

2016

Love lessons

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LOVE LESSONS

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Madeline Mae Allen

Spring 2016

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Tessitura

The musical concept of tessitura is generally defined as the range within which a singer's voice is the most comfortable. In Italian, tessitura means "texture." In other words, a vocalist's tessitura is the set of notes with the richest tone, the most pleasurable sound.

Anyone who sings on a regular basis understands this, even if they don't know the terminology. There are notes that feel better than others, that sound more resonant and open. These notes feel like home when you sing them, as if the extreme muscular work of gathering and releasing air through your vocal folds at a calculated, controlled rate isn't actually difficult. These notes are the reward for hard work.

Tessitura is different from range. While range refers to the extremes of a voice or instrument – the space between the lowest and highest pitches available – tessitura describes a smaller, more important cluster of notes. It is the place where a singer's voice sparkles, where a sustained note sounds like it takes no effort whatsoever.

Tessitura is a huge factor in classification of voice types in classical music. While range, timbre, and passagio (the point at which a voice switches between registers – the "break" in a given singer's range) are also important, it is often tessitura that determines a solo singer's voice type. It is not about how high or low a vocalist can sing, what notes they can "hit," but where their tessitura sits.

There are three main voice classifications for female soloists: soprano, mezzo-soprano, and alto. A classification determines which roles a singer is fit to sing. Of course, the boundaries are sometimes fluid, but it is generally accepted that a soprano will

never sing an alto role because she simply doesn't have the right voice type for it (and vice versa).

One thing, however, is for certain: once you know your voice type, it becomes the driving force behind all formal vocal training.

When I entered college to study voice, I thought I was an alto. I sang that voice part throughout my entire high school choir career and I had fallen in love with harmonies – long, twisting lines that jumped around the bottom of my range with no clear path. It was a challenge, holding a part so removed from the melody, but I soon absorbed it as part of my identity. Being an alto made me a more serious singer, I told myself. It made me work harder.

When I started my first year as an undergraduate voice student, I was confident in my ability to read harmonies and pick out inner voices in choral compositions. I looked forward to more challenging repertoire, more complicated lines that intertwined with the melody. Then the choir director, on hearing my voice during auditions, told me she was moving me up to soprano.

“Your voice has a soprano color,” she said. “You should be exercising your high range.”

And just like that, I had to learn to become a different singer.

Singing is scientific. Air from your lungs must pass through your vocal folds to make them vibrate – the higher the air pressure, the higher the frequency of vibration. The air must then pass through the vocal tract, made up of the larynx, pharynx, and mouth, which change shape to control the type of sound generated.

Singing is also psychological. You must believe you can generate enough air to make your vocal folds vibrate quickly enough. You must practice it over and over and not get discouraged when it doesn't happen perfectly right away. You must try even when you are sure you'll never get it right.

I wanted to ignore my new vocal classification, but my voice teacher started assigning me only soprano repertoire. I was stubborn, but so was he. During warm-ups he wouldn't let me watch his fingers on the keyboard as they crept higher and higher, closer and closer to the notes I was afraid of. He shouted when I said I couldn't sing that high. He made me sing even higher when I gave up.

And, after I graduated college with a degree in music, I did give up. At least for awhile.

After college I took a job caring for teenagers at a fine arts boarding school. I didn't sing. Not in the way I had previously, anyway, and I didn't want to. I had graduated bitter and fed up with the classical music world, ready for a change of pace. I didn't want to stand next to a piano and sing Italian words I didn't understand. I didn't want to think about the way breathing was affecting my sound. But I found that the longer I kept myself away from music, the more it begged to become part of my life again.

On a whim, I bought a cheap ukulele and taught myself the basic chords. At night, after the girls in my residence hall had retreated to their rooms, I would practice. I would lightly strum the strings, feel the nylon rub violently against my fingertips which were too soft, not yet hardened by years of practice. It was fun, refreshing, a new challenge. And the only person I was doing it for was myself.

I finally remembered what music used to feel like: a release.

But I still didn't think of myself as a singer. When asked what I studied in undergrad, I was hesitant to answer. I was intimidated by the label. I wasn't good enough, I hadn't worked hard enough, I didn't *know* enough about singing. Four years of insecurity had hardly been erased by one degree.

Living in a community of artists, I met friends who also played music. Some had conservatory educations, others were self-taught. I could only sing and occasionally strum along on my ukulele, but they welcomed me anyway. We sat in a circle, the Island of Misfit Musicians, and somehow we found a way to sound good. We worked up arrangements of classic folk tunes and reimagined songs we had heard on the radio. All we needed was a starting chord and someone to count us off.

We started playing on Thursday nights at a tiny dive bar with one microphone. It drew all kinds of musicians, but the lineup of players was almost always the same. There was the crowd favorite, a singer-songwriter whose Springsteen covers were killer, and the goofball pediatrician who played every bluegrass instrument in the book. There were local radio personalities and family bands; each of them played because they loved it. As some of the only participants under the age of 40, my group didn't necessarily fit in, but the regulars welcomed us almost immediately. Once, as I stood onstage red-faced, attempting (and failing) to tune my ukulele's stubborn new strings in between songs, a man in the crowd called out encouragingly, "I just hate tuning those damn things!"

The place had a makeshift stage with a gaudy velvet curtain backdrop. We would order pints of cheap beer and baskets of chicken fingers and listen to the masters, the ones who had been playing far longer than we had. In between sets, the host would read

bad jokes or excerpts from the police blotter in the newspaper. By the end of the night all the musicians in the bar would be onstage together, playing the same song, some learning it as they went, while the rest of the crowd danced around the tables and sang along. It was the closest thing I had to a musical community. I had never felt that before. Singing, as I had known it, was completely individual. But standing on that makeshift stage improvising harmonies to a tune I had only heard once before, surrounded by musicians who played for fun, who did it because they didn't have an artistic release otherwise, who studied and practiced because they *loved* it, it struck me: music is supposed to be collaborative. You can be the best vocalist or guitarist or violinist in the world, but without collaboration, you can't get anywhere.

So my tessitura had to expand. It had to make room for more than just me, more than just my narrow view of what it means to be a singer. It had to become more than just range, airflow, posture, technique, and dynamics. It had to include feeling, community, and connection.

I've now come to think of my tessitura as something that transcends my musical self. It's the place I'm comfortable, where I can flourish without fear of failure. I don't think I ever really found it when I was studying music. It got lost in academia, buried beneath music theory exams and chord progression analysis. Learning to be technically perfect was stifling and I was stunted.

In order to generate a significant stream of air for singing, vocalists learn to breathe from their diaphragms, to stand up straight, to inhale deeply. They learn to control this air with their abdomens, to not let it release too quickly. They learn how to

turn the air into art by shaping vowels with their tongues and sustaining them as long as they can, as long as the black dots on the page tell them to.

But they also learn how to interpret the dots, how to make the text sound like it's being painted with music, how to make singing seem like the most natural thing in the world. They learn how to turn the important things, the hard things – the notes, the technique, the pauses for breath – into a vehicle for the lyrics. I'm still not sure which part is harder, the execution or the interpretation. But I think I'm still learning to do the latter.

In Loco Parentis

The position of residence hall counselor at a boarding fine arts high school is not something you see on the average person's resume. For three years after college I lived in a dorm, worked long hours, ate all my meals in a cafeteria, and tried to "parent" a group of teenagers who were only a few years younger than me. When I was interviewing for the job, the Dean of Students described it to me as "a lifestyle, not just a job." Even now, in conversations with people who are curious about what I spent the years of my early twenties doing, I use that terminology to describe it. Because truthfully, the job was bigger than one simple definition. It was late night movies with "my" kids draped over the dorm lobby furniture. It was trips to Target for emergency tampons and taking a carload of boys to the mall to get their hair cut before their mothers arrived for Parents' Weekend. It was learning to sleep through a stampede of footsteps past the door at 8:27am before first period began. It was chaperoning prom, trips to the movies, and bonfires in the woods. It was being a mother, sister, friend, mentor, taxi driver, teacher, cheerleader, and ass-kicker all at once.

On the first day of training, the Vice President for Student Affairs used three Latin words to explain to me and my coworkers the complexity of our new positions: *in loco parentis*. Having been a Latin nerd throughout high school and college, I knew the direct translation meant "in the place of a parent." In legal jargon, this term allows schools to act in the best interest of a student, much in the way a parent would. I listened to the V.P. explain the term and its significance in our field, and I took it all in with a sense of overwhelmed interest. Because the concept is broad enough to encompass a

variety of situations, and because at twenty-two years old I had no actual experience acting as somebody's literal parent, I didn't realize at the time that my new position would employ those three words on a very basic level. But I also didn't realize that it would be about so much more than that.

At the beginning of that first school year, I was fresh-faced and ready for a new experience in the field of education. I was innocent, naive, and curious. I had barely survived a semester of student teaching and was ready to reinvent the way I looked at my students. I no longer wanted to be in the classroom, no longer wanted to fight the tireless battles that every educator fights every day. I needed a change but I desperately wanted to stay connected to arts education, so I had accepted the position the same day it was offered to me, packed up my entire life in less than a week, and driven to the north woods of Michigan to try something new.

But I was green. Those first few weeks on the job, I didn't know how to reconcile my authoritative teacher persona with the softness and understanding that the position required. I watched my experienced colleagues navigate student interactions with ease and grace, while I stuttered through my very first floor meeting and struggled to remember and recite basic residence hall policies. I lived by the Residence Life handbook and was afraid to make any decisions without first consulting my coworkers. What I lacked in confidence, however, I made up for in enthusiasm. Each girl in my charge had a carefully crafted paper cupcake nametag pinned to her door, and I had adorned the hall bulletin board with even more cupcakes bearing tips for a "sweet" school year. I had been eager to put my craft skills to use ever since I found out hall decorations were an assigned duty for Hall Counselors, so I threw my energy into decorating, hoping the swirly letters

and brightly colored scrapbook paper trimming the hallway would make up for my lack of experience in the field.

I knew, of course, the weight of my responsibility in the job. As a former camp counselor, I was familiar with the task of caring for other people's children. But these girls were different. They were bold, artistic dreamers far more worldly than I had been at fifteen, perhaps, even, than I was at age twenty-two. I didn't realize then, but I was afraid of them. They were the girls I wasn't. They were the girls I had watched in high school but not gotten the luxury of being.

Secretly I wanted to be more like them. I wanted to be fearless and unapologetic. I wanted the strong and deep friendships that only come from being entwined with the same group of people in a tiny community for your adolescence. I wanted the strength and curiosity to create without worrying what anybody else thought. I wanted to go back in time and teach Teenage Me how to put on mascara and wear skirts with combat boots.

I wanted to feel like I had been one of them at some point in my life.

But I hadn't. It had taken me 22 years to learn how to dress for my body type, and even another one or two after that to learn how to wear lipstick. I envied the girls in my residence hall, those who were cool without trying, who were friends with everyone because popularity didn't matter at art school. I envied their commitment to their art, their effortless fashion sense, their tiny waistlines, their shiny hair. I envied them because being around them made me feel like I was still sixteen, clunky and awkward, learning to exist in my own skin.

And my coworkers often felt the same way. We drew comparisons between ourselves and our students, jealous of their freedom while we were constrained to live

and work in the same place. On realizing this, the Dean of Students said to our staff once, “You can do so much that they can’t.” She was referring, of course, to the privileges that come with being an adult. It was a perspective that many of us forgot during the day-to-day tasks we were faced with. Many of us were only a few years older, not so far removed from adolescence, and, having graduated college with no idea what we wanted to do next, in a similar confused state of being as most teenagers. We lived in the same dorm rooms they did (albeit usually two conjoined rooms to give us more space). But, the Dean reminded us, we could drive off campus for dinner if we had the time or run our own errands without having to take a bus into town. We could drink alcohol on our days off. We could even have microwaves in our rooms. We had cars, paychecks, and a worldview that sixteen year-olds can’t possibly have. But in many ways, we still felt like we were straddling two different phases of life, much the same way our students were.

Kids at boarding school are forced to grow up fast. That’s not a surprise to anyone. But along with this rapid maturity comes a level of protection, shelter from the outside world. Students at boarding school are liminal, in-between. They feel like adults because they live away from home, they manage their daily responsibilities without the watchful eye of their parents, and they are able to further their education in a way that isn’t usually possible until college. But they are still young, still naïve. They leave campus only with permission and pre-arranged transportation. They don’t get to drive to the movies with their friends on Saturday or loiter at the mall. They can’t spend time alone with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Sometimes they can’t even do their own laundry. They are children who wish to be grownups. They are Peter Pan in reverse.

So it was easy to see ourselves reflected in our students, and that reflection tended to complicate things. It was hard to enforce rules when a student who reminded you of yourself at fifteen was crying about the reason she was late to curfew. It was tough not to pick favorites. It was even tougher not to get attached to those favorites. So, when I first started in the job, I tried hard to keep a safe distance from my girls. Until I couldn't anymore.

It sounds cliché to say that there was a single defining moment when every aspect of the job started to make sense and I suddenly found my stride, that, in the movie version of my life, one individual event would be the turning point at which the actress playing me would suddenly stop being clueless and start getting her shit together. But, in fact, that's how it happened.

About a month and a half into my first school year, I had finally gotten a good hold on the mechanics of the job — the routine duties that accompanied my desk shifts, the names of all the young girls living in my building, the odd hours and lack of sleep. But there were still students on my hall I didn't connect with, who would walk by the front desk during my shifts and barely respond to my innocent inquiries about how the day was going. One of these girls was named Erin.

Erin, like a handful of our students, came from a privileged family on the East coast. She wore designer pumps with her school uniform and rolled with a tight group of girls whom she had been friends with since their freshman year, before I started at the school. She had intense ups and downs, not unusual for a teenage girl, especially one living away from home at fifteen, but I started to notice her mood swings seemed a lot more intense than most of the other residents. A couple of times I caught her crying in the

hallway or speaking angrily to someone, presumably her “overprotective” parents, on the phone, but any time I asked her if she was all right, she brushed me off. We continued this little dance — me reaching out and her refusing my help — for several weeks, until one evening, when another student came to the front desk after curfew to tell me Erin was crying, loudly, in the hallway.

Tired after a long day of desk shifts and meetings and expecting another useless exchange, I went to check on her and found her in her bathrobe, clutching her arms to her chest and sobbing. On the ground next to her was an X-acto knife. It took me a few moments to register the gravity of the situation, mainly because I was surprised to see her exposing her wounds so publicly in the hallway. As soon as I sat down on the floor across from her, she tugged on the sleeves of her robe to hide the fresh cuts. I asked her what was wrong but she refused to answer and instead retreated into her room.

The actual order of events that night blurs in my memory. I remember the blood, the knife, and Erin’s tear-stained face, but I don’t remember how, why, or when I decided to do what. I’d like to say I snapped into action, that I dealt with the entire incident calmly and professionally, but I don’t actually know if that is true. I remember calling my building’s manager, who happened to be right downstairs. She had known Erin for a year and she helped me coax Erin out of her bathroom. We dressed her in a coat and walked her to the Health Services building across campus, where they bandaged her wrists and called her parents.

In situations where a student’s mental health is a danger to them, it was our job as their counselors to stay with them until things were figured out. I had heard about these “overnights” during training, but I assumed it was another one of those scary stories they

tell you as a precaution, just so you know what to do in the worst case scenario. Yet there I found myself, at midnight on a weeknight, sitting in a dorm-room-turned-infirmary with just a bedside table, a chair, and a cot, on which a girl I barely knew lay, sobbing and refusing to speak to me. I sat on the uncomfortable chair and stared at the wall, then at her, watched her flip through photos on her phone to distract herself, told her not to rip the bandages off her wrists when she started, then called the nurse when she wouldn't stop. I sat and wondered what her parents, driving halfway across the country in the middle of the night to come get their daughter, were thinking. I wondered if I could have done a better job getting through to her, if I could have saved her in some way, even though I knew deep down that it wasn't my job. I couldn't save her. Not from herself.

As scary as the entire episode had been — being forced into crisis mode so early in the job, watching a girl I had hardly spoken to fight her inner demons in front of me, then watching her leave campus and trying to console her heartbroken friends — it reinforced the importance of the work I was doing. It could sometimes be easy to get caught up in the monotony of the job, in reprimanding students for being late to curfew or staying up past lights out, in chaperoning dances and watching teenagers be teenagers every day and night, but Erin reminded me that each student I interacted with had her own story. Each girl living on my hall had baggage, and while it wasn't my job to know every single detail of their baggage's contents, it was my job to care that they carried it at all.

The rest of my first year went by quickly and was overwhelmingly positive, so much so that I had already decided come February that I would return for a second year. I had finally built solid relationships with the girls in my hall (many of them called me “Mom,”

a nickname I embraced and accepted, having previously worked with eight-year-olds at summer camp) and I had learned to relax my interpretation of residence hall rules and not be so rigid when it came to doling out consequences for small infractions. There were days, of course, where I questioned my sanity for choosing this job, like when I, as the on-call counselor, had to escort an eighteen-year-old boy to the ER for pain in his scrotum, or when I had to work an opening desk shift at eight in the morning after closing up the building until midnight the night before, but most of the time, I was content living in the boarding school bubble. It was comfortable and unpredictable at the same time — not one day was the same as the next and I loved it.

Of course, half the reason I felt at home was my coworkers. Living in proximity and working, at times, under high levels of stress meant we looked to each other as both professional and personal support. Not to mention, living in the middle of the woods in northern Michigan, surrounded by teenagers and faculty members twice your age pretty much requires you to band together with the only other twenty-somethings on campus. We saw all sides of each other — elated, sleep-deprived, frustrated, enthusiastic, stressed out. We embraced each other the same way our students did. We were family. I don't know that I'll ever know a group of people as intensely as I did during those three years.

Not surprisingly, the intensity of our relationships wasn't always a good thing. Any arguments, flirtations, or important social events sent a ripple through the staff, leaving nobody untouched. We knew each other's secrets, though they were often overshadowed by the secrets of our students which were far more interesting, and we didn't always get along. But when I look back on each year's staff, I don't remember the spats and the friction that arose every once in awhile. I remember afternoons spent

lounging at the coffee shop down the road, people coming going as their desk shift schedules allowed. I remember carpools into town for tacos when the cafeteria was serving cod nuggets for dinner, nights at the beach as soon as the weather warmed up, and eating ice cream together while promising “not to talk about work” for one evening. I remember spending my nights off in our little staff cabin, the only place on campus where we were allowed to drink alcohol, playing card games with a group of people who understood the inbetweenness of my own life because they were there, too.

The summer before my second year, the Dean of Students asked me if I wanted to move to a smaller dorm.

“You’ve proven you can take on more responsibility,” she said. “I think you would be a good fit there.”

Moving buildings meant not only changing age groups — my first year had been spent with the freshmen and sophomore girls, and now I would be with the juniors and seniors — but also taking a role as the only hall counselor in that dorm. I agreed to do it, knowing it would be a challenge yet excited to flex my leadership muscles a bit more in a job I had already grown to love.

So I hastily packed up my two adjoining dorm rooms and moved to the residence hall next door two days before training started. Most of my students in the new building were returners, girls who had attended the school for at least one or two years already, so they came back to campus ready to be the veterans, experts on how to sidestep residence hall policies and suck up to their counselors. But I was also ready for them. I immediately set to work fostering a community I had complete control over.

The dorm itself was too small to have a real lobby and front desk, so my living room became the hub of evening activity. I would prop open my door an hour before curfew, sit in my favorite purple armchair, and wait for the girls to filter in and out. As they came to sign in for the night, I got plenty of chances to speak to each student individually, a luxury I hadn't experienced living in a larger dorm the year before. It was refreshing and empowering to know that I was the only person they expected to see when they got home for the night. And it was affirming knowing that they took comfort in the coziness of my little dorm living room every night, kicking off their shoes and settling in to update me on their daily activities.

Being their primary caretaker in such a small building made me feel more important. Sure, these older girls didn't need me as much as the younger ones had the year before, but they knew me more intimately. They saw me in yoga pants and messy hair at midnight. They knew which other staff members I was close with. They sat on my living room floor and watched movies before it was time for them to go to their rooms. And I knew them better this time around, too. I made them tea when they were stressed. I taught them how to make virtually anything in the microwave. I helped them with their music theory homework. I listened to their boy problems. I fixed the things that needed fixing.

Of course, I didn't always know how to fix the problems in my own life. The blurriness of my personal and work lives often made the solutions complex, and it was easy to avoid solving them by throwing myself into work and focusing on the girls instead. But the reality was, I still felt a little lost. In taking this job, I had avoided having to evaluate what exactly I wanted to do after college. My future loomed uncertain. I knew

the job wouldn't last forever, that I would have to leave the comfort of my residence life bubble eventually. It was scary to think about it, knowing that I had no desire to use the education degree I had earned. But on certain nights, when I wished for more independence, for the ability to burn a candle in my own room or drink a glass of wine in my sweatpants after a long day, for the things that I believed separated me from the "real" adults in the world, that undefined future seemed out of reach.

While boarding school is itself a unique beast, a boarding school dedicated to the fine arts is even more so. Many of my students were there to get the training and education necessary to be admitted to top level conservatories. Juilliard was as common in conversation as the cafeteria menu.

So when I say that being surrounded by young artists was difficult, I don't just mean because they require a different kind of attention and care than your average, run-of-the-mill teenager, though I'm sure the campus psychologist would support that statement. I mean that seeing that kind of dedication on a daily basis really makes you question your own work ethic and goals.

I had studied music in undergrad, but I had never been half as good as some of the girls in my hall. Watching them prepare for college auditions and attending their recitals filled me with an intense kind of pride, and was also humbling. I knew they were going to achieve things I never dreamed of as an artist. I worried sometimes that I had given up on music too soon, that I hadn't worked hard enough or that I should have gone to grad school. More, I worried that my students looked at me as someone who had given up on her dream, a washed-up former singer who took a Residence Life job because she wasn't good enough.

Besides my career confusion, my personal life remained messy, too, due mainly to the fact that I actively avoided solving personal conflicts that would arise. I spent the majority of my months there in love with a man who couldn't love me the same way.

John was my best friend on staff. We became close during the second half of my first year, when we were paired up to "rove" campus together. For two hours a week, we were in charge of roaming, regardless of the weather (and in northern Michigan, winter lasts for half the year), checking to make sure none of the students were getting into trouble. When you spend two hours together every week, walking around in freezing temperatures and several feet of snow, you get to know each other pretty well.

Our relationship started out innocently enough. We bonded over our love of *Lord of the Rings* and our musical backgrounds. We chatted about our families, our favorite TV comedies, and gave each other album recommendations. It was all surface-level, the kinds of things you share with a distant friend.

Then one night, while roving campus, John got the idea to sneak onto one of the school buses owned by the school. It was empty and parked in the bus lot, and all we had to do was push gently on the door to get in. Being a rule-follower, I hesitated just outside the door, but when John turned to me on the steps with a boyish look in his eyes and whispered, "Come *on*," I shrugged and followed him.

We snuck to the seat at the very back of the bus and crouched down, even though we knew the chances of getting caught on an abandoned bus at nine o'clock were slim, especially considering we were technically some of the only adults on duty that night. We giggled and whispered and joked about what would happen if someone from Campus

Transportation suddenly came, started up the bus, and drove it away with us still hiding in the backseat.

I felt like a kid again, finally breaking all the rules I had dutifully followed at sixteen. Of course, I knew it was silly that I had gained all this insight from one short-lived episode on an abandoned school bus, but from then on I looked at John as a person who could ignite in me the desire to break out of my comfort zone.

The bus incident became our secret, the thing we would refer to in coded conversations. It gave us our own language, bonded us in a way we hadn't before. From then on, things got more intense. John went through a bad breakup, and I consoled him. I dealt with the aftermath of a casual fling, and he listened to me cry about it. We became emotional support for each other, when before we had been merely comedic relief. We flirted and joked and spent more and more of our free time together. It wasn't until we spent the summer apart that I realized I loved him.

At the end of that summer, when we were finally back in the same place, he kissed me. We sat on the beach of Lake Michigan, and I'd had too many glasses of cheap wine, but I still remember the entire moment. I remember how he brushed my bangs out of my eyes, thinking no man had ever done that to me before. I remember that, in the back of my mind, I knew this was going to be complicated later on. I remember ignoring that premonition because I'd never been kissed like that before. I remember thinking things would finally work out. They didn't, of course.

We spent an entire year in an undefined, complicated relationship. John told me he didn't want a girlfriend. I said okay, but that didn't stop us from spending all of our free time together. We went to dinner and movies together. He paid for my drinks. I

helped him pick out new clothes online. He spent his free evenings in my living room even when I was on duty, chatting with my students and lending a hand when I needed one.

I've now come to understand that this is practically a rite of passage for twenty-somethings, that you have to experience the are-we-or-aren't-we saga at least once. But at the time, the back and forth nature of our relationship, the constant questions from coworkers about why we spent so much time together or were we dating, was all-consuming.

It's funny the way you can give perspective and advice to others but be too blind to listen to it yourself. I tried to be sage and wise for my students, the one with more relationship experience, when in reality I felt completely clueless about the whole thing. I looked at my girls floundering in confusing teenage relationships, yet I was practically in one myself. Yet again, I saw my life mirroring that of my teenagers, and I felt like I didn't know much more than they did.

Things with John didn't really resolve until I finally moved away. Sometimes I wonder if I wasted two and half years pining for him when I could have been meeting other people or devoting more time to my job and my students. But if there's anything I learned from my time working with emotional teenagers, it's that worrying you made the wrong choice isn't going to change the fact that you made it.

I opted to stay for a third and final year, once I finally settled on applying to graduate school. I had examined all of my options and realized the thing that had been getting me through the hard parts of the job was writing. I decided to look into MFA programs and spend a year preparing and applying, which meant either finding a new job for that

timespan or staying in the little residence hall with my girls for another year. It was uncommon for counselors to stay that long — most people moved on after two years — but I knew that my plans to embark on a scary new academic journey would seem much less intimidating if I could sort them out while living in a familiar place.

Besides the stress of applying to schools (which gave me something to commiserate with my senior students who were going through the same process), my third year was itself a rollercoaster. Even though it's the most recent year, it remains the most jumbled. It's hard for me to define moments from others, to remember which memories happened with which people on what day. But the entire year retains an almost glowing picture quality, the way a flashback scene in a movie does when the director wants to make sure you understand that it happened in the past. I look back on it for what it was: the end of something hard but good.

One memory from that year does stand out, however, and I generally use it to define my entire experience in the job. It was prom night. Prom night for boarding school students is a big deal. They get to feel like “normal” teenagers. They dress up, take pictures with their dates, and even request photos with their counselors, their stand-in parents. They eat a fancy dinner, dance for hours, and go to bed exhausted. The next morning, everyone wears pajamas to the cafeteria and recounts their favorite moments from the night before over brunch. It's one of the most exciting weekends of the school year.

Of course, the job of the Residence Life staff chaperones was to provide a constant adult presence throughout all parts of the dance. But that didn't stop us from enjoying prom. My coworkers and I dressed up for the occasion, and we roamed the

room in our tuxes and dresses, watching our students dance, eat, laugh, and have the perfect prom experience. A song came on that all of us recognized, and we all made our way to the dance floor. As we attempted to break into the sweaty throng of students, they parted for us, and all of a sudden I heard shouts of approval from all around us as the students welcomed us into their dance party. We danced alongside them and laughed at the hilarity of the situation — a bunch of twenty-somethings surrounded by teenagers who actually seemed to want us there. It was the perfect encapsulation of our jobs. And for the duration of that song, we felt the love we had shown them throughout the entire school year reciprocated back at us.

I still feel more of a connection to that campus than I ever did to my high school or my college. I entered the job insecure and overwhelmed, and I left with a profound sense of responsibility and belonging. I found a community that understood me, made friends I still keep in touch with, and learned to juggle a thousand different sides of myself all at once. I taught my students how to leave the comfortable world they were used to and enter the next one, but I learned just as much from them in the process. I was there to play the role of a parent, but in many ways, I grew up there.

Reflection

I loved my body before I knew it wasn't beautiful.

As a child I admired my freckles in the mirror, little splashes of brown across my milky face and shoulders. I counted the rings of green in my eyes, traced the bump on the bridge of my nose with my index finger, smiled widely so all my crooked teeth showed. I didn't look in the mirror and hate what I saw. I didn't mind the soft hairs that sprouted out of my skinny legs or my awkwardly long second toe. I loved my body and the way it let me dance around the basement with my dad every evening and roll down the hill in the backyard at dusk. I loved my long arms and my tiny ears and my "inny" belly button.

I didn't know I wasn't supposed to.

But my long, thin, gangly body betrayed me. It expanded, became rounder and softer. My face grew fuller and hips appeared almost overnight. Suddenly I was the girl who wore a bra out of necessity, not just to follow the crowd. I covered my body up with hooded sweatshirts, baggy jeans, things that didn't show there was a lump here or a jiggly part there. When it was time for the swimming unit in P.E. class, I lied and told my teacher I had my period so I wouldn't have to wear a swimsuit.

At lunch I sat with girls who only ate salad. I thought about not eating my bagel and cream cheese while I listened to them talk about getting their eyebrows waxed. I examined their perfect makeup, their clean-shaven legs. I looked down at my own wide thighs, the thighs that no longer fit into jeans I got at the beginning of the school year. I ate my bagel anyway, but each bite tasted like guilt.

In college I learned to love the parts of me that were the least ugly – my voice and my brain. I sang and I studied. I felt empty. I loved boys who would never love me back, yearning for someone to tell me my other parts were beautiful, too, because maybe then I would actually believe it.

I don't remember why I started running, but I remember very clearly the first time I ran two miles without stopping. My face was flushed, my lungs were tired, and every pore seeped sweat, but my legs felt strong and alive. They kept me going. They did what they were supposed to do. They carried me, and suddenly I felt guilty for not allowing them to do what they were built to do for so long. I've been running ever since.

I still don't love my body every day. Some days I hate the soft layer around my midsection, the dimply parts of my thighs, the pastiness of my skin. I hate my uneven eyebrows and how easily my face turns red whenever I'm the center of attention. But more, I hate that I lived so many years with those feelings ruling my life. I hate that I couldn't look in the mirror, ignore the extra fat on my stomach, and count the green rings in my eyes instead.

It took half my life for me to start loving my body again, the way I did when I was a kid. It took six mile runs in the wet summer air feeling the tickle of sweat on the back of my neck. It took seeing my calf muscles make their appearance whenever I wore high heels. It took falling asleep tired and sore and smiling. It took seeing my body for what it was: something that moves, breathes, and feels, not something that is merely seen.

Bedfellows

My romantic relationships take place between midnight and six a.m.

He'll come over in his sweatpants, phone in his hand, baseball cap on backwards. Maybe he'll come straight from work, or maybe he'll be out drinking with his friends and text me to say he's "in the neighborhood." Maybe I'll pick him up and listen while he fidgets with the radio stations on my half-broken car stereo, yawning at the expanse of empty road in front of me. He'll bring something to read or the latest episode of some new show I have to watch. Then he'll greet my cat with a tickle behind his ears, kick off his shoes in the same place they always go, and climb under the covers of my bed without a second thought. This is our routine now.

When he's there, arm around my waist, breath in my hair, it doesn't matter who we are together. Maybe he'll kiss that spot on my neck, maybe he'll stroke my spine with one soft finger. Maybe we'll have sex or just lie there. It doesn't matter. It's warm and it's comfortable and we are a "we" without having to talk about it. Night blurs into early morning, but our sense of time has evaporated. We glance at the clock and don't register what it means. We know we'll be tired the next day but we don't care. We whisper. We laugh. We touch.

This is how it's been for my most of my adult life: men who only see me in the early hours of the morning. I've been quick to let them, because the way they look at me then and there, in my stretched out yoga pants and glasses, is better than the way they didn't look at me in the daylight for most of my life. This is proof that I am worth loving for a few hours at a time, for a few hours at all.

I take solace in the nonchalance of it all. Lying together, our feet intertwined like the roots of the old tree in the backyard of my childhood house, I don't have to worry about my unwashed hair or the brand new pimple on my chin. I'll pretend I didn't just hastily shave my legs in the bathroom fifteen minutes ago, but that's the only illusion that's worth keeping up. He won't notice anyway.

This is the only kind of relationship I can commit to because it requires no commitment. The fall asleep laughing about nothing, tickle each other under the sheets relationships that can only happen in those magical hours before the sun is up. These relationships don't make me face what will happen tomorrow, next month, next year, don't make me answer the hard questions or admit my insecurities. They don't make me put everything on the line, admit my attachment, or do anything that requires an outward expression of feeling. Nothing is at stake.

In the moment, all that matters are the words between two people and the way their curves fit together. When the room is dark enough to see only outlines and shapes, everything small is magnified: every deep breath, every giggle, every raspy syllable carrying a full day's baggage. It makes me feel safe. It keeps me from being exposed.

Eventually we'll fall asleep, his arm draped over my shoulder or around my hips. I won't be conscious of each small movement my body makes or worry that I'll drool on the pillow and he'll make fun of me. His snoring won't bother me. We're used to each other. We forgive each other's drools and snores.

It will feel normal, like we share this bed every night, not only when it's convenient or one of us needs a distraction. It will feel comfortable. It *is* comfortable.

Without these nighttime routines, I'm just a single girl who chooses the wrong men to love. The men I really want, the men who don't end up next to me, know how to stop an innocent beer-fueled kiss from turning into something more. They know not to sleep in the same bed as me for fear of getting in too deep, leading me on. They show restraint when they could text me late at night. They protect me from themselves. They assume I need protecting.

So I end up with men who want a late night meet-up, nothing more. They're content to whisper about insecurities under the cover of darkness, or feign real intimacy through stroking my hair, but when the sun rises, they're gone.

Without them, I'm the girl who wants a boyfriend. The girl I swore I'd never be.

I pride myself on being the fiercely independent, single girl. When my friends harbor broken hearts, they come to me. I give them advice and chocolate, promise there are better things ahead, that singleness is not something to be feared. I'm always unattached, so they know I know what I'm talking about. They praise me about it and admire my uninhibited freedom. They never expect me to show up to a party with a new guy or need a plus one to a wedding.

And most of the time, I'm okay with that. I don't mind championing the single life, speaking up for the women who put their careers first or don't go looking for love. I don't mind being alone, relying on myself, putting my needs first because there isn't anyone else to consider. I like that. Usually.

But when the few men I see at night stop coming around, I nurse my wounds in secret. I don't cry to my friends, the ones who sat on my couch last weekend and did the

same, because to them I'm the girl who doesn't want a relationship. I'm the one who preaches the gospel of singleness, who looks down on girls who bounce from man to man, as if they are monogamous to a fault.

I keep playing the role I've created for myself. I'm not one for definitions. I'm cool, casual, ready for anything. Even if "anything" means a relationship with no outlines, no boundaries, nothing defined.

But if any of those nocturnal visitors wanted to make a commitment, were willing to change the nature of this charade, I would be relieved. Then I wouldn't have to rely on just those sleepy, nighttime scenes to get me through the self-doubt that accompanies being the only single girl in a world full of young, happy couples. I wouldn't have to pretend I'm the cool, unattached one anymore. I wouldn't be alone.

Sometimes I forget the unspoken rules of these not-quite-relationships. I find myself overthinking why I'm doing this, then speaking, being that girl, asking every question that comes to mind. *Is this okay? Should we talk about it? What does this all mean?* Talking about it tends to suggest a seriousness I'm not ready to accept, but I have to keep going, keep probing, get answers, even though the cool girl I try to be is saying, *No, not right now. Not when his face is scratchy and comforting and his socks don't match. You're going to mess this up. You're going to lose him.*

So I don't ask the questions that haunt me. I don't ask him what things will be like when we see each other in the daylight, or why he is able to call some girls his ex-girlfriends, but I will never join those ranks because I wasn't granted the privilege of the label. If I do, he might not come around anymore. He might realize what we're doing, how complicated it's all gotten. And then he'll look back on me not as his ex, but as the

midnight girl, whose hands he held in bed but not in public. And I'll look back on myself as the girl who went along with it.

He'll set his alarm for five-thirty in the morning because he has to work. He'll hit the snooze button a few times then ruffle my hair as he slides out of bed. He'll tell me not to get up, to go back to sleep, but I won't listen. It feels good listening to him sing in the shower, watching him button his shirt in the dim light of the early morning. It feels real, more tangible than the weird dreamlike state we usually exist in. It's comforting to imagine that this could be a life together someday, to delude myself into picturing a future where there isn't one. Maybe someday I could make him coffee while he towel dries his hair or chase him down outside of the apartment with the packed lunch he forgot. Maybe someday mornings could be just as comfortable as these nights are. This imagined domesticity is what keeps me from saying the three words I know will end everything: "What are we?"

So I keep letting him curl up next to me. Because it's easier to pretend for a few hours than face an empty bed.

Unbeliever

I lost religion before I was even old enough to understand what it was. To their credit, my father, a Lutheran-turned-atheist, and my mother, a lapsed Catholic, tried their hardest to keep a semblance of faith in our household when I was a child. My sister and I were both baptized (in two different churches, though we were only born two years apart) and we grew up with a loose understanding of the Christian faith. Ask my parents about it now and they'll laugh. Oh, the days when they were young, subscribing to a doctrine they didn't actually believe, letting pressure from their own parents get to them.

The last time I visited home, my sisters and I found a box of home videos in the basement. After my sisters' initial complaints that I, the firstborn, had seven full tapes dedicated to my infant years, my whole family cozied up on the couch to watch those containing all the moments my parents had thought to capture when the three of us were still young. In one scene, we decorated cupcakes for Jesus's birthday at the kitchen table in our pajamas, a scenario that made my mother scoff at her past self.

"Maddie, why don't you sing that song for the camera? The one you learned in Sunday School?" came my dad's voice from behind the camera.

"Okay!" four year-old me chirped, bouncing up and down. Never one to turn down an opportunity to perform, I launched into a squeaky rendition of "Jesus Loves Me," my younger sister Olivia chiming in only when she remembered the words.

While watching this fuzzy scene from 1993 play out on our high-definition television, my sisters and I teased my parents mercilessly. Remember when? we said. Remember how you forced us to believe? Remember when you pretended you believed,

too? They smiled and mocked themselves along with us, but I wondered if they regretted their approach. If they would go back and change it if they could.

Over the years, our family tried on faith like winter coats, but nothing fit. We shopped around but nothing was warm enough. For awhile we attended the local Unitarian Universalist church, which, if we were going to adopt some kind of religion, was much more in line with my parents' "peace and love" mantra.

I remember the Christmas pageant at the UU church. While the Lutheran pageants had been rehearsed and planned, this was basically just a free-for-all. Any child who wished to participate was welcomed, and each got to decide which character they wanted to be. This meant they usually ended up with four Marys, seven or eight wisemen, a couple of Gabriels, and a few Cabbage Patch Kids offered up as Baby Jesus. My sisters and I went as angels, with homemade glittery wings our babysitter had helped us fashion.

Eventually, we gave up altogether, stopped going to services on Sunday, stopped singing the Sunday School songs, even faded away from the ever-welcoming UU community. I was glad. I didn't like the scratchy tags on the dresses I had to wear to church. I didn't know the kids at Sunday School. I preferred to stay home and paint with watercolors or play in the backyard. Without church, Sunday mornings meant pajamas and games and my dad singing loudly to Bruce Springsteen while making pancakes in the kitchen.

I didn't think of it as leaving the church, but merely gaining the freedom to do other things, make other choices. I didn't think losing religion made me different.

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When I decided to attend a Lutheran college, my dad tried to hide his concern. In his mind, religion had caused most of the problems in his own family, dividing his brothers and isolating his mother. Religion was, somehow, at the core of every upsetting headline, every tragic event. He wasn't bitter about it, just tired.

"I'm worried you won't fit in there," he said cautiously, once I had sent in my deposit.

I rolled my eyes at him and told him I would be fine. I was going to study music, not theology, and this school had one of the best choral programs in the Midwest. I wasn't worried, and I was surprised that he was.

But as soon as I arrived on campus, I realized I was an outsider. The school was small, and while Christianity wasn't central to the curriculum or even a factor in admission, it was still omnipresent. Most of my friends came from Lutheran backgrounds, had attended youth group in high school or even had parents who were pastors. They made references to hymns I'd never heard, to summer camps they all knew of. Nobody outwardly questioned my lack of faith or tried to convert me. I just couldn't access their shared experiences.

Overall, that was okay. As long as I wasn't branded a "heathen," I was fine. I went along in my studies, worked hard, got good grades, and forgot about Christianity unless it was part of my music history exam or required credits.

Every student on campus had to take at least two religion courses, one of which had to be based on the Bible. I chose "Intro to the Old Testament" freshman year, to get it out of the way. My professor was an atheist – a fact he didn't admit outright but was pretty easy to piece together based on his lectures – and the course was structured around

an academic analysis of the Bible and its history. Despite being at eight in the morning, I found the course enjoyable, especially because my own religious beliefs (or lack thereof) played no part in it whatsoever. I liked learning about the history, the controversies. I approached the Bible the same way I did my music courses – with vigor and determination. I felt, for once, that I could access the language and content of something based in the Christian faith, and that my normal feeling of unknowing didn't matter.

Of course, it didn't seem like a defining moment at the time. But now I believe that my success in that course gave me the push I needed to get through four years at the school without letting my insecurity about religion inhibit me. If my atheist professor could teach religion courses at a Lutheran college, I could certainly get my music degree from one. I held my head up and pushed on, keeping in mind the reason I was there in the first place.

But there remained subtle reminders that I was not part of this culture, that I had not been raised in it. My dad's fears weren't necessarily affirmed, but his words still stuck with me. I couldn't relate to the college motto, *solī deo gloria*, "glory to God alone." I didn't attend church services except for when my choir was scheduled to sing. During those services, people on either side of me always knew the congregational hymns by heart. I sank in my seat and hoped nobody would notice that I didn't take communion. It didn't make me question my beliefs, but it made me worry that other people did.

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In small-town Minnesota, “What church do you go to?” is as common a question as “How’s the weather?” Never does anyone think to ask, “Do you go to church?” first. It is simply a given that you do.

During junior year of high school, I took an exploratory humanities course that focused on world religions. At the end of the class, we took an all-day field trip to visit many of the religious buildings in the area. We toured a Greek Orthodox church, a Buddhist temple, a Catholic church, a synagogue, a mosque, and an Amish household. At each place, someone of faith would speak with us and answer any questions we had. It was one of the most valuable educational experiences I had as a teenager. I was able to understand the way faith influences a person, and how conflict can arise just from religious disagreements. I was enlightened, but also discouraged. I knew that, logically, it was impossible for every single person we met on this trip to be “correct.” How does one person stay steadfast in their beliefs, knowing that? How do you not let the knowledge that other beliefs exist cloud your own faith?

I wish I could say I had some major religious epiphany that day, but I didn’t. I approached the whole thing pragmatically, examined things the way an academic would. Looking back, however, I think it set me up to become the inquisitive, impartial person I had to be to get through in a world where people didn’t understand my lack of faith just as much as I didn’t understand their reliance on it.

Once, when talking to my mom about religion and the role it plays in Midwestern life, she mentioned how she used to get so annoyed anytime someone would tell her they were praying for her. She hated the implication that she somehow needed their prayers,

and the fact that the person saying it didn't think to ask if she wanted the prayers in the first place.

“But,” she finally said, “I've come to realize that they're only doing what they know how to do, what gives them comfort. It doesn't comfort me, but that's not what matters.”

Conversation Hearts

SWEET TALK.

Kevin liked to text me when he was drunk. I pretended I was offended because it was easier than admitting I was flattered by his whiskey-fueled propositions. But I still responded, and I let him keep texting me. I let him come over after I'd gotten into bed for the night. I let him stay until four in the morning even though I had to work an early shift the next day. I let him make offensive jokes. I let him do a lot of things because I was surprised that a guy like him chose a girl like me to text late at night.

Then one night I texted him, and when he didn't respond I hated myself for being upset. So I stopped letting him get away with everything.

I had never felt so liberated by merely allowing myself to be in control.

MARRY ME.

We were six when Tyler and I decided to get married. It was only natural, after all; our sisters were best friends, our moms were best friends, and we both agreed that Raphael was the best Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

We were six and a half when we found out he was moving to Colorado. It definitely threw our marriage plans off track, but I knew that when we visited, we would still stick plastic bugs down each other's shirts and it would be like nothing had ever changed.

We were twelve the last time he came to visit. We played Harry Potter trivia every night. We ate cheesy popcorn for dinner and locked our little sisters out of the house. We were the same as we had always been.

We were twenty-four when I found out he was engaged. I scrolled through his barebones Facebook profile and looked at pictures of his fiancé. They looked perfect together. I bet his fiancé thinks Raphael was the best Ninja Turtle, too.

HUG ME.

When Karl started dating one of my best friends, I was convinced the world was over. I cried on my dorm room couch and ate my way through two bags of Doritos. I watched Nora Ephron rom-coms and cried to my best friend on the phone. My roommate stayed at her boyfriend's place for a week because I was so miserable to be around. My tiny semblance of a love life had come crashing down around me, and I couldn't even be mad at him because Kirsten was the most dateable of all my friends. She had perfect blonde hair, an athletic frame, and she was fearless. I had awkward bangs, wide hips, and I had never gotten a boy to date me.

More than anything, I was upset that I had convinced myself he loved me as much as I loved him. I just assumed that he felt the connection between us when we sat on his cold tile floor and listened to the second movement of Brahms' Requiem. I read way too much into the movie marathon we had at the beginning of the school year. I didn't see the signs.

I had to stop being friends with him eventually. I couldn't handle the way he still wanted to hug me after choir rehearsal and invite me over to his room to watch *The*

Office every Thursday night. It's one of the only times in my life when I decided to cut and run before it was too late.

ONE KISS.

John and I sat in the sand for what felt like hours while our friends sang folk songs around the campfire across the beach. I had been on that beach since noon, and now, long after the August sun had set, I was still there and he was next to me. We watched the tide. We talked and we didn't talk. He held my hand.

He brushed my crunchy, salted hair out of my face and planted one kiss on my forehead before he finally found my lips. I was woozy from the wine and the sun all day and the way his white tee shirt seemed to glow underneath the clear sky. I kissed him back and didn't ask why.

When he pulled me up out of my perfect little sand seat, he whispered, "I'm glad we were here tonight."

Later, as I tossed and turned in bed and tried to ignore the sand on my feet, that line repeated in my head over and over – a line to never forget but also a line that would hurt when I remembered it.

TEXT ME.

I should have gotten the hint when Marc stopped texting me.

I should have stopped walking by his cubicle at work, stopped smiling at him when we passed in the hallway, stopped offering him advice when he asked for it.

I should have left my friends alone, refused to grill them for information they didn't want to give me about how he had moved on.

I should have moved on first.

I should have done a lot of things. But I didn't.

TRUE LOVE.

If I had it, I wouldn't be eating all these candy hearts.

Why I Don't Talk About Weight Loss

I used to be fat, but you'll never hear me say that out loud.

I'm not ashamed. In fact, I was pretty happy when I was fat. The truth is, I've never felt comfortable with the amount of attention my personal weight loss brought. When people mention it, I don't know how to react or what to say. I don't like to talk about my "transformation" or how I'm a "new person" because I don't actually think much about myself has changed, other than the number on the scale or the size of my clothes. Sure, I can run more miles than I could when I was fat and I feel more confident in my clothes, but I still have the same interests, the same vices (hello, peanut butter), the same habits. I'm just skinnier, and that makes people think I must be a different person.

It's not all that surprising. I mean, the weight loss industry sells change, convinces people that they aren't their best selves until they weigh less. Social media has become a hub for transformation photos, for inspirational weight loss quotes, and for people preaching about the insecurities and self-esteem issues that miraculously lifted once they lost those extra thirty pounds. We eat up stories of transformation, before-and-after pictures, reality shows about people who lose half their size.

Weight loss, and the lifestyle changes that accompany it, are perceived as entertainment. And that's one of the reasons I hate talking about my weight loss journey. While it sometimes feels great to get attention for being thinner, it's not something I have fully adjusted to. In my head, I haven't gotten used to my new body. In my head, I can't believe people are paying attention to me at all.

Once, I sat on a couch in the corner of a bar with a group of new friends. I had lost about forty pounds at that point, and the girl sitting next to me brought up how much thinner I looked, compared to the pictures she'd seen me in. She said, "That must be a really crazy thing to go through."

She meant it encouragingly, of course, but I still averted my eyes and said something like, "I mean, yeah, it's tough but whatever." I didn't know what else to say. I had gotten used to not receiving much attention for my appearance. But unlike many people who were overweight in adolescence, I don't have a story about how often I was bullied for my weight or how miserable I was walking down the halls of my high school. I blended in, and if people said nasty things about how I looked, I wasn't aware of it at the time. The normal narrative of the "fat kid" wasn't something I owned, so the attention I got once I started getting skinnier caught me off guard. And sitting there, trying to figure out what to say about my personal Journey to Thinness to a girl I didn't know very well, I felt trapped by my transformation.

That same conversation has happened countless times since I lost most of the weight. Changes in body weight or shape invite commentary, even interrogation. People want to know how you did it, what motivated you, and how you feel now that you're not fat anymore. Most of the time this is innocent. Sometimes it's even in the form of compliments. But after losing nearly eighty pounds, I still don't know the proper way to react when someone asks me, "How did you do it?"

Truthfully, I don't have a bunch of tips or inspirational advice, and that surprises people. We're surrounded by weight loss rhetoric that teaches us there's something you don't know if you're overweight. You're obviously missing out on some key piece of

information that is keeping you fat. It can't be as simple as changing your eating and exercise habits. There has to be someone or *something* helping you in order for you to achieve it.

I'm not going to lie and say I was always sublimely happy when I was fat. I had bad days. I hated swimsuit shopping. I was acutely aware that I looked much heavier than my tall, svelte younger sisters. But I'm also not sublimely happy now that I'm thinner. I still have bad days. I still hate swimsuit shopping. I still compare myself to my younger sisters.

Losing weight forces you to adapt to not only a different body but a different mindset. I have trouble accepting that I can fit into the sizes I need when I shop for clothes. I've lost track of the number of times I've wandered into a dressing room with clothes far too big for me. I've held onto old dresses that billow at the waist and armpits because I'm afraid to give them away in case they'll magically fit me again. I've caught glimpses of myself walking past windows and mirrors and been shocked at the flat lines of my silhouette. I've been surprised when a friend whom I perceive to be "smaller" than I am lends me a piece of clothing and it fits me.

It's not something I want to be pitied for, all of this mental adaptation I've had to face. It's a part of the process. It's a good thing. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't decide to lose weight to become more confident and comfortable. I just haven't fully gotten there yet, and I know it will be awhile before I do.

Around the same time I started eating better and exercising, my mom did the same and lost seventy pounds. She talks much more openly about her weight loss than I do. She knows how to answer people's questions when they ask them, and she shares

how proud she is of her accomplishments. But when one of her friends questioned her eating habits and thought she was restricting too much, she got really angry.

While the majority of people will hear your story and support you, some will question your methods. More than once I've fallen victim to the criticism of friends telling me to "take a break" or "just eat what I want," not realizing that, after years of working to adopt healthier habits, exercising *is* my break and healthier food actually *is* what I want to eat. I no longer view these things as punishment because I've realized how much better I feel when I make a conscious effort to incorporate them into my life. In an era where publicized body positivity is becoming increasingly popular and many companies and individuals are fighting for diversity in the types of bodies represented in the media, it can be easy to criticize someone who is working on their health. It can be easy to tell them to "love themselves," without realizing that perhaps striving to improve is a way of loving yourself, too.

My mom's reaction to this criticism would be to automatically write it off as jealousy, to conclude that other people are simply self-conscious of their own unhealthy habits and your own focus on health makes them more aware of that. Maybe that's true to some extent. But I think that it has more to do with the fact that we've been told it's okay to voice an opinion on other people's lifestyles.

And it doesn't always come from a place of negativity. Maybe someone is actually concerned that you're eating too little or exercising too much. After all, when you care about someone, isn't it your job to intervene when you're worried about them?

When one person believes they know what's best for someone else life becomes problematic. And it can go both ways. I know I'm guilty of telling friends they'd be

better off if they did more meal prep on the weekends. But just because that system works for me, doesn't mean it's good for them, and looking back, I realize those comments may have been perceived as judgmental and mean.

Weight loss and my approach to health are personal, though it's become very clear that I'm in the minority when it comes to this belief. With so many social media outlets for public accountability and community support, weight loss itself has changed. I applaud any woman who is willing to post her transformation pictures on Instagram or document her weight loss journey publicly, because that is never something I would be comfortable doing. Instead I choose to focus on where I am now, on the way I work to incorporate healthy habits into my life, because it took me so long to find them.

Sisterhood

When we were kids, my mother dressed me and my sister in matching outfits on holidays. She instructed the hairdresser to cut our hair the same length – just past our chins, with blunt bangs that grazed our identical eyebrows. We were always referred to as a unit: Maddie and Olivia. We shared everything: dolls, toys, a bedroom, even our birthday parties. We were born two years and five days apart, so it was easier, my parents figured. Only one set of paper plates and napkins to buy. They usually chose a marble cake so we could have two flavors in one.

In high school we shared friends and an old Chevy that had been passed down from our grandfather. We rapidly quoted episodes of *The Office* back and forth at the dinner table. But I never got to be the kind of older sister who imparts her wisdom, teaches her how to flirt with boys or shave her legs. You don't get to do that when you're a unit.

When I left for college, I watched as Olivia got to play older sister for the youngest in our family. She did it better than I ever could. She took our baby sister shopping, passed on her old clothes, taught her how to apply eyeliner. She taught her how to flirt with boys, listened to her problems, went out to get her emergency ice cream late at night. She was the older sister I never got to be.

It's hard being the first to leave. You come back, and the house might look the same, but it's clear you don't fit anymore. My spot at the dinner table had been taken. Our rapid quoting of TV shows had been replaced by conversations I held no ownership over. I was

still the oldest and presumably the wisest, but that didn't seem to matter. My (somewhat) worldly experiences carried no weight when I entered the doors of that house. Instead, I was just a visitor, home for the weekend with her bag of laundry and her schoolbooks. I wasn't an integral cog in the machine of my family anymore. They kept turning without me.

It's supposed to happen this way. You're supposed to grow up and move on. I had moved only seventy miles south; I wasn't gone for good. I still needed my family, my sisters, my place at the dinner table. I still needed to feel like I had some place to come home to.

Olivia and I, though we were a unit growing up, always had our differences. She was the wild child, even as a little girl. She was the one whose silly faces and voices made my mother crack up behind the video camera when she recorded us. I was the one who desperately garnered attention by breaking out into song. She was flexible. I held onto control for dear life, uncomfortable when things didn't go predictably.

As teenagers, our differences were magnified. Olivia, in tune with the social landscape of high school and well-versed in flirting, found a boyfriend almost immediately. I, however, pined after boys who never noticed me and sulked because I was alone. Olivia was thin, bubbly, and adorable, while I was chubby, awkward, and had no concept of how to dress or do my own makeup.

The only place I felt I rose above her was in theatre, landing the lead in the spring musical two years in a row, while Olivia was in the ensemble. Then, the year after I graduated, she got cast as the lead. She probably perceived it as following in my

footsteps, or trying to get out from the shadow of her older sister. I perceived it as another way she rivaled me.

So while we shared much of our lives from toddlerhood to teenagedom, we were never that pair of sisters who braided each other's hair and stayed up late talking about boys. We coexisted, we loved each other, and we tried to get along, but the older we got, the farther apart we grew.

The longer I lived away from home, the more I felt disconnected from the rest of my family every time I came home. After college, I moved twelve hours away to Michigan, while both of my sisters lived less than an hour from each other in Wisconsin and only a few hours away from my parents. Once again, I felt removed, being the only one who couldn't meet up with the four of them for the weekend.

Once, on a trip home, I got extremely jealous of the bond my younger sisters shared. They had spent more time living together, just the two of them, and they are closer than I am with either of them. We were getting ready to go on a day outing to a carousel tourist attraction we had loved as children, and something in me snapped as I watched them joke back and forth together. I felt like the outsider yet again, and I informed them that I didn't feel like going anymore if I was going to be left out of everything. I knew I was being dramatic, that I was too old to pull a stunt like this, but I couldn't stop myself. I stormed up to the bedroom that I had been moved into when my youngest sister took mine during college and wallowed in self pity.

Later, my mom told me that she was glad I had finally said something about feeling excluded. “They can be very cliquey,” she said. “I know it’s hard for you when we’re all together like this.”

I had never realized that my mother saw it the way I did. I assumed I was alone in my feelings of separation. It felt good just to be acknowledged.

Olivia and I both moved west to Washington to go to graduate school, albeit on opposite sides of the state. Last Christmas, we drove together from Washington to Minnesota and back in that same Chevy from high school. We shared candy, chips, and plastic containers of watermelon from the gas station. We quoted episodes of *Friends* and listened to stand-up comedy. We were a unit again for those 21 hours in the car.

As we passed cows and South Dakota grass, I imagined this was exactly what my mom had hoped for her two girls when she picked out those matching dresses.

The Art of Eating Breakfast Alone

Some girls dream about their wedding day or the way their soulmate will propose to them. Some dream about what they will name their kids or what their first house will look like. I dream about eating breakfast with a man.

At some point in recent history, “breakfast” became synonymous with “serious relationship.” “I don’t do breakfast” has become the casual dater’s mantra. Because when you stay for breakfast after a wild night of passion (or even a lukewarm one), it means you’re committing to something more than just sex or a casual fling. It means you’re willing to face each other in a different kind of nakedness, first thing in the morning, over plates of toast and bacon. It means learning how the other person drinks their coffee. It means seeing each other raw and tired and caffeine-deprived. It also means you care enough not to slip out the front door as soon as you get the chance.

Recently, I pictured making coffee for the man lying in bed next to me, bringing two mugs into the bedroom and resting my head on his shoulder while we sleepily sipped them. I imagined getting dressed together and walking to the diner down the street, ordering runny eggs and laughing about the movie we’d watched the night before. I saw myself giving him my extra bacon once I’d stuffed myself full.

And the daydream scared me.

This is not how it works in the world of casual dating. We’re not supposed to crave that closeness when we’re dating around. We’re supposed to keep people at arm’s length, to not want to make the first move that will finally take things to the next level.

We're supposed to approach relationships with caution, to not enter into them until we're certain that the outcome, good or bad, will be worth it.

Maybe that's why the list of men I've eaten breakfast with is so short.

When I think back on my romantic encounters, I often find myself defining different periods of my life by the men who were central to them. None of these men were boyfriends or fiancés. None of them broke my heart in any real, deliberate way. Some of them didn't even know they played a significant role in my love life.

High school was Joey, the curly-haired, pure-hearted Mormon who took me to prom in his family's ten passenger van and wasn't allowed to kiss me goodnight. College was Karl, who wore sandals even in winter and always invited me over for *Lord of the Rings* marathons or Brahms' Requiem listening parties, despite the fact that he was dating one of my best friends. After college was John, arguably the closest thing I've had to a serious relationship. I spent three years loving him and he spent three years trying to convince me I shouldn't.

I did eat breakfast with John, although never in that close, post-sex way. We ate lots of meals together, in fact. All-you-can-eat sushi from a hole-in-the-wall restaurant across the street from a sketchy auto mechanic. Matching salads, except for the dressing. Pizza and beer after a long week. Sometimes we'd get ice cream and he'd order us each a different flavor so we didn't have to settle on just one. He always picked the right ones without even asking.

But, even adding up all the shared meals, the times he picked up the check, the intimate secrets whispered over plates of chips and salsa, I don't have the privilege of

calling him an ex-boyfriend. We spent three years in between friends and something more, so when I enumerate to other people the ways in which we were close, the moments we shared, the entire relationship feels invalidated. We never woke up together to spend a lazy morning sopping up egg yolks with bread and swirling cream in our coffee. We were never a “we” at all.

I hear my friends list off their ex-boyfriend's names or casually slip relationship stories into conversation and I wish I could do that. I wish I could lay claim to any of these past men, pretend that what we had was something serious, impart the wisdom I gained from those partnerships on friends who are needing advice — "Oh, when my ex did that, I was furious!" — but I can't.

Instead they exist in my mind as markers, chapter titles for my life, easily indexed for future reference. Want to know how it feels to be dumped by the same man twice? Turn to "John, Year Two." Not sure what to do when your friend has a crush on the same guy as you? You might find the answer in "Joey" but probably not because, let's face it, you were kind of an idiot at age sixteen.

Sometimes I look at the man I'm with at the moment and I wonder if he will be the one who defines these years of my life. I wonder if I will look back and see that relationship as a landmark, another chapter added to the book.

So I considered eating breakfast with the man sleeping next to me in bed. I looked at the way his feet dangled off the edge of the mattress, the way he snored when his head was in exactly the wrong position, the tufts of hair near the back of his head that always stood up

in the morning. I thought about how much we didn't know about each other, how I'd never met his parents, how I didn't know his roommates' names or his go-to coffee order. I wondered why the thought of eating breakfast together seemed both intoxicating and impossible. I wished breakfast could just be breakfast, that it could just be an extension of the closeness we'd experienced the night before but not a symbol of something more. I wished I could sit across from this man at a booth in my favorite diner and feel the same way I do when we're talking at the ceiling in the darkness of my room. I wished my mouth could form the simple words that might prompt that exact situation, but the fear that his response wouldn't be the one I was hoping for held me back.

I ate my oatmeal alone the next morning and I pretended nothing was missing. I sat in my cozy armchair and watched the people pass by on the street, the same way I always do. I've grown content in my singleness, in the comfort of silence and being alone. But even the most comfortable routines get tired after awhile. So while I don't need a person to eat breakfast with, sometimes I think it would be nice to have one.

Finding Normal

In my family, mental illness is a common topic of conversation. My mother, my sisters, and I all openly admit our anxieties. We are not shameful about our diagnoses or medications. We tell each other when it's a bad day or how our most recent therapy appointment went. My father, the only one not lucky enough to be in the Crazy Club the females in the household have unofficially formed, patiently waits out every outburst, every anxiety attack, disappearing behind his phone or computer screen until some semblance of normalcy has returned to the family. It's not insensitive, it's just what he does.

Of course, our family dynamic sort of has to be this way. My mother has struggled with anxiety for most of her adult life and our family has a history of various mental health disorders, diagnosed or not. Once, a new therapist, upon reviewing my family history, told me simply, "Your family is what we in the profession call 'loaded.'" I wasn't offended; he was right.

I've been aware of my own struggles with mental illness since the second grade. I don't think I put it together at the time, but the reason my mom ushered me into therapy as an eight year-old was because of her awareness of her own illness. She says she also remembers her anxiety-fueled research on parenting and coming across studies that claimed you could alter a child's brain chemistry if you got them into therapy early enough in life.

I was afraid of everything. Some were the usual eight year-old fears: the dark, the stairs to the basement, scary scenes in movies. Others were more irrational, or fears that

eight-year-olds typically don't have the awareness to acquire yet: carbon monoxide poisoning, spontaneous combustion, accidentally swearing without being aware you're doing it.

My mother knew these weren't normal eight-year-old fears, so she asked our trusted pediatrician for a referral to a child psychologist, and my parents eventually took me to see Dr. Jennifer Fischer. They told me she would help me with all the things I was worried about, and I agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to go. (Part of the deal was that I got a new Beanie Baby toy after every appointment. My parents were pretty New Age when it came to most parenting techniques, but by the time they had one kid in therapy, they were no longer above bribery.)

Dr. Fischer was warm and welcoming, everything you hope the person who is going to help your child overcome her irrational fear of asphyxiation will be. She taught me relaxation techniques, and ways to distract myself when I was feeling afraid. She told me to put every technique into my "toolbox." It was, of course, metaphorical, but I couldn't help but wish I had a physical toolbox in front of me, one I could dig through and pull out what I needed when I couldn't sleep at night because I was afraid that the wolves from that awful chase scene in *Beauty & the Beast* were living beneath my bed.

Once, while I was still in therapy, the carbon monoxide detector in my house went off while I was at home with my mom. My fears had finally been confirmed. Dr. Fischer told my mom later that it was the best accident she could have ever hoped for — accidental exposure therapy. We renamed it the carbon monoxide "protector" as a reminder that the alarm had kept us safe. Slowly, that fear faded, although I still remember its pulsing lime green light at the end of the hallway outside my bedroom.

And while I was the first of my sisters to need professional help, I was certainly not the last. All three of us went to see Dr. Fischer at one point or another. All three of us dealt with what would now likely be labeled Generalized Anxiety Disorder. All three of us need specialized attention, therapy, methods of distraction. But eventually, I became the least worrisome daughter.

Olivia was diagnosed with depression at age sixteen. My mom told me over the phone during the winter of my freshman year of college. At the time, I had never known anyone with depression. The word sounded so heavy, so abrupt. I didn't know how to process it while living away from home, disconnected my sister's daily struggles.

Around the same time, Grace, the youngest and in middle school, was diagnosed with OCD and started undergoing intense exposure therapy. Her doctor asserted that in order for her to get rid of her irrational fears (spontaneous swearing and pencils, among others) she had to face them head on. My mom still credits that therapy as the reason our entire family swears openly and frequently.

Suddenly my sisters needed more help than I did. Suddenly I was the "normal" one.

This had its perks. I stayed at college and got good grades and my parents didn't have to worry about me. But I found that their shared mental illness struggles bonded my younger sisters in a way that kