Paul blinked and shook his head.

Jenny gazed out the window through a gap in the graffiti. She scratched her neck, then glanced at Paul and Lauren. Of the four of us, Jenny was the quietest, the least likely to complain about a bug bite. She was probably also the most responsible. Rather than looking conspicuously touristy like the rest of us as we posed for pictures, she could have blended in.

“That must have been one serious spider, Jenny,” Paul said.

“No kidding,” she said. “It’s seriously itchy.”

“The scratching will make it worse. Tie the scarf really tight around your neck or something.” Lauren reached across the car to pull on the ends of Jenny’s scarf.

“Are we at our stop yet?” Paul sat down next to me to look at the map and tram schedule on my lap.

“Almost. I think.” I pointed at the stop that said Duomo. “That’s the cathedral, right?”

“Looks like it. Don’t you think we’ll be able to see it? It’s supposed to be huge.”

“Yeah, you’d think so, but some of the buildings are pretty close to the tram. Might block it out.”
Outside the graffiti-covered windows, old graffiti-covered buildings lined the streets. Like in Madrid, the first story of most buildings was occupied by businesses, and this late in the evening many of them were closed, their metal storefronts pulled down like garage doors, revealing more layers of spray paint. Each graffitist’s work covered up the work of others. I studied Paul as he gazed at the map. I was glad he got along with my friends. I knew he probably didn’t love traveling with his girlfriend and her girlfriends all the time, but he sauntered along with either a grin or a thoughtful look on his face.

“We’ll figure it out. If we get off too soon, we walk west. That’ll be the plan.” Paul stood and squinted. “Now if we can just figure out how to make the tram stop.”

***

Our hostel was named the “Bed & Bed Milan.” When we arrived we called it cute. The old, three-story house stood between a watch repair shop and a convenience store, but it had a fenced-in yard with lots of plants and a stone walkway. Inside, the bedrooms had been converted into hostel rooms with four twin beds each. All the bedrooms on each floor shared a bathroom, which had one shower stall. For a cheap hostel found on hostelworld.com, this place seemed like a pretty good deal. It wasn’t loud, it looked clean, and we didn’t have to share a room with ten other people and keep our valuables in a locker.

We spent two days in Milan, which is apparently the fashion capital of the world. The number of storefronts displaying expensively clothed mannequins confirmed this. We visited the city’s main plaza, ate some good Italian food and some really bad Italian food—hungry tourists are very susceptible to mediocre, over-priced food—climbed to the top of the cathedral, saw some really expensive shoes and purses and ties in store windows—what about a purse makes it worth €1500?—and ate gelato twice. We marveled at twenty-
somethings doing tricks on roller skates in the middle of a city street and then teeter-tottered
in a city park.

After we woke in the hostel on the morning were we supposed to take a train to
Venice, Jenny pulled back her sleeves.

“Guys, this is really weird. I have more bites on my neck. And some on my hands.”
She stood in the middle of our bedroom, eyes darting, as if a spider might emerge at any
moment and attack. I imagined one of the giant ones from Harry Potter crawling out from
under the bed and flexing its pincers at us.

“It must be biting me in my sleep. I mean, otherwise I would have noticed.”

Paul stopped shoving his clothes into his suitcase and stood up.

“Well, maybe you should check the bed.”

For a minute everyone looked at each other. No one moved.

“Okay, fine.” Paul rolled up his sleeves. “I’ll check the bed.”

The rest of us peered over Paul’s shoulder as he pulled back the comforter. He
shrugged.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Pull back the sheets,” Lauren said, keeping a good ten feet between her and the bed.

I thought of how back home in our shared apartment, Lauren always kept her sheets super-
clean, washing them more regularly than most people have time for. The idea of any
creatures in a bed must have appalled her.

Paul removed the top sheet and then the fitted one. He leapt back.

“Whoa.”

“What?”
“Look.”

Tiny, reddish-brown bugs skittered toward the mattress seams, trying to get out of the light. Although the sheets were clean, the mattress was yellowed and covered in little brown stains.

“What are they?” Lauren asked. She pressed the fingertips of her hands together, making a steeple. The skin around her fingernails turned white from the pressure.

“I think they’re bed bugs,” Jenny said. She took a deep breath, presumably trying not to panic. She crossed her arms. “And I’ve been sleeping in this bed for three nights. They’re probably in my stuff. They’ll probably come with us. They’re traveling bugs, remember?”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“Remember the bed bug pamphlets they had in the dorms?”

“You mean the ones we joked about, with the creepy close-up bug drawings on them?” Lauren laughed nervously and looked toward her own bed. After thinking for a minute, I remembered those pamphlets, too, the ones that were put in the dorm rooms of every residence hall. They claimed bed bugs were on the rise in U.S. cities and precautions should be taken, but the idea seemed funny at the time. When I was a kid my dad used to say, “Don’t let the bed bugs bite” before my brother and I went to bed, and I didn’t even know bed bugs were real. And once I learned they were real, I imagined them sort of like cockroaches, remnants of ancient Egypt or something, lurking in the walls and basements of old buildings, creepy but mostly harmless.

“Yes, those pamphlets.” Jenny unzipped her neatly packed suitcase—she was always incredibly organized, and had managed to pack eleven days worth of clothing into a carry-
— and started poking around it, then taking each piece of clothing out one by one. “I have to make sure they’re not in my clothes.”

I searched the other beds, pulling back the sheets while standing as far from the beds as possible, but the rest of the mattresses were clean. I felt bad thinking it, but I was glad the bugs hadn’t been in my bed. I think Lauren, Paul, and I all had that thought, but kept it to ourselves.

A bunch of college kids with rolling suitcases and Italian guidebooks probably didn’t look very threatening, but we figured Paul would be the most intimidating of all of us, so when Jenny finished going through her clothes, Paul took her downstairs to the manager to try and get our money back. She protested, but he told her she had to come with him because she was the evidence. He said this gravely, his eyes wide. I half expected him to burst out laughing at the absurdity of calling Jenny “the evidence,” but he didn’t.

Half an hour later, after the frazzled guy manning the Bed & Bed’s front desk came up to our room to examine the bed, shook his head, mumbled in Italian, and looked from Jenny to the bed and back a few times, we got half our money back.

“That was more difficult than it should have been,” Paul said. “He didn’t speak much English, and despite what people have been saying, you can’t understand Italian if you speak Spanish. Just because they sound similar doesn’t mean they’re interchangeable.”

On the tram a few minutes later, we gazed back at the hostel, its quaint fence and front yard now more ominous than cute.

“I guess you shouldn’t expect much from a place called the Bed & Bed,” Lauren said. “They don’t even give you breakfast.”

“More like the Bed & Bug,” Paul said. Despite our collective worry, we all laughed.
The bed bug, also known as the wall louse, the chinche, the crimson rambler, the mahogany flat, and the red coat, is a small parasitic insect that enjoys feeding on the blood of warm-blooded mammals, most often humans. They typically reside in places where humans sleep, colonizing beds and couches. Although not entirely nocturnal, they are most active at night and are not big fans of light. After 1940, bed bugs mostly disappeared from developed countries because of the increased use of the pesticide DDT, though since the 1990s their numbers have been on the rise.

Bed bugs are tiny—usually 4-5 millimeters long—and oval-shaped. Similar to a ladybug, but flat, like a watermelon seed. They are reddish-brown, but the babies are translucent, making them very difficult to see unless they are fully grown. The best way to identify a bed bug infestation (assuming you haven’t actually seen the bugs) is by looking for tiny, brown, bed-bug-sized stains on your sheets or mattress. They eat and then defecate shortly thereafter, leaving these distinct marks.

The bed bug usually feeds when its host is asleep, emerging from its hiding place at the corners of the mattress and fixing itself onto a convenient human. Bed bugs feed in one spot for up to ten minutes, and leave raised bumps on the skin. These bumps are hard, red, and incredibly itchy, and can last for up to a month. The bed bug typically bites the most readily available skin, so people generally find bites on their necks, faces, hands, and feet.

Bed bugs are conniving. They use kairomones and pheromones to communicate, directing each other to the best nesting places and coordinating attacks.
We took a train that looked like it hadn’t been remodeled since the 1970s from Milan to Venice, all of us hoping that we’d left the bed bugs behind. Just a minor incident that would be funny later and that would pay for a meal that night. The four of us shared a compartment, Lauren and Jenny facing Paul and me. I made sure to face the direction the train was going, since I always got motion sick if I sat backwards. Our luggage sat on the racks above our heads. I hoped it didn’t carry any stowaways. The image of an army of bugs emerging over the edge of the suitcases like a wave flashed in front of my eyes. I shook my head and pressed my eyelids shut. When I opened them again a green landscape, occasionally punctuated by houses and cows, flew by outside the train’s window. I focused on the color, the olive green, the way it matched the dated colors of our train car, then reached into my backpack to dig out the guidebook for Venice.

The train took us to a town on the edge of the mainland because it couldn’t go all the way to the island. We took our luggage off the racks and filed out onto the platform, then out to the street. We tried to find a free taxi. Paul held up his hand to shield his eyes from the sun, and when he did, a tiny brown bug fell out of his coat sleeve onto the pavement. Lauren and I looked at each other, horrified, as Jenny followed the bug with her eyes. It skittered along the sidewalk trying to find a crack to hide in. The sun made it impossible to deny; the bed bugs had come with us.

An hour later, we stood at the door to our motel room, afraid to go inside. After all, the reason that the Bed & Bed had bugs was probably that some traveler had picked them up and brought them to the hostel. We were about to enter a new motel and potentially contaminate it with bugs. Our room was at the back of the building, and the door opened to the outdoors. After making sure there weren’t other motel guests around, we opened our
suitcases and shook out everything we had, our shirts and socks, our purses and backpacks. While Jenny and I finished emptying out our belongings, Paul and Lauren went off to find food and returned with cookies and oranges. The four of us sat on the porch, peeling the fruit and staring at our possessions.

“Well, there’s not much else we can do.” Paul got up to put his clothes back into his bag. He was right. The rest of us followed, but were careful to leave our luggage as far away from the beds as possible.

And so we tried to forget.

Venice is like Disneyland for adults. You take a cab or bus to the island, you get off and buy a boat pass that allows you to ride the water taxis for a certain number of days, and then you go out to see the sights. You can visit the cathedral, feed the pigeons in St. Mark’s Square, or take a boat to the nearby island of Murano to watch glassblowers. If you’re willing to pay €70 you can ride in a gondola, complete with a singing man in a striped outfit, and if you have extra money, you can buy colorful masks with glittery feathers sticking out of them. In many ways Venice doesn’t make sense. The whole island is sinking. The streets and canals aren’t laid out in any logical pattern. Paul and I took turns as map-reader, attempting to make some sense of the place. Without a map, it would be incredibly easy to get lost and find yourself in a three-foot wide “street” that dead ends into the greenish-gray water.

We ate dinner that night at a restaurant that served good Italian food and paid for it using our bed bug money. Our table was situated on the restaurant’s patio beneath a cloth canopy. The evening had that fuzzy quality that happens when it begins to get dark outside, but the streetlights have not been turned on yet, when insects start to sing and edges become indistinct.
“This all worked out pretty well.” Lauren grinned over her glass of red wine.

***

The next day Jenny was the first one awake. When I sat up in bed she was standing in front of the mirror.

“There are more of them.” She held my gaze in the mirror. She had bags under her eyes. And she was right; she definitely had more bites.

“Okay,” I said. “Well we need to do something. Should we ask the motel to change the sheets?” I pushed my own bed sheets off and sat crossed-legged, glancing around me for any sign of the bugs.

“That probably won’t do any good. They’re in our stuff.”

“How do we get rid of them?” Lauren stood next to her bed. She crossed her arms and held tightly onto her elbows. She looked like she was trying to make herself as small as possible, as if that would help keep the bugs from noticing her.

Next to me, Paul sat up in his bed.

“There’s got to be a way to kill them. They’re just bugs.” He reached over and pulled his laptop out of his backpack. Paul, a computer science major, never travelled anywhere without his computer.

“Maybe they have free WiFi in the lobby. I’ll check it out.” One of the things I liked about Paul was that he was resourceful, and always found ways to solve problems. Although going to the lobby in his pajamas to research bed bugs on the internet may have sounded strange, it was completely in character.

***
Bed bugs are resilient. They can live for up to a year without feeding. The bugs can survive frigid temperatures; it would take more than fifteen minutes of exposure to -26°F to kill a bed bug. Bed bugs can survive low humidity, too, drying out and losing up to one-third of their body weight without dying. Heat isn’t much of a problem for them either. Microwaving a bed bug might kill it, though that isn’t very practical. If a bed bug is exposed to 115°F temperatures for more than seven minutes, that should do that trick. Making sure you’ve killed all of them, though, is still tricky.

Bed bugs mate frequently. The male pierces the female’s abdomen with his hypodermic genitalia, the female then lays eggs, and ten days later the eggs hatch. One to two months later the translucent, nearly undetectable offspring reach adulthood. A female bed bug lays between 200 and 400 eggs per year, and in that year there are generally three generations of bugs. The average bed bug life span is ten to twelve months.

Fun fact: DNA from human blood can be obtained from a bed bug for up to 90 days. What purpose such a procedure would have eludes me.

***

“I can’t believe this is the only laundromat in Venice,” Lauren said as she piled her clothes into one of the washing machines and pressed the button labeled caldo. To kill bed bugs, according to Paul’s internet research, you needed to wash everything in hot water, then put it in the dryer for at least forty-five minutes. The laundromat was located at a truck stop right off a main highway. The facility was tiny, just a few machines. A steady stream of truck drivers peered in at us on their way to the diner next door.

“At least it wasn’t far from the motel,” I said. “I was afraid the cab driver would be suspicious of us for taking all our suitcases here.”
“Oh, whatever,” Paul said.

I cringed; Paul always thought I worried too much, even though I usually tried to hide my concerns. Perhaps I wanted to appear more laid back than I actually was. Paul put Euro coins into the machine that sold packets of laundry soap and pulled the lever.

“People are allowed to wash their clothes,” he said. “I’m sure he didn’t think anything of it. We’re all just getting paranoid.”

“No kidding!” Lauren ran her fingers along the edges of her suitcase, making sure the bugs weren’t hiding along the seams or zipper. “It’s like it said on the internet, bed bugs make you crazy. People get post-traumatic stress from them.” I thought PTSD seemed a little extreme, but the bugs were making us all nervous.

Jenny sat down and pulled a tube of anti-itch ointment we’d bought in Milan out of her purse. She started rubbing it onto the red bumps on her hands. The tube had pictures of a mosquito and a jellyfish on it. Apparently it would have worked for jellyfish stings, too.

“I itch all over. And I keep imagining I itch in places where I don’t even have bites.” Jenny wasn’t much of a complainer and for the most part quietly dealt with the fact that she was the only one who’d been bitten so far.

It took us more than an hour and a half to get our clothes washed. One of the machines wasn’t working well, and for every three minutes its neighbor machine counted down it only counted one. Meanwhile, we turned purses and coats inside out. We held all of the luggage up to the light, examined every pocket. It was a sunny day, and sunlight poured in through the laundromat’s windows which were covered in drawings of soap bubbles. Through them, the parking lot looked like any other parking lot. It felt like we could have
been anywhere, like we’d been set adrift on a foreign continent and ended up along the side of a highway we could not identify.

“So what about the clothes we’re wearing?” Jenny asked. “They could be contaminated, too.”

“I don’t know. I think they’re fine.” Lauren said, looking out the window. “I’m not real keen on changing my clothes in front of the window with all those truck drivers watching.”

“Jenny’s right, though,” I said, brushing imaginary bugs off my jeans. “We’ve washed this much. It would all be a waste if there’s still a bug in the clothes we’re wearing.”

Lauren grudgingly agreed. We concocted a plan, which involved one of us changing at a time in a corner next to the vending machine, while another held up a piece of clothing to block them from view. After two hours, we left the Laundromat, tired but triumphant. We were at war with the bed bugs, and we were going to win.

The rest of our time in Venice was fairly uneventful, at least in terms of bugs. We left for Salzburg, Austria, a couple days later on another train. It took us through the Italian Alps, and then through the green countryside of southern Austria. I snapped photos of places painted with history, like they meant more because they were different from the buildings and landscapes I saw in my everyday life. We visited museums, went to a beer hall run by monks, and attended the not-so-popular-with-the-locals *Sound of Music* tour. After three or four bed-bug-free days, we thought we were in the clear. Jenny continued to put what we were by then referring to as the “jellyfish ointment” on her bites, and we all crossed our fingers.
But then in Munich a few days later, I woke up with a bed-bug-sized lump on the back of my wrist.

“Shit.”

“What?” Paul half rolled over.

“Look.” I held up my wrist.

“Is it a bite?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure? Maybe it’s an actual spider now.” Paul rubbed his eyes.

“That’s unlikely.” I got up off the bed. My back and arms started to itch all over. My stomach dropped like I was riding in an elevator falling too quickly. I never had a huge fear of bugs as a kid. Sure, spiders weren’t my favorite thing, and I always hated finding those giant centipedes with the long hair-like legs in the shower, but they didn’t instill fear in me. As I ran my hands over each arm and shook out my shirt, though, I felt afraid.

“I think from now on I’m sleeping with my pants tucked into my socks. Didn’t you ever do that at summer camp to keep the mosquitoes from getting you?” Lauren pulled her socks up around the bottoms of her pajama pants—yellow with pink flamingos on them—even though she wasn’t going back to sleep.

“What are we going to do?” Jenny passed me the jellyfish ointment. It felt heavy, tainted, like the burden of a baton in a relay race I did not want to take part in.

“Probably not much we can do at this point. It’s just one bite. And we’re going back to Madrid tomorrow,” Paul said. “C’mon guys, they’re just bites.” He looked less certain than he sounded. “Let’s go get some breakfast.”

***
Bed bugs, because they are so difficult to get rid of, frequently cause psychological trauma. Many people have difficulty sleeping during and after a bed bug infestation or encounter. This lack of sleep can lead to more distress. Phantom itching is also a common symptom. On some occasions, the bed-bug-afflicted have suffered from delusional parasitosis—the belief that there are bugs crawling on them when there are not—or even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Recently, an employee of Fox News sued her employer’s landlord for damages because of the stress she experienced after being bitten by bed bugs at work (although they favor dark places such as bedrooms, bed bugs will infest any kind of furniture, even office furniture). She claimed she often woke up during the night, frantically searching her sheets for bed bugs with a flashlight. As far as I can tell, the suit has not yet been resolved.

***

Back at Barajas in Spain after a few hours on a plane, we stood on the terminal’s moving walkway, inching toward the baggage claim. I imagined additional bugs jumping off of other people’s suitcases onto mine, or my bugs latching onto the possessions of others, quickly crawling into the dark seams. The airport felt less shiny late at night, everything duller and grayer. The metal ground beneath my feet felt like it carried me toward uncertainty and potentially sleepless nights. When I arrived back at my piso, I stood at the door with a similar feeling to the one I’d had standing at our motel door in Venice. I was terrified of infecting the apartment.

In Madrid, I lived with a Spanish woman—probably in her late fifties—and her two grown daughters, who were both in their twenties. Mercedes was a short, blond woman (she claimed she was one of the few rubias in Spain because she had a German great-
grandmother), who bustled about the house making beds, hanging laundry, and watching the
TV game show based on Madrid’s metro system on the thirteen-inch television in the
kitchen. She always seemed to be in a rush and was generally nosy. Two other American
students rented rooms from her, and we often thought she went into our rooms and picked
things up and moved them around, but not for any good reason. A notebook might have
moved to the opposite side of a desk or a box of tissues might have relocated from the
bedside table to the windowsill. Because Mercedes liked to control everything, I was afraid
she would throw a fit if bed bugs appeared in her apartment.

Unfortunately, the bites multiplied. First I just had a few on my wrists, but then they
moved up my arms. I took Lauren’s advice and started sleeping with my pants tucked into
my socks, a hooded sweatshirt pulled over my head—the strings tied tightly under my chin—
and my fists balled inside my sleeves. I felt dirty or diseased, like the bugs were an infection.
I felt little phantom legs crawling on my arms and legs. Even my scalp itched. I knew I’d
have to tell Mercedes.

“Mercedes, there are bed bugs in my room.” I couldn’t think of a better way to lead in
to the discussion.

“¿Bichos de cama? No, you must be mistaken.” She stopped sweeping the kitchen for
half a second, then turned and continued.

“No, I’m sorry, but I’m not. We had them in Italy on our Spring break trip. We
thought we got rid of them, but now I have more bites.” I balled my fists in my sleeves even
though I wasn’t in my room and traced the pattern on the linoleum with my foot.

“No. Bichos de cama can ruin a house. We can’t have them.”

And so Mercedes refused to believe in the bugs.
After a sleepless night, I saw Paul and Lauren at school the next morning. The two of them sat in the cafeteria of the humanities building drinking coffee.

“You don’t look great.” Lauren poured sugar into her espresso.

“My señora won’t believe I have BBs.” We’d started calling them by the code name BBs in public, since we didn’t want people to know about our problem for fear they would avoid us. I collapsed into a chair and put my head on the table.

“Well, joder,”—many of the study abroad students had taken to overusing Spanish profanity—“maybe you should tell Rafa. He can fix anything.”

Rafa was assistant to our program coordinator. He was a Spanish man in his late twenties who served as go-between for American students and their Spanish hosts. Rafa was known among the American students for having a lot of facial hair and for posting a picture of himself dressed up as a lobster on the internet. I took Lauren’s advice and pleaded with him.

“Rafa, I have bed bugs and my señora won’t believe me.”

“Well, do you really have bed bugs?” He looked at me over his glasses and winked.

“Yes, I have bed bugs! I have picaduras all over!” I pointed at the bites on my wrist.

“Do you know the difference between a pica and a picadura?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but stopped. I thought I knew the difference. A pica was an itch and a picadura was a bite, right?

“Yes, I have picaduras, not just picas.”

He raised his eyebrows, then grinned and shook his head. He leaned back in his swivel chair and stretched his arms over his head.

“I’ll call Mercedes. Don’t worry, Katie.”
***

Once Rafa forced Mercedes to accept the bed bug situation, she moved all of my possessions to a spare bedroom, then sprayed everything I owned with Raid. The house smelled terrible, and the other inhabitants complained about the fumes. Breathing bug-killer probably was not great for anyone. I followed Mercedes around the house as she sprayed Raid in all directions as if it were air freshener. I knew from internet research that Raid probably wouldn’t take care of the bugs. She stopped in the hallway in front of the bathroom and turned around to look at me.

“You look miserable,” she said. “They’re just bugs. I thought American girls were supposed to be brave!” I looked at the floor and took a deep breath. She was right; what was I so afraid of? Yet I was still freaking out.

I flopped on my bed in my closet-sized room. The white lace curtain fluttered back and forth in front of my window. The building’s inner courtyard emanated dreariness: gray cement walls, cold sky above. I wanted more than anything to be independent. To be capable. I wanted to think I could live thousands of miles from the country where I grew up and have no problems. I disappointed myself. The fear felt tangible, like a physical thing crawling up through my stomach, attacking the rest of me. Laundry hung on the line outside, socks and sleeves and underwear dangling stiffly, held up by an assortment of colored clothespins.

In Spain, most people never wash clothes with hot water because it’s expensive. Mercedes offered to do extra loads of laundry and wash all of my clothes in cold water, but that would not have helped, since bed bugs will only die at really low or really high temperatures. You essentially have to freeze them or fry them. I got out my Madrid guidebook and looked up laundromats. There were only two for the city’s five million
inhabitants. The closest one was twenty minutes away by metro and involved one transfer. I convinced Paul to help me carry my two suitcases of clothes across the city, which he did mostly without complaint. There were probably an array of things he would have preferred to be doing, but he spent the afternoon helping his paranoid girlfriend fight her war on bugs. When I glanced at him he wiped the semi-exasperated look off his face. There were only a few other people in the laundromat, and luckily this one was significantly bigger than the Venetian one. I shoved all my clothes into three washing machines, turned them on caliente, and sat.

“This’ll take care of all the bugs,” Paul said, putting his arm around me.

“But what if it doesn’t?”

“It will.” He watched my clothes spin around in the washing machine. A pair of blue jeans knocked a green t-shirt from view.

“Why didn’t the bugs come back in anyone else’s stuff? I was careful, too! I checked all my clothes.” I pulled my knees up to my chest. I was resentful and felt guilty about it.

“Just bad luck, Katie.” He brushed his brown hair out of his eyes. “Sometimes you just can’t plan for things. Nobody plans for bed bugs.”

“Why won’t they just die?” I kicked a ball of dryer lint across the floor. “I feel like I’m spending all of my waking life and my sleeping life, when I manage to fall asleep, thinking about bugs. When I’m in bed I think I see them scampering up the walls in my peripheral vision, but then I look again and they’re not there.”

An hour and a half later, I pulled my clothes out of the dryer one by one. I threw a sweater—now doll-sized—into the trash. It was followed by a pair of khaki pants, now
covered with ink. Apparently they had had a pen in the pocket. I held them up over the trash can and pouted as Paul snapped a picture.

“You’ll laugh about this someday, you know.” He grinned. I glared.

***

When I got back to my piso, I put all of my clean clothes in garbage bags to keep them from getting infected, like in elementary school when everyone had to keep their coats and backpacks in trash bags at the back of the classroom because of a lice outbreak. Mercedes must have come in my room when I wasn’t there and sprayed with Raid again because somehow my clean clothes still smelled like chemicals. Every night I checked the mattress for bugs, terrified that I might find them and have to go through the clothes washing process again. I turned every clothing item inside-out before putting it on. I continued to sleep with my pants tucked into my socks and I usually slept curled up in a ball, using Lauren’s original tactic of making yourself small and hoping the bugs don’t notice you. In Madrid, the bugs were like an evil force. Why? Because I never actually saw one. Only the bites. And the imaginary bugs I saw climbing up the walls in the dark.

One afternoon I met Jenny and Lauren for Chinese food. The restaurant was a funny combination of Asian food and Spanish habits; they served the Chinese food as a menú del día, a Spanish lunch special with an appetizer and dessert that cost the standard seven or eight Euros. We sat at a table whose placemats displayed the Chinese zodiac and drank lemon-flavored Fanta.

“Do you think this is a bite? This looks like a new bite, but it doesn’t itch as much as the others.” I pulled back my sleeve and thrust my arm across the table at Lauren. The skin was red from scratching.
“I don’t know,” Lauren leaned back, as if the bites might jump from me to her. “Let’s hope not. You might just be imagining them at this point, you know?”

People were starting to think I was crazy. I was starting to think I was going crazy. I felt contaminated and annoyed that I was the only one who still had bug issues.

“Or it might have been there before I washed all my clothes. I keep hoping I killed them all.”

“It’s not like you brought tons of them back with you,” Jenny said. “It was probably just a couple, and they’d probably be dead by now.” She swished her soda around in her glass.

“Maybe. But they can breed, right?” I folded and refolded the paper from my straw.

“Yes, but let’s pretend you brought back a couple guy bugs. Then they’re probably dead, since they can’t breed.” Jenny smiled. “We’ve got to get your mind off these bugs.”

***

Fun Fact: Bed bugs are resilient, but not all that smart. Male bed bugs often puncture the abdomens of other male bed bugs, thinking they are females.

Although not the brightest bugs, they still manage to cause a lot of trouble. Recently, a Hollister clothing store in New York City had to close its doors because of bed bug issues. The store re-opened three days later claiming it was bed-bug free. In an article about the so-called “invasion,” the writer described how many commercial buildings in New York City took extra precautions, some of them bringing in bug-sniffing dogs. Apparently Beagles or Jack Russell Terriers are most effective.

***
Weeks went by, and the bites continued to itch. But after a while I realized they were the old bites, not new ones. Eventually I started sleeping more than a few hours a night, and although I kept tucking my pajama pants into my socks before getting into bed, I stopped sleeping with the hood of my sweatshirt on.

In the end, the bed bugs were gone. And a year later, back at our university in Milwaukee, the four of us laughed about the bugs. When a girl in one of my classes said she was afraid her apartment had bed bugs, I provided first-hand info and advice. Whenever I know someone with a bad cockroach problem, I have an equally annoying bug story to share.

I recently listened to a This American Life podcast in the car. The title of the episode was “Fear of Sleep,” and in it comedian Mike Birbiglia talked about a sleep disorder that causes him to act out his dreams, which led to him jumping out of a hotel window. Then Ira Glass discussed a series of people who couldn’t sleep. Some of them had sleep disorders. Some of them had seen too many scary movies. And some of them had bug problems. A woman from New Jersey whose apartment building had bed bugs was interviewed. The woman and her husband had done everything possible to get rid of them. They had exterminators spray chemicals, they washed everything they owned in hot water, they threw away furniture, and even reupholstered a couch they did not want to throw away for sentimental reasons. The woman constantly slathered anti-itch cream on her kids. She found live bugs and put them in plastic containers to see how long they could live. Months went by and the bugs were still alive. She became paranoid that they might somehow get out of the container and infect more of the apartment, so she checked on them regularly, not sure how she could throw them away without causing more trouble. At the end of the episode, she checked the couch again after a bed-bug-free period, only to discover the bugs were back.
She sighed, close to tears, and said she would get her husband to take the couch out to the curb.

It was a bummer, she explained, because her husband really loved that couch. But there was nothing else they could do. They couldn’t afford to move. They just had to keep going, she said, keep battling on. She said she needed to remember to write “BED BUGS” on the infested couch so no one would take it.

I heard this podcast almost four years after my bed bug incident and realized my encounter could have been a lot worse. For me, it was just an encounter. The bugs didn’t colonize my apartment, and I didn’t have to fumigate everything I owned. I didn’t trap them in jars to find out how long they take to die. And Paul was right; now it’s a fairly funny story.

The medical definition of a phobia is “a persistent, irrational, intense fear of a specific object, activity, or situation, fear that is recognized as being excessive or unreasonable by the individual himself.” Do bed bugs cause fear? Definitely. Is that fear irrational? Maybe. But while the bed bugs are interrupting your sleep, making you itch all over, and leading to questioning of your own sanity, it sure feels like there’s something to be afraid of. Because despite the joking tone parents use when they put their kids to bed, bed bugs do bite.

When I think about it now, though, I am still fairly embarrassed. I cringe at the way I kept talking about the bugs, at the way I began to sound crazy, even to myself. I cover my eyes when I see pictures of myself with my socks pulled up over the bottoms of my pajama pants. I remember Paul trying to hide his exasperation as I searched my arms and legs for more red bumps in the school cafeteria. I remember the way he tried to smile, then turned back to his computer screen. I didn’t want to be the girl who was happier in her comfort zone, who stayed at home in a bug-free zone without the challenges of adapting to a new
place. I wish I had been the brave American girl Mercedes said I was supposed to be, but there is something about fear that can take over. It can permeate your brain, conquer your thought patterns and lead them astray. But things usually end up looking better in the morning…whenever that bug-free morning comes. Then you remember how silly you used to be, how much fun you had abroad, and how much you wish you could go back and take another walk through the plazas, another ride on the city bus, and drink another sugary espresso in the cafeteria. When the fear subsides and rationality returns, you remember the nice parts of traveling. You remember the efficiency of European transportation, the shiny airports and train stations, the way your travels shuffled people together for a time before pulling you apart again.
Section II:
Letting Go

Grandma always used to make those cookies, the Slovak cookies, every Christmas, Grandpa says. The flat chocolate and crème ones, the powdered ones with the jelly on top, the ones that looked like crispy cigars.

Those were Rozky, Grandma says. I learned to make them from my mother. The great-grandmothers brought all their recipes over when they came to this country.

They were tasty. Grandpa grins.

Sure they were, Grandma says. They were a lot of work, too. All that rolling out the dough, all that grinding the walnuts to a powder. She glances toward the kitchen, past a set of miniature spoons hanging on the wall that came from somewhere in Europe. Maybe I’ll make a batch or two this year. Just a batch or two.

I remember they used to be up in the attic at your old house, I say, the house in Wauwatosa. They were wrapped in waxed paper and piled in tins.

They stayed fresh up there, so they could keep for a long time. Grandma leaves the room and returns with a recipe box. Let’s see what I’ve got here. I don’t think I’ve thrown any recipes away in years. I can’t seem to let them go.
5.

Storming the Bastille

I remember snapshots of people, even if a camera never actually captured the images in my head. I remember the image of my high school (and college) boyfriend Paul driving in his parents’ van, squinting because the sun is in his eyes, brown hair falling in his face, left hand on the steering wheel. Looking at me. I remember the back of his head as he looked at his computer, tilted to the side to stretch his neck. I remember his profile as he looked out at Lake Michigan, his eyebrows pinched together as we stood on the jagged white rocks along McKinley Beach on the edge of Milwaukee.

I remember a day during college, maybe our sophomore year, when Paul suggested we go walking through the Marquette Interchange construction site—near Marquette University where we attended school—and take pictures. It was a weekend, a Sunday, and so the bulldozers and cranes stood silent, no workers in sight. The highway interchange project took almost my entire four years of college to complete. Construction teams tore down the old ramps, and tubes, pipes and wires stuck out of the concrete like old, twisted fingers reaching up toward the sky. For years the ground was covered in mud and dust. Eventually new lanes and ramps went up, new lights that made the highway glow purple at night from underneath. The Marquette Interchange is a huge mess—an organized mess, I suppose—of tangled roads, spitting out into the city in all directions. I’ve always been impressed by highway interchanges, by the thought and planning and construction that go into them. Back in the fifties when the Milwaukee highway system was constructed, people were skeptical about tearing down old neighborhoods to build these modern snakes of concrete. Now the city is proud of its up-to-date interchange.
The day Paul and I took pictures was still early in the process. Piles of rubble and metal still covered the ground. Most of the old parts of the interchange were still being demolished. Only one new ramp was under construction, its metal guardrails shiny compared to the surrounding decay.

“Come on,” Paul said. “Let’s go under I-94. This destruction is awesome.”

Paul held my digital camera and I wore my old Minolta SLR around my neck, the one that still used film. It worked best that way; he was the one prone to taking a dozen pictures of the same thing. Paul hurried off to the south through the dirt, stepping over puddles.

“Are you sure we should go in there?” I asked, eyeing a nearby sign that said “Construction Zone.” “It says we need a hardhat.”

“It’s Sunday and there’s no one here. We’re not going to get in trouble.” Paul raised his eyebrows. “Come on, Katie.”

I followed him. We took pictures of the highway ramps from underneath. We took pictures of the signs and fences warning us not to go any further. We took pictures of the machinery, the dump trucks and the Caterpillar excavators with metal claws on the ends that reminded me of the claws you’d find in the games at Chuck E. Cheese, the ones where you tried to grab a stuffed animal (only to have it slip through the flimsy metal pincers). The Caterpillars probably never missed, though. Those jagged, metal scoops likely always picked up dirt.

Then we climbed up to 9th Street and walked east to the 6th Street Viaduct. The suspension bridge was fairly new. Its white metal stretched across the Menomonee valley like a spider web, and curved arcs and wires held it in place. We crossed the bridge halfway, stopping in the middle and looking to the west. Paul snapped pictures of the interchange, the
Brewer’s stadium in the background. The slaughterhouses below in the valley were hidden from view.

“Stand by the railing,” Paul said. “Turn and look at me.”

The sun was almost directly overhead and I squinted in his direction, my eyes tearing up from the brightness.

“I can barely see you it’s so bright.” I pulled my scarf tighter around my neck. The wind blew stronger up on the bridge.

“Just smile.” Paul grinned at me, the camera covering his face except for his hair and mouth.

I smiled. The sun glinted off Lake Michigan in the distance.

“Good,” he said. “I got it.”

I wonder what happened to that picture of me on the bridge, my hair too short for a ponytail, curly pieces falling out over my face.

My world shifted once when Paul and I stopped dating, when we returned from spending a semester in Madrid, Spain. The Milwaukee as I knew it—the one I grew up in—had been filled with bits and pieces of us, of him. The place was the same, but nothing about it was the same. The streets and restaurants and walks I took from the dorm to the lake or my parents’ house (in Wauwatosa, a western suburb) to Hart Park nearby were all the same, but none of them were the same. Afterwards, there were a lot of places I stopped going, and when I did go to them, they felt like an echo, like the breeze blowing in off the lake with a smell or a sound or a temperature that reminded me of something. Milwaukee felt more real and less real at the same time.
My world shifted again when I graduated from college, nine months after Paul and I broke up. I moved to New York City for the summer, convinced I wanted to work in publishing, become an editor. I signed up for a summer class, learned all about magazine and book publishing, met the people who ran Vogue and Scholastic and Simon & Schuster. I spent a couple months living in Manhattan, wandering around the city. I didn’t know quite what I wanted while I was there and I missed the life I’d never had, the one in which I graduated and moved somewhere with the guy I’d dated for most of my adolescence. I got angry. But mostly I got tired. That’s when I first started running, sometimes at the gym in the basement of the dorm I lived in, sometimes outside through the East Village. When the summer ended I couldn’t find a job, so I gave up and moved back home.

I felt like I’d reached a dead end. I began running more. Running almost every day. That’s when I joined a gym and started running five or six miles on the treadmill until my leg muscles felt numb and my mind moved along with the hum the machine’s circling belt.

I still run. I run because it makes me feel better. I run because it feels like it fixes things (even if it doesn’t really fix things). Runners don’t lie about the endorphins. I run because one day when I the world left me discouraged I said screw this, I’m going to the gym. And slowly, very slowly at first, my running shoes started collecting miles.

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I rarely run at night. Running at night requires extra preparation—you have to find something reflective to wear—and it sounds dangerous. I don’t want to be the deer in somebody’s headlights. So normally, I don’t run at night. On a Thursday night in July, though, I ran at night. I ran at night, and not even on a sidewalk. Ran with thousands of other people through the middle of downtown Milwaukee’s streets, south on Water, east on
Wisconsin, north on Prospect. Our feet pounded the pavement, the noise amplified by the surrounding skyscrapers. We wove in and out of the crowd, avoiding those jogging too slowly, getting out of the way for those trying to get a good time. People laughed when they almost ran into each other. They talked and yelled. The mood was goofy. The city had stopped for us, closed its streets and let us run wild through its concrete grid. A woman stood in the middle of a pothole pointing to her right and left, trying to prevent sprained ankles.

Spectators lined the sidewalks. *Only a mile and a half till you can have a beer!* a man called. A nearby runner laughed, his breath coming out in gasps. This race—Milwaukee’s annual Storming of the Bastille 5K—was my first race in more than six years, since I’d run cross country in high school. It was the start. The starting again.

I ran the race with Jenny, one of my college roommates who still lived in Milwaukee. She and I had both been running for about a year and decided we should sign up for a 5K. I’ve since discovered that when I run with a goal it’s easier. There’s a reason for it, even if it’s an artificial reason. It feels more official somehow.

We didn’t run fast. Plenty of people passed us. For a fun run, I was surprised that so many people wore hardcore running gear, the short shorts specifically for running, the loose-fitting mesh tank tops, even a few pairs of racing flats. I guess someone does always win at the end. Serious runners do turn up at any kind of race. At the end of the 3.1 mile tour of downtown—it looks different at night, the lights, the shadows, the lack of people in business suits—the course turned north on Jefferson. The last stretch of street took us up an incline. Cathedral Square, the site of the festival, loomed at the end. My Asics crunched spilled popcorn. People cheered and held their beers in the air. Balloons tied to “loading zone” signs and parking meters tugged upward in the breeze.
Milwaukee tries to bring people together at the festivals. Some people call it the city of festivals because it has so many. The festivals bring people out, since in an upper-Midwestern city, you have to get out while the weather’s warm. The festivals bring people together to dance, listen to music, eat ethnic food and snow cones and cotton candy. And at Bastille Days, the city also brings people together to run.

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Milwaukee boasts nearly thirty festivals every summer, not including Summerfest, one of the largest music festivals in the world; it lasts for ten days from late June to early July. Most of these festivals take place at the Henry Maier Festival Park along the lakefront where concert stages, restaurant stands, and a sky glider—like a chair lift, except not at a ski resort—reside all year round. (Imagine: aqua and orange and yellow two-person benches suspended from a wire, piles of snow covering their seats in January.) The vast majority of the festivals are ethnic festivals: Polish, Mexican Fiesta, Irish, German, Festa Italiana, African World, Indian Summer, Asian Moon. Others include Pride Fest, the Jazz Festival, and the Brady Street Festival. Summerfest, the first major festival, had its origins in the Midsummer Festival which, according to historian John Gurda, took place at the lakefront from 1933 to 1941 and brought nearly one million people to Lake Michigan each year. The Midsummer Festival, like many of the others, involved entertainment, beer, and a midway, and the city’s mayor at the time, Dan Hoan, described the attendees as “one large, happy family, playing together as [they] work[ed] together for the greater glory of the city we all love.” During the Depression, city officials wanted to create something that would build the city up and create unity, though the tradition ended with the beginning of World War II. Eventually, Milwaukee mayor Henry Maier undertook the task of creating a similar annual
festival, and so the first Summerfest—also known as “the Big Gig”—occurred in 1968 as a way to provide entertainment to residents and tourists and bring in money for the city. Ethnic festivals, beginning with Festa Italiana, inhabited the festival grounds for summer weekends shortly thereafter. Some festivals brought traditional dresses and dancing, some brought kielbasa or enchiladas or crepes, and some brought Irish Setters and a blow-up Gulliver from *Gulliver’s Travels*. Some even involved the archbishop saying mass to a crowd of thousands on Sunday morning.

If you were going to give Bastille Days an ethnic label, you’d have to call it French, though the festival, held every year at the beginning of July, is probably less ethnic than other fests like Irish or Italian. French food and wine—and quite a few other kinds of food and wine—are available for purchase in Cathedral Square, which is a patch of green space the size of a city block surrounded by restaurants, apartments, office buildings, and St. John’s Cathedral. The cathedral’s stone façade is set back off the street, more so than the other buildings, and it alone looks like it could have come out of eighteenth century France. French explorers Jacques Marquette—the Jesuit priest and namesake of Marquette University—and Louis Joliet passed through the city in 1673, but present-day Milwaukee does not house a large group of people with French ancestry.

A surprising number of people can pack themselves into one city block. They come to see the mini Eiffel Tower, listen to the roaming minstrels, and participate in the kissing contest; the contest involves a dozen or so couples sitting on folding chairs, their lips locked together. Their friends stand by laughing and little kids either stop to gawk, yell “eeeww gross!,” or hurry after their parents looking uncomfortable. Then:

*Can we get kettle corn?*
Can I have a monkey puppet?

Can I get my face painted?

As I crossed the finish line on the corner of Wells and Jefferson Streets, all I could think of was Can I get some water? I am not particularly fast—to be honest, I’m not fast at all—so by the time I finished the race a thousand other people had already finished, too, and used up all of the plastic cups allotted for the event. Volunteers at the water table just beyond the finish line held up their hands and shrugged. A dozen gallon-sized milk jugs filled with water sat lined up on the table in front of them.

“We have jugs of water, but we’re out of cups.” A blond woman pushed her t-shirt sleeves up over her shoulders, exposing her upper-arms. “Sorry,” she said.

One runner grabbed a jug and started drinking out of it. Others followed his lead.

“We’ll never be able to finish a whole jug,” Jenny said, brushing a few loose strands of hair off her face and breathing hard. “I feel bad taking it if we’re just going to waste it.”

“Well, we’ll do what we can.” I grabbed a jug and started drinking, then passed it to Jenny. Nearby runners dumped water from the jugs over their heads; despite the late hour, the air was still hot and humid. I stood, hands on my hips, trying to slow my heart rate. My skin felt sticky. The last mile of a race is often painful—lungs screaming, legs heavy—and then very abruptly it’s over. The runners recuperate and head off in different directions, scattering into the city. I’ve always thought that the ends of races are a little sad in that way. The event itself is jubilant, so many people excited about the same thing, but then suddenly it ends, and that’s it. That moment of unity—of shared enthusiasm—is over.

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They call the run the “Storming of the Bastille” to commemorate the day during the French Revolution when the Bastille, a fortress and prison, was attacked: July 14, 1789. The prison itself only housed seven prisoners at the time, and the government had been planning on closing it down. The attackers could not have done much more than acquire the ammunition within the fortress to assist their cause. So the attack was mostly symbolic, an attack on the French government, since the Bastille itself was seen as a symbol of French royalty. The original attack was a symbol of tearing down the old and starting anew. Now, more than two hundred years later and on the other side of an ocean, I wondered what we thought we were tearing down, if we thought we were tearing down anything. Sure, in large part the run and the festival itself are a celebration of French culture. But it makes me think about the larger function of this festival and of all of Milwaukee’s festivals. If Milwaukee is anything, it’s a city divided. It’s a city racially and economically segregated (earning the title Most Segregated City in America more than once). Even at the time of its origins in the late 16th and early 17th century, the city was divided into Juneautown and Kilbourntown by two of its early founders who decided to set up their own trading posts in separate areas. In the following century, German immigrants moved into one area, Polish immigrants into another, Italian immigrants into their own neighborhood. These neighborhoods would later become Latino neighborhoods, African American neighborhoods. Some are now Jewish or Hmong neighborhoods. The city has evolved since its founding, but neighborhood boundaries are still sharply defined as if measured out with a ruler and drawn with a Sharpee. The marker’s tip bleeds black lines to divide the city.

Summerfest was founded in part as a way to bring people together and create positive feelings in a segregated city. The festivals that occur today probably serve largely the same
function. So maybe the Storming of the Bastille in Milwaukee is symbolic, too. Symbolic of the tearing down of what doesn’t work, of what’s wrong with a place, and trying to create something better. Of overcoming the barriers and differences that exist. I wonder if it works. If it’s authentic. Or if when the festival ends the city just goes back to the way it was, those black lines quickly put back into place.

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I associate different parts of my life with different parts of the city. Early childhood in Wauwatosa, just west of Milwaukee proper, where I’d sit on the back of the couch and stare out the window of our first floor duplex watching bikes and joggers go by. Elementary school and middle school in the southern suburbs, the roads windy and the yards green. High school in the neighborhood near 76th Street and Bluemound Road, the area where the city blocks are all evenly spaced, interrupted only by Interstate-94. That neighborhood is one where the trees are old, their leaves and branches shading the streets, not baby trees like I’d spent years with in the suburbs. In that neighborhood the stores and businesses blend into the houses: a diner, a hairdresser, a pharmacy. A dry cleaner that would be easy to miss if it weren’t for the soft, chemical smell of laundry and dryer sheets. In that neighborhood we ran up hills in the city parks at cross country practice or completed five-mile runs in the Heinneman’s Restaurant parking lot where our coach waited for us with popsicles. In that neighborhood I walked the dog, taught him to wait on street corners, to look into the door of Rose’s Flower Shop or Simma’s Bakery, famous for its cheesecake.

I associate the area sandwiched between downtown and Avenues West—a neighborhood once filled with the houses of wealthy residents, now filled with poverty and crime—with college, when I spent eighty percent of my time on Marquette University’s
campus. Then I associate the post-college year—my last year in Milwaukee—with the East Side, the trendy part of town where my friends moved to live in old, high-rise apartments next to the lake, where restaurants were numerous and parking spaces scarce.

Some personal eras are even more specific than those general ones. Like the city bus ride on 76th Street from Southridge Mall to my high school that I associate with being fifteen. Waiting at the stoplight with the unnecessary left turn arrow on 76th Street and North Avenue to go to a friend’s house: sixteen. The dip in the road on 68th Street, before the city filled in the potholes: seventeen. The view from my dorm window of the downtown public library, its stone roof held up by pillars and covered with pigeons: eighteen.

One drive I can’t pin to any one age. It happened dozens and dozens of times over five years or so, in high school and in college. My boyfriend Paul’s parents lived on the northwest side of the city, an area filled with old brick houses. The neighborhood was still okay at the time, though since then it’s gone downhill, the crime rate going up and property values dropping. His parents moved to New York years ago.

Paul and I used to drive in his parents’ minivan from their house to the intersection of Highway 41 and I-94, often to go downtown, to go to his high school, to go visit friends. We’d drive down Appleton Avenue, an awkward angle street that would confuse anyone not from the area. We’d pass strip malls filled with Walgreens and Blockbusters, Catholic churches and Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Halls, a nursing home, a handful of auto repair shops. The street cut east, slicing through 76th street, 68th street, 51st street. I would sit in the passenger seat, half-noticing the landmarks I’d observed many times before. Paul would be in the driver’s seat. One of the street lights would turn yellow and he’d drive on through the
light, hitting the ceiling with his right hand, as if the gesture somehow forgave not stopping.

I’d laugh.

“That was a close one.” I put my feet up on the dashboard and glanced at him out of the corner of my eye.

“Nah, not that close. I couldn’t have stopped anyway! It’s icy.” He punched at the buttons on the radio. “Can you change the CD?”

I smiled. I hit the ceiling, too, then opened the glove compartment to search for music. I pulled out CDs by the Smashing Pumpkins, Pink Floyd, Beck.

Appleton Avenue dead ended into Lisbon Avenue—another angle street that continued on in a similar east-southeast direction. The street also dead ended into a business that sold head stones; you had to go either right or left at the stoplight, but while waiting for the light to change you got to look at sample grave markers. They came in all shapes and sizes. Straightforward square or rectangular stones stood in rows, almost like in a real cemetery. Curved red stones and black stones, elaborate pillars or statues of angels. Many of the stones were so polished they looked like glass. Like the surface of water. Like if you touched them you might fall in. Early on in our relationship, Paul and I looked at the stones, then at each other. Creepy, we’d say. Paul’s brown hair—usually a little too long—fell into his eyes, and he’d brush it back off his face. Then we’d turn left onto Lisbon Avenue and be on our way. In later years, we’d forget about the head stones altogether. I’d only notice them once in a while, the same headstones still populating the fenced-in yard. Sometimes they would be covered in snow or frost, other times bird poop. But always still shiny.

We drove that street for years, at all times of day and in all seasons, and then suddenly we didn’t anymore. I can’t quite remember when the last time we drove that way
would have been. It’s been years since I drove it by myself, years since I’ve been in that part of town. But some places you don’t forget.

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Jazz music pumped out of a panel of speakers near the water table. Jenny and I walked around to the front of the stage where an old woman with long, gray hair played a saxophone. She reminded me of my seventh-grade science teacher who had probably been a real hippie in the sixties, though when I was thirteen I didn’t really know what a hippie was. The saxophonist’s solo ended, and Jenny and I left our half-empty jug of water on a bench.

“There’s no way anyone’s going to drink that.” Jenny shook her head. She was always practical, never wanted to waste anything. Probably appropriate characteristics for an accountant.

“Well,” I looked from the jug to the crowd. “No. You’re probably right. I wouldn’t drink from a half-empty bottle of water I found on a park bench.”

Other runners, easily identifiable by the paper numbers safety-pinned to the fronts of their shirts, filtered into the crowd. Jenny and I wandered through the park to Kilbourn Avenue, the street that borders the square on the north side. During the festival, Kilbourn was filled with restaurant stands and temporary stores selling everything from sun dresses to bonsai trees to puppets. We stopped next to a massive vat of kettle corn operated by a man wearing a red and white striped apron. His hair was gray and curly and he yelled “popcorn!” while he stirred, throwing sugar over the kernels. Nearby, a tall man in jeans and a long-sleeved, black button-down shirt—which seemed much too warm for the weather—leaned on a stool next to a stand selling paper lanterns, wind chimes, and paintings of what could have been the French countryside.
“You girls run?” he asked, moving his hand to indicate our apparel.

“Yeah,” I said. “Just finished.” We stepped into his shop. In the back hung a variety of tie-dyed clothing.

“Were you fast?” He smoothed the front of his shirt.

I caught Jenny’s eye and we both smirked.

“We weren’t slow,” I said.

“I used to be a runner,” the man said. “I could have done that run in under twenty minutes. Did you break twenty?”

I laughed and touched some wind chimes, making the metal tubes cling and clank against each other. Even in high school my mediocre times embarrassed me, so now I kept them to myself.

“Not quite.”

“Close?”

“Ish.”

“Would you like to buy a painting? How about this one. This one’s Paris!” He held out a painting—probably the size of a baking sheet—of a café scene, something imitating a Van Gogh or Cezanne with thick brush strokes and bright colors.

“No, thanks,” I said. The man frowned. He looked like he might be in his thirties. I wondered where he was from. Before we turned and walked away I noticed he wore cowboy boots.

A small crowd gathered further up the street. We found an open space big enough for us to see, and at the center of the circle on the pavement sat a man wearing cut-off jeans, a white t-shirt, and a cowboy hat. He knelt, a large piece of red chalk in his hand, above the
face of a young woman, her eyes staring straight off to the east, her head the size of a parking space. The curves of her face were perfectly drawn with tones and shadows, and she looked more like a painting or a photograph than a chalk drawing. To the left of her hair, the man was filling in an outline of a sword with intricate swirls in the metal. To the left of the sword was another woman, her shoulders and head emerging out of the side of the blade, her hair covered in a turban. This woman was old and her eyes were closed. A blue hand reached up from below out of the pavement, touching the woman’s turban. About two-thirds of the chalk drawing were filled in with color and the other third was just outline. It looked like a man’s face might later surface below the old woman.

Later I would try to track the man down on the internet and learn that his name was Seth Sanders. I would learn that he had been making chalk drawings throughout the state for at least ten years, that he frequently worked in Madison, Wisconsin, often at one of the farmer’s markets. I would learn that he typically drew images of famous paintings—the Mona Lisa, Vermeer’s Girl with a Pearl Earring—making them into collages of faces and objects. I would find photographs of his Girl with a Pearl Earring in which a cowboy’s head grew out of the girl’s head scarf.

As I stood in front of the faces on the pavement in Cathedral Square, all I knew was that I was captivated.

The faces in the man’s drawings popped out of the pavement, their cheekbones and lips and eyes perfectly shaded, curves and edges emerging in a way I felt like I could touch.

“That’s amazing,” Jenny said. “I wish I had my camera.”

“That is pretty incredible. I wonder how you become a chalk artist like that. I wonder where he’s from.”
“Yeah, I’m sure they hire him for this.” Jenny squinted. “That old woman’s face looks familiar, but I can’t place it.”

“Yeah, it does.” I stood on my toes to see better. “I can’t place it either.”

The crowd around the chalk artist stood, some with crossed arms, others with hands in pockets, transfixed. The colors of the drawing were so bright it felt like the image was lit from within, and I almost expected that light and color to be reflected in the faces of the bystanders.

A small girl to my left stood in front of her parents, her mouth open, eyes wide.

“Mommy, can we do that at home?”

Her mother laughed and put her hand on the girl’s brown curls.

“We can try.”

The chalk artist kept his head down as he drew, rarely looking up at his surroundings. It was like the world around him disappeared and he became immersed in a world of chalk, separate from us in his bubble of work. He also managed to make the pavement disappear, covering it with layers of soft limestone. I found this impressive, since Kilbourn Avenue, like most other streets in Milwaukee, was still marked by potholes and covered in a web of cracks, even in the summer. The city fixed many potholes each spring after the cycle of freezing and thawing ended, but it never managed to deal with all of them. The streets hit worst by winter always got priority. But this man’s creation covered the cracks and seams. The broken covered by art. Covered by something new.

“Did you see the guys spray painting over there?” said a woman’s voice somewhere behind me. Her tone sounded strange, sort of like a child mocking another kid at school. Did you see what he’s wearing? Did you hear what she said? Can you believe it? I turned and
craned my neck, looking left and right for the spray painters the woman was talking about, but too many people stood in the way. They gazed past me at the chalk drawing, their faces lit by the glow of streetlights.

“Yeah, what do they call them, aerosol artists?” said a man’s voice.

“That seems generous, to call them artists. It’s just graffiti. Kind of like this guy, really. Drawing on public property is pretty much just graffiti.”

I turned again to try and catch a glimpse of the woman speaking, but couldn’t.

“Did you hear that?” I whispered to Jenny. “That woman calling this guy’s art graffiti?”

“Yeah,” she said, raising her eyebrows and pressing her lips together. “People say stupid things.”

Later I would also learn that Seth Sanders won second place in the Bayshore Chalk Drawing Contest, held annually at Bayshore Mall on Milwaukee’s north shore. I would learn that many people admired his work, cataloguing the images in blogs on the internet. I would learn that chalk drawing could actually be a profession, that there were chalk artists with galleries and websites. I would learn that Seth Sanders was also a painter. And I would learn that there were other people who considered his chalk work graffiti, and instead of appreciating it, asked about whether he could be punished for doing chalk drawings on city sidewalks without a permit.

People are strange.

To me, the artists at Bastille Days made sense, at least if the festivals are meant to do what I imagine they are intended to do—bring people together, create unity, entertainment.
These artists make art public. They take what we have to work with and turn it into something that makes people stop and pay attention.

I wondered what would happen if it rained during the festival. Would they cover the drawings up? Or would their colors melt together, powder turned liquid, streaming toward the gutters? I wanted the colors to stay, to work their pigments into the pavement. Permanent like Sharpee. I wanted the new to last. Milwaukee probably wanted the new—the new sense of community, the new image of the city—to last, too.

When I moved back to Milwaukee after college, nothing felt permanent. I felt like I had lost direction, run up against a wall. I felt like I was back at the intersection of Appleton and Lisbon Avenues waiting for the light to change. I felt like I was staring at that dead end, at the shop selling head stones, not knowing how to turn left or right. I later realized that for me, running a race again validated something. It was the beginning of something new. It felt like the event that allowed me to turn. I don’t even know if I turned right or left, and I don’t know if I was aware at the time that I was turning. But at some point after the run, after the chalk colors melted away, the vendors packed up, and the discarded paper cups were collected, I realized I was moving again.

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It got late. Jenny and I left the chalk artist coloring in the figures on the pavement and bought the kettle corn and cotton candy we’d promised ourselves when we started the race. Even though we were in the city, I could still hear crickets chirping. The street pounded with the thump of the jazz band’s bass. The smell of fried food hovered in the air. With my eyes I traced the cursive words on the sign of the Saz’s Restaurant stand, famous for its barbecued
ribs and mozzarella sticks. Cathedral Square was still packed with people despite the late hour.

We ate our food sitting cross-legged in the square. Swarms of moths and mosquitoes circled around the streetlight above us. I squinted, trying to see the stars through the clouds, but they were mostly drowned out by light pollution.

I finished my popcorn and folded up the red waxed-paper cone it came in. I tossed it into a nearby trash can.

“We should get back.”

“Yeah, there’s work tomorrow.” Jenny stood up and brushed bits of lawn off her legs.

We walked east on Kilbourn toward Prospect Avenue, where I’d parked my car near Jenny’s apartment. Blocks away, we could still hear the music and voices of the festival-goers.

“We should run,” I said.

“Are you serious? Aren’t you tired?” Jenny stopped and reached down to her toes, stretching her calf muscles.

“Yeah, I’m tired. But we should run back.”

I started jogging. I avoided cracks in the sidewalk. I stepped on the imprinted words “Milwaukee Department of Public Works – 1991.” Jenny caught up with me.

“Okay,” she said. We were both tired; we held our arms too close to our bodies, the muscles tightened, our elbows bent.

I kept running through the blinking “Don’t Walk” sign at the intersection of Kilbourn and Prospect, north past the old, renovated houses, now turned into galleries, museums, office buildings. Past the triangular green space between Prospect and Farwell Avenue, the
one with the strange concrete and gravel patterns on the ground. Past the Renaissance Place, the banquet hall where my high school used to hold its prom and where two of my college friends would later get married. Past the high rise apartments and condos. Past the Pasta Tree, the funeral home, the Maharaja Indian Restaurant, the Paul Weise Furniture Store. We arrived back at my car, parked across the street from Jenny’s apartment building in front of a building reserved for retirees. Jenny lived up on the eighth floor of her building and the window in her living room looked out at the lake. You could see the marina, the boats anchored to the piers. You could see soccer games in the park below at the bottom of the bluff. The lake disappeared into the horizon. Michigan was too far in the distance to see.

We stood looking up at the high-rise’s red brick, breathing hard. Each apartment had a window that stuck out of the building, and the windows reminded me of honeycombs or a bug’s eyes, protruding and geometric.

Small groups of people wandered north up the street, probably from the festival. Some of them carried lawn chairs and backpacks.

“Alright,” I said. “We made it.” We smiled in the dark.

“Do you want to come up?” Jenny asked after a few minutes. “Get some water?”

“I’m okay. I’ve got a bottle in the car.”

“Okay, well, have a good night.”

“You, too.”

I got in my car and turned the key in the ignition. The radio came on, and the voice of the announcer on WUWM, the local NPR station, filled the car.

—the Bastille Days festival continues through Sunday this weekend in Cathedral Square Park. There’s parking available on the streets in the surrounding neighborhood or in
a number of lots charging between five and ten dollars. Next weekend the South Shore Frolics festival will take place in Bay View, and the weekend after that Festa Italiana will be held at the Summerfest Grounds. For more information, please visit wuwm.com.

I pulled the car into traffic and turned around to take Farwell Avenue back toward I-94. A few minutes later, as I accelerated up the on-ramp, the Marquette Interchange glowed purple, the painted yellow marks dividing the lanes new and uniform.
6.

How to Fit in with Your Friends Who are 100% Irish at Milwaukee’s Irish Fest:

1. Smile. Nod. Pretend you have a grandmother on your dad’s side who may have been part Irish. (You will likely imagine your grandmother shaking her head at this, pointing at the lace from Eastern Europe decorating her coffee table and the photos on her walls taken in the seventies of distant relatives in what used to be Czechoslovakia. Ignore her. Also ignore your other grandmother, the genealogist, who claims she can guarantee you are 0% Irish. German, Austrian, Polish, Czech, Yugoslavian, Hungarian, yes. Irish, no.)

2. When pressed, say that no, you are not actually Irish, no, not at all, not even 1%. Yes, despite the fact that you are so pale. Yes, your mother did used to joke that you may have been part Irish because of this. No, she was kidding. Smile. Nod. Order a beer. Something local. Miller, PBR, Leinenkugel’s. You may not be in Ireland, but you are in Milwaukee.

3. Wear green. Because it’s like Saint Patrick’s Day on steroids, the biggest festival of the Irish heritage outside of Ireland. Yes, even though this is annual, it’s a BIG DEAL.

4. Eat a baked potato. The potatoes are huge, so come hungry. You can get them vegetarian-friendly—served with something like nacho cheese and broccoli. Your friends will only shun you a little bit for not getting the famous baked potato with beef stew on top. Most of them are used to your vegetarianism by now anyway.

5. Stop walking and become engrossed by a troop of Irish dancers so that your friends have to stop, look up, ask each other where you have gone, and then return to find
you enjoying a jig. It is preferable, for appearances’ sake, to stop and watch an adult
troop because that way it will appear you are interested in the dancing itself and don’t
just think the little children in bright poufy dresses and little suits and knee socks are
cute. (It is good music and the dancing is also good, so it is likely you will actually
enjoy this.)

6. Display excitement when you come across a giant, blow-up, sleeping Gulliver (from
Gulliver’s Travels fame), tied down to the ground with ropes. Do not mock Gulliver.
He is a literary hero. You may end up reading about him in your freshman English
class in college and at that point you may find him boring—too many details about
the mundane daily activities of fictional travel in foreign lands—but today he is
massive and important.

7. Pet all of the Irish Setters at the dog booth nearby. One will not suffice. Pet all six or
seven of them so none of them feels left out. Though come to think of it, the dogs will
probably be sick of strangers petting them by this point. Let’s put it this way: if the
dogs look cranky, just cross your arms, nod your head, and tell the old lady brushing
their fur that they are very pretty animals. She will smile. You will smile back. Your
friends will smile. All smiles!

8. Have another beer. Your companions will likely be paying less attention to your
selection by now, so order whatever kind you want.

9. Attend a concert. A small one will do. There are plenty of them, men and women of
all ages playing fiddles and flutes and violins. Or if you’d prefer, watch Gaelic Storm,
the fairly famous band from Ireland that comes to Milwaukee every year for Irish Fest
and St. Patrick’s Day. They’re fun. They’ll have the crowd sing the chorus of their
song "Me & the Moon." One half of the audience will sing “I brought the whiskey” and the other will sing “He brought the light.” They do it every year. They’ll tell the crowd that this festival is impressive, the biggest Irish festival they’ve ever seen. They’ll speak with accents.

10. If someone’s wearing a “Kiss Me I’m Irish” shirt, you don’t have to kiss them. They may not actually be Irish. It’s really, when it all comes down to it, like St. Patrick’s Day. It’s a three-day party where everyone can pretend to be Irish. So have a beer, then drag your friends to German Fest or Polish Fest or Festa Italiana next weekend. Though when one of your companions takes you aside and unexpectedly kisses you next to the stand selling corned beef and funnel cakes—his lips still tasting like the dessert’s powdered sugar—it’s probably in your best interest not to resist.
Remember the Blue Shirt

“Eat some peaches. We’ve got great peaches. Or the grapes. We got those at Sendick’s just this morning. Great red grapes for this time of year. Try them.” My grandpa shoves a plate of cut up fruit in front of me, at the same time gesturing to a bowl of candy on the round coffee table, the one with the intricately carved legs. “There’s candy, too. Eat candy.”

My grandpa has a habit of always offering food, even when you’ve just eaten. My dad always says it’s a Mische thing, and so when my mom does it, he’ll point and yell, *Look! She can’t help herself! It’s a Mische thing!* He says we have Grandpa Lou to blame for the fact that whenever we eat in a restaurant, my mom can’t help but put some of whatever she ordered on your plate, even if you’ve said no thank you.

I’m visiting my grandparents at their new home, a two bedroom apartment at Harwood Place—a retirement community with an assisted living facility/nursing home attached so when you need it you can just move over—for the first time. Since they moved in a few months ago, my mom’s been saying I’d have to go visit them when I was home in Milwaukee, since they were so excited about the place. *Grandpa can garden outside,* she’d said. *They have garden plots. He’s always out there with his tomatoes and his peppers, and apparently the old ladies who garden always come up and ask him if he’s married. And,* she’d said, *they have a restaurant on the first floor with a renowned chef, and there are lots of outings they can sign up for, and they’ve made some friends. It’s great for them. I wish the other set of grandparents would do something like this.* My other set of grandparents doesn’t want to leave their house.
“I’m good, Grandpa. Plus, we’re going to eat lunch soon, right?” I try to sit up so the plate isn’t pinning me to the red, velvety chair.

“Nonsense,” he says, shaking his head. His eyes are practically closed in that way they always are. His eyelids don’t seem to open as much as they used to. “Eat up. Try the grapes. They won’t fill you up.”

I smile and take a few grapes. My dad’s right; it’s no use arguing with a Mische who offers you food. Grandpa used to be a TV salesman, and perhaps his sales pitch spills over into everything else he does. You don’t think you want these grapes? Well, let me tell you why you want these grapes.

In some ways, the apartment doesn’t look that different on the inside from their old house, the upper-level of a duplex on 88th Street on Milwaukee’s west side. The same circular coffee table and floral loveseat—Grandma Jeanette still calls it the davenport—fill up the living room. Grandma’s dozens of plants sit on the windowsill. The chili pepper-shaped lights and bowls and hanging kitchen decorations can still be found in the tiny kitchen and dining room. Grandma’s computer—where she works—has a home in the second bedroom with all of her cacti. They’re potted in orange-yellow glass containers of all shapes and sizes. One of them is shaped like a boot, another like a pitcher. Depression glass, she’d once explained. From my mother.

Grandma sits on her davenport, one leg crossed over the other. She wears purple pants and a matching purple sweater. For as long as I can remember she’s worn bold clothing. My mom says this is not new; Grandma always wore gaudy jewelry and bright clothes. You should have seen her in the sixties, Mom often says.
Grandma looks out the window. She can’t bird watch here the way she used to at her old house, can’t hang a birdfeeder.

“We have a nice view, don’t you think?” Their apartment is up on the eighth floor of the building, the top floor. “We can see the whole neighborhood from here. We can see Children’s, which troubles Maddie a little when she comes over, so we try not to point it out.”

Maddie, my cousin Vanessa’s five-year-old daughter, used to have a younger sister who died of cancer at Children’s Hospital. Maddie covers her ears when she hears ambulance sirens.

“It is a great view,” I say.

“They were lucky to get this place,” says my mom, who sits on the couch next to my grandma, also eating grapes. “Weren’t you, Mom?”

“We were really lucky. You can never get corner apartments on the top floor like this one. You have to wait for somebody to die. Which is how we got this one. We were on the waiting list, and somebody died, and now here we are.” She laughs, a high-pitched “ha.”

I raise my eyebrows and run my fingers back and forth over the chair’s velvet, making the fabric turn dark and then light. I remember where the chair sat in the old house. It was half a pair. I don’t know what happened to its partner. The chair was where the books used to live when we were kids. The *Berenstain Bears* and *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Animalia*. All the books got shoved away underneath until my cousins and I came over when my grandma babysat.

There’s something a little strange about my grandparents moving to this place. It’s nice for them, but strange. Like it signals the beginning of the end of things, somehow. They
don’t seem particularly resistant to change, though. They seem willing to move on, happy about it even. They spent decades in their old duplex, but I don’t imagine it will take us long to start forgetting. Probably just the details at first: the color of the wallpaper, the arrangement of the furniture.

“Don’t take that the wrong way,” Grandma says. “We’ll die someday, too, and then someone else will luck out and get the nice view.”

Grandma has never been one to beat around the bush.

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Many of Milwaukee’s citizens seem to have no trouble moving on either. No trouble leaving the past behind. Back in 2001, people in Milwaukee got pissed off about a blue shirt. It was a sculpture. A giant, blue, translucent plastic thing two stories tall that would wrap around the corner of the parking structure at Mitchell International Airport. The Blue Shirt was a public artwork commissioned by Milwaukee County’s Public Art Committee to “welcome” people to the city. According to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the shirt was supposed to cost $200,000 dollars, but when the County Board called off the project in 2003, the artist, Dennis Oppenheim, had only spent $75,000, mostly on engineering research for the construction of the shirt. Only plans for the shirt exist, as well as an homage perhaps, which is painted on the side of a building in Milwaukee’s Riverwest neighborhood, an area once impoverished, but now becoming populated with young hipsters.

According to the artist, the Blue Shirt wasn’t supposed to have any kind of connotation aside from presenting the human aspect of the city, whatever that meant. According to the County Board, the plug was ultimately pulled on the project because the artist didn’t meet a deadline. According to things you can read on the internet, this might not
be the whole story. Supposedly, people on the County Board, including the County Executive, felt that the Blue Shirt presented the wrong image of Milwaukee. The Board said blue shirt meant blue collar meant Milwaukee was still a working class city, and they weren’t too keen on the idea of Milwaukee being presented as a working class city, not in this day and age. Not since the city wanted to attract people. Like many other Midwestern Great Lakes cities—once centers of industry and manufacturing—Milwaukee’s inhabitants no longer want to be associated with those roots. The city has moved on, the industries have left—take, for example, the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company, which was established in the 1840s and made things like giant metal gears, and finally filed for bankruptcy in 1987, or the Pabst Brewing Company, which left the city for Ohio in the nineties—and now the city wants to promote a new image. John Gurda, a Milwaukee historian and author of *The Making of Milwaukee*, chronicles these changes in his book. Population is down from its peak in the 1960s, he reports, and some find this troubling. So like other cities, there’s lots of urban renewal, lots of new buildings and events sponsored by local companies. The city wants to evolve, become something else. Embody the picture of its modest skyline—lakefront, tall buildings, highways, the sun shining and the sky full of puffy clouds—that you might find on a postcard or a wall poster.

But I wonder about the validity of denying the Blue Shirt. There was plenty of public outcry when the project came to a halt. It was unfair to the artist, people said. It was unfair to those who’d invested time in the project. It was unfair to the public. It was unfair to the people who were still working class in Milwaukee. I wonder if they’re right. I wonder what’s so wrong about acknowledging the city’s roots. After all, those working class, manufacturing roots are the reason the city grew to be what it was in the first place.
John Gurda narrates the growth of the city early on in his book and says Milwaukee began to develop as a city thanks to three men in the early 1800s. Solomon Juneau, a French-Canadian, came to Milwaukee in 1818 to set up a fur trading post on what is now Milwaukee’s East Side. In 1834, Byron Kilbourn, a government surveyor and railroad executive, arrived in Milwaukee and decided that the area near the Milwaukee river, west of what by this time was known as “Juneautown,” was worth purchasing and founded “Kilbourntown.” In the same year, George Walker set up another fur trading post south of these settlements in what is still known as “Walker’s Point.” Eventually—after a fair amount of controversy—these three villages merged in 1846, combining their governments and resources and incorporating the city.

Milwaukee’s founders were immigrants—at least to the Midwest—and Milwaukee itself would become a city of immigrants. By the mid-nineteenth century, Irish and German people began flooding the city, opening all sorts of businesses, everything from steel manufacturing to construction equipment to slaughterhouses and leather factories. By 1856, there were twenty-four breweries operating in the city. Polish immigrants joined the others during the second half of the nineteenth century, only outnumbered by Germans, and they were followed quickly by Italian and Sicilian immigrants. Each group moved into a neighborhood and built its own little town within the city. Each group brought new industry, new customs, new languages. So for decades afterward, Milwaukee continued to grow. People came because of the plethora of jobs in the city’s industries. And the businesses encouraged this; as surprising as it may sound now—during a time when immigration is generally viewed unfavorably—companies in Milwaukee even offered free English language
classes for employees so recent immigrants could work and still learn the language. In 1919, a leading Milwaukee employer called Pfister & Vogel offered language and civics classes (“Americanization classes”) during the workday, and employees were paid to attend. Other companies like Chain Belt provided free dinners on weekdays while lectures on similar topics took place.

Even until the 1970s and 80s people always assumed they would be able to get a job in a factory and make decent money. My dad used to talk about how one summer he and his sister got a job working the night shift at Allen-Bradley, a company that originally manufactured factory equipment. He said he would sit on the line repeating his tasks and movements, seeing how many whatever-he-was-makings he could make in a night. He didn’t keep that job after the summer ended. Shortly after that, it became less easy to get one of those factory jobs, as the factories began closing or leaving the city.

But for many years, working class jobs were the city. They were what brought in money and what kept people employed. The city manufactured products that were used all over the country. A friend of mine has a vintage poster that probably came out of this era. In it, a woman in a flowing gown waves her hand over a drawing of the United States. A light emanates from southeastern Wisconsin. Beneath her in bold text it reads: *Milwaukee feeds and supplies the world*. I thought this poster seemed humorous when my friend bought it, since now Milwaukee isn’t considered anything special by the rest of the country. But maybe, once upon a time, it was.

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“The Prodzynski’s homesteaded land in Canada,” Grandma says as she gets up to fill a plastic watering can. “Lived up there for years. And you know what’s up there? Nothing. A hell of a lot of nothing.”

My grandma’s work takes up a lot of her time and energy, so she talks about it frequently. She’s probably one of the few eighty-nine-year-olds out there who can easily navigate a computer. She had a computer way before it was commonplace to have one at home, back in the early nineties when all systems operated on DOS. Today, her computer is up-to-date and has a large screen with enlarged text so she can read it and work on her genealogy.

“What did they do up there?” I ask. I reach for a peach and look at my grandpa to see if he notices.

“Farmed. Built a barn, largest barn in the province at the time. I have a copy of a picture from the newspaper somewhere,” Grandma says, waving her hand toward the back bedrooms.

“Is that the family with all the redheads?” my mom asks.

“Yes, the redheads. The nuns, too. Have I shown you that photo? If you were a girl in that family you became a nun. Five or six daughters, and they were all nuns, every last one of them. Do any of you want anything to drink? We’ve got Diet Rite in the kitchen. Lou? Bring out some Diet Rite.” My grandmother gestures toward the kitchen.

“I’m fine, Mom. I have water.” My mom holds up a glass. “That’s horrifying, though, about the nuns. Can you imagine?” She turns and looks at me. I look at a clock on the wall with pictures of different birds where the numbers should be, trying to remember if they had it in their old house.
“That is horrifying,” I say.

“Well, what choice did they have?” Grandma asks. “You could become a nun or get married.”

I’ve heard this story before. Grandma has a tendency to keep telling them. It makes them feel strangely circular, like I’ve met these people before—even though they’re long dead—and I pass by them again as I pass through my grandparents’ house.

Grandma’s a genealogist and for years has researched our family. She’s traveled to Europe to find the places our ancestors lived and the places they’re buried. She’s traveled to Utah numerous times because, as she puts it, the Mormons have the best records. Apparently they’re good record keepers, have partnered with Ellis Island to gather data, and have one of the biggest genealogical libraries in the world. I’m told it has something to do with the fact that in their religion a person can baptize their dead ancestors by proxy, so they want to know who all their ancestors are so they can retroactively save them. Maybe this isn’t all that different from what Grandma does; she finds out about our ancestors so she can make them real again, save them from obscurity, give them new life.

Grandma has traced each line of the family as far as she can until the line is “dead,” until she can’t reach any further back. She’s traced one line all the way back to somewhere in Austria in the 1500s, where I had an ancestor named Hedwig. When I learned that during high school—she gave me print-outs of the family history so I could use them for a project in my World History class—I was amused that I had an ancestor who shared a name with Harry Potter’s snowy white owl.

“Then there was the other line up in St. Cloud, up in Minnesota. They’re still up there. Lou’s family.” Grandma traces her fingers over the veins in her other hand.
“How did your mom and grandma end up being born in Steven’s Point?” My mom reaches for more grapes. Despite what Grandpa says, I know we will all be full by the time we go downstairs to try out the restaurant for lunch.

Grandma looks at me.

“Part of the line moved down from Canada. Did you know your great-great-grandmother was the first white woman born in Steven’s Point?”—(we do know this)—“And your great-grandmother went to college! Imagine that, a woman of that generation going to college.”

My grandma also grew up in Steven’s Point, a town located in central Wisconsin, a couple hours northwest of Milwaukee. I’ve always found that impressive, that my great-grandmother went to college. It’s even impressive that my grandmother went to college. She was pursuing a graduate degree when she married my grandpa in the forties.

“And eventually we all moved east, ended up next to this lake,” my mom says.

“Yes, here we are, though there are distant bits of the family scattered all over. Many of the ones that came here to Milwaukee came for the work, like most of the other immigrants. Your dad’s side did that,” Grandma says, looking at me. “Lou, can you get me a dishcloth? There’s a stain on the davenport.”

My dad’s grandfather—my great-grandfather—was a foundry worker at the Falk Corporation in the Valley. A century ago, many factories and slaughterhouses were located in the Menomonee Valley, the area between Milwaukee’s downtown and “South Side,” which today is where the city’s Latino community lives. The company was founded by a German immigrant named Franz Falk in 1858 as, believe it or not, a brewery. The brewery stood next to the Pabst Brewing Company. Eventually the founder’s sons turned the company
into a machine shop, which later evolved into a business that made metal gears. Like many of Milwaukee’s present-day residents, I have ancestors who worked in these factories, and whose work gave Milwaukee its reputation. My great-grandfather spent years shaping hot metal. These companies spent years helping the city grow.

Perhaps also worth noting is that I am essentially a European mutt. I guess that’s probably not that different than most Americans my age at this point. But I have relatives from Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia. From Croatia and various other parts of the former Yugoslavia. My grandma likes the complexity. Whenever someone new marries into the family, she gets excited that she can go digging into a new line. *It’s pretty cool*, I say to my mom, and my mom says, *Yes, it’s cool, but there’s something about the way Grandma does it...she likes to find out the stuff that people probably wouldn’t have minded keeping buried.*

My grandma always has a big-screen TV tuned in to a headline news channel. I remember one week a couple years ago when there was some kind of scandal surrounding the governor of South Carolina. I remember Grandma’s reaction: *The news this week has been fantastic! Have you seen the gossip? I love it.*

So it doesn’t surprise me that my grandma likes to dig up people’s secrets.

But even if that’s part of her motivation, I think there’s something else there. A desire to remember, to know the story. What I worry, as I watch the second hand on the bird clock pass from a blue jay to a finch—which makes the clock start chirping—is that none of us care enough about knowing the story. Grandma puts all this effort into remembering, but soon many of us will begin to forget.

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There are plenty of people who know about where their families come from. I’ve noticed that a) they’re often older than me, and b) if they’re my age, it’s because their families aren’t a bunch of mutts. They come from Ireland or Germany or Slovenia, and their families celebrate that. They wear shirts that say “Kiss Me I’m Irish” and learn to Irish dance because they actually are Irish, and they learn to cook kielbasa because they are actually Polish.

One of my college friends recently got married, and he comes from a family that is almost purely Slovenian. After I met him, I somehow ended up learning that I am also part Slovenian, but part Croatian as well.

“That’s no good,” Ed said.

“Why not?”

“Oh, my grandparents always used to say the Slovenians and the Croatians didn’t get along, but you’re both! Talk about internal conflict!” Ed laughed. He loves bad jokes.

“Thanks, Ed.” I rolled my eyes. “Didn’t they used to be part of the same country?”

“Yes.”

I should probably know more about my family’s genealogy. Also about world geography.

At any rate, Ed was marrying Amy, another one of my college friends. Their wedding was going to taking place in Milwaukee, but neither of them lived in Milwaukee anymore, so coordinating the wedding became a challenge. Finding a place for the reception was particularly difficult.

“Can’t we just have the reception at a Slovenian hall?” Ed’s dad asked.
“What’s a Slovenian hall?” Amy asked. She put her hand on her hip. She may not have known what a Slovenian hall was, but already knew she didn’t want to have her wedding reception at one.

“You know, a gathering hall, where the older Slovenian women in the community come and cater events.”

Ed and Amy both raised their eyebrows and exchanged glances.

“Dad, I don’t think they have those anymore,” Ed said.

“Why not? They should.” His dad scrunched his forehead and sighed.

Later, when our friends discussed it, we concluded that the only thing close to what he was talking about in the city was probably Serb Hall, which is a place you can rent out for special events, and which has fish fries on Fridays during Lent.

My generation does not have the same direct experience with our immigrant heritage that previous generations of European descent did. My mom used to talk about how when she first knew my dad, she saw his grandmothers a fair amount. The two of them would sit around and speak in Czech, leaving my mom out of the conversation. *It was so frustrating,* she said. *They never bothered to translate.*

I do remember going to the Milwaukee Public Museum as a kid, where I’d spend hours staring at a replica of a dinosaur, a room full of crystals and trilobites, an artificial rainforest, and eventually the Streets of Old Milwaukee. For those who grew up in Milwaukee, the Streets of Old Milwaukee exhibit is a favorite at the museum. It was built in 1965 and is essentially a replica of downtown Milwaukee’s streets around the turn of the twentieth century. The streets themselves are cobblestone and they’re lined with shops and houses. There’s a cobbler and a dentist and a candy shop that actually sells fruit-flavored
candy sticks. Connected to this exhibit is the European Village, whose houses depict thirty-three European cultures at around the same time period. I remember looking in the windows of these houses, seeing the women in babushkas, the embroidered napkins, the eggs painted with geometric shapes. I remember my mom saying to my brother and me that our family came from many of those places. To me, they looked like fairy-tale places, like the cottages you might find in a book. I remember throwing pennies in the fake fountain and sitting on the bench next to a statue of an old man who eternally looked out over the street. The place even felt old. The air seemed to emanate oldness, stuffiness, like the past hovered there somehow. I guess that’s probably how a lot of kids feel, like the past is something old and gone and incomprehensible.

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We ride down to lunch in the elevator along with an old woman using a walker. The woman smiles and nods, and we smile back. My grandparents’ are impressive in this way; they are almost ninety and have no trouble getting around.

When we reach the first floor the woman waves goodbye. We pass many others with walkers or canes or wheelchairs on our way to the restaurant.

“You’re going to love this,” Grandpa says, waving at a man he must be acquainted with who’s standing by a wall filled almost entirely with mailboxes.

My mom looks at me and widens her eyes. She knows Grandpa exaggerates.

“’It’s pretty good,” she says. “We had some good sandwiches last time.”

The building itself is nice, much nicer than any other nursing home or elderly community I’ve ever visited. The ceilings are high. Large windows line the hallway and provide a view of a garden and outdoor seating area. The walls aren’t covered in some awful
floral-patterned wallpaper. The restaurant has polished wooden tables with cloth napkins and vases of flowers on each one. I’m surprised that it looks like a real restaurant and not like a school cafeteria.

Once we’re seated at the table, Grandpa says, “Look, eggplant parmesan, you ladies can eat that.” Since my mom and I have been vegetarians for more than a decade, most of the relatives know to check menus to make sure there’s something we can eat. “I’ve been eating vegetarian, too, you know. No meat except fish. It’s how I lost all this weight.”

“That’s great, Grandpa,” I say.

“I know. I look great, don’t I?” He laughs and winks, then looks at his menu. “I’m having the salmon.” He snaps the menu shut and puts it down on the table.

Grandma studies the menu, readjusts her glasses on her nose. “I think I’ll try that eggplant.”

Our lunch conversation covers the usual—my work, my parents’ new house, how my brother’s doing, how the other cousins are doing—and doesn’t return to the family’s genealogy. This is how these conversations go lately. People are interested in what Grandma knows to a certain extent, but there are always more important things to talk about. What I worry is that if I can barely keep the stories straight, how will the younger ones ever know the stories? Once my grandma’s not around to tell the stories, to babysit the little kids like Maddie, then how will she ever find out?

I’ve often marveled at the wealth of knowledge my grandma has. Many people struggle to trace their families back a few generations, but she’s made it her goal to trace ours back and back and back. I worry that we don’t appreciate this knowledge enough. I mostly remember anecdotes from the family history: the family that sent their son out to Minnesota
from Pennsylvania to live with distant relatives, the great-great uncle who fell into a vat of boiling metal and died painfully at home on his son’s birthday, the redheaded homesteaders and the long line of nuns. If you try to trace them back, the families spread outward from children to parents to grandparents, to great uncles and aunts, to great-greats and great-great-greats. If you tried to draw it they’d climb up off of your paper and onto the desk, then off the desk onto the floor. And then if you turned around and traced them forward—through their choices, their marriages, their moves across countries and to new countries, their children and their careers—you’d end up back in Milwaukee on the edge of the water.

“Want to see my garden?” Grandpa asks when we’re finished.

“Yes, let’s,” I say.

“It’s out back. I’ve got a pretty big plot. I’ve got all sorts of things: tomatoes, three kinds of peppers, green beans, you name it.” He leads us like a tour guide, waving his hand out over the space in front of us. He nods to the right. “We even have our own little library here where you can check out books.”

I look into a room covered in bookshelves. It’s probably not even the size of the library at my elementary school, but it’s cute. I see a section of mysteries—Sue Graftons and Mary Higgins Clarks—and a section of romance novels on the nearest wall.

My grandpa leans toward me and whispers, “All the gardening ladies, they ask if I’m married. I always laugh and hold out my left hand. I still have my Jean.”

“Yeah,” I say, smiling, “I’ve heard.”

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Later, when we’re back in their apartment, the conversation turns to the news. Grandpa switches on the TV, and the local news anchors discuss a shooting that happened overnight on the South Side.

“You hear about that other shooting in Walker’s Point? Some guy got shot outside a bar a couple weeks ago. Just minding his own business.” Grandpa opens his mouth and leans back, the way he does when he’s about to point a lot and tell you what he thinks.

“I think I did actually,” I say.

“They think it was gangs. Gangs from Mexico. The Latin something-or-others.” Grandpa jabs at the air in front of him.

“Yeah,” I say. “I heard that. The Latin Kings they think.”

“That’s awful!” Grandma says. “Just awful. You don’t hear great things about the South Side.”

“Maybe it was just a mugging,” my mom says. “Those things happen all the time.”

“No,” Grandpa says. “They say this one was the gangs. Recent immigrants from Mexico. Let’s watch, maybe they’ll mention it.” Grandpa turns back to the TV.

“Grandpa,” I say. “That’s—”

But I don’t get to finish because the phone rings. My grandpa picks it up.

“Mische.” Which is the way he’s always answered the phone. “Oh, yes, hello, here’s Jean.” He hands my grandma the phone.

“You have plans later, don’t you Katie? You want to get going?” My mom stands up and looks for her purse.

“Well, okay,” I say. “Yeah, we should get going.”

I stand up, too, and look around for my jacket, but I feel off balance.
I want to tell them that making assumptions about recent immigrants, even if the TV news perpetuates them somehow, is just…wrong. It’s uninformed. It’s thinking like that all over the country that leads to people treating immigrants poorly, and it’s like thinking with blinders on. It’s thinking based only on the present moment that conveniently ignores the past. It baffles me that people can be the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of immigrants, yet think that immigrants today are somehow different from their ancestors. It baffles me that we can be the children and grandchildren of foundry workers and machine operators and brewers, yet somehow think that is not important. As if they don’t have something to do with us being here now. We belong to this culture of selective forgetfulness.

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So here’s the thing about the Blue Shirt: it seems like an act of active forgetting. Passive forgetting—especially when it’s about something important, when it’s about where we come from, how we got here—is often reprehensible enough. But when a city tries to shed itself of its history or when it’s afraid to acknowledge how it came to be what it is, that seems even more reprehensible.

Not everyone forgets, I suppose. There’s the painted blue shirt on the side of that house in Riverwest. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel also reported on a 78-year-old man who made a shirt out of wood, painted it blue, and hung it on his front door in 2003. He put a picture of the head of John Norquist, one of Milwaukee’s former mayors, above the shirt’s collar. He said he made the shirt because another man from West Allis, just west of the city, had fallen out of a tree and broken his leg while trying to hang a blue shirt. So at least the County Board’s decision to stop the Blue Shirt project didn’t go unnoticed.
No, not everyone forgets. There are plenty of portrayals of Milwaukee that people don’t seem to have a problem with. The bronze statue of The Fonz from Happy Days stands over the Milwaukee River on Wisconsin Avenue just east of the Riverside Theater. The Fonz is life-size and gives two thumbs up to passing traffic. The sun reflects off the shiny copper. Since the statue was installed in 2008, thousands of people have had their pictures taken with The Fonz. They stand next to him, grin, and give the camera two thumbs up. No one seems troubled by this depiction of Milwaukee, by the way Happy Days and its offshoot Laverne and Shirley represented everyday people—often working class people—in the city. Citizens perpetuate plenty of other stereotypes, too. At Brewers games people in sausage costumes—Italian sausage, Polish sausage, a hot dog, chorizo—race around Miller Park during the seventh inning stretch. Billboards all over the region advertise the city’s brewery tours: Miller, Sprecher, the Lakefront Brewery. So maybe it’s not that everyone willingly forgets what we come from. Maybe it’s only a certain group of citizens. Or maybe the debate has something to do with what people expect of art, with what we expect art to convey. But regardless, there’s something about it that makes me worry. Something about the way everyone has something they’d rather forget, and the way we will sometimes go to extremes to do so. The way we slowly forget is troubling as well. The way the details of our family’s histories, our past experiences, the neighborhoods and houses we used to live in and the people we used to know begin to fade. We move on to the new.

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When my mom and I sign out at Harwood Place’s desk, I catch the eye of the woman sitting behind it. She looks too cheerful. A fake cheerful. Her hair has been neatly curled with a curling iron and dyed red.
“Be sure to put down the time you’re leaving.” She fluffs some of the tulips in the vase next to the log book.

“I will,” I say. I write down “2:45” and turn to go. “Have a good day.” I don’t look back to see her expression.

We leave through the automatic sliding doors and head for the visitor parking area.

“It’s nice,” I say.

“It is.” My mom digs around in her purse for her keys. “I’m glad they moved.”

“It’s kind of strange, though. Just that they’ll never be in the old house again.” To the west, the sky is turning that dark blue-gray color of a possible thunderstorm. Some dry, crumpled leaves blow across the pavement. The parking lot must be pretty new; it has very few cracks and the yellow lines of the parking spaces are still bright gold.

“I wonder what they did with all that stuff they had hanging on the walls. The stuff from all their travels, like those maps and the accordion fans.”

“Yeah, I don’t know actually,” Mom says. “I know they got rid of a lot of things.”

“Remember those drawings they had at the top of the stairs, the ones above the place where they hung Christmas cards and stuff?” My grandparents had hung three rows of string across a wall near their old kitchen, and they’d pin up the cards with clothes pins.

“Which ones?”

“The ones we’d done as kids. There were pictures I drew of Grandma and Grandpa in like second grade. They must have been up on that wall for a decade and a half. The paper was faded. I remember I drew them with brown hair because I thought they’d be offended if I made their hair gray. There were poems and drawings by the other cousins, too.”
I wonder why I remember these things and not others. When I think about my own life, about the piles of items and memories I have forgotten—the childhood friends, the dates, the family vacations, the stacks of old CDs from “favorite” bands, the 4x6 prints and old negatives gathering dust in a shoebox somewhere—I wonder why I remember these details. Especially when others have already forgotten them. I wonder if it matters.

Mom laughs. We arrive at her Toyota RAV4. I try to pull the handle.

“It’s locked, Mom.”

“Oh, sorry.” She points her car key at the driver’s side door and pushes a button a few times. The car beeps and we get in.

“You’ll have to come visit again next time you’re home. They’d like that.” She adjusts her rearview mirror.

“Yeah. I’ll have to.”

I look up at the brick building, trying to figure out which window is theirs. From here, I can’t really see the curtains hanging in any of the windows, so they all look the same. Mom puts the car into reverse and backs out of the parking space. The wind blows as we drive away.
Sitting on the Back of the Couch, 1989

On Wells Street, three houses east of 68th Street, I sit on the back of the couch looking out the window. An old man on a bike rides by, swerving to avoid the jagged crack in our sidewalk that the ants march along from one anthill to another. The yard is small, square, and flat. The lawn is neatly trimmed. Old maple trees line the street, their branches hanging like arms that might reach down and grab your hair when you’re kicking a ball—one of those colorful rubber ones from Walgreens—around the yard. The driveway’s black pavement sticks out like me—the kid too tall to blend into the line of children at school—because the others on the street are gray. Once, I dumped a whole bottle of bubbles onto the pavement and watched rainbows swirl around in the soapy liquid. I can’t go outside by myself, but Mom tells me to get off the back of the couch. I’ll ruin the cushions. They’re not meant for sitting.

Howling in Suburbia, 1991

My bedroom window feels much higher than the second floor of our new house, the one in the southern suburbs where ours was one of the first on the street. The yard here is rectangular. Dead bugs—spiders and flies—shrink up in the space between the glass and the screen. I think I can hear them creeping in the dark, when I hear the coyotes. In school, they tell us we must have a family plan for emergencies. We must have an escape route. My family has no escape route. This worries me. I imagine fire burning up the banister of the stairs, eating the frames of the pictures on the walls, and having nowhere to go. The leap from the window to the backyard would be enormous—I envision my legs shattering—and there’s nothing to grab on the way down, just the tan metal siding. My teachers ask if we
have an escape plan, like they ask if my family eats dinner together at least a few times a week, and to both questions I nod. Yes, I nod, but I do not say yes. Maybe the lie is less if I don’t speak it out loud. Getting in trouble in school is perhaps more terrifying than fire. But if the fire comes up the stairs, I don’t know where I will go. It’s a long way down. Down to where I hear the coyotes at night, the pack of them that lives in the undeveloped field and woods behind our house. In daylight, that field looks immense, but at night the coyotes howl at the full moon and they sound like they could be right outside the window, yip-yip-yipping, and even though I know they are small and scared of people, they do not sound small and scared of people. They sound like they are laughing, mocking me, and so I don’t know which would be more terrifying, them or the fire.

**Waiting for Grandma’s Cardinals, 1993**

Grandma’s house has a birdfeeder window. It’s where she sits to watch her cardinals, where she teaches us to watch for them, too. She keeps an inventory of them, so they are *hers*. She sits on the old, floral-patterned couch in a living room that my grandpa allows her to keep very pink. In front of the couch stands the coffee table, the one they got somewhere in Asia. Carved wooden animals and plants and swirls cover its legs and the legs of the miniature chairs that fit underneath it, that would probably only be the appropriate size for a gnome or a toddler. There’s a “goof” on one of the legs, as Grandma says, where the wood carver messed up and had to fill in the space with some kind of brown plastic-y material. “Oh well,” she says, “Everybody goofs.” To see the cardinals you must look past the “whore house lamp.” That’s what my mom calls it. The lampshade is a reddish-pink silk material and strings of plastic shimmery beads hang from the edges. We look out the window and there are no cardinals. I wonder how she got the little red birdfeeder up into the birch tree. Beyond
the tree, the neighbor’s house is square and brick, like most of the others on the street.

“They’ll come,” Grandma says. “We just have to be patient. They will come.”

**Things are Different on the East Side, 1994**

Aunt Lisa’s house has three stories because it’s one of those old ones on the city’s upper-east side. It’s just east of the river, and from it my cousins can walk to the grocery store or the CD store or a bunch of restaurants like the one that sells gyros or the one that sells falafel. Their yard is skinny. A fence runs around the back and sides of the house, and it practically touches the neighbor’s house. From the third story window—my aunt and uncle’s room, but my cousins and I go in there if the adults aren’t around—you can see the rooftops of the neighboring houses, the streetlight at the corner, the little cross-the-street man flashing white.

The sounds are different: sirens, cars splashing puddles onto the sidewalk, people yelling.

“Let’s go outside,” my cousin Maggie says. “We can walk to the park.” Maggie is only two months older than me, but she feels much older. She lives in the city and knows how to get around. She’s not afraid of the sirens and the metal bars on the windows of the stores not too far away. “Is it far?” I ask. “Will your mom let us go?” Maggie raises her eyebrows. “Of course she will.” She runs out of the room. I follow, placing one foot carefully in front of the other on the squeaky floorboards. Part of me hopes Aunt Lisa wants us to stay in the house.

**Distraído/Distracted in Spanish Class, 1998**

Spanish class takes place on the top floor of the school, its window looking out at the parking lot. The lot is huge, a sea of blacktop and yellow lines with a playground and swing set on the other side of the ocean. In Spanish class in grade school we learn the same thing for nine years. ¿Cómo te llamas? What is your name? ¿Cómo estás? Así-asi. How are you? So-so.

We’d sing ¿Qué tiempo hace? What’s the weather like? Hace buen tiempo means weather
that we like... The American flag flaps in the wind right outside the window, and I watch the fabric ripple and make snapping sounds and the chain bang against the flagpole ding ding ding. “Pay attention,” Señora Trojan says (the boys always laugh at her name). “Class isn’t outside the window.” The light coming in the window is always too bright. I turn back to the chalkboard. It’s not like I want to be in the parking lot anyway. I hate recess.

**Painting Apples, 2001**

Art Fundamentals A, the freshman art class for drawing and painting, is on the 6th floor of our high school. That’s where they keep the art, all the way upstairs where the nuns used to live when nuns still ran the school. Now the nuns’ rooms are practice rooms for the kids in band, tiny little cubicles where you can play your flute or your trombone. My friends and I don’t sit near the windows, but the supplies are by the windows. That’s where you get your paint and wash out your brushes, where the colored water coats the walls of the metal sink. The windows provide a view of the neighborhood, the uniform little houses, the square ones and the bungalows with their curved roofs and their windows like eyes, the perfectly square city blocks. There’s a daycare across the street. And a portrait studio. If you look to the left you can see Gilles, the frozen custard stand. It’s been there for decades, since back when our parents were kids, and it still has the same sign, the one with the dancing light-up ice cream cones, one vanilla and one chocolate. The tone is different in this neighborhood. It’s older and duller and brighter at the same time. “I like it,” I say. “You like what?” my friend Jess asks. Jess sits with me in class. We met in biology the first day of school. She wears all dark colors, blacks and grays and maroons. They match her hair. “Nothing. I mean, I like your painting of that apple.” She looks at her apple, a green and red mackintosh, a rendition of the one sitting on the table in front of us. “Thanks.” I like her and my new friends, too.
Selling Gyros, 2004

“What can I get you?” I ask a man who stands outside the Greek Village Restaurant holding a Miller Lite. The line at my window is at least five people deep, and the same is true of the windows on my right and left. “Can I get a gyro?” He pronounces it *j-eye-row*. I roll my eyes and refrain from correcting him. I have heard every possible pronunciation imaginable for this Greek lamb and pita sandwich, but it is no use telling drunk Summerfest goers that it’s pronounced like the European currency. They wouldn’t remember anyway and would probably just come back and ask for a *j-eye-row* or a *g-ear-row* again tomorrow. The Greek Village Restaurant’s Summerfest stand looks out on the Miller Lite Oasis, one of the stages where bands play. So far this week we’ve listened to everything from Hard Rock to a children’s choir. I wear my hair pinned back underneath a blue baseball cap. I hand the drunk man his gyro and he throws a quarter in our tip jar. Every two windows share a tip jar. The blond girl working at the far left window always gets the most tips. She might be a very nice person, but the fact that she gets all the tips annoys everyone else. “Katie, take a break,” says Sherri, the owner’s wife. She has dyed red-blond hair and waves her hands around, telling people to do things without looking at them. I ask one of the guys in the back for some rice—as a vegetarian, I can’t eat the gyros—and sit outside on a picnic table. My hair and t-shirt smell like fried food. I wonder how I ended up with this job. Summerfest, Milwaukee’s ten-day music festival, is not fun—or even the least bit amusing—once you’ve worked at it.

Pigeons on the Parthenon, 2005

This is what I see from my dorm room on the fifteenth floor of Straz Tower: Milwaukee’s downtown public library, the court house, the pigeons. None of this is new to me. I knew it would be there before I moved in, but I stare at it sometimes anyway. The library’s right
across the street and I can see its roof, its dome, its pillars. Like something out of ancient
Greece or Rome. The court house sits behind it and to the right, similar style. Now that I
think about it, I can see the prison, too. Those are the smallest windows I’ve ever seen. Tiny
and narrow and rectangular. You could sit inside one of those rooms and stare out at concrete
Milwaukee all day every day. It sounds terrifying. Pigeons must like classical architecture.
Groups of them sit on the library’s dome, then something will startle one of them and the
whole flock will swoop off, moving in unison like a school of fish through the smoggy air. I
learned that Milwaukee received an F for air quality and the evidence shows up on my
windows as a layer of dirt. The pigeons always come back, though. Sometimes they land on
the sidewalk in front of the building, searching for scraps of food people left in the trash cans
by the bus stop. I once caught a man trying to kick the pigeons. I mean, I caught it on camera.
I snapped the picture and submitted it to the school’s literary journal and they published it,
but they got my name wrong and attributed the photo to someone else. My window faces
north. Grandma always used to say north windows are bad because plants don’t like them
(Grandma taught me that because she loves plants; she has dozens of cacti. The cacti love
her). North windows don’t get enough light. So sometimes I’m jealous of my friends on the
south side of the building whose rooms get more light, south light, and who get a view of the
entire Marquette Interchange. On their side, the highway weaves in and out of itself, the
sections of concrete intertwined like pieces of knotted string.

**Click Click Click, 2007**

My college apartment is across the street from the rugby house. The guys living there have
taken a large sheet of plywood and written “POO” on it. Apparently they are trying to mock
the fraternities in the neighborhood whose signs read “ΣΛΒ” and “ΔΧ” and “ΣΦΕ.” They are
having a party on their roof. This seems stupid. People should not drink beer and sit on a slanted roof. This happens frequently. Sometimes the neighbors call the Public Safety Department to make them come down. The two guys on the roof today clink their beer cans and grin. My roommates and I watch this, and we are not sure if we should laugh or roll our eyes. This window faces west. I have lined plants up on the table in front of it: an aloe, two basil plants, some parsley, a bamboo. They seem to like the window. On the other side of the building along Wells Street is where all the bars are located. At 2 a.m., after bar close, I can hear the click click click of high heels and the high-pitched laughs of drunken students. They make me feel like I might be missing out on something.

**The Marina, 2008**

My college roommate’s apartment window looks out at Lake Michigan. Jenny lives on the eighth floor of a high-rise where all of the apartments have a lake view because the building’s windows jut out of its north and south sides like the eyes of an insect. From these, you can see the lake to the east. Every time I enter her apartment I stand in front of the window and look at the marina. Waves move across the surface of the water from the direction of Michigan. Even with binoculars there’s no way you could see the other side of the lake, though. “I could look out your window forever,” I tell her. She laughs. “Sometimes I do,” she says. The view from my parents’ house, where I’ve temporarily moved back in, is not so spectacular. Jenny works for Deloitte, one of the big-four accounting firms, goes to a church and gym in the neighborhood, takes dance classes, and shops at the upscale Pick ‘n’ Save that’s frequented by all the East Side’s young professionals. When I ride back down the elevator to go to my car, I wonder if that’s what I wanted.

**How I Left, 2009**
The view from my Civic’s windshield as I drive west out of the city is blinding. Unless you leave early in the morning, the sun will be in your eyes. I follow the snake of traffic past the skyscrapers, the old, run-down neighborhoods, the baseball stadium, State Fair Park. Past the neighborhood of my high school, my parents’ house, the places where I got my teeth cleaned and my hair cut. I should have washed my car; the windows are dirty and the sun highlights the grime. Once I cross the county line I go up an incline—the incline that determines who gets to use Lake Michigan’s water and who doesn’t—and the lights are mesmerizing. The red lights in front of me and the white ones going back east look like they’re flowing over the land like water, a constant stream of people, of movement, of lives going by. People listening to talk radio and pop and the oldies station. The suburbs go on for a long time, finally turning into forests and farmland. Miles and miles of corn, alfalfa, soybeans before I reach my destination out in the Heartland, where I will study writing, where I will become a teacher, where I will have new streets to learn and new windows to look through. When I come back, the feeling will be different, because you can only go so far east. There’s a stopping point; you can’t drive east in Wisconsin forever the way you can drive west into the Great Plains for what seems like forever. You can only go so far east in a city built up against the water.
Section III:
Not What We Expected

Part 1:
We rented an apartment along the beach, Grandpa says. Jennie, me, her brother and his wife. A nice place. We spent a couple weeks there, seeing the town, eating Spanish food.

Enjoying each other’s company, Grandma adds.

Yes, Grandpa says. Enjoying each other’s company.

Spain is a lovely country, Grandma says. We’ve been to many other countries in Europe, too. Italy, Germany, England, Czechoslovakia. Spain was one of the prettiest. And the cleanest. You’d be surprised. Some of those others, like Italy, they aren’t as pristine as you might expect.

The dollar went a lot further back then, too, Grandpa says. You could get a lot more for your money.

It was a nice trip, Grandma says and nods.

Part 2:
We took your cousin Sara to Mexico once when she was a kid, Grandpa says. Have I told you about the time we went to Mexico?

Sara was probably a young teenager, Grandma corrects. I remember it because she had just become a vegetarian. She’d gone to the library and researched how to get enough protein. Then she brought the book home and showed it to me, said look, I will be healthy as a vegetarian. It looked like she was right, so I couldn’t argue with her. She looks out the window.

So we took her to Mexico, Grandpa continues, cracking the knuckles of his left hand with his right. She and I went swimming in the ocean. The current was stronger than we thought it would be. Not what we expected. We swam as hard as we could. The current tugged at our legs and arms. I’m not sure how we made it back to shore. Sara must have been a strong swimmer. He crosses his legs, leans back in his rocking chair.

It was a nice trip, Grandma says. We had a good time.
9.

_Fútbol, La Madre, y La Virgen de Guadalupe_

“The priests are coming tomorrow,” Adán says. He has his back to the kitchen table—shoved into the corner of the kitchen so that you have to suck in your stomach to sit down in the chairs next to the walls—and stirs breakfast with a wooden spoon.

“The priests?” I ask. I try to sound neutral. I’m afraid I sound slightly horrified. Adán’s statement sounds ominous, like _The British are coming!_ Or _The stampede of wildebeests is coming!_ I imagine a stampede of priests rushing in through the heavy, wooden front door, robes flying, crosses swinging around their necks.

Yes, this is ridiculous. I have encountered dozens of priests—during more than a decade of Catholic school—and have never once seen a stampede. Priests tend more toward folding their hands and boring a hole in your head with their eyes. _How have you sinned? What needs to be forgiven?_


“Ah, so why are they coming?” I cut a slice of mango into pieces with my fork. A chunk jumps off onto the floral placemat. I stab it and check for fuzz; it’s a _manila_ mango, which is the good kind, better than the _ataulfo_ because it’s sweeter and less gritty.

“Priests from the seminary come every summer to learn Spanish. So then they can go back to their parishes in the United States and work with people who speak Spanish. Usually it’s Father Adolfo who comes, but this year it’s two others.” Adán approaches the table with a pot of coffee.
“La gasolina,” he says and fills the tiny white mug in front of me with brown liquid. Then he brings over the sugar bowl and milk pitcher without me having to ask. He grins. He’s almost always grinning, even though he has to feed a dozen foreigners every morning, even though he’s done it for years, ever since he started having kidney problems and couldn’t work a normal job anymore.

“Of course,” I say.

“You will need it. You have a busy day, no?”

“Kind of.”

“This week will get crazy, you know. The World Cup begins on Thursday.” Adán goes back to the stove and turns off one of the burners.

“I know,” I say. “I’ve heard rumors they’re cancelling classes so everyone can watch the game.”

“Of course they are. Every television in the country will be showing the game. They’re setting up a giant screen in the Plaza de Armas.”

He puts a pan of eggs down in the middle of the table. They’re scrambled with a red sauce that makes them delicious. This is noteworthy, since I don’t normally like eggs. But somehow, I like almost everything Adán cooks, except maybe nopales, a salad made of strips of a cactus that looks like a prickly pear. It’s something about the texture; the cactus is chewy and squeaks against my teeth. And it bleeds, oozing sticky sap. But other than that, everything Adán makes is fantastic, and he’s not afraid to tell you that either. My chilaquiles are the best in the country, hands down, he says every Friday, el día de chilaquiles. The day when we eat fried tortilla strips covered in cheese and chile sauce.
“So there are two priests coming?” I imagine the rest of us having to behave ourselves while the priests are around. Not that we don’t normally behave, but I worry about accidentally swearing in front of a priest. I fear my thoughts and opinions might somehow be scrawled across my forehead, subjecting me to judgment.

“Yes, two. At least I think two. Conchita knows more about it than I do.”

Conchita is Adán’s wife. She’s the one who inherited this house we live in, this old house with the pink façade, the ornate architecture and bright painting on the walls inside. The entryway of the house is dark and filled with plants. A parakeet chirps in a hanging cage. A staircase goes up to the part of the house where Adán and Conchita live, where the kitchen and the living and dining room are. From there, you can see out over the top of the whole neighborhood, over all the connected roofs to the rainclouds in the distance. The thunderheads just hover there, though. Everyone keeps telling me it’s the rainy season, but so far no rain. The storms seem stuck out there on the edge of the valley. Alternatively, if you keep going straight from the entryway down a half set of stairs, you end up in the long tiled corridor open to the sky. Bedrooms line this hallway, their screen doors letting in the outside air. Since it hasn’t rained yet, water coming in isn’t a big problem. I live in one of these rooms. There’s a metal panel you can close over the screen part of the door, but it gets too hot and stuffy, so at night I leave it open. Then I spend hours listening to the incessant chirping of the crickets, the thud of paws landing on the cement roof as the neighborhood’s troop of stray cats runs around, the whir of the blender as Conchita makes soup or juice.

“Where’s Erin?” Adán asks. “She’s going to miss breakfast. And everyone must eat la vitamina T in the morning!”
“She’s got a head cold. I think she’ll be up soon. What’s vitamin T?” I sip my coffee. It tastes better than the coffee at home, though maybe I’m just buying into everything Adán says. He claims because he roasts it himself it’s inherently better.

“The tortilla vitamin! Available only in Mexico!” He laughs, a big loud laugh, and grabs his stomach. Adán’s not exactly what I expected him to be. He’s in his sixties, wears jeans, a t-shirt, and flip flops, and is always laughing. Sometimes I wonder if he puts on a face for the foreigners.

I finish an egg taco and wipe my mouth with a napkin. Most mornings we eat something with tortillas. Eggs, chilacas (green peppers with cheese), squash flowers, potatoes. People in central Mexico don’t eat many flour tortillas; they eat corn tortillas. Adán always heats them in a pan, then puts them in a cloth so they stay warm.

“Oh, I see. The tortilla vitamin.” I laugh and roll my eyes. Sunlight comes in from the window ten feet above us—all the ceilings here are incredibly high—and hits me in the eyes. The blue walls of the kitchen light up. As I reach for another tortilla, I recall a billboard near our house on Avenida Corregidora that advises pregnant women to eat tortillas because they have folic acid. Maybe there’s something to what Adán says.

“Yes, have another taco,” Adán says. “Everyone has room for another taco!” He turns and looks at me. “Ah! Katie! That’s the wrong side of the tortilla! El otro lado, la derecha.”

“There’s a right side of the tortilla?”

“Claro. The less brown side. The right side is less ugly.”

He picks up a tortilla from the basket, flips it over, and shows me the side with more brown spots. He holds it out on his palm.

“See?”
“Yes, okay. I see.” I smile and turn over my tortilla.

I’m starting to think Adán is religious about food. There are rules to food. You can’t add too much sugar to the juice. You have to roast the coffee yourself. You need to use the right side of the tortilla. Food is what keeps you going. Adán believes in food, his food especially. I think I’m starting to believe in food, too.

***

This house seems miraculous, in a way. It somehow always has room for more people. Erin—another student from Iowa State, where I attend graduate school—and I are here in Querétaro, Mexico, to teach English for the summer at El Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, and we live at the end of the hallway. Erin is in her early thirties, recently went back to school to finish a degree in linguistics, and speaks almost no Spanish. Cynthia, the professor from Iowa State who brought us here, lives across from us. There’s a political science professor from Toronto named Tamir who teaches at The Tec like we do. A Belgian girl named Stephanie. A college student from Texas named Leah. A middle-aged woman from California named Deborah. A group of Mexican college students who are sometimes here, sometimes not. Five thirteen-year-old boys from Texas who are here with a school group. A half dozen other people who have come and gone. There was one night the house was short rooms—one night when it couldn’t expand anymore—so Cynthia stayed at a friend’s house until the population of the house returned to stable. It’s chaos, and I don’t know how Adán and Conchita keep track of it all. We have to be fed in shifts, and the kitchen table can only seat four at a time. Sometimes we pull up extra chairs so six or seven of us can eat at once. Eating is on a timer in this house. At 7pm the first group of us comes in
for dinner, at 7:45 the second group, at 8:30 the third. Usually we eat with the same people, so even though we move in different directions all day long, food brings us back together.

Adán and Conchita have grown children and now they make a living by renting rooms out to foreigners. They feed us and do our laundry and clean our rooms. They live just north of downtown in Querétaro on Calle Heroe de Nacozari. Conchita told me the story once, when I asked her who the hero of Nacozari was.

“Every city in Mexico has a street with that name. It’s based on an old story about a train full of dynamite speeding out of control toward the town of Nacozari. A man was able to stop it, but he died in the process. So he’s the hero of Nacozari.” Conchita always looks busy, so she’ll usually tell these stories as she’s doing other things. Washing dishes in the sink—they don’t have a dishwasher, cooking rice for dinner, putting vegetables into the blender, her voice rising to be heard over the noise.

I wondered why there was a train full of dynamite speeding out of control in the first place, but I think that part got lost in translation.

Here are some of the other things to know about Conchita: she’s a short, petite woman with dark hair, she’s always in a hurry, and it’s best to catch her in a good mood or keep quiet. She also has theories. She told us one the other day about the crazy train conductors:

“Don’t they have any sense?” Conchita said, throwing her hands up in the air. “Aie! It didn’t used to be like this. The trains didn’t used to come through here all the time, just once or twice a day. But now they come on their way to Mexico City. And the drivers are American. At least I think they’re American. The trains come from Kansas City. That’s what it says on the side of the building down the road. Kansas City. But you know what happens?
They sit in those little compartments alone for days on end and they go nuts, they go *loco*, and so they come roaring through town blaring their horns and disturbing our peace. Do they wake you up in the middle of the night? They make the house shake! There are cracks in the walls! Those cracks didn’t used to be there. But what can you do? They just keep coming, bringing whatever they bring, and making sure everyone along the way knows it.”

“Do you know why people always stand on the tracks at Avenida Invierno asking for money? There were two young men out there this morning. They always have backpacks.” Deborah, the woman from California, always has lots of questions and is not afraid to ask them despite her limited Spanish.

“Aie, *sí*, they’re from Guatemala. They jump on the trains and ride them north. Trying to get to the United States. It’s incredibly dangerous, *pobrecitos*. At least they blend in. Once there were Africans waiting at the tracks. Africans! Can you believe it? They were seven feet tall and black; how could people not notice them? And how did they get here? Must have come over on a boat or come from the Caribbean. *Es muy peligroso.*” Conchita covered her eyes with her hands and put her head on the table. Like I said, she doesn’t usually sit down at the table, usually bustles around the kitchen. She’s a short woman, barely five feet tall. She wears her hair tied back at the base of her neck and has bangs cut straight across her forehead.

She looked up and sighed as a horn sounded in the distance.

“See? Not a moment’s peace.” Then she got up to stir something on the stove.

Conchita rarely talks about herself, but once she sat down and told Cynthia, who has been staying with them in the summer for eleven years, that electricity and other bills for the house were expensive and they were having trouble keeping up with them. The bad press
about swine flu and narcotrafficking was keeping foreigners from coming during the school year. She’d turned and looked at me and said, “This is not a good career. No insurance, no security. It’s hard work.” Then she got up to wash more dishes.

What Conchita believes is less clear. I think maybe she believes in stories, and in taking what comes your way because that’s all you can do.

***

The next morning the priests arrive while I’m at work. I meet them when I come home for la comida—the main meal of the day—around two in the afternoon. When I enter the kitchen with Erin, the table is extra crowded and Conchita quickly pulls up more chairs. (Adán always cooks breakfast and Conchita always cooks lunch and dinner.) The two priests are engaged in conversation with Deborah. One of them looks to be about thirty and has dark hair. He wears the traditional black priest’s outfit with the white collar, but as I sit down I notice he wears black and white Adidas tennis shoes. The other is blond, perhaps a little older, and wears a Hawaiian shirt and Crocs. At first glance, they don’t seem like typical priests.

They turn to look at us as we sit down.

“Hello,” Adidas Shoes says. “I’m Father Matt.” He gestures toward Hawaiian Shirt. “This is Father Mike.”

I wonder, briefly, if it is normal for them to introduce themselves like that. Father.

“Hi,” Erin and I both say.

“I’m Katie.”

“Erin.”
“Nice to meet you both. Have you been here long?” Father Matt leans back in his chair as Conchita puts a basket of tortillas in front of him.

“Eat more, padre. There’s plenty.” She smiles. I get the sense that the presence of the padres cheers her up somehow. Like she enjoys paying attention to them more than the rest of us. Maybe it’s just because everyone in Mexico is Catholic. Everybody respects the church.

“We’ve been here a few weeks,” Erin says. “We’re teaching at The Tec, English classes.”

“That’s cool,” Father Matt says. “We’re here”—he waves his hand toward Father Mike again—“to direct a seminary program for the summer. We came down with a bunch of priests-in-training so they can learn Spanish.”

“Yeah, Adán mentioned that,” I say.

“We have to get going soon, orientation classes this afternoon, but do you guys know the best place to buy a phone card?” Father Matt puts his fork down on his plate. He smiles. He seems to emanate friendliness.

“I don’t actually,” Erin says. “We’ve been using Skype to call people at home. There’s not internet here at the house, but there’s free WiFi in the plazas downtown.”

“I know a place,” Deborah says. “Just down the street. That way.” She points in front of her. “Wait, maybe it’s that way.” She points behind her.

I lose track of the conversation for a minute and look at Father Mike, who hasn’t said much. He leans back in his chair with a slight scowl on his face and pushes spaghetti noodles around his plate. He catches me looking at him.

“This doesn’t seem very Mexican, does it?”
“The noodles?” I ask. For some reason I expected the kind of person who wears a Hawaiian shirt to be agreeable. “Well, not all the food is what we think of as typical Mexican food, but it’s all good.”

“All done padre?” Conchita asks. Normally she grumbles a bit if we don’t eat everything on our plates, but today she smiles.

“Sí, yes, all done.” He nods and she takes his plate. “Gracias.”

***

I’ve been told Mexicans care about three things:

1. Soccer
2. Their Mothers
3. The Virgen of Guadalupe

I am in no way surprised by this. People have been talking about the World Cup since I arrived, and Mexico’s jerseys—there are green versions, white versions, and black versions—are everywhere. On people, hanging in doorways, taped to the back windows of cars. The United States may not have soccer fever, but Mexico sure does.

One’s mother—and family in general—is clearly important in Mexico, too. One of Adán and Conchita’s sons lives in town with his wife, and they come over most days of the week. Their son Leo rides up and down the hallway on his tricycle, its wheels squeaking and clicking over every ridge in the tile. He gains momentum as he rides, his little legs pumping, and either crashes into the wooden door at the south end of the hallway or the stairs at the north end. After the crash he yells, “¡Abueeeeliito000!” After a minute Adán yells back from upstairs.

“¿Qué pasa nieto? What are you yelling about?”
“I crashed!”

“So pick your bike up and come help me with the laundry!”

Leo spends most of his afternoons at our house, following his grandparents around as they clean, riding his tricycle, or chasing Boss—the family’s Boxer—up and down the stairs. If I smile at him and say, “Hola Leo,” he clams up, though, and hides behind Conchita.

Sometimes if he is upset Conchita sings to him. Often the songs sound like children’s songs. Other times they are slower songs whose words I can’t identify. Her voice floats down from the kitchen until it’s drowned out by the sound of the blender.

Family is the center of this house, and supposedly of this whole country. Plus, I’m told in Mexico bad things will happen if you insult someone’s mother.

Mexico is also Catholic with a capital C. Depictions of the Virgen Mary decorate courtyards and bedroom walls and dangle from the rearview mirrors of city buses next to crucifixes. When I studied in Spain as an undergraduate, I learned that the only people who go to church in Madrid are old women; everyone in Spain is Catholic, but not religious. In Mexico, everyone is Catholic. Catholic and religious. During one of my first weeks in Mexico, Erin and I walked south to the city’s downtown to explore. As we passed one of many used bookstores, out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed Adán heading north up the street on the opposite sidewalk. He wore a backpack and his usual t-shirt and jeans. He didn’t see us. Conchita says he goes to church for a couple hours every afternoon. Adán doesn’t strike me as the kind of person who is religious enough to go to church every day. But it surprises me that most people in Mexico are so religious.

I also saw a sign on the door of a hostel we stayed at in Guanajuato—a nearby mining town where we spent a weekend—that read: “This home is Catholic. We do not accept
Protestant propaganda, nor propaganda from other sects. Live Jesus Christ! Live the miraculous apostle St. Judas Tadeo!” After we got back to Querétaro, I noticed many of the houses in our neighborhood hung this sign on their doors, too.

One of my more bizarre religious experiences in Mexico was the day I met a German Protestant missionary in the Plaza de Armas. She was in her sixties, had short gray hair, and asked me if I spoke English. She made me take her pamphlets and said she hoped we would run into each other again. I wondered what a Protestant missionary was doing in one of the most Catholic countries in the world.

Maybe these things stick in my memory because I spent so many years surrounded by Catholicism as a kid. I attended Catholic school for most of my education, but my family was never much more than Christmas-and-Easter Christians to begin with. So by the time I was in college I didn’t think much about church anymore. I haven’t spent much time in churches, or felt very comfortable in them, since abandoning religion in high school. And I guess I don’t have a great reason for feeling uncomfortable around priests; I’ve known many of them, and some of my college friends even considered becoming priests.

Bits of it stay with me, though. I remember when I was a kid, my grandma on my dad’s side made us say prayers whenever we stayed over at her house—always the “Now I lay me down to sleep” one about the possibility of dying before you wake up, which creeped me out—and then took us to church so we could light candles for our dead ancestors. In school growing up, someone said prayer over the loudspeaker every morning and we took theology class every semester. In college, I took mandatory classes that required reading the Bible and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. So really, I know a ton about religion. You’d think two priests wouldn’t make me nervous.
I remember uncomfortable bits—less academic, less Grandma—too, though. I remember after I decided I didn’t really buy into religion anymore, I went with a friend to see another friend of ours play guitar at a youth mass. The priest called everyone up to the altar, but my friend and I stayed behind in our pews because we felt like outsiders. Like we weren’t supposed to join them. As they prayed, I wished I could sink down into the wooden bench and disappear from view. Even if the other churchgoers weren’t looking, even if they all gazed at the priest, their backs to me, it still felt like being under a spotlight.

***

At breakfast the next morning, I tell Adán I understand probably eighty percent of what people say in Spanish.

“That’s pretty good,” he says. He laughs again. “You’d just better hope they’re not talking about you in the other twenty percent.”

“Thanks, Adán.” I take a bite of papaya. I don’t like it as much as the mangoes, but it’s good with lime juice squeezed over it. Papaya has a color that matches the walls in my bedroom. It’s a deep pink-orange-red, but not overly bright the way other colors tend to be in Mexico.

“I think you need more of la gasolina.”

“Why?”

“Because you put the salsa spoon in your café.”

I glance at my mug and see little bits of tomato and chili pepper floating on the surface of my coffee.

“You must either be really sleepy or like your coffee picante.” His laughter seems to echo off the walls and the ceiling. I smile and cover my eyes with my hand.
“Buenos días,” Father Matt says as he sits down in the chair across from mine. I peek at him through my fingers, then take my hand away.

“Buenos días, padre,” Adán says. “Coffee?” He brings over the coffee pot. He asks if we want la gasolina every morning, even though he knows everyone’s answer. It’s one of Adán’s rituals. Eating here is full of rituals.

“No, thank you. Just some milk, please.” Father Matt takes a napkin and smoothes it over his lap.

“How are you?” I ask.

“Good, good. Just a little sleepy, still adjusting, you know? Hey, would you and Erin be interested in going with Father Mike and me to the convent sometime soon? I hear there’s a great tour of the old aqueduct there.” He takes a sip of milk and smiles again.

“Sure,” I say. I try to read his face. I wonder if going to a convent with a priest is a bad idea. “Yeah, we’ll have to make some plans, maybe next week?”

“Yeah, sure.” He turns to Adán. “Is it supposed to rain today?”

“Well,” Adán looks up at the window, then shrugs. “It is supposed to rain often this time of year, but so far we’ve had none.”

***

On Thursday, the sun beats down on the city as Mexico ties with South Africa in their opening game of the World Cup. When I leave the house to go to work, Father Mike and Adán are watching the game on the TV in the upstairs living room. Adán stands in the kitchen doorway drying a plate with a towel. Father Mike sits on the leather couch and has his right foot propped up on his left knee.

“Are you going to watch?” Adán asks.
“Yeah, I’m going to watch on the big screen at The Tec.”

“You’d better hurry or you’ll miss the first half!”

The buzzing of the match follows me as I head down to the street. For some reason the crowd noise reminds me of angry bees. Later I will have to ask Erin—who likes soccer—what that’s all about. I’ll also have to ask her about the rules and see if she knows who the players are. Soccer is not one of the sports I grew up with. Ask me about basketball, volleyball, football, even tennis or golf, and I know what’s going on, but when watching a soccer game, the only position I can confidently identify is the goalie.

After the match is over in the afternoon, the whole city erupts with honking and yelling and music. Everyone is outside and everyone wears green. The air is electric. The noise goes on all night and everyone goes out to celebrate, even though Mexico didn’t get a straight out win. Crowds stream downtown to the plazas or to the nearest alcohol-serving establishment. (As Adán likes to say: In Mexico, the first beer will make you tipsy, but the second one will make you sober, so everyone drinks lots of beer.) It’s like a giant festival.

If there’s one thing Mexico believes in, it’s its soccer team.

I wonder if the excitement is compounded by Mexico’s nearing bicentennial, which will take place in September. Banners and decorations have popped up in the plazas and there’s a light-up sign that counts down the days and hours and minutes until Mexico’s birthday. A lot of extra celebratory events are taking place this summer to lead up to the two-hundredth anniversary, things like traditional dance shows, dinner theaters, parties in the plazas. Querétaro is located in the Heartland of Mexico, so this important date matters to its citizens. The region is full of old farming and mining towns, and you can get to half a dozen cities in less than a few hours on a bus. But Querétaro is also an important historical city; the
Mexican Revolution began in Querétaro, when Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez, the governor’s wife—la Corregidora, conspired with Ignacio Allende, Miguel Hidalgo, and Ignacio Perez to try to gain independence from Spain. You can see her statue in the Plaza Corregidora, and her house at the Plaza de Armas.

So maybe in addition to fútbol, Mexicans believe in their heritage.

***

Over the next week, we develop a routine at breakfast. Both Father Matt and I are taking grammar refresher classes so we can stop screwing up the complex tenses—subjunctive, past subjunctive, past perfect—and we start testing ourselves at breakfast.

“¿Yo…hubiera…comido el taco si… podría tolerar…los chiles?” I raise my eyebrows at Father Matt, then look at Adán.

“I think that’s right. You would have eaten the taco if you could tolerate the chilies?” He squints, and a forkful of pineapple hovers in midair, paused halfway to his mouth.

“I hate the subjunctive. Past subjunctive especially. It’s hard to think in a tense we don’t have in English.”

“Yeah, it’s like you have to change the way you think.” Father Matt finally eats the piece of pineapple.

Adán bustles over and sets down a pan filled with green peppers and cheese.

“They’re spicy,” he says. “You have to be a mujer valiente to eat them.”

“You have to be a valiant woman to eat them?” Father Matt raises an eyebrow.

“Or man.” Adán grins. “Eat up.”
Father Matt stops for a moment, looks down at the table and closes his eyes. He makes the sign of the cross over his food, then mouths the words of what I assume is a blessing. He always does this. I never quite know what to do while he prays.

I wonder what Father Matt would say he believes. His demeanor suggests he believes in humor and friendliness. But he’s serious, too. He believes in his vocation.

Later in the day, Erin and I walk downtown after work to buy paletas, popsicles made out of fresh fruit and sometimes cream. We have become addicted to these since Conchita recommended them to us, have tried most of the flavors—watermelon, cantaloupe, grape, pineapple, mango, kiwi, strawberries in cream, oreo, something with a lot of seeds that we couldn’t quite identify—and make the ten minute walk to get them at least a few times a week. As we walk south, we pass the padres who are heading north toward the house.

“Buenas tardes,” Father Matt says.

“How’s it going?” Father Mike asks, looking past us. He wears a different Hawaiian shirt. He may not look much like a priest, but he certainly looks like a tourist. Then again, Erin and I look like tourists, too. Our foreignness, the way we stick out, unites all of us.

“Fancy seeing you guys here,” I say. Avenida Invierno is our corridor, the street we all walk on to get anywhere, so we often pass our housemates on the street.

“Yeah, no kidding. Oh, I was meaning to ask if you ladies still want to go tour the convent. Cynthia says it’s worth a trip. Leah said she might be interested in coming, too.” Leah, the college student from Texas, attends the same language classes as the priests, so she’s started hanging out with them up on the roof in the evenings, where Adán has put out some lawn chairs.

I catch Erin’s eye and shrug.
“Sure, we’ll go,” she says. “How about later this week? Thursday or Friday maybe?”

“Yeah, sounds good. I’ll ask Leah, then we’ll get back to you.” He waves and follows Father Mike.

“I don’t know what to make of Father Mike, you know?” Erin says once they’re a block away.

“Yeah, he’s a little awkward. Sometimes the comments he makes seem a little inappropriate. His Crocs make me laugh.” I step aside to let a woman walking a small, fluffy dog pass us. I recall Father Mike at lunch earlier, his forehead scrunched and his eyebrows lowered as he detailed a frustrating experience he had trying to explain to the man working at the convenience store on the corner that he was looking for a particular brand of toothpaste. Perhaps Father Mike just is not great at adapting to new places. He emanates grumpiness.

“At least Father Matt’s really nice,” I say.

“Yeah, don’t tell anyone I said this, but it’s too bad he’s a priest. It’s bad enough when all the nice guys are taken, but do they really need to be taken by Jesus?”

We both burst out laughing.

The other day while sitting outside a restaurant in the late evening, Erin told me the story of how she was engaged a few years ago, but it didn’t end up working out. We ate a potato dish trying to be a Spanish tapa. Erin said she felt like she was now in a different place than many of her friends who are married or have little kids. I realized she and Father Matt were probably about the same age.

“Father Matt bought conchas at Buen Pan the other day and gave me one. I thought that was cute,” Erin says. Conchas are sweet rolls shaped like seashells. They’re our favorite pastry.
“They’re pretty cool for priests,” I say.

***

At the end of the week, we take a trip to visit the ex-convent of Santa Cruz. The city’s famous aqueduct ends inside the convent, and a former emperor of Mexico was held captive there back in the 1800s. So the five of us get on the number 12 bus going south on Avenida Corregidora and cross our fingers, hoping as we wind through residential streets about the same width as the bus that we will end up at the convent. When the bus—which from the outside resembles a large, white ice cream truck—emerges into a plaza, Father Matt jumps up and swings his backpack over his shoulder.

“This is it!” He heads toward the back door. “Aquí!” he calls in the direction of the driver as we all follow him out of the bus.

Outside, the sun beats down on the plaza’s khaki-colored stones. The four of us stop in front of a statue of a priest. He wears the robes of a monk, and beneath his feet is carved the name “Junípero Serra.” I squint at the statue for a minute.

“Hey,” I say. “I read a book about him. In a literature class last semester. Death Comes for the Archbishop by Willa Cather. I think it was based on his life.” I recall a class period spent in a room with no windows, in which a group of grad students grumbled about how the book wasn’t particularly interesting.

“It is,” Father Matt says. He looks up at Junípero’s face, a serious expression on his own. For a moment his eyes go distant and he is transported to somewhere else. Inexplicably, I remember a guy who I had a class with in college, a guy who wanted to become a priest, which disappointed some of the girls in the class. Like Father Matt he was always friendly, soft-spoken.
“That’s one of my favorite books. Serra was a very dedicated priest. That book really inspired me,” Father Matt says. The corners of his words bend a little, blending together, as if his attempt to speak Spanish with an accent has slipped over into his English.

I look at Father Matt, a man not really that much older than me, and feel awed by his dedication to his vocation. Despite my lack of religious beliefs, or maybe even because of it, I find something about his career choice impressive.

“That’s really cool,” I say.

“I think there’s a tour every half hour, and it’s just about 2:30,” Leah says, pointing past the statue to the church. She tugs at the end of her long, brown ponytail. The church’s façade is yellow-orange and made of stone, and large wooden doors stand open to the plaza. Near the entrance another statue, this one depicting a native man and woman wearing traditional clothing and headdresses, catches my attention. Its colors are bright blues and oranges.

Erin begins walking, but then trips on the edge of one of the plaza’s stones.

“Ouch! I do that all the time, at least once a day! Ask Katie. I can’t go a day without tripping.” She stops to adjust her sandal.

“She’s right,” I say. “Happens all the time. Just imagine if it were raining like everyone keeps saying it will. The pavement wouldn’t just be uneven, it would be really slippery, too.”

“Erin would be out of luck.” Father Matt smiles and heads for the convent.

Inside, led by a teenage boy who speaks in bursts of information, we see the building’s stone courtyard and hallways, the room where Maximilian I of the Austro-Hungarian empire was once held captive, the beginning of the giant aqueduct, which from
here looks slightly less impressive than it does from outside. We see a tree that our guide tells us is very old and very rare. Maybe the only one in the world. Its thorns grow into the shape of tiny crosses, which can be purchased in the convent’s lobby or in many of the touristy shops downtown.

Afterward, Father Mike decides he wants to walk home, and the rest of us try to figure out which side of the street we need to catch the bus on. We end up picking the wrong side and ride a bus for more than half an hour until it comes to a halt on a narrow street up in the hills outside the city. The driver turns and looks at us.

“Where are you trying to go?”

We all look at each other and laugh. Father Matt bites his lip. Erin covers her eyes. Outside the window, dark clouds wait just beyond the city.

“Avenida Corregidora,” Father Matt calls from where we sit at the back of the bus. “North of Universidad.”

“Well, this is the end of the route, so you’re going to have to ride it all the way back.”

The driver turns to face forward. A few raindrops fall on the windows, but then the sun comes out again a moment later.

“Okay, no problem.” Father Matt crosses his legs. “Whoops. Hopefully we’ll get home in time for dinner.”

I usually hate getting lost, but getting lost together somehow makes it better. Even if we’re a bunch of confused foreigners, we have strength in numbers. Us versus Mexico. We can figure it out.

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I’ve always been the kind of person who feels better when I’m moving, so I’ve developed a habit of going walking. When I was younger and lived in Milwaukee, I used to walk from my college campus to the edge of Lake Michigan. When I studied in Spain, I walked the length of Madrid. When I spent a summer in New York City, I walked two-thirds the length of Manhattan. So I have spent a lot of time walking around Querétaro’s downtown. On one of the last lull days before Mexico’s next World Cup game, I walk south on Avenida Corregidora. The church of San Antonio, a red-orange structure taller than its surroundings with a fountain in the small plaza out front, sticks out among the other buildings. Its bells ring at random intervals, the gong noise echoing through Querétaro’s centro historico. I check my watch: 6:08pm. We have encountered this frequently during our time in Querétaro; the bells never ring at a particular time. They ring in the morning and they ring in the evening, but usually not on the hour or the half hour or the quarter hour. I reach the Jardín Zenea—a plaza filled with neatly trimmed bushes, balloon vendors, and people sitting on benches—and go into the Temple of San Francisco. Maybe it’s something about living with the padres—or seeing shrines and crosses all over the country, on roadsides, in buses, in the market between a fruit vendor and a stand selling bootlegged DVDs—but I feel like I should go in a church.

Outside, the Temple of San Francisco is brightly colored red, orange, and yellow. Inside, the church is similar structurally to Europe’s churches: a high ceiling, rows and rows of wooden pews, a long aisle leading up to the altar. The smell makes me think of my mom, who used to say that the smell of frankincense so common in churches always made her feel nervous as a kid, since it was usually used for rituals like Catholic funerals. To my right, a
bloodied statue of Jesus wearing a red velvet gown and a crown of thorns stands in a glass case.

The click of my shoes on the floor echoes as I walk toward the altar. A few people sit in the pews, some with their heads bowed, praying. More statues line both sides of the building, their faces twisted in agony. Cynthia once suggested that the influence of Aztec religion on Catholicism made Christianity in Mexico bloodier than it might have been. At the feet of some of the statues people have placed pictures of loved ones. Some have names and dates written on them.

The church possesses a feeling of order, of calmness. Like most things Catholic, everything in the church has a place, a reason. Even though I am someone who likes structure and routine, perhaps the oppressiveness of order is what bothered me about religion. In high school and college I made my way through the theology section of the local used bookstore exploring other systems of order—Buddhism, Taoism, Unitarianism—some with less rules. At the end of my research, I began to realize it might not be the system that was the problem; the problem was just that I could not make myself believe something I did not feel. I was too rational. Authentic religion cannot be forced. Once, in high school, I attended a retreat for all teenagers considering receiving the sacrament of Confirmation in the Catholic Church. The retreat leaders kept saying we needed to open ourselves to Jesus and let him come to us. We needed to just believe. Dozens of teenagers nodded as the leaders spoke. I looked up at the ceiling’s wooden cross-beams. They made the retreat center feel like a log cabin. I imagined my head or my stomach opening up and making room for Jesus, but the mental picture felt absurd. The others smiled and felt Jesus, felt connected to each other, but I couldn’t do it. I felt alone, like a circle of logic and skepticism hovered in
the air around me, keeping everyone else at arm’s length. I stopped attending Confirmation classes after that.

There are two smaller rooms off of the main part of the Temple of San Francisco. The first holds graves, and the names of those buried in it climb up the walls. I imagine drawers and drawers of bodies, their feet all pointing to the center of the room. The second room is a shrine to Mary. Her statue sits at the center of the room behind a railing with kneelers in front of it. Churchgoers can put money in a box and then light a candle. If all the real candles are already lit, there is a section of electric candles that glow red. For a moment I wonder how my grandma would feel about this, if she would think lighting a fake candle for Great-Grandma Sukalich was somehow a copout. The room is quiet, an incredibly still quiet, the kind that feels like it might swallow you. The room flickers like a heartbeat, the electric candles in unison, the real ones adding to the pulse. For the first time in years, I feel okay in a church. I feel like I understand something. Maybe it is the quiet, the stillness, and for once pausing to stop thinking. The people here feel connected to something. I breathe in deeply and hold the air in my lungs. I stand in the doorway for a few moments, watching two young women kneeling in front of Mary’s statue, soaking up the room’s red glow, before I go back outside.

***

At the end of the spring semester before I came to Mexico, I went with my friend John to a graduation party at a bar on Main Street in Ames, the Iowa town where I live. We stood near the bar. Both of us had had a couple beers. I was surrounded by people I didn’t know whose names I was trying to keep straight. I was worn out, tired of work and winter, and slightly lonely—I liked grad school, but at times, especially after being cooped up in my
apartment for a handful of snowy months, it felt isolating—so I thought I ought to appreciate
being out with new people. The song “Blood Bank” by Bon Iver was playing, and I started
pointing out that it’s one of my favorite songs by that songwriter, and John turned, looked me
in the eye, and asked, “Do you believe in God?”

I opened my mouth, surprised. Not many people ask bald questions like that.

It reminded me of another conversation I had in a bar that semester, in which a
handful of my friends discussed sex. One friend started counting something on his fingers,
and another said, “Geez, you’re counting how long it’s been since you last had sex aren’t
you?” She covered her mouth and laughed.

“Ten months,” he said.

For some reason, standing in the bar with John, I thought, When was the last time I
believed in God? As if believing in God were somehow like having sex. I wondered if it was
that maybe they were both about connections. About relationships. About not being alone. I
wonder now if that’s in part what religion is about, what belief is about. Maybe it’s about the
things that connect us to other people. That make us feel less alone.

***

The night after Mexico beats France in their next World Cup game—this time I
watched in the living room with Father Mike—everyone stands on the stairs of our house
watching the city’s celebratory fireworks. Father Mike and Father Matt, Deborah and a friend
of hers, Cynthia and Erin and Leah, Luis—one of the Mexican students, Stephanie, Tamir.
The thirteen-year-olds from Texas sit on the roof. Adán and Conchita stand at the back at the
group. Adán puts his arm around Conchita’s shoulders as I come up the stairs.
Watching the red, green, and white fireworks explode over the rooftops, I think that maybe this is one of the upsides to Adán and Conchita’s job. They get to meet people from all over the world, and they help bring those people together.

“I see you’re wearing your verde,” Adán says, pointing at the World Cup t-shirt I’d bought.

“Yes. Figured I had to. Everyone in the country’s wearing green today.”

One of the thirteen-year-olds stands up as huge green sparks trickle down through the sky. “Whoa! That’s awesome!”

Father Matt stands on the roof, hands in his pockets, and smiles in our direction, a green baseball cap on his head, unusually bright against his black and white uniform. At this moment, I feel like maybe I believe in people. This crazy mixture of people from all over the world. Maybe that’s what food and stories and soccer and religion all have in common: they all bring people together. They create unity. I can believe in that.

***

That night, it finally rains. The water beats down on the roof; the hallway turns into a river. The priests, Stephanie, Tamir, and Leah were sitting up on the roof when the clouds opened up, and Tamir runs Stephanie down to her room, holding a flimsy umbrella over her head. They yell and laugh as Stephanie struggles to fit her key into the lock on the door to the neighboring room.

The air smells like moisture, unusual for this desert.

I hear what I think is Father Matt’s voice outside. Earlier in the day we’d had a conversation about Facebook at dinner. Erin told Father Matt he should look us up on Facebook, but then backtracked and asked if priests use Facebook. He squinted at her.
“Are you serious?” he’d asked. “Priests are just people, too.”

The rain pounds the tile outside, the cement roof. I wonder where the cats are hiding. I think about water, how it is finally raining. I think about how the streets outside are probably full of rushing water, since the city isn’t built for rain. I think about how its inhabitants have talked about how they need the water anyway. I think about how going to new places can renew you. How the people there can renew you.

I sit on my bed, following the blue floral pattern Adán painted on the orange cement walls with my eyes. A breeze comes in through the screen door. I listen to the rain and smile.
10.

Bilingual Jealousy

The woman who owns the hostel in Guanajuato, Mexico, speaks too much and too loudly for seven-thirty in the morning. She also wears too much makeup. She doesn’t stop smiling. I cut my pancakes with a fork—surprised to see a pancake at all in Mexico—and pass the syrup to the man across the table. Because of the owner’s endless questions, I know he has a temporary appointment at the university, and his wife and two daughters have come down from Colorado to spend the summer with him.

The daughters, tiny, blond, eight-year-old twins who cut their food neatly and sit up straight in their chairs, speak perfect Spanish. Their father, a man with light brown hair and glasses, explains that their paternal grandmother is from Mexico and lives with them in the United States. From her they’ve learned how to converse perfectamente in Spanish without having to try. Without having to think about it.

The twin on the left puts down her knife and fork and says, in English, “I’m full.”

“Do you want anything else? Are you still hungry?” the owner asks. She claps her hands together and the bracelets dangling from her wrists clink together.

“No, estoy bien. No quiero más,” the girl says, shifting back and forth on the floral seat cushion that boosts her up.

The owner smiles and takes the girl’s plate. The girl looks bored and antsy. I can tell she wants to leap up and examine the colorful objects all over the dining room and kitchen—framed pictures, plants, candles, shiny balls hanging from the ceiling. She follows the spiral metal staircase next to the table upward with her eyes.

“¿Puedo ir arriba?”
The owner says yes, she and her sister can go upstairs to the greenhouse. The girls grin at each other and run toward the stairs.

I am jealous. I stir granola into the small bowl of yogurt in front of me. I take a bite and frown.

I am jealous not because the girls got to escape upstairs—though I certainly wouldn’t mind leaving this conversation we have all become trapped in with our host—but because they speak Spanish with perfect grammar and a perfect accent without ever opening a textbook or sitting through a lecture or studying abroad in a foreign country. They have been raised speaking two languages, and so have no idea how much anyone who’s tried to learn a second language after childhood envies them. I wish I could turn back the clock, insert a bilingual relative into my family, and have them teach me to speak something else, something besides English.

I guess I shouldn’t forget my grandmother on my dad’s side who speaks Slovak. Though to be honest, I didn’t realize she was fluent in Slovak until long after I could have learned it with ease. One day at her house, frustrated with my grandpa’s ever-loosening grip on reality, a string of foreign words flew out of her mouth. My dad laughed and told her not to curse in Slovak. I didn’t know if he was kidding or not, whether she’d actually been cursing. My grandma never curses.

I struggle to follow the rapid Spanish shooting back and forth to my right, so when I finish eating, the owner gestures up the stairs, and I climb in search of the twins. Plants with long vines curl around the staircase’s metal railing and dangle from the ceiling. I glance back at the guests still gathered in the kitchen, but can only see the tops of their heads, not the
expressions on their faces. The owner continues to babble, gesturing with her hands much more than necessary.

I came to Mexico to teach English in a nearby city, but feel slightly awkward about the arrangement, mainly because the students I am supposed to be teaching English speak better English than I do Spanish. For some reason this seems wrong. I should be at least as competent in a foreign language as they are. Plus, I learned Spanish before. I majored in Spanish in college and spent a semester in Spain. By the end of those six months in Madrid, my grammar and even my accent were pretty passable. But language, at least in my experience, is not like riding a bicycle; the ability to use it doesn’t come right back to you. I feel like I’m learning the vocabulary and sentence structure and conjugations all over again. And the other problem with not learning when you’re young, with studying textbooks and only practicing when you encounter a native speaker or take a vacation to an exotic, Spanish-speaking locale, is that when you find yourself in a place that speaks only that foreign language, no one cares about the A’s you got all through high school and college. In Mexico, I am just another foreigner who has difficulty decoding speech, responding without stammering, and using the appropriate verb tense.

At the top of the stairs, I’m amazed by the size and brightness of the greenhouse. A room larger than the kitchen constructed almost entirely of windows sits on top of the hostel. Plants cover every surface and hang from dozens of hooks.

The twins sit on a white, metal, two-person swing that reminds me of a wooden one my grandparents used to have on the lawn in their yard. They slump down in the seat and push off the floor with their feet. They eye me with unclear expressions, their mouths slight frowns, their eyes squinted. They probably wonder what I’m doing here. They make me feel
out of place. Like I’ve been upstaged by a pair of Spanish-speaking elementary schoolers who have no idea what they’ve done. They lift their matching pink sandals at the same time, then put them back on the floor. They both grip the seat of the metal swing. Their bangs fall perfectly straight across both of their foreheads. The wooden floor creaks beneath them.

“Can we go outside?” I ask. Past them at the far end of the room there’s a door that looks like it leads to a porch.

One of the girls nods.

“Thanks,” I say. Their eyes follow me across the room.

The porch is made of concrete, painted white, and enclosed by walls that come up to my waist. It’s not a big area compared to the size of the room inside, but the view makes up for its small space. The porch is connected to the roofs of all the neighboring buildings, and when I look west across the rooftops I see the hills of Guanajuato with colored cement houses built in to them. Dozens and dozens of houses. The houses are pink and aqua and purple and yellow. Red and orange and green. The colors are all spaced out so that no two neighbors are the same. I wonder if the neighborhood planned it that way so the hillsides would be picturesque or if it somehow just happened, if the residents decided to make their houses different from the ones next door, better and brighter.

The others from the breakfast table come upstairs to the greenhouse and out onto the porch. Pretty soon it’s crowded and we all take pictures of the hillsides, the rooftops, the dome of a nearby church. The sun is shining. Can you take my picture? We speak to each other in English. There’s no reason not to; it’s everyone’s first language. But I feel bad that my Spanish isn’t better. That everyone around me assumes it’s better to use English. They’re
not wrong. It just leaves me a little deflated. I’ll always be an English-speaking American abroad.

I remember a presentation one of my students in Iowa gave about a school trip to Paris. She described her experiences and argued that learning a foreign language is something all Americans should do. She told an anecdote about a fellow student on her trip who asked where the bathroom was in English, assuming the Frenchman she’d stopped would speak her language. The man rolled his eyes and walked away. Another student in my class raised his hand after the girl’s presentation and asked why the Frenchman blew her off. *If someone came up to you in Iowa and started speaking French, wouldn’t you be perplexed?* the girl asked him. *Sure, but this is America, that’s different. Everyone should know English here.*

I remember being annoyed with my student, shaking my head at the back of the room as I made notes about the girl’s presentation on a grading sheet. Plenty of people think the whole world should know English and have no problem admitting English is the only language they know, aside perhaps from the semester or two of Spanish or German they took in high school or college. Maybe if I were one of these people, I wouldn’t feel ashamed standing up on this porch in Guanajuato.

I have touristy things to do before leaving town, so I exit the porch and head back downstairs. The twins are no longer on the swing. One of them squeezes the leaf of an aloe plant with her fingertips. The other stares at a sculpture made of twisted pieces of metal and blue glass bottles.

“*Hasta luego,*” I say.

One looks up, perhaps wondering why I spoke in Spanish.
“Bye,” she says, then runs to find her parents.

“Bye,” I repeat, but it comes out as a sigh, and I press my lips together as I go down the stairs.

Dust particles float in a spot of sunlight above the table. The breakfast dishes have been cleared away by the owner’s teenage daughters. I pick up the city map I’d left on the table next to my purse. Tourists need maps, and I needed to find the cathedral. I scan the streets for a building labeled *catedral*.

*At least I can read the map in Spanish*, I think. But it is only a small consolation.
11.

How to Order a Paleta (When Your Spanish Isn’t Great) – Part 1

1. Enter the shop off of Calle Juarez. The sign above says “Paletas Michoacán” and features smiling cartoon faces. Your Mexican host has told you that this is the best popsicle stand in Mexico. Consequently, many other stands write Michoacán on their signs even though they aren’t really affiliated with the chain. You’ve been told this one is authentic, though, so you have to pay it a visit even though trying new things in a foreign country inevitably involves making a minor fool out of yourself (handing incorrect change to the clerk at the OXXO convenience store, getting off the bus at the wrong stop, giving up trying to use a phone card after ten minutes of not being able to successfully make a call at the pay phone, the one in front of the second-hand furniture store that blasts music from *The Little Mermaid*).

2. Approach the freezers. They aren’t typical freezers; they’re long like tables and slide open on top like the containers that hold the Nestle Drumsticks and the red, white, and blue Bomb Pops in American gas stations. The one in front of you will have the *paletas* without milk, just fruit, sugar, water. The freezer on your left will have the ones with milk. They taste more like ice cream than the others. They’re probably not as good for you. Some of them have cookies in them. Oreos.

3. Smile at the shop owner when he comes out of the back room and nods. Say something like “buenas noches.” He will smile back, the creases around his eyes becoming more noticeable. You will momentarily wonder what he thinks of you, like you wonder what everyone in Mexico thinks of you, the pale-skinned, freckled, skinny foreigner.
4. Look at the menu over your head, though it’s fairly cluttered and will take too long to decipher, so abandon that and examine the freezers. The different flavors won’t likely be labeled, so you’ll have to guess based on color. That one’s probably pineapple. That one strawberry. The white-yellowish one’s a mystery. It looks like it could be melon, but will probably have seeds in it that will get stuck in your teeth. And yes, the watermelon one does actually come with black seeds.

5. If you know the name for which flavor you want—*fresa* or *piña* or *sandía*—then tell the man. If not, point, smile, and say *esa, por favor*, that one please. He’ll open the freezer, grab the *paleta*’s stick with a napkin, peel off the waxed paper wrapper covering the fruit, and hand it to you. Beads of water will begin to form on the popsicle’s frosty edges as soon as it touches the humid evening air.

6. The popsicle will probably cost about ten *pesos*, a little less than a dollar, though prices may vary depending on the flavor you picked. Pay with coins. No one in Mexico wants to make change for paper bills, even small ones, and if you force the *paleta* man to give you change for paper money you’ll feel guilty even though it would be nice to have that change for the bus.

7. Tell the man *hasta luego* (“until later”); oddly enough, since you’ll most likely be back tomorrow, this is probably one of the few times you’ll say this to a stranger and actually see the person again) and head back out to the street.

8. Eat your *paleta* while wandering home. You can bite it if you want (you always tried to resist biting popsicles and lollipops as a kid, but usually never lasted until they were gone). It might hurt your teeth. It’ll probably be eaten before you get to your house. Smile at the men working at the taco cart at the end of your street as you finish
the popsicle. The grilled onion fumes permeating the air will make your eyes water.

Put your key in the lock of the over-sized wooden door—like something out of the
Middle Ages—content because you managed to complete the task you set for yourself
without doing anything embarrassing.

How to Order a Paleta (When the Choices Just Aren’t the Same) – Part 2

1. Park outside the shop with the sign reading “Paletas Betty.” Even from the car the
place will look trendy and sterile, just like many of the nearby businesses in Chandler,
Arizona’s renovated downtown. Pay the meter and take off your sunglasses. A drawn
image of Betty—brunette, smiling, with perfect white teeth—will stare at you. Stare
back.

2. Enter the shop. A bell on the door will jingle. You’ll be blasted with air conditioning.
A teenage guy with a perfect tan and gelled hair will ask how you’re doing and if
you’ve been to Betty before. He will remind you of one of those lifeguards you used
to see at the community pool when you were in middle school.

3. Smile. Say no, you haven’t been to this shop before, but you did eat *paletas* in
Mexico the previous summer. (At this point, the guy will probably say something like
“oh, interesting” and you will both feel awkward. You, the person who felt the need
to tell a stranger about your travels; he, the stranger who got stuck listening to you
and doesn’t know how to respond, like an acquaintance caught looking at photos of
your vacation or your family.) Approach the freezer in front of you. The friend you
came with will do the same, then look up at the menu, which lists six or seven flavors.
Hide your disappointment that there are so few choices.
4. The guy working the counter will explain that Betty’s *paletas* are made with all natural ingredients and that the flavors available rotate depending on what fruits are in season. He’ll say the most popular flavor is mango or banana or pineapple with chili. Smile again. Nod.

5. Look back at the display. You figure you should pick out something interesting, maybe one of the flavors with chili in it, since that’s not a popsicle you see every day, not something you can get at your local Hy-Vee or Albertson’s grocery store.

6. Order and pay the two or three dollars the *paleta* costs here. The cashier will leave you to remove the waxed paper covering the popsicle yourself. When you look perplexed that there’s already a bite taken out of one of the top corners the cashier will explain that the missing bite is Betty’s signature, that if the popsicle has a bite out of it already that means it’s ready to eat. He will grin like an overzealous waiter hoping for a large tip and gesture to a poster behind him explaining “the meaning of the bite.”

7. Say “ahh, I see” or smile or nod appreciatively. Exit the store. As the bell on the door rings, the tan guy will tell you to come again soon. You will hope your *paleta* is worth it. You will not say *hasta luego.* You will not say “see you later.”

8. Outside, while standing in the blinding sun, eat your *paleta.* Try to explain to your friend that there are so many more choices at the *paleta* stands in Mexico. Watermelon and grape and cantaloupe and coconut. The flavors don’t rotate; they’re all available all the time. Say they’re cheaper in Mexico and the store feels less perfect, nicer. Your friend will smile, nod, put on his sunglasses. Light will reflect off of the row of expensive parked cars: Mercedes, Audis, BMWs. A row of money in a
city filled with people who believe they deserve to have everything nice, new, and shiny. Even their popsicles. You’ll sigh and take another bite, making Betty’s original bite disappear, as you head back to the car.
Section IV:
The Middle of Everything

Twelfth and Wisconsin, Grandma says. That’s where your grandpa and I had an apartment. Back when he went to school at Marquette and I did the bookkeeping at the bank. It was an old building, brick, small windows. Our apartment looked south toward Gesu, the Catholic Church. We could see its big stained-glass window from our bedroom.

I suppose it wouldn’t be there anymore. That was a long time ago. Grandma digs around in her purse in search of something, then pulls out a cough drop. We lived there, though. Right in the middle of Milwaukee, right in the middle of everything.
12.

What We Didn’t Plan For

1. Being Led to the Flood

If you drive west on Highway 20 from Dubuque, the hills along the edge of the Mississippi River flatten out as if someone pressed them. The land becomes so perfectly flat you can see miles and miles of farmland only punctuated by the occasional barn and farmhouse. To an outsider driving through, it would be difficult to determine what decade you were in since the farmhouses were built as long as a century ago, their architecture simple, their windows blurry like the surface of a pond with oil on top, swirls of the viscous liquid distorting what lies below, betraying the age of the glass. That expanse of northern Iowa is forgettable, yet sometimes terrifying. In early summer, the air is so thick with bugs your car’s windshield looks like an insect graveyard by the time you reach your destination. In winter, wind gusts can turn a sunny day into a whiteout when clouds of snow blow up from the ground across the highway like the sky breathed on your windshield, its frozen breath blocking out your vision.

Many people in the rest of the country probably don’t think too much about Iowa. It’s just one of those states out there in the middle, one of those states filled mostly with farm fields, corn and corn and occasionally soybeans and pigs. I’d never visited Iowa before deciding to move here for graduate school despite the fact that I lived in Wisconsin, Iowa’s neighbor to the northeast. So I’d never thought much past corn about Iowa. I grew up next to Lake Michigan, so the lack of water is what stood out to me. No lakes, just a small river—more like a stream—here and there. The Skunk River, Squaw Creek. At first, in spite of all the openness, all those open spaces, the land felt oppressive. Just land, land, land, all
organized into neat little sections between the grid of straight roads, then organized into neat rows of corn. The only sea around is that sea of plants. And it’s been like that for a long time. There are public records of Iowa land ownership available on the internet, maps that show the Johnsons owned that rectangle of acres just east of Duff Avenue and the Sheldons owned the patch just west of Iowa State’s campus. Iowa is a land that’s been ordered. Everything has its place. Each section of property fits together with the others like a puzzle.

Eventually it stops feeling that way. By my second summer in Ames, the fact that driving a few minutes outside of town put me in a cornfield didn’t seem so strange. By then I’d met many students from farm families, many people for whom this wasn’t just a sea of corn, but a way of life.

I met plenty of Iowa outsiders living in Ames, too. When I met John, an engineer from Minneapolis—something I definitely wasn’t planning on, meeting someone my age in a bar full of twenty-one-year-old undergraduates—it was evident he cared about two things. The first one was frogs. I hadn’t known him very long before I met the frogs in his kitchen; they were pretty hard to miss, since a tank of them glowed brightly from the corner of the room, lit from above by fluorescent bulbs. I didn’t know whether the light was for the sake of the frogs or for those of us looking in at them, trying to spot their colorful bodies among the leaves.

I had just moved to a new apartment on the north side of town that August and John lived a block west in my neighborhood. At the time, he was working for a landscaper while trying to find a job that would lead to a career. The job market hadn’t treated him well, and so instead of a 50K salary and a desk, he earned ten dollars an hour digging holes, planting trees, and becoming critical of his neighbors’ landscaping.
“They need to cut the branches back on these bushes,’ John said as we walked east on Bristol Drive. “I don’t know why they put that kind of bush here in the first place. No one thinks.” He skimmed the tops of the nondescript bushes with his hand.

“That tree’s going to die.” He pointed at an oak that lost a large limb in a recent storm, the top of its trunk split down the middle.

“Why’s it going to die?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Because more than fifty percent of the bark on the trunk is gone. There’s no way it’s going to recover.” He squinted at it and shook his head. I caught a glimpse of white skin at the collar of his t-shirt. From the neck up he was darkly tanned, and his hair was bleached blond from working in the sun all summer.

We walked north on Stange Road, the main street going north out of campus, and he stopped to look at another clump of bushes. This time he pushed the branches right and left. He said that a family of rabbits lived in it, but he didn’t see a nest. He said he knew what to look for—a clump of leaves and branches—because he’d seen rabbit nests while at work. Once some of his coworkers removed the feet from a dead rabbit so they could make lucky rabbits’ feet. Once he killed a mole with a stick.

“You killed it?” I asked.

“Yeah. Had to. You don’t want a mole burrowing around your baby trees. They cause all sorts of trouble.”

Before working for Country Landscapes, John didn’t pay much attention to landscaping, but after working there, as he put it, he was tainted. He noticed what kinds of bushes and flowers and trees people chose for their yards. And it wasn’t unusual for him to nod in the direction of someone’s backyard and point out that “that’s a stupid place for a
berm.” He was also concerned about taking care of things and got angry when people didn’t tend to their yards, didn’t clean up storm debris, didn’t trim their bushes. Working for a landscaper had taught him to pay attention to the way people controlled spaces.

“The least people could do is take care of what they have. There’s so little we can control. You can work hard and end up in the middle of Iowa with two degrees and no career.”

“And most people don’t even bother to control what they can? Don’t take care of their bushes?” I asked as we waited at a corner to cross the street.

“Exactly.” John darted across to the median at a break in traffic.

After making a loop around our neighborhood, we headed back toward John’s house.

“Damnit,” he said as we walked up to the front door. “My package still hasn’t arrived.”

“What package?”

“I’m getting three Lamasi. They were supposed to come today. I paid for overnight shipping. And it’s been so hot, they’ll probably be dead when they get here.”

“That’s no good.”

“Hey, do you think you’ll be free tomorrow afternoon? Could you check for me and see if they get here before I get home from work?”

“Sure,” I said, not quite knowing what I was getting myself into.

Though he’d only been landscaping for a few months, taking care of spaces—and the things that lived in them—wasn’t a new thing for John. Ever since high school he’d been a breeder of poison dart frogs. The little frogs you see in cages at the zoo or in pet shops, kind of like tree frogs except smaller and with crazier colors and patterns. At that point he had
sixteen frogs, though the number varied depending on how many breeding pairs he had and how many he could sell.

The frogs lived in four tanks in his house, three of which were in the basement. The first—and biggest—tank downstairs had three kinds of frogs in it. One type was black and yellow and about the size of a walnut. Each of these frogs had a different pattern. One of them was named Domino because it had two spots on its back. There were also green frogs that had a metallic shine and solid blue ones. Then the two smaller tanks housed tiny yellow-blue-black frogs called Lamasi that are no bigger than your thumbnail. They hid in the plants. The fourth frog tank was upstairs in the kitchen on the counter next to the stove. (“I have to keep a tank in the kitchen while I can, since I’m sure my future wife won’t let me keep frogs in the same room where we eat.”) Its inhabitants included three blue Azureus frogs and one Benedicta, a penny-sized red and blue frog named Liz.

Back in the house, John peered into the tank with a flashlight.

“Liz’s boyfriend arrives next week.”

“Her boyfriend?”

“Yup, via USPS.”

“Oh, you mean like how the Lamasi are coming in the mail tomorrow?”

Turns out the internet is full of frog message boards where you can buy and sell frogs. The frogs get sent overnight mail and arrive in tiny plastic containers inside larger Styrofoam ones. The USPS boxes read “perishable.” In the summer an ice pack in the box keeps the frogs from overheating, and in the winter “hot hands” hand warmers—the kind skiers put in their gloves—keep them from freezing.
John was also in the market for some “blue jeans” frogs, as they are popularly known by breeders because of their red bodies and blue legs. The frogs I’d seen in the Midwest as a kid were what I considered typical frog colors, green and brown, and the most interesting kind was the leopard frog, which isn’t all that unique. I wondered where creatures as colorful as these dart frogs came from originally. I imagined Costa Rica or Belize or somewhere near the Amazon. I assumed purchasing them was legal, but bringing a tropical frog to Iowa felt odd. An emblem of an exotic world, these frogs had become a commodity. Something to buy, breed, and sell.

I peered through the glass of the tank in the kitchen trying to see a frog, but only saw leafy greenery. The dart frogs hid from view. I didn’t blame them. I’d always felt a little bad for creatures kept in small spaces. In college, I told my roommate she couldn’t have a Siamese fighting fish because it would be sad trapped in a tiny fish bowl. It would swim in a miniscule circle, its shiny red, blue, or purple fins floating forlornly just below the water’s surface. I shook my head to wake myself up. John put a lot of time and effort into caring for the frogs; that had to count for something, right?

John spun a plastic container of fruit flies around on the kitchen counter.

“I feel like I shouldn’t spend the money, since I don’t have a stable income,” he said.

Buying fruit fly cultures is expensive, so breeders make their own. They fill plastic containers with a potato starch paste and some paper towels, then dump in a bunch of flies. Give it a week or so and the sides of the container are covered in maggots and flies are crawling around. Crawling because they can’t fly; they’re bred to be “non-fliers.”

“How much do the frogs cost?” I asked.
“Depends. An adult Azureus pair could probably get me $150. But Liz’s boyfriend costs $400 on his own.”

“That’s crazy.”

“It’s an investment.” John shook a white powder—“froggie vitamins”—into a plastic cup and then poured in some flies, coating them with powder. He opened the tank and dumped in the flies. They spread quickly over the moss and bromeliads on the bottom of the tank, covering the ground like powdery ants coming out of an ant hill. The three blue frogs hopped to the front and started eating, lurching forward and snagging flies with their tongues. The way they jerked back and forth to attack the flies made them look like little machines, little robot frogs.

“As long as they don’t die on me, I end up making money. That’s why they get the vitamins. One of my Matecho downstairs is calcium deficient. You can tell because when she tries to catch the flies she misses.”

John attempted to pour more flies into the plastic cup of vitamin powder, and a paper towel coated in bugs fell out onto the floor.

“Shit! That’s never happened to me before. Quick, pick them up and put them back in the container.” And so we knelt on the linoleum floor, letting fruit flies crawl onto our fingers one at a time, and then dropping them back into their container. A stubborn fruit fly refused to crawl onto my index finger.

“Can’t we just kill them? They’re going to die anyway.”

“Too many to kill. Need to save them.”

It struck me as funny, the things we want to keep out of our spaces and the things we need to keep in. Can’t have a mole in the yard, but better not kill the fruit flies. For a moment
I wondered if it could be an Iowa thing, too, since the land is so controlled. People in Iowa didn’t want the original water of Iowa’s marshes so they got rid of it, but now Iowans depend on the rain for the crops. I dismissed the thought, though. Control is not just an Iowa thing; it’s probably a people thing.

Later that evening, outside John’s house on the front porch, a tree frog climbed up the siding. I didn’t know tree frogs lived in Iowa, but apparently they do. It leapt away from the porch light, vibrantly green even in the semi-darkness.

“So how long will you work for the landscaper? Until it snows?” I watched the tree frog disappear around the corner of the house.

“Yeah, as long as I have to. And you can always shovel snow.” He sighed. “This is pretty shitty. Can’t get a decent job even after seven years of school. At least my hobby brings in a little money when I can sell the offspring.”

“What would your dream job be? If you could do anything.”

“I want the job I’m qualified for. Environmental engineer. I’d like to work in consulting.” John kicked at the welcome mat.

“No, I mean if you could do anything. You don’t have to be qualified for it.”

John squinted.

“I’d like to raise frogs, have hundreds of tanks. I have a great design for tanks you don’t have to clean”—he did, I saw it; he constructed them out of large, clear pieces of acrylic—“and I’d sell them and raise enough money to live off of. Enough money to have a nice house, a nice car, a guitar and a piano.” He trailed off. “That’s probably silly. Plus, my dad’s the only one who supports my hobby. Everyone else thinks the frogs are strange.”

John kicked the edge of the doormat to make it lie flat.
“So you can stop by and look for the Lamasi tomorrow?” he asked.

As I walked home the sound of cicadas was almost piercing. Two rabbits hurried into some nearby bushes. A neighbor, an older man in a Hawaiian shirt, pulled his trash can to the end of his driveway, then stopped on the way back to his garage to pluck some crabgrass out of his lawn. Crabgrass always reminds me of visiting my grandparents when they used to live in Florida, since their entire lawn was crabgrass. Apparently one person’s lawn is another person’s weed.

The man stood up and waved. I waved back. The sound of frogs croaking at a nearby pond mixed with the buzzing of the cicadas. The sun set over the cornfield to the northwest.

The following day John called me at two in the afternoon. I was in my office writing comments on student essays. He said according to USPS the box should be on his front porch.

“I’m going to be so upset if they’re dead. They’re expensive. And they didn’t ask to die!”

“I’ll cross my fingers. I hope they’re not dead either.” I closed my cell phone and stacked the papers on my desk, imagining little frogs dead on their backs, their legs sticking up in the air.

I took the next bus home to our neighborhood and hurried to John’s house without stopping at my apartment to drop off my backpack. I imagined a cardboard box with three dead frogs in it. I imagined cutting the tape off the box and having three frogs leap out and escape. I tried to remember how much the frogs cost. Maybe the box wouldn’t be there and it wouldn’t be my problem.
When I got to the end of the driveway, I could see the front door. A box slightly bigger than a shoebox leaned against it. When I picked the box up, it was much lighter than I expected.

In John’s kitchen, I couldn’t find a scissors, so I cut off the packing tape with a knife. The sender used a hell of a lot of packing tape. I took a deep breath before opening the box, only to discover a Styrofoam one inside. I pulled up a corner of the lid as slowly as possible, thinking *please don’t leap out, please don’t be dead.* Inside was a small plastic container with leaves in it. I held it up to the light. A yellow and blue frog no bigger than a dime clung to the inside of the lid. Two more hid in the leaves. Their throats were all moving, their chirping too high pitched for me to hear. I took the container of frogs down to the basement where it was cooler and left it next to the frog tanks.

John and I started dating shortly after that, so I ended up spending a lot more time with the frogs. At first they weirded me out. They seemed like a strange hobby, though as a vegetarian, any hobby that required live food probably would have made me uncomfortable. Later on I would help glue their new tanks together, learn how and when to feed them, and eventually help capture each of them with a spoon and a tiny Tupperware container, pack them carefully with packing peanuts and heat packs, and send them through the subzero December temperatures to their new home when John finally got an engineering job in Arizona (they couldn’t survive in an unheated U-Haul for more than a day). But at the beginning, I slowly learned their names—Matecho, Euakaari, Lamasi, Benedicta—and gradually became less weirded out and more fascinated.

John liked to take care of things and he liked to know how things worked. Like many others at Iowa State University of Science and Technology, he spoke a different language
than me, a language of chemicals and gears and irrigation. A language that didn’t focus on words, the nuts and bolts of everything I do. When I came to Iowa that difference made me defensive. It made me feel out of my element. When I met John I realized that people have entirely different skill sets and understand the world in very different ways. This explains why many of my students seem indifferent to the writing classes I teach. In many respects, we speak different languages and they probably wonder why they need to learn to speak mine and write essays when I don’t have to learn how to balance differential equations and grow crops.

The second thing John cared about was water. After working for the landscaper before landing the engineering job, he got a job with Des Moines Water Works taking samples of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers and doing testing in a lab. He tested the nitrate and phosphorus levels in the rivers, and it wasn’t until he pointed it out that I made the connection between those substances and the agriculture that puts those chemicals into the water. *It’s all from the runoff*, he said. John also told me that most of the bodies of water in Iowa are manmade: Ada Hayden—a water-filled quarry near my apartment—Clear Lake, Gray’s Lake. Not surprising perhaps, since more than ninety-five percent of the land in Iowa has been altered by humans. John said that in the first half of the twentieth century many rivers were straightened to make transport and water use easier for cities. I tried to imagine how you’d go about straightening a river, but couldn’t quite do it. I pictured someone pulling on a river as if it were a string, getting rid of the curves. Maybe there were bulldozers involved. John claimed that this practice potentially contributed to erosion and flooding, which Iowa seems to see more and more of. The way he described the rivers was poetic,
though. From above, he said, the rivers look like arteries. Thye stretch out into the landscapes like spidery veins. They’re like the blood vessels of the land.

Because John cared about frogs and water, those two things entered my radar, became a part of my vocabulary. I drank the tap water without filtering it—now that I’d learned from John it was safe—and I paid a little more attention to where the rivers flowed. I fed fruit flies to the frogs and sprayed their tanks with water to keep the plants from drying out. The first summer I knew John, talking and thinking about those things became a part of my routine.

The end of that summer makes me think of a handful of things. I think of the weeks of thunderstorms that everyone complained about (“I can’t sleep! The lightning and thunder always come through at 3am. It’s obnoxious.”). I think of collecting the storm debris, burning it in the fire stove on my back porch, and roasting marshmallows. I think of the band The National from Ohio that my friends got briefly obsessed with, the lead singer’s deep, slow voice, the mellow guitar, the quirky lyrics (“I was carried to Ohio in a swarm of bees” or “Why do you think I enjoy being led to the flood?”). I think of mosquitoes and humidity and running outside.

Most people think of the flood. The TV news anchors called it one of those five hundred year floods. We’d gotten so much rain over a few week period that the rivers rose, bursting over their banks and turning streets into rivers, parking lots into lakes. The entire Ames commercial area on South Duff Avenue was underwater, and the pressure broke the doors of stores and restaurants—Target, Walmart, Panera Bread—despite the sandbags lined up against them. Iowa State University’s campus turned into a giant pool of water that reached up to the windows of the cars in the parking lots. At some point on the first day of the flood a water main burst, potentially contaminating the drinking water and requiring us to
not use any water for days. No doing dishes, no laundry, no showers. Many new students had just moved to the area for the coming semester and were met with this unpleasant set of circumstances. Some were met with wet carpeting and flooded basements.

That morning, my roommate Gen and I biked south on Stange Road toward campus. From our apartment we rode down a hill past the north end of the golf course, but after that we had to stop. The creek that normally flows underneath a small bridge had swelled and become a river that rushed over the street from the golf course on the west side to the empty field on the east. The water completely covered the pavement, filled the parking lots of nearby apartment buildings, and turned the golf course into a small ocean. A crowd of people gathered on each side of the water which was too deep to cross, though two men ventured out from the south side and had trouble keeping their balance. A college-aged man took photos with his cell phone. An older couple stood, hands on their hips, surveying the rising waters. Kids splashed along the edge of the water, running past a no parking sign whose base was no longer visible. An old man watched as a garbage can floated out onto the nearest fairway.

We stood among the onlookers for twenty minutes or so, snapping pictures with our cameras—the underwater “no parking” sign, the putting green that had become a beach at the edge of the water—and watching the water rush past us. Friends in town called to ask if our apartment was okay and if we were able to get anywhere since so many of the roads were closed. Luckily, we had just moved to the north side of town which is on higher ground than the rest of the city. Our old apartment on the south side was in the area that had been hit worst by the flood, and all the basement apartments filled with water. My car would have been submerged in the parking lot.
We held up our bikes and squinted in the sunlight. The flood had chosen one of the hottest weeks of the year to arrive. It was ninety-five degrees outside and the air was so humid you could (as my mom always says) practically cut it with a knife.

“Should we head back?” I asked, squeezing and unsqueezing the bike’s hand brake.

“Doesn’t look like we’ll be able to go anywhere south of here today.”

“Yeah, I guess we’re stuck. We can go home.” Gen clipped her bike helmet under her chin and pushed off the pavement back up the hill.

Then Gen and I joined the stampede of people at the grocery store, trying to hoard as much bottled water as possible after the city made the announcement saying we couldn’t use the tap water.

Later that afternoon when John got off of work, he drove straight to our apartment without bothering to stop at his house. He rang our doorbell two or three times, and when I opened it he was grinning.

“I didn’t know if I’d be able to make it back since the water is covering parts of the highway. I made it! Let’s go take pictures!”

“You look too excited about this. I bet the people elsewhere in town are less excited. And the whole city’s underwater. How are we going to get anywhere?” I looked around the kitchen for my glasses, which I’d left on a side table in the living room.

“But this is so exciting. This is exactly what I studied in college. This is what I do. It’s all about water systems and treatment.”

He kept grinning. I raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?”
“Plus, I told my work I’d document the flood here and make a presentation about it. So I need pictures!” John bounced up and down in his heavy work boots. “Come on, let’s go!”

“Okay, okay. Let me get my camera and some bottled water. It’s crazy hot out there.”

We drove to Ada Hayden because he’d heard the lakes had risen, but we couldn’t get all that close to the lakes in the car, and from where we were they didn’t look terribly high. Then we took a roundabout route south to campus and parked on the parking deck where the water wasn’t as high. I had to jog to keep up with John who ran toward the campus’s rec center. Its door had been sandbagged and murky brown water crept up toward the tops of the bags. To the south, the freshman dorms’ parking lot was underwater, too. The few cars that had been parked in the lot looked lonely, stranded out there in the middle of a brown, murky sea. Once past the dorms, we walked east on Lincoln Way, the main street that runs east and west through Ames. The auditorium on the south side was completely flooded. Students wandered through the middle of the street in shorts and tank tops. The ditch filled with water to the left of us reflected the puffy clouds above in the sky. John snapped picture after picture. We sweated in the sun.

“Let’s find some shade. It’s gross out here,” I said, wiping my forehead with my arm and pushing my glasses back up my nose. I come from a cold state and will always say I prefer heat over cold, but this day was miserable, the air practically sticking to my skin.

“Okay, let’s head back to the car. But we need to see if we can get over to Duff, too. I heard that everything over there flooded.” John shoved his camera in his pocket and bounded off back west toward the car.
“That’s all flooded? That’s crazy. All those businesses will be damaged.” I moved over and walked on the squishy grass next to the sidewalk to avoid a group of girls in bikinis meandering in the direction of the dorms. Muddy water squished up over my feet.

“Yeah, well,” John said over his shoulder. “They probably should have known better. That whole area is in a flood zone, and the city knew that when plans to develop South Duff were made.” I couldn’t quite see his face, which was shaded by the hat he wore.

Back at John’s Mazda, we stood next to the open doors and waited for the hot air to exit the car.

“Onward!” John said and got in the driver’s seat.

“But it’s hot,” I said. Hot waves of air visibly rose up out of the car.

“But the flood waters will start to recede soon. Let’s go.”

John turned his key in the ignition and sat down. I felt sweat drip down my scalp underneath my hair and wondered why I was letting John drag me all over town to see the flood. Maybe because it was so unusual to see someone so excited about something like this.

Over on Duff Avenue we parked in an empty parking lot just north of the Target, whose parking lot we would later call Lake Target because the water was so vast. A TV news crew stood at the edge of the water which filled the entire commercial district to the south. The US Cellular parking lot was underwater. The lots of the Perkins. The Walmart. The movie theater. The Chinese buffet. A group of people gathered in the middle of the road, looking south. I wondered why we were all there. Whether it was to see the damage and destruction or to see what nature can do, to see it rebel against the world we’d built around it. Or maybe we just wanted to witness what we’d normally see on the news or read about in the paper. In any case, few of us really understood why it had happened and what it meant. John
was probably one of the few people who did. Most of us expect the world to be organized and function like we’ve planned for it to, and then we end up baffled when something out of the ordinary disrupts the routine. Something outside of our power takes our control away. Order turns into disorder.

“How far do you think the flooding goes?” I touched the edge of the water with my sandal.

“You probably don’t want to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, that water main burst, so it could be contaminated.”

“Oh that’s great.” I stepped back onto the dry pavement. “With what?”

“They’re probably worried about E. coli.”

“Gross.” The sun reflected off the water. A duck swam toward us.

“The water probably goes past Highway 30. Parts of the highway supposedly flooded.” John put his hands on his hips. “I should have brought sunglasses.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“I was following the flood coverage on the internet at work.” He grinned. “I’m a water nerd. I can’t help it.”

“I guess we’re all some kind of nerd,” I said. I adjusted the strap of my bag on my shoulder. “Ready?”

“Okay.” John made no sign of moving.

“Wait, let me take a picture of you with the water first.” I held up my camera.

“Make an astounded face.”

“What?”
“You know, look baffled. By the water.”

John put his hands on both sides of his face like Macaulay Calkin in *Home Alone*. I took the photo.

“Got it. Let’s go.”

On the way back to our neighborhood we drove as close to my old apartment as we could. The complex and street in front of it were indeed underwater. A fairly well-kept brick building with a neatly mowed courtyard and neatly trimmed bushes across from a residential neighborhood, a city park, a bus stop, a grocery store, turned into a mess. Our system turned to chaos.

A week later it would be back under control.

2. Not Another Switchback

“That’s a short cut,” I said. I turned around to look back at the sign that said State Route 88. “I think.”

“You think?” John glanced in the rearview mirror. “You’re not sure?”

“Well, the GPS on my phone makes it look like if we keep going this way it’ll take forever to get back to Phoenix.” John had finally gotten an environmental engineering job and it happened to be in Arizona. I came down in February to visit him and we decided to go hiking in the Tonto National Forest northwest of the city. We climbed the Butcher Jones Trail, a walk that took us past Saguaro Lake, a large man-made lake that contradicted my outsider perception that water doesn’t exist in the desert.

“How long is forever?” He blew out his breath and slowed down, deciding whether or not to turn around. To the left of the highway we were driving on was Theodore Roosevelt
Lake, a man-made body of water created by the Roosevelt Dam to our right. The lake looked unnatural in its surroundings, a bright blue surface against the red rock of the desert. Along its edge next to the highway a field of dead-looking trees, parched like bleached bones, reached out to the sky. The lakes far edges met red mountains. The scene reminded me of a family vacation to the southwest when I was in middle school, when we went to Lake Powell, another man-made lake whose surroundings at times looked more like the moon than the earth.

“Hour and a half? It’s hard to say. That turn we just passed looks like a short cut, though. It cuts right from here to Apache Junction on the outskirts of the city.” I am generally good with directions and maps. My dad used to have me be the “co-pilot” in the car when I was a kid on road trips—tracing our progress on a fold-out map—and the highway looked like a shortcut, so I figured it would be a better route.

“Okay, okay, I’ll turn around. Just hang on.”

I could tell we were both getting hungry—I tend to get crabby if I don’t eat for a long time—and dinner was at the other end of the road.

“If the map on my phone is right, this way should be quicker,” I said. I dug around in my bag for a granola bar, opened it, and split it in half. “Here. Eat this.”

I stuck the granola bar in John’s mouth. He chewed loudly.

“Thanks,” he said.

“No problemo.”

John followed the sign we’d seen for State Route 88, and the road curved around the back side of the dam, becoming steep and turning down the side of a hill.
“Whoa, this is a crazy drop off. And they want me to turn?” John went slowly, trying to switch the gears of his car’s manual transmission without making the car jerk. He gripped the steering wheel hard. “Why don’t they have a railing along this road?”

“I don’t know.” I held onto my seat and stopped myself from pressing an imaginary brake on the floor. “They should. It’s like the crazy mountain roads in national parks. They never have enough guardrails.” I remembered riding in the backseat of a rental car as my dad drove our family through Yosemite or Yellowstone or King’s Canyon, my mom covering her eyes and saying the road made her nauseated. I remembered strange-looking plants in the middle of California. They had tall stalks with yellow blooming flowers on top that looked like cauliflower. We called them alien plants.

“Can you get a picture of the dam from here?”

“I can try.” I turned around and tried to capture the huge concrete damn and the river below it in my viewfinder.

“Can you get a shot of that road we just came down, too? I should show it to my dad. Show him I drove this car down a crazy-ass road like that.”

John called his dad often to tell him little things like this. Sometimes he called him a handful of times a day. This always surprised me a bit, since my family usually talked on the phone with each other once a week. Sometimes I found John’s calls to his dad tedious. Why did he need to know what road we drove down or what we had for dinner? Nevertheless, I twisted around in the other direction and took a picture of a truck going up the same road we’d just come down. The immense concrete wall of the dam—280 feet tall and 723 feet wide—loomed in the background, holding back more than one million acre feet of water.

“I got one. It’s kind of blurry.”
“Crap,” John said.

“What?” I turned back toward the front windshield and readjusted my seatbelt. We had reached the end of the pavement and a sign in front of us read “Unpaved Road Next 25 Miles.”

“Unpaved road?” I asked. My eyes got wide and so did John’s. “That can’t be good. Wouldn’t dirt or gravel be bad for your car? Plus, it can’t be easy to drive a manual on an unpaved road.”

“No, it won’t be easy.”

“Won’t? I think we should turn around. This was apparently a bad idea.”

“I’m not going back up that hill! Are you insane? That was nuts.” John put the car into gear and inched forward. The road immediately turned back uphill along the edge of the Salt River. We could see the road ahead, red and dusty, as it wound its way along the canyon and out of site.

“There are no guard rails. That’s nuts. We should go back.”

“Can’t.” The car picked up speed…to fifteen miles per hour.

“John, twenty-five miles of this is a really long way. It’ll take hours. And it’ll get dark soon. I doubt there are streetlights along an unpaved road.”

“We’ll find out.”

John accelerated and I dug a bottle of water out of my backpack. The sun already hovered too low over the mountains.

It turns out that State Route 88 is also known as the Apache Trail. It also turns out that it’s less of a highway and more of a windy dirt path through the Superstition Mountains. Originally, the road was a stagecoach trail and got its name from the Apache Indians who
used to travel through these mountains. About.com’s travel guide describes the road as both “well-traveled” and “treacherous” and claims that despite the road’s fantastic scenic views, it’s not a good route for nervous drivers or passengers. I also learned it’s not a great road for people afraid of heights.

“Oh my gosh, how far is that drop off?” John stared straight ahead and gripped the steering wheel hard.

I looked out the passenger side window toward the river. Its water was barely visible hundreds of feet below. I was becoming more interested in landscapes—because of books I’d read, classes I’d taken in graduate school, traveling I’d done—so although I didn’t know a lot about rivers and dams, I wondered if this river was larger before the construction of the dam. The river wasn’t very high at that moment, though John had said Arizona has a monsoon season and that it hadn’t happened yet. Neither of us knew exactly when it was going to occur, though. Later I would find out that the dam controlled the river mainly for irrigation purposes. The dam was considered an engineering feat when it was completed in 1911 because of its vast size. It fit perfectly into the canyon like a cork into a bottle and made humans the controllers of the region’s most precious resource.

“Far,” I said.

“I can’t look. I’m afraid of heights.”

“Well, you shouldn’t look. Want some fruit snacks?” I reached toward my backpack again. I hadn’t known John was afraid of heights. My mom has always been afraid of heights. When we went to the Grand Canyon when I was little, she kept yelling at my brother and me to get away from the edge when we were more than ten feet away.

“No. I need to concentrate.”
The car continued to climb, hugging the mountain’s edge while curving to the left and then quickly turning and curving back to the right.

“This switchbacks suck,” John said. “They just won’t end.”

“I guess that’s the only way to get up the mountains. I didn’t know switchback was the term for them.”

“My heart won’t stop pounding. I think my adrenaline’s been rushing for the last hour straight. That can’t be good for you, can it?” He straightened his back, flattening his shoulders against the seat.

“I’d drive if it weren’t a manual. But seeing as I’ve only driven a manual transmission once—”

“Yeah, I know.”

The sun descended toward the peaks of the mountains in the distance. The twenty-five miles of dirt road were bumpy like a washboard and they weren’t going quickly enough. The mile markers were few and far between, and once we got onto the paved road there were supposedly still fifteen more miles until we reached the edge of the city. Occasionally cars and trucks drove past us going the other direction, and we made comments like Who are these idiots? and There’s no way that car can handle those curves. and Is that truck narrow enough fit on the road? We kept hoping that the section of road we’d traveled was worse than what lay ahead. Eventually, all the passing vehicles had their headlights on as the sky turned pink and purple. I felt like I was falling into a trance with the never-ending road in front of us, the mellow music floating around in the car, bouncing off the doors and windows. We’d listened to all the CDs John had in the car and ended with the instrumental songs of Bon Iver followed by The National’s High Violet album. Then we played those
albums on repeat. John said this was because they were the calmest. Both collections were mellow, the sound of string instruments and keyboards humming so that you felt like the sounds entered your body. In that car traveling down that desert path I felt like the alien, the one out of place. It felt like the land could swallow us whole and we could be lost forever.

Arizona, particularly southern Arizona, was a place I knew little about before I started visiting John after he moved to Phoenix. In January during my first visit I was baffled by the sprawl of the city. I had been told the suburbs go on forever, but having never seen a place with that much sprawl, I didn’t quite comprehend what that meant until I saw it. Subdivision after subdivision after strip mall fan out into the desert. I was amazed that the city could support all of the Applebees and Targets and Cheesecake Factories, but apparently the increasing amount of snowbirds coming down from the northern states every winter keep all those places in business. The Valley has more than four million residents spread out over sixteen-thousand square miles. Compare that to Manhattan, where 1.6 million people fit into less than thirty-four square miles, and you can get some sense of the amount of space the people of the Phoenix area take up. The continued growth of the city seems counterintuitive, too; more and more people move to a place with less and less water. It reminds me of standing in front of the Bellagio’s fountain in Las Vegas where a water show consumes hundreds of gallons of water everyday just to give people something to look at. Admittedly, I’m no expert on water use, but something about this rapid development strikes me as problematic. According to the City of Phoenix’s website, “Phoenix has the water it needs – but none to waste.” I’m not sure whether this sounds ominous or forward-thinking: “beware what happens if we use too much water” or “let’s take a step in the right direction and conserve.”
Another surprising thing about Arizona is the amount of farming that takes place. The Phoenix Valley is as flat as central Iowa allowing for easily plowed farm fields, but mountains surround the city on all sides. John and I also went hiking at South Mountain, a nearby recreational area within the city, and to get there we drove east on Queen Creek Road to I-10. Queen Creek follows the south edge of the city, and after driving for a few miles we were surrounded by farm fields and desert. In the fields, tractors rode back and forth over the land, kicking up dust. John had mistaken some of these fountains of dust for dust devils, tornado-like swirls of dirt that seemed to emerge out of nowhere. Sometimes they were only a few feet tall. Other times they rose up into the sky like columns. In other parts of the city I saw fields of soybeans. I saw what looked like dead, brown fields with stacks of hay bales in them. I saw pastures for cows and sheep (don’t they get hot in the desert with all that wool?). I even saw corn fields, their green stalks and leaves almost shocking in a landscape otherwise so brown and tan and red. The corn surprised me, since I imagined it needs the moister climate of the Midwest to grow properly. Perhaps this says more about my lack of knowledge about agriculture than anything else—turns out Arizona grows all kind of fruits, vegetables, and grains—but to me the corn looked out of place. It felt like it didn’t belong in the desert. Then again, maybe it didn’t belong in the Midwest either. Maybe people just put it there. There were a lot of things I didn’t know about the places I visited. And about the places I lived.

“I can’t believe you thought this was a shortcut. I’m blaming this one on you,” John said. He laughed, but didn’t sound amused.

“Hey, it’s not my fault! The map was zoomed out so none of the curves showed up. It looked like a straight shortcut.” I held up my phone as if it was the one responsible.
“I don’t know if I’ll trust your directions again.”

“I’m not bad with directions! I swear.”

The Apache Trail also made us feel out of place because although it was pretty close to Phoenix, a city of millions, it felt like it was hundreds of miles from civilization. Aside from the few cars we passed, there were no people. There were no places to pull off the road. There were no buildings or rest stops or road signs. There were no animals. There were no city lights in the distance. The Superstition Mountains felt remote and wild.

“Is that a parking lot up ahead?” I squinted into the fading light.

“Yeah, it looks like a place to pull off.”

“I think I see a building. Maybe there are bathrooms.”

John pulled off the road next to the building, which was a bathroom. The parking lot was at a point of high elevation, and we jumped out of the car and looked out over a valley, the Salt River flowing somewhere below where it was already dark. The shadows of saguaros stretched down the sides of hilltops.

“That’s gorgeous,” John said. He took a deep breath and shook out his arms. “Man, all of my muscles are tensed up. But we can’t stay here long or it’ll get dark before we get out of here.”

We got back in the car and began to descend the mountain we’d climbed. The closer we got to the paved road, the more campsites we saw. After driving downhill for a long time we reached a line of buildings—just a couple of saloons—and a road sign that said “Tortilla Flat.” Later I would learn that Tortilla Flat is the smallest community in Arizona with only six full-time residents. Originally, gold prospectors camped at the site, and in 1904 the town was established as a stagecoach stop for construction materials on their way northeast to the
site where the Roosevelt Dam was being constructed. From the car, Tortilla Flat looked like a glowing mirage. It was stereotypically western, aged buildings along a dusty road, except for neon signs advertising beer and gifts and barbecue.


“They must. Otherwise you’d have to drive a million miles of windy road to get to your job as a bartender.” I stretched and my legs stuck to the car seat. I realized I’d been sweating a lot even though the car’s air conditioning blasted at us. “Should we stop?”

I looked at the building labeled saloon. I wondered who we’d find in there. Who would want to live in a place so isolated and forgotten?

“I don’t know. We should probably just keep going.”

By this point the sun had completely set, and once we left Tortilla Flat, the only light came from our headlights. A few minutes later the road finally turned to pavement.


He connected his phone to his car’s Bluetooth so he didn’t have to use his hands and pressed a button on the steering wheel to dial.

His dad picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dad. You’ll never believe what Katie just made me do.”

I whipped my head around to look at him. Me? I mouthed.

“What?”

I’d only met John’s dad a few times, but imagined him doing something while holding the phone. Changing the channel on the TV or flipping through the newspaper.
“We were driving back through the Tonto National Forest where we went hiking and she said she found a shortcut, but it turned out to be this insane winding dirt road along a cliff next to a river.” John grinned. The car’s headlights reflected off the yellow and white lines on the pavement.

“Do you have pictures?” his dad asked.

“Yeah, Katie got some. I’ll send them to you.”

They said goodbye and hung up. The brevity of their conversations often surprised me, too.

“It feels great to be back on paved road, doesn’t it?” John looked at me and smiled. “I think my upper back muscles are going to be tight for a week. Ugh. I think I need to stretch. Want to pull over?”

“Sure.”

At the next sign for a campsite John pulled over. We waited for a truck to pass us before getting out of the car. Once the headlights were gone the only light was from the stars above us. We stared up.

“Stars that bright only exist outside of civilization,” John said. He walked around the car toward the dark figures of cacti along the side of the road. “How did we end up way out here? It’d be nice to come back and go camping sometime.”

I looked at him in the darkness, but could only see his outline. John and I had gone camping once before, at Ledges State Park in Iowa. It rained and a bunch of owls had kept us up most of the night. The parks of Arizona made Ledges seem small by comparison.

“I’d drive in from the city on the paved part, obviously,” he added.

“Obviously,” I said and laughed.
Half an hour or so later we could finally see the lights of the Valley in the distance, emerging out of the surrounding darkness. When we drove into Apache Junction, houses and restaurants appeared at the side of the road, TVs glowing inside and signs advertising beef jerky and tamales. When we reached the highway and the bright signs of Lowe’s and Walmart and Ikea came into view we both looked at each other.

“I’ve never been so appreciative of civilization,” John said.

“Yeah, me neither. That was nuts.”

“Ready for some dinner? Sushi?”

“Sounds good.”

I caught his eye and we both grinned. John shifted the car into fifth gear and accelerated to seventy miles per hour. Cars sped past us, their headlights adding to the glow of the streetlights and buildings. In the city, we don’t properly appreciate the function of headlights. Everything is so bright to begin with, the lights don’t slice through the darkness the way they do in the middle of nowhere. The darkness can’t swallow them up in the city. Maybe cities have taken away the power of darkness.

3. On I-35, the Only Way to Go Is Straight

A few weeks later, I drove the frost-covered pavement of I-35 north toward Minneapolis.

I-35 between Des Moines and Minneapolis rivals Iowa’s Highway 20 as the straightest piece of highway I’ve ever encountered. Get on I-35 north, and three hours later you’ll be in the Twin Cities. You won’t pass much besides open fields, some wind turbines, and billboards advertising the Spam Museum.
I’d seen I-35 look like a graveyard of vehicles in the ditch, driving south to Des Moines the previous December. I drove 35 miles per hour—even though the speed limit was 70—and passed two-door Mazdas, their front ends buried in snow banks, Ford trucks missing their front bumpers, minivans facing the wrong direction, having spun out on icy overpasses. All the vehicles still among the living crawled along the interstate. I passed semis in the ditch, one of them on its side, its tires and innards exposed to the moving traffic, yellow caution tape unnecessarily marking its presence. I passed two UPS trucks and pondered whether there were still packages inside. Storms like that one—a blizzard during the week—can put cities out of commission for days. Iowa State University never cancels classes, but classes were cancelled that week. On that day, after the storm, the drifts along the edges of the highway looked like sand dunes with dried yellow grasses sticking up out of them.

This day, early on a Saturday morning in late February, there wasn’t much snow on the ground. We’d had a warm day or two, and the blanket of dirty snow had begun to melt. No ice or new snow crunched beneath my car’s tires. The world outside the heated bubble of my car didn’t reflect the turmoil I felt that day. I drove north, the acceleration taken care of by my cruise control, staring straight ahead. Normally I listened to podcasts on long drives to pass the time—Radiolab, Stuff You Should Know, This American Life—but when upset I tended to put on music and space out. I usually picked music I didn’t need to really listen to, music I’d heard hundreds of times, whose songs I already knew all the words to, where I knew the order of the songs on the albums by heart. I put on The National’s High Violet, the newest and most mellow of their albums. Nothing peppier seemed appropriate.

I associated that band with Iowa, mostly for silly reasons.
The first time I drove to Iowa to visit Iowa State’s campus after I decided to go there for grad school, I listened to one of the band’s earlier albums, *Alligator*, while driving through a thunderstorm. Rain pounded my windshield and occasionally turned to hail. The downpour was so hard that I could barely see my surroundings. It felt like I was traveling inside a submarine under the ocean’s surface, the rain outside was so overwhelming. Matt Berninger, The National’s lead singer, sang to a woman named Karen: “Whatever you do, listen, you’d better wait for me / I wouldn’t go out alone into America.” I kept my eyes on the white line along the side of the road as my car crawled toward a place I’d never been. There was something about the farmland that seemed like a different America than the one I was used to. A non-urban America, an America of open spaces and highways and greenness.

During another drive, this one to Iowa City, the state’s other college town where the University of Iowa is located, I listened to *High Violet* for the first time. I usually didn’t pay attention to when new albums come out, but for this one I’d gone to the local Borders on the Tuesday the album was released, and after discovering the store didn’t carry it, went next door to Best Buy and purchased their last copy. When I first listened to the CD the songs all melded together. The instruments were calmer than in their previous albums, the vocals eerier. Or so it seemed while driving east through a constant drizzle on I-80. The music grew on me later, the songs distinguishing themselves from one another.

So by the time I drove to Minneapolis in late February, I didn’t need to really listen to the songs anymore. I just needed them to fill the car and my ears and my brain, to turn everything into a buzz, a hum to drown everything else out.

I haven’t had a close family member die, so when John called me to say his dad had died of a heart attack—they would later discover it was actually a brain aneurysm, a place
where a blood vessel or vein ballooned, filled with blood, and eventually burst—I couldn’t
tell him anything useful. Not that useful information would have been what he wanted
anyway. I had only met his dad a few times. I only knew that he and John were very close.
That they talked on the phone a lot. It turned out the reason they found him so quickly after
he died was that John couldn’t get a hold of him and insisted his sister in Minnesota go check
on their dad.

After he’d called me two nights before, I sat in a rocking chair in my living room, the
pasta I’d made for dinner gone cold on the table next to me. I rocked back and forth for hours
until my roommates said I should go to bed.

I can’t remember ever feeling so bad for someone. It is one of those things that makes
you physically sick. I had nothing else to compare the feeling to than a bad breakup I’d gone
through when my stomach hurt all the time, when all I could do was drink chocolate milk,
when my muscles felt like they didn’t know how to work anymore. The first few days after
John’s dad’s death gave me the sick stomach feeling. Later on we’d discuss it, and he’d
describe the sick feeling he had as the same kind he’d had after a breakup, too. We’d both try
to describe the event, but it felt like we talked around it. Like we never found the right words
to explain it. Maybe it’s another instance of language not being enough. Or maybe I’m just
not as good with language as I once thought.

There wasn’t much traffic on the highway on that Saturday morning. At least not that
I noticed. John had flown home to Minneapolis from Phoenix the day before, and I said I
would meet him there.

The following two days felt fake. Maybe it was just because they were the kind of
days we don’t have much control over. The kind of days we don’t know how to deal with. I
stayed with John at his sister’s house, and I tried to be helpful and stay out of the way at the same time. On Saturday I tried to keep John busy. We went through boxes of old photos because his mom and sister wanted to display some of them at the memorial gathering the following weekend. I flipped through images of people I’d never met at weddings and parties and in the military, not sure what I was supposed to be looking for. I handed some of them to John.

“Do you know who this is? Should we put it in the keep pile?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” He shuffled through a stack of photos on the carpet in front of him and shrugged. Then he held one up. “This is Dad snorkeling in Hawaii.”

“How old were you when you went to Hawaii?”

“High school.” He studied the image, then carefully put it on the top of the small “Keep” pile.

That evening John’s sister gave me directions to the closest mall, where John and I walked around with the irrelevant goal of buying him some running shoes since he hadn’t brought his from Arizona and would probably be in Minneapolis for a while. The mall felt bright and too normal. Everyone at the mall was having a regular Saturday night. Kids ran around. Adults walked by with shopping bags. Everyone wore big coats and scarves. It was typical winter in the Midwest.

We stopped in a few shoe stores before going into a sporting goods store where John picked out some shoes. At the register the cashier smiled and asked how we were doing.

“We’re fine, thanks,” I said. I smiled to make up for the fact that John was staring in the other direction.
The cashier put the shoebox in a bag, and I poked John to get him to swipe his credit card. “You all have a good night now.” The cashier handed the bag to John. The man squinted, slightly perplexed.

“You, too,” I said. John was already halfway to the door.

“Thanks,” he said once we were back in the mall.

“For what?”

“Doing that. Saying the necessary things. I’m so out of it.”


We wandered the mall for a while longer, and I finally convinced John to have a smoothie. He was refusing to eat until he saw his dad at the funeral home the next day. As we sipped our smoothies he said, “My dad used to walk through the mall with me and point out girls I could date.”

“Really? That’s funny. That’s not something I picture him doing.” John’s dad was an older man. He was balding, wore glasses, and had a mustache. On the few occasions I’d seen him he hadn’t said much. One day we went to breakfast at The Café across the street from our neighborhood in Iowa, and he mostly looked out the window while drinking his coffee. He had helped John pack all of his possessions into a U-Haul and drive it across the country to Phoenix.

“I guess I didn’t know him that well, though,” I said. “How old were you when he did that?”

“A teenager I guess.”

The Claire’s Accessories store to our left advertised free ear piercings with the purchase of a set of earrings. The kiosk in front of it sold cell phone covers in crazy colors
and patterns. Hot pink and zebra and glittery. They reminded me of when I was a teenager. I didn’t know you could still buy cell phone covers.

“I feel like I should be doing something, but like I’ve run out of things to do,” John said. He sighed, put his hands in his pockets, and walked faster.

“Do you want to head back to your sister’s?” I asked.

“No, let’s walk more. I need to walk.”

“Yeah, I know how that is.”

The next day a blizzard hit Minnesota, dumping eighteen inches of snow on the Twin Cities in twenty-four hours. John’s sister’s boyfriend drove us through the snowy roads to the funeral home in his SUV. What should have been a fairly short drive took nearly forty-five minutes.

The family only had a small viewing with some other relatives. The body was going to be cremated, so they weren’t preserving it at all or paying for anything special. No makeup or embalming or carefully folding the deceased’s hands over a best suit. I didn’t know if I should go in with the family or not. I didn’t know whether I wanted to. Most of the relatives didn’t dress up much because it wasn’t a funeral, but John wore all black. Black suit, black shirt, black tie. He stood over his dad—who was dressed in a medical gown and lying on a metal gurney—and looked like someone I didn’t know very well. Someone with a past I didn’t know that much about. His memories were his, and I couldn’t know them any more than he could know mine. I hovered in the background and realized it takes a long time to know people, and even then, you can’t know everything.
I got stuck in Minneapolis the following day and had to cancel my classes. The snow wouldn’t stop falling. Around lunchtime, when it finally lightened up for a bit, I took John to McDonald’s, the closest fast food restaurant.

“I needed to get out of the house,” he said. “Plus, every once in a while I like McDonald’s.”

I went through the drive-thru window, then pulled into one of the parking spaces whose lines were distinguishable beneath the snow. John ate his cheeseburgers and I ate his fries.

“I feel a little better today. Now that I’ve seen him,” John said.

“You look a little better today.” I put my right hand on his knee and got salt on his jeans.

“I hadn’t been able to eat or think properly in days.” He swallowed a bite of cheeseburger.

“I know. Everyone was worried about you.”

The McDonald’s parking lot was connected to a gas station, so cars and trucks, their wheel wells filled with snow, pulled in and out of the lot. A semi whose side read “Rainbow Foods” was parked at the edge of the snow-cleared area to our left.

“I’d hate to drive a semi in snow,” I said. “Can you imagine hitting ice in that thing?”

“Dustin says it’s even worse when you’re trying to land a plane on an icy runway.”

“Yeah, I bet.” John’s sister’s boyfriend flew commercial planes for AirTran and had talked about it the day before when John and Anna’s relatives asked him about his work.
“I know it’s only February, but I was hoping winter was over. It seems too late in the year for a storm like this, but I know that’s not true. We had a snowstorm during finals week in May when I was in college.”

John looked out the window in front of him. The car had finally warmed up and snowflakes melted when they hit the windshield. That morning John, his sister, and I had spent the better part of an hour trying to dig my car out of a mound of snow.

“You shouldn’t drive back until the roads are better,” he said.

“Iowa supposedly didn’t get much snow. The roads should be better across the border.”

“Still. I don’t want you to end up in the ditch. Maybe you should just stay until next week.” A memorial gathering had been planned for the following weekend—John’s mom didn’t want a religious service—and John wanted me to come back up. (I would end up coming back up the following Friday. An impressive amount of people attended the gathering, probably almost a hundred friends and colleagues. It was the kind of memorial everyone probably hopes to have; lots of people, not much gloom. Dozens of people John had never met or barely knew shook his hand and told him what a great man his dad had been.)

“I would if I could. But I have to get back to work tomorrow. I’ve already missed today.” I was behind on everything I needed to get done that week and knew I’d only have a few days to go back, get it done, and then drive back to Minnesota. But it was just work. I felt like I could organize my life as much as I wanted into neat little blocks of time—teach, write, grade papers, run, etc., etc.—but things could come up and destroy the routine, make it irrelevant. Calamity doesn’t wait until the moment is convenient.
“I know.” John crushed his yellow sandwich wrapper into a ball.

I drove south on I-35 that afternoon, inching along behind a pickup truck. All the cars drove slowly, no more than thirty-five or forty miles per hour. The wind kept picking up out of the west, gusting and threatening to blow my car off the road. Travel in the winter generally sucks. I had been stuck in too many airports that winter, slid across too many intersections. So many things can throw a wrench in plans. Snow storms. Floods. Death. They’re the things that are difficult to plan for, even if you watch the Weather Channel.

The thing with catastrophes, too, is that we pay attention to them for a while, and then we move on. Cities flood, get destroyed by earthquakes and tornados, burn to the ground. We go and look at the devastation—the flooded streets and parking lots, the golf course turned into a lake—we watch the news reports on TV, we take pictures. We clean up. We rebuild. If the trouble isn’t looking us in the face, we eventually stop looking. And I don’t think people should necessarily be blamed for that. It’s what happens; we move on.

With this kind of personal catastrophe, with unexpected death, I wonder if it works the same way. If we pay attention for a while, look at the pictures, hug people at the memorial, sort through what was left behind, get rid of what’s not needed. Eventually those most affected will get up too and move along, even if the memories of it stay with them. But eventually memories fade. It makes me wonder what we’re left with. What gets remembered.

Initially, events like those make people try to plan better. Most of John’s male relatives died young of what family members thought were heart attacks. Now they wonder if those men died of aneurysms. John and his sister researched aneurysms on the internet, learned the signs, talked about meeting with doctors to see if they can get tested since aneurysms can be genetic. They learned to limit stress and bad foods and caffeine, anything
that can raise blood pressure. Aneurysms typically kill people between ages thirty and sixty.

John’s dad was sixty-two.

I wonder if this is another case of people trying to plan and change and prevent, except this time on an individual level, this time on the level of the body. I can’t blame them. I would do the same thing. It makes me rethink the way people try to control the environment. Maybe it isn’t always bad, if done properly. Originally, at least, people—like those in Iowa—thought when they were altering the landscape they were acting in humans’ best interest. Are those actions really any different than trying to change your body? Maybe. In either case, there’s only so much you can prevent. Only so much you can do. Floods and aneurysms will happen anyway, even if we do exactly what we’re supposed to do to avoid them. There’s still a lot we don’t know.

A couple weeks later John returned to Arizona, and life moved on, although on an altered path.

“It’s lonely here. It feels weird that I can’t call my dad,” John said on the phone.

“I know. It’ll probably feel like that for a long time,” I said. I dumped a bunch of chopped peppers, onions, and carrots into a frying pan.

“I can’t do anything. I get home from work and just space out. I can’t remember the last time I did chores or fed the frogs.”

“You should go feed them. They’re probably starving. Shouldn’t they be fed every day?” I imagined the tiny red and blue frogs, the Benedicta, hiding in the leaves of the bromeliad plants waiting for food. Or the blue and yellow Lamasi, waiting in the dark corners of their tank. It was almost funny, the way I worried about the frogs now.

“I know. I just can’t seem to do anything. I’m thinking about selling the frogs.”
“What? But you love frogs. How could you sell them?” I remembered him telling me, way back when we first met, that he wanted to expand his frog business, make his own tanks, have dozens and dozens of frogs. I remembered the way he got excited and then felt bad when I didn’t seem to get it.

“I know. But my dad was the only one who really supported my hobby. I just can’t get myself to care about it now.” I imagined him lying on his bed, running his hand through his hair, probably turned blond from the Arizona sun.

“Come on. You can’t get rid of the frogs. That’s ridiculous.” I hit the kitchen counter with the wooden spoon I used to stir the vegetables. “I won’t allow it, if only because we spent all that time catching the frogs and packing them up and shipping them across the country when you moved. Then it will have all been a waste.”

Had someone told me the year before when I first encountered the frogs that I would one day become their advocate I would have laughed. Frogs? Snakes? Reptiles? Unusual pets? No thanks.

“Anyway, end of discussion. Go feed the frogs,” I said.

“I need to order more food for them. I’m almost out. I haven’t made any new fruit fly cultures.” John sighed, but I could hear him standing up.

“Well, then you’d better get on that. Liz and her boyfriend are hungry.”

“Oh, ha ha.”

“I sense sarcasm.” I poured more olive oil in the pan to keep the vegetables from scorching.

“I’m going to feed them now.”

“Good. Must keep the frogs happy.”
John didn’t say anything for a minute. I turned down the heat on the stove.

“You just have to keep going, get things back in order, keeping doing what you need to do.”

“Yeah. I just feel like I don’t know which way I’m supposed to be going half the time.”

“Straight is fine,” I said. I pictured going north on I-35 or west on Highway 20 or east on I-80, wind blowing the snow across the highway or green rows of corn rustling in the wind. “Sometimes that’s the only way you can go.”
What I’ll Miss about Iowa Thunderstorms

The thunderheads grew more immense as they moved east over central Iowa, their dark, puffy bodies rising up like smoke out of a fire, except more corporeal. Three friends and I stood in the empty parking lot next to my apartment gazing west as these dark creatures rolled toward us, swallowing the land they passed over. Lightning crackled through them, accentuating their edges and reaching into the sky like fiery tentacles. It left bright spots in my vision, like when I closed my eyes and pressed on them as a kid, causing bright kaleidoscopic designs to appear on my retinas. A wall of rain, distinguished by a gray more solid than that of the clouds, hovered in the distance.

The storm clouds were more threatening than other clouds, more alive. They came at us with purpose. We were in their path.

July was the season of thunderstorms.

A small metal stove sat on our back porch, left by a previous tenant. One friend went to rekindle the fire we’d built in it. He opened the stove’s grate, adjusted the logs with a stick, then came back toward us, the end of his fire-tending log burning. He turned the wood over and over, the fiery bits flickering on and off. I held my breath. The sky lit up and thunder echoed in the distance. The air was humid, sticky. The air anticipated the storm. It held the potential for rain in its breath.

My friend turned his back on the rest of us and threw the stick into the empty lot. The wood made a clunking noise as it skipped along the pavement. Embers scattered through the darkness, like stars speckling the concrete. Like the sky and the ground had inverted.

*What are you doing?* we asked.
He grinned and kicked a piece of charred wood. The movement turned it from black back to orange.

The wind picked up. The storm closed in on us.

I’d watched many storms come in over the Midwest, but they were most noteworthy in Iowa where the land was so flat. Nothing could block the view as darkness blanketed the fields. I noticed I breathed the air—that blanket of moisture—more at those moments than at any other. Then just before the storm arrived the temperature dropped.

As a kid I hated thunderstorms. I watched the local warnings on TV: severe weather warnings, tornado watches, hail warnings. The tornado warnings scared me the most. Those were the red scrolling banners on the bottom of the screen I crossed my fingers against. I’ve still never seen a tornado in person.

But as I grew up thunderstorms came to mean summer and water and normalcy. They’re what happen that time of year. Without thunder breaking into my sleep, without the sound of rain pounding the roof and the sidewalks, angry drops hitting the ground so hard they bounce back up, summer wouldn’t feel right. A place without that kind of rain misses out on the best kind.

The four of us stood in a line staring west as the clouds morphed from one shape to another. The mass of water and air exploded like a gray, black, and white splatter painting. The wind blew our hair back.

Just before the rain started, a car turned into the lot, the driver thinking another exit existed to the main street. I held my breath, afraid of what would happen when the car drove over the coals. We stepped back onto the building’s lawn as the car turned around in a circle to exit the way it came in. Its tires reignited the wood, and as the car sped out of the lot, a
shower of sparks flew up behind its back tires, making it look like it was about to take off. In its wake, the embers fell back to the pavement, exploding like tiny fireworks as big drops of water began to hit us. The car turned the corner at the next intersection and didn’t return. I let out my breath.

We took cover under a porch and watched the rain put out the glowing bits of wood. They hissed and emitted tiny streams of smoke before dying. Then the sound of water hitting pavement drowned out all else. The ricocheting drops leapt up onto our feet.

That’s what I’ll miss when I move away. The anticipation of what’s coming followed by the inevitable. The warm, humid air followed by the rain, washing away everything else.
The parking lot outside the slaughterhouse in southeastern Iowa did not smell like pig. It did not smell like death or blood or even like the deli at the grocery store where bright red chunks of beef or pink pieces of chicken sit behind glass. The air just smelled like late summer, like cornfields growing tall in the humidity. The massive white building labeled “Pork Processing Facility” did not betray anything real about what went on inside; the label just gave it a name that turned the plant’s daily activities into a process, streamlined and simplified, erasing with that sterile adjective the actual events occurring at the facility almost twenty-four hours a day. Twenty-thousand pigs were “processed” at the slaughterhouse daily. That was almost as many pigs getting killed in the town each day of the week as there were people who lived in it. I glanced back at the guard’s station where we had to sign in, then up at the white walls looming in front of us. The air hummed. The sun was overly-bright, and I squinted behind my sunglasses. The other students on the Agroecosystems Analysis field trip with me stood in small groups on the pavement, waiting to be motioned to climb up a two-story flight of metal stairs and venture inside.

I felt like an outsider on this field trip, a writer in a pack of scientists and sociologists who had been studying the food system for years. I signed up for the class because it sounded different. The opportunity to visit farms, food production facilities, and retailers in Iowa would be way more hands-on than sitting in a lecture, and I had somehow managed to live in Iowa for two years without ever visiting a farm. Plus, as a writer I believe in story. I believe in narrative. I believe in the importance of putting faces to the systems we use in our daily lives because the fastest way to make someone stop and think about the way we live is to
show him or her a real live person. To look at the people who chop up the pork, who harvest the corn, who pick Japanese beetles off of the soybeans. (Did you know the soybean plants are three feet tall? I had no idea; from the highway they look like they grow so low to the ground...)

In addition to feeling like an outsider because of my discipline, I also felt like an outsider because I was a vegetarian. Most of the other students were meat eaters—which surprised me at first, but the “eat local” movement seemed to be the trend among this bunch—and some had visited places like this before. I had never seen a slaughterhouse, and I was nervous. I shifted my weight back and forth from one leg to the other. Part of me hoped we might somehow avoid going inside. Sure, we had the option of not going on the plant tour, but I told myself that it was something I should see. It was something everyone should see. We all need to know how our food gets from the farm to the grocery store. And that involves watching pigs die. But my brain was filled with images of squealing pigs, gushing blood, and slabs of meat. They whirled around in my head like a tornado of pig parts, legs flying, heads with eyes that stared blankly back at me when I closed my eyes.

We climbed single-file up the metal stairs into a surprisingly typical office area. People at cubicles decorated with plants, family photos, and kids’ drawings looked up and smiled at us when we came in. The normalness, the way it lacked pig, left me slightly taken-aback. I had expected the world inside the building to be tilted somehow, but turned out perfectly level. It was disconcerting. Half of us were led to a conference room where the plant’s general manager gave a presentation about what they do at the facility and their success. He wasn’t kidding; the plant is incredibly successful, at least in terms of efficiency and cost-effectiveness. As I looked at his PowerPoint slides and listened to his statistics, the
whole thing started to seem almost normal. *We get most of our pigs from farmers within a one hundred mile radius. We process five million pigs each year. We just upgraded our locker rooms and employee break areas.* I nodded and took notes, scribbled down the numbers like I might get tested on them later. He spoke clearly and cheerfully as he explained all the improvements made since he began working for the company two years prior. He spoke like someone who does a lot of public speaking, almost like a salesman, and for a moment he almost had me sold.

“We no longer shock the animals on the kill floor,” the GM said.

The words “kill floor” made my brain sizzle. It seemed funny that the plant tried to disguise everything else with words like “processing” and “cleaning,” but kill floor wasn’t disguised at all. The man said it matter-of-factly, like he’d probably said it thousands of times before. To him this whole process was normal. It was how his company made money. And the company employed half the population of the town. Whether you called it pork processing or pig killing, it was a way of life, and it wasn’t going anywhere.

“Instead we use a CO₂ chamber,” he said. “The pigs walk into a small room, it fills with carbon dioxide gas, they pass out, and then the blood is drained and they go on for processing.”

I uncrossed my legs and shifted in my cushy swivel chair. How could I sit in a nicely air-conditioned office in a comfortable chair while somewhere downstairs animals were dying? My inner vegetarian still felt queasy. Somehow, though, hearing the GM explain the process and the way the pigs were knocked unconscious made me feel slightly relieved.
“How long have you been using the CO₂ process?” I asked. I hadn’t asked a lot of questions on the trip yet. I usually felt like I didn’t have enough expertise to know what to ask.

“Six or seven years,” he said.

I made a note and nodded. I’d heard stories about cattle being led into a slaughterhouse and knowing from the sounds of the cows that went before them something bad was going to happen. Some of the cows would try to turn around, to back away from the screams. At least the pigs didn’t know what was coming.

I think I first heard tales of slaughterhouses in middle school when our social studies teacher described visiting one. I can’t remember why he went, and I can’t really remember much about him. Just that he looked tired of dealing with young teenagers, had an addiction to Coca-Cola, and made us read aloud from our history textbook during class. But his description of how animals became meat horrified my thirteen-year-old self enough that I wrinkled my nose at McDonald’s cheeseburgers—once my favorite kind of fast food—and when we dissected frogs in our science class later that semester, I decided, *no, I cannot eat meat anymore. If my food walked, I don’t want it.* Some annoying friend then asked about food that swam. I scowled and shook my head.

After the presentation, we filed back into the cubicle area where we put on heavy lab coats, rubber boots, hard hats, goggles, and gloves. Half of the class had gone on the tour while the rest of us listened to the presentation, so they handed their outfits off to us. The white coat I put on smelled sour. A girl named Cindy handed me a helmet with blood on the top of it. I must have grimaced because one of the guys said, “Yeah, we had to duck under some pigs.”
My stomach turned over as I imagined pigs dangling far above us. I caught the eye of another girl putting on a hard hat and lab coat who looked equally terrified.

“I know I need to see this,” she said. She tried to tuck her red hair into her hairnet, but struggled because of the gloves. “But I’m afraid I won’t want to eat meat afterward.”

“Yeah, I’m a little freaked out,” I said.

“Okay, good, we’ll walk through it together.”

Our tour guide was a floor manager at the plant. He smiled a lot, wore a net over his beard, and was only twenty-two. (At one point on the tour he stopped and told us if we wanted to start a career in the meat-processing industry, his company provided a great training program.) We all wore earplugs and headphones because the production lines created so much noise, and our guide explained in bursts—my headphones did not work very well—what we saw. The first building we walked through felt like a refrigerator. Hundreds of people hurried past us or stood along conveyor belts. (Later, someone would point out that the vast majority of these employees were Latino.) Chunks of meat flew by and workers sliced extra fat off the cuts. Our surroundings were white and silver and shades of red. Machines whirred all around us, and random pieces of pig flew out of chutes coming down from the ceiling into big circular bins waiting on the floor beneath them. A sheet of skin landed in a bin next to me. The skin pile jiggled like a huge mound of Jello. I tried to hurry past it, stepping as quickly as possible around the bits of fat scattered over the wet concrete floor, though this was challenging because my boots were at least five sizes too big. Our guide stopped at another bin holding discarded bits of skin and muscle.
“We use everything,” he said. “You ever heard anyone say ‘We use everything but the oink’? Well it’s true. A lot of the excess is sold to other facilities. This here”—he held up what looked like more skin—“gets made into gelatin.”

I pictured the tiny, rectangular packages of Jello my mom, brother, and I made into Jello Jigglers as kids. We made orange pumpkins at Halloween and lime green trees at Christmas. One year we even made grape bats. I remembered people saying Jello contained horse hooves and scrunching my nose in distaste. As it turns out, that probably wasn’t all that far from the truth.

When we exited the cold part of the building and entered a warmer room, my glasses fogged up. I took them off and squinted to see without them.

“Now we’re going to move on to the part of the process where the pigs get butchered. The guys that do these jobs have to be very skilled. A bad cut of meat doesn’t make a buyer happy, so these employees are good at what they do,” our guide said.

The refrigerated room hadn’t bothered me that much. In reality, it was just like a giant version of the meat deli at the grocery store. But what bothered me the further we got into the tour was that we got closer and closer to the live pigs, the ones standing around waiting for slaughter. Our guide said we would get to the kill floor eventually. I held my breath.

There was no way to prepare for the room we saw next. Dead pigs—hundreds of them—hung by one of their hooves from hooks that moved mechanically along the ceiling. Their stomachs had been sliced open and their heads cut off, though the heads hung by their spinal cords from their rest of the bodies; our guide told us that for inspection purposes the whole pig must stay together for a certain amount of time to prevent potential contamination. The eyelids had been cut off—someone later suggested this might be because blood can pool
beneath the eyes—and some of the tongues hung out of the mouths. These pigs did not hang
high above us like I had imagined, but were so close I could have reached out and touched
them.

“We’re going to have to go under here to get to the next area,” our guide said. “So if
you just want to wait for an opening and come through to the other side, we’ll be able to
move on.”

I was in the middle of the group, and my mouth probably dropped open as one by one
the students in front of me watched a few hanging pigs pass, then ducked down and darted
between two of them. One student took a while to get through and seemed to sway on the
spot, leaning forward, about to move, but then leaning back again. I counted the pigs as they
went by. Pig...pig...pig...

“Go!” someone said. “Now! There’s an opening.”

The student turned sideways and darted between two pigs.

Blood dripped onto the hard hat of the girl in front of me and she crouched down. I
now knew where the blood on my helmet came from.

When it was my turn I tried not to look too closely at the passing pigs. They were just
big objects floating past my vision. I couldn’t think too hard about what I was actually
seeing. I was afraid if I did I might freeze and get stuck in the middle of the plant, hands over
my eyes, unable to get back out. I just needed to find the gap. Pig...pig...go! I held my hard
hat tightly to my head and hurried to rejoin the group.

Our guide led us on—backwards in the process, almost as if we were going back in
time to the moments before the pigs became hams, before they lost their heads and their
eyelids, back to where the pig would be a whole pig, awake and alive—to a machine like a
giant furnace that scorched the hair off the bodies. The machine propelling the hooks sent each pig through a burst of flame. I peered inside and a blast of heat flew in my face along with the smell of burning flesh. The dangling pig looked like it was almost smiling. Its eyes were shut and it moved slowly through the fire, almost like a ghost. I blew all the air in my lungs out through my nose. When each pig exited the machine a man grabbed its head, opened its mouth, and pulled on the tongue. I didn’t know what he was checking for. Clear liquid fell out of each pig’s mouth and onto the floor, and some of it splashed up onto my boots. I scrunched my toes even though there was no way anything could get through the rubber.

I have never loved getting dirty. As a kid, when I wasn’t reading through the children and young adult sections of the library, I spent a lot of time outside, but even then I didn’t like getting covered in mud or going near bugs. In high school, if someone had suggested we go camping, I probably would have suggested we stay in a cheap hotel instead. In recent years, though, I had started spending a lot more time outdoors and accepted that if you want to do things like go camping and hiking, you will inevitably get dirty. Dirt wasn’t the end of the world. Even on this field trip I’d had to accept that for two weeks I would be dirty. Standing out in the sun and visiting farms in Iowa in August involves a lot of sweat and grime. But pig guts were an altogether different kind of dirty, a kind I wanted to stay far away from. A kind I did not want covering my boots and dripping down my hard hat.

On the way to the ominous kill floor we passed a group of workers slitting open the pigs. One of the animals got marked with a spray-painted yellow X. Contaminated, it meant, though by what I didn’t know. The overstimulation had started to either numb or desensitize me, and I kept my eyes on the floor and hurried past carcass after carcass. We left the
butchering building and went outside into the humidity. My glasses fogged up again. There, in the space between a group of buildings, the air smelled like what I could only identify as dead pig. Hot air blew from a source I couldn’t pinpoint, making the stench even more noticeable.

For a moment, I wondered at what point in the process a pig becomes pork. When does the terminology change? And does the language actually change what the animal is, or do the words just exist to make consumers feel better?

“It’s a warm day,” the guide said. He stopped and waited for the group to catch up. He put his hands on his hips and grinned. “It’s a great job I have here. I’ve learned tons about this business, about how to make a living in pork production.”

Those of us standing around him nodded. I caught the glance of Julie, the red-haired girl, again. I couldn’t tell how she was doing; her face was too obscured by her hard hat and glasses.

I was surprised by how much of the process we were allowed to see and by how close we got to the pigs. I’d expected us to watch the plant from behind glass or something, like how medical students might watch a surgery or how police officers might watch a suspect being questioned. But the company let us go right into the workings of the place. I didn’t know whether to be awed or baffled.

“The next building we’re going to go into is the kill floor. We’ll move on quickly to get there since I know many of you are anxious to see this.” He gestured to follow him and we moved along like a heard of freshman on a college campus, uncertain of what we were supposed to do. A few workers glanced up. I wondered what they thought of us. I wondered if they cared why we were there.
At the door to the kill floor, our guide stopped and said, “If any of you are squeamish or nervous around blood, now might be a good time to hang back. I’ll let you know when we’re about to see the bloody part.”

I took a deep breath—then blew it out quickly because now the air smelled like live pig, a potent combination of sweat and manure—and steeled myself to go in. I’d made it this far, so I needed to make it all the way to the end…or the beginning, depending on how you looked at it. We climbed another set of metal stairs, the see-through kind where you can see how far down you would fall if you slipped, and then the room opened up into a floor filled with pens. Live pigs filled all of these enclosures. They walked around and oinked. I stared at one of them for a while; it stood back from the group in front of it, sniffing the air above its head. It looked oddly content, like it had no knowledge of how limited its future was. One of our professors came up behind me and put her hand on my shoulder.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. I smiled and nodded, probably too enthusiastically. I worried I must have looked horrified, that I wasn’t hiding it well.

“Here’s the CO₂ chamber,” the guide said, pointing to our left. An automated metal gate pushed a group of six pigs into the chamber while an employee with a stick prodded the stranglers along.

“They have to be able to walk into the chamber on their own or we have to take them out of the line, have them looked at by a state official,” the guide continued. We would later learn, while visiting small-town meat lockers and cattle feedlots, that an animal must be able to walk into the slaughterhouse or it can’t be killed. While this was largely a practical issue—related to fears about Mad Cow disease—something about it seemed noteworthy. The pigs
must be able to walk to their own deaths. Face their own ends. Though considering the company claims the pigs have no idea what’s coming, perhaps this ending isn’t really all that poetic.

A metal door closed and the pigs were put to sleep. The general manager told us during his presentation that the pigs essentially have a heart attack, so that when they come out they’re “pretty much dead.” A door opened on the other side of the chamber and the pigs slid out onto a conveyor belt. Since they no longer had control of their bodies, their fat and muscles rippled when they hit the belt. The image of the jiggling fat looked like the bins of pig leftovers we’d seen earlier, except at this point still attached to an animal. Then an employee grabbed one of the pig’s legs, hoisted it up, and attached it to the metal hook that would carry it through the rest of its processing.

“Now if you want to see the blood-letting you can just walk up this staircase here and take a quick look.” The guide stood aside and pointed up. When it was my turn I climbed halfway up the flight of stairs, just enough to see a man stab a pig in the throat and a waterfall of deep red blood gush out. I had expected the pigs to have their throats slit.

The man doing the stabbing did it rhythmically, almost mechanically, putting a knife into each pig and pulling it back out. He was dirty, covered in dried blood. On the kill floor, the employees didn’t wear the white lab coats and hair nets like the workers did in the rest of the plant. Maybe the work here was too dirty. By the end of a day on the kill floor a white lab coat would probably be a reddish-brown lab coat. The man had short hair, though because of the dirt I couldn’t tell what color it would be if we were standing outside in the sunlight. He looked like a factory worker in a photograph taken in the early twentieth century. Everything about the pork plant was highly modernized and mechanized with the biggest and best
technology. The plant was really an efficient machine with people to play a few of the bit parts. But this man, the man who did the killing, for some reason looked timeless.

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I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a city known for its industry during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More specifically, it became very famous for its meat packing. When I was younger, I probably just blocked out the part of “meat packing” that involves slaughter. I mean, I grew up in the state where everyone worships the Green Bay Packers, a football team named after a meat packing company, but I chose not to put two and two together. I think this is what many of us do; we choose to turn a blind eye. We don’t want to know where the meat we eat comes from.

I had a great-grandmother who lived in a neighborhood of Milwaukee that is known by many as Piggsville because there used to be a pig farm nearby. The neighborhood is in the Miller Valley (near the present-day Miller Brewery) underneath Interstate 94. It grew during the late 1800s and was populated mostly by Slavic immigrants like my great-grandmother. The pigs probably got sent east to the Menomonee Valley where there are still slaughterhouses today. When I was in college at Marquette University in downtown Milwaukee, some days I came outside and if the wind blew from the right direction, I could smell the sweet-sour smell of the slaughterhouse. I don’t know how I learned to identify it as “the slaughterhouse smell.” Maybe it was the chicken bones and feathers we used to find scattered across the Astroturf of the university’s soccer field. But in college I laughed it off; yeah, some days it smells like slaughterhouse, haha. Though I wonder if inside a part of me was at least a little bit horrified. My city was slaughtering tons of animals every day. My city. Right over there on the south side of campus.
But most of us never bother to look.

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After our tour, our guide brought us back up to the room where we’d started. The fluorescent lights seemed too bright. The smiling employees too normal. *Don’t you know what goes on down there?* I wanted to ask. I’m sure they did.

As we stripped off our protective gear—I wondered then if the clothing was to protect us from the meat or the meat from us—our guide answered someone’s question about how many truckloads of pigs arrive at the plant each day.

“Well,” he said. “A semi can probably hold about one-hundred-eighty pigs. We do twenty-thousand pigs a day. So you do the math, that’s a lot of trucks. A lot of coordination goes into keeping this place running.”

I thought of the times when I was a kid when I’d ridden in a car that passed a semi full of animals on the highway. I used to stare out the back seat’s window up at them. Sometimes chickens’ feathers would stick out of the air holes in the truck’s walls. Sometimes pigs or cattle would be pressed up against the sides of the truck. The pigs’ pink fat would bulge out through the holes. *Eeeeww, it’s full of animals. They’re all going to die!* I’d say. My parents would nod. *Yes, yes they are.*

My classmates asked a string of other questions. They were always full of good questions. At that moment, I couldn’t have put a question together. My brain was on overload, too many colors and images and sounds. And smells. I smelled my shirt. It smelled like slaughterhouse. The sick-sweet smell of dead flesh.

Someone asked about the workers’ union. Someone asked about the distribution of the meat. Someone else asked about the percentage of employees who are recent immigrants.
I thought back to one of my great-grandfathers who was a butcher. The guide said many of the workers were recent immigrants. Later that day, I started thinking about the ways a place can be full of contradictions. The way many people in the United States—and in Iowa—aren’t big fans of immigration, yet a big chunk of the state’s pork production, one of the state’s biggest money-makers, relies on these people. I wondered how many Iowans looked closely at the farming industry. I wondered why I hadn’t looked closer sooner.

Back in our fifteen-passenger vans an hour or two and many miles later, I still smelled the slaughterhouse. I couldn’t tell if it was because of the smell on my clothes or because the smell was somehow burned on my brain. I felt like it might be in my head. It wasn’t until we were riding in the van that I started to feel really queasy, like the whole experience had caught up with me.

I noticed pig confinement buildings—where hogs spent their days in metal pens too small for them to turn around in—pass by outside the windows. The structures were long, narrow, and usually unmarked. They had no windows, just periodic circular fans built into the walls for ventilation. A large wooden cross stood next to one of the buildings. I wondered if that was supposed to make what went on inside better somehow.

“God,” a student sitting in the row in front of me said. “I can’t stop smelling that smell. We all smell like slaughterhouse.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s like the smell is following us. We’re not going to be able to get rid of it all day, not until we shower. Even then I feel like it’ll follow me.”

Maybe the smell was somehow like knowledge. Once you have it, you can’t un-know it. You can’t get rid of it. It follows you.

“I’m glad we saw it,” someone else said. “It was pretty cool to see how efficient it is.”
When I thought about it, I knew that plenty of people would probably visit a facility like the one we had just seen and think nothing of it. They’d probably say, *okay, that’s how it’s done*, and then continue eating meat (as most of the people in my class did), and I’m okay with that. I’m still really troubled by the scale of the production, by the fact that meat-eating in this country isn’t going to become less anytime soon, but if people at least look at it and understand it, then that counts for something. It’s the not looking that I was guilty of for so long and that most people are guilty of. Agriculture and large-scale meat production are huge parts of life in the Midwest, though. They’re part of the economy, the history, the culture. They’re not going anywhere. For most of my life I knew the city I grew up in became a large city because of meat production, but I didn’t want to know more than that. But without fully understanding the processes—of how meat is made, of how we become the people and societies we are today—I don’t think we can make truly good choices. We have to see the faces of the industries we are connected to—the general managers and office workers, the meat cutters and the blood letters, and forgive me for saying it, but the faces of the pigs that become the pork. No story is as simple as the one marketed to us. You have to look deeper.

One of my grandfathers told me a story once about how when he was a kid in Minnesota, his family would go to the local meat locker and buy half a pig or a quarter of a cow. At the time, it seemed to me that a system like that doesn’t exist anymore. That no one has any idea where their meat comes from. Later on our field trip, I discovered that’s not entirely true. We visited two local meat lockers in small towns that I imagine were not all that different from the meat locker my grandpa used to go to. At those places, people knew where their meat came from because they often brought in their own live animals for slaughter. At those places, there wasn’t a huge chain of distribution to remove the face of the
animal from the mind of the customer. So maybe not knowing isn’t a problem everywhere.
It’s just a problem that’s becoming bigger and bigger in American society. People in cities
are so disconnected from their food that if you asked a kid where food comes from, he’d
probably say the grocery store. So maybe it’s people like me, the people who grew up in
urban environments where getting dinner meant going to Pick ‘n’ Save, who need to be
forced to look. Put us in those fifteen passenger vans, drive us out to rural Iowa, and show us
where our pork comes from.

In the mean time, I think I’ll continue avoiding food that once walked (or swam, flew,
crawled, slithered, etc.).
15.

This Is What I Return To

1. Magnesium

I sit on a blanket with John and Jenny on the top of the hill at Veteran’s Park. Other groups of people sitting on blankets surround us, waiting for the 3rd of July fireworks (yes, the 3rd; the city of Milwaukee holds its annual fireworks display on the 3rd so the smaller surrounding towns can hold theirs on the 4th). Some people cook hot dogs on portable grills. Some attempt to play Frisbee in the few remaining pieces of unclaimed ground. Others drink wine or beer and frequently glance southeast in the direction of the War Memorial, from where we collectively assume the fireworks will be launched. We’ve laid claim to the part of the park at the top of the bluff, the high point before the land slopes steeply down to Lake Michigan’s shore. In front of us a statue of Solomon Juneau, one of Milwaukee’s founders, gazes west back at the city. Once shiny, he’s now the duller minty-green shade of oxidized copper.

This is John’s first visit to Milwaukee even though he grew up next door in Minnesota. He is baffled by how bustling the city is, by how something always seems to be going on. Jenny and I tell him he just came at a good moment, when the weather’s warm and people come outside. Jenny has lived in this neighborhood on the lower east side since we graduated from college. Always prepared, she brought our blanket and a cooler filled with beer and cheese curds; there’s no more appropriate and stereotypical way to be a visitor in Wisconsin than to drink and eat cheese.

The sun sinks behind the tops of downtown’s skyscrapers, lighting up their outlines. The image reminds me of photography classes I took in high school, of an assignment when
our teacher told us to go out and find edge lighting. Find objects or people or buildings that look like they’re being cut out of reality by an X-Acto knife, light shining through the knife’s slices. Those pictures look like a two-dimensional world is being broken apart, like there might be something hidden behind it.

The general mood is one I’ve only encountered on occasions like this, when a huge group of people—in this case half a million—gather for the same purpose, anticipating a celebration. Vendors roam along the sidewalks selling glowsticks, sparklers, and those fireworks that when you throw them against the pavement make a popping sound. Little kids run around or draw on the sidewalk with chalk. Below us, if we look past the edge of the bluff toward the lake, we can see the sea of people waiting in the park below. Their blankets, cars, and tents divide the landscape into little pieces. The ground looks like a giant living organism—covered with people, crawling with movement. The air is humid even though we sit right up against a Great Lake, where the water usually keeps the land cooler and the air less sticky. As people shoot off fireworks the sparks seem to hover in the air, suspended a few seconds longer than should be possible, until the bits of light finally die out and ash falls to the earth.

We eat cheese curds—they don’t squeak against our teeth like the ones I’ve eaten in the past—and cookies shaped like stars with red, white, and blue sprinkles, and wait for the fireworks to begin.

When they do finally start—a first warning rocket shoots up into the sky making a whoosh noise followed by a loud crack—everyone quickly returns to their spaces and sits down. People who had been walking by on the sidewalk filter into the gaps. A man wearing a
backpack and carrying a walking stick kneels behind us in the space between our blanket and the next. A fluffy dog to our right barks and wraps his leash around his owner’s legs.

The fireworks show is the best one I’ve ever seen in Milwaukee. For a moment I wonder if my perception is just skewed since it has been a few years since I last saw Milwaukee’s fireworks, but decide it is not just that. This year a display of constant low-to-the-ground fireworks goes on while the larger explosions rise above them, shot off from three different locations. Huge ones reach out into the sky like giant spiders, grasping at the night air. Smaller ones screech and swirl down to earth, their sparkly tendrils swimming downward like tiny minnows. The noise from the explosions echoes off the buildings. It sounds like thunder in the distance, growing louder and louder. I have always liked the way that everyone gets lost in a fireworks display. The way everyone’s faces look. Mesmerized, childlike, lit up by the pyrotechnics. The crowd stays mostly quiet except for people leaning over to their friends and saying, “I liked that one.”

After half an hour John leans over and says, “You must like magnesium.”

“Huh?” I say.

“Magnesium. The metal. That’s what makes the silver ones silver. You seem to like the silver ones.”

I smile. Once again, John knows something I don’t. He sees something in a way I don’t. Fireworks aren’t just colors and light, they’re metals and chemicals. Lithium for red, calcium for orange, copper for blue. Maybe I should have thought about it before. The sparks obviously aren’t magic. They’re the end result of a series of reactions. Then again, I’m one of those people who until I was an adult hadn’t considered the fact that fireworks are three-
dimensional. Even though I can only see them as flat, as two-dimensional, they obviously explode outward in all directions.

“Which ones do you like?” I ask.

“Lithium. And copper. Magnesium, too.” He smiles.

The show lasts a whole hour, much longer than any fireworks show I’ve ever seen.

“Did it live up to your expectations?” Jenny asks John as we stand up and join the mass of people moving west toward their vehicles. Everyone heads to the parked cars and the buses and the highways, which will carry them through the city like blood cells through veins and arteries. We keep the city alive. Or maybe it keeps us alive.

“Totally. Milwaukee knows how to do fireworks. And cheese.”

We all laugh. Cars honk their horns, unable to make progress through the tide of people. A group of teenagers weaves in and out of the crowd on bikes. A stray firework snaps and fizzes in the air behind us. Above, the windows of condos and office buildings glow yellow. Everyone is awake and watching.

2. A Fish Kill

I have seen the water of Lake Michigan churn, the waves crashing up against the breakwater and slamming into the beach. I have seen Lake Michigan flat like glass, the cumulous clouds above reflected in the water. Today Lake Michigan is neither calm nor choppy. Small swells slosh up against the pier and shore, but they are not white caps. Today it’s sunny, a Saturday. I walk out on the breakwater pier with a few friends, something I’ve done many times before. The breakwater is about thirty feet wide and at the moment rises
about twenty feet above the water. A three-foot-high wall of concrete bisects the pier, and on the left-hand side a row of fishermen sit on buckets and drop lines into the water below.

We walk slowly. There’s a bit of a breeze, but there’s always a bit of a breeze. I climb up on the concrete divider and walk along it like I did when I was a kid, one foot carefully in front of the other, then leaping over the periodic gaps. The sides of the wall are covered in graffiti. Some of it I recognize from when I came out here as a teenager: a magic eight ball, a deck of cards, bright green letters asking someone named Lisa to be someone else’s girlfriend. The outline of a jack-o-lantern that I posed next to for a picture in high school has faded to the point that I can only recognize it as a pumpkin because I knew what it used to be. The band name “The Smashing Pumpkins” that used to be scrawled next to it has completely faded.

Halfway down, the breakwater narrows and the wall ends. I jump off and join my friends who have stopped to look at a group of ducks. The birds paddle in circles, occasionally jabbing the water with their beaks to snag bits of whatever it is they’re eating that’s invisible to me beneath the surface.

“Why are there so many dead fish?” one of them asks.

Hundreds of what look to me like minnows float belly-up on the surface of the water. Sunlight glints off their silver-white stomachs. The ducks ignore them, passing through the fish cloud on the way to other feeding grounds.

“Fish kill,” another friend replies. “Probably an algal bloom.”

Before, when I was younger, I probably would not have thought much of a fish kill. I learned, though, that fish kills are complicated. They’re not good signs. At the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico there is a region referred to as the “dead zone” where the nitrogen levels in
the water are so high few things can live. Run-off from agriculture makes its way down the Mississippi River, pooling at the bottom before heading out into the ocean. The problem with nitrogen is that it makes it easier for plants like algae to grow. Then the boom of algae uses up all the oxygen in the water, leaving too little for fish to survive. Hence, fish kills. What I still don’t know is precisely how to connect the dots between the fish kills in the Gulf of Mexico and this fish kill here in Lake Michigan. Is this the same phenomenon? Is Wisconsin agriculture causing the same problems?

A few days later, while riding in a fishing boat on an inland lake west of Milwaukee, I lean over the side of the boat to see carp floating belly-up on the water’s surface. These fish are not silvery. They are chalk-white and big and bloated. Their fins are beginning to decay. I look up and watch a speed boat pulling a water skier pass by, causing the dead carp and the boat I’m in to rock.

Until recently, I didn’t know that this lake—and probably many others in the region—used to be a marsh. A dam turned it into a lake. And to think I’d spent most of my life assuming all the lakes Wisconsin boasted were natural.

I look back at the nearest carp. It’s nearly a foot-and-a-half long. Massive bunches of weeds lurk just beneath the surface of the water.

I’ve learned we know so little about what is natural. I’ve learned we understand so little. About what we really are, really were.

3. The Leaves Blowing

My mom carries sweet corn—the ears like bright yellow rolling pins—out the back door, careful to not let any roll off the plate. My dad brings a tray of brats and veggie
burgers, sets them down on the porch’s metal table. He repositions a stack of napkins under a plate before the wind can snatch them away.

We sit on the porch at my parents’ house with my grandparents. The late-afternoon sun is hot. It’s mid-July, one of the best times of year in Wisconsin; you can be outside at all hours and not need a jacket. The leaves on the oak trees rustle in the breeze. Squirrels dart across the yard, stopping in the middle, pausing to look at us, then hurrying away.

My grandma reclines on a lawn chair. The sun reflects off her glasses making it difficult to see through the lenses. My grandpa sits at the table. He drums his hands to a beat that’s only in his head.

“He’s always drumming,” my grandma says. “All the time, he’s drumming, drumming, drumming. He’s become the little drummer boy.”

My grandpa smiles, but not at anyone or anything in particular. Since I last saw him, probably six months ago, his Alzheimer’s disease has progressed. It’s changed. Before, he always looked far away and sullen. Now he looks far away and happy. He laughs to himself. He often hums or sings.

He begins singing something that sounds like “The Farmer in the Dell,” but has non-words, words and sounds that are not really words. Maybe he hears them as words.

I put butter on my corn, then pass the container of Smart Balance “buttery spread” around the table. My grandma cuts my grandpa’s brat into tiny pieces and hands him his fork with a piece of sausage on it. He takes the fork and blinks at her for a few seconds, then holds it back out to her.

“You want some?” he asks.

“No, Paul,” she says. “I have my own. That’s yours. You eat it.”
She sighs.

“This is the way it is now. He was a mechanical engineer, but he can’t open a car door anymore.”

We all nod. I tear corn kernels off the cob with my teeth, eating each row neatly from one end of the cob to the other.

Grandpa leans back in his chair and points at a squirrel.

“There!” he says. “Look!”

We all turn and look.

“Yes, Dad,” my dad says. “We see it.”

My grandpa rests his fork on his plate.

“He does that all the time, too,” my grandma says. “Always trying to get you to look at things. You know what he did? The other day he brought me over to the window, dragged me over there, to show me the leaves were blowing in the breeze.”

She throws up her hands and half smiles. Then she says, “At least he seems happy, right?”

I consider how we think it’s silly to bother looking at the leaves blowing in the wind. That’s not something any of us notice on a daily basis, not something we’d ever stop to point out to someone else. I don’t think it’s something my grandpa would have pointed out when he still knew what was going on, knew what reality meant. But maybe there is something to be said for noticing the leaves. Maybe my grandpa can now notice the things the rest of us have forgotten how to notice. Maybe the ability to notice the small things is something he’s finally returned to, something he’s finally remembered.
We eat our sandwiches and talk of other things. Music comes from a neighbor’s radio. The song “I Melt with You” by the band Modern English floats over the fence. It’s one of those songs you don’t remember until you hear it, but then find yourself singing along with the lead singer, accidentally pronouncing words with his British accent. *I’ll stop the world and melt with you... You’ve seen the difference and it’s getting better all the time.*

Grandpa drums and moves his lips. He grins at us. I start laughing. I can’t help it.

I turn and watch a squirrel hop across the yard, pausing in the way squirrels can, mid-leap, before bounding up a tree. The squirrel disappears, but a branch sways up and down, and its leaves rustle. They go still for a moment, but then get caught again by the wind. They keep blowing. Grandpa keeps on drumming.
Coda:
Light Them Now

Can we light off these bottle rockets? my cousin asks.

In a bit, Grandpa says. We have to do it off the pier, over the water. You can’t shoot them off over the cornfield. The farmer wouldn’t like that.

We stand at the intersection of Highway K and Bay Road next to a cornfield. We just returned from visiting the farm across the street. The farmer lets us look at the cows and the kittens. I stare into the field’s bright green rows, neat and leafy.

Corn looks good, Grandpa says. It’s knee-high by the Fourth of July.

What’s that? my cousin asks, pointing at a cross tied to a telephone pole. Pink flowers and blue beads decorate it.

Some teenagers died at this intersection, Grandma says. Many years ago now. They were driving fast late at night. There was an accident. Something people don’t expect and can’t plan for. She looks at the cross. The flowers rustle in the wind, straining against the string that holds them in place. Someone remembers, though. Someone still comes to replace the flowers.

Can we shoot off the bottle rockets now? my cousin asks again.

Okay, Grandpa says.
Works Consulted

For “Cooking Without Recipes, Shopping Without Lists”:


For “Remember the Blue Shirt”:


For “Storming the Bastille”:


For “Throwing Like a Girl in Pulaski Park”:
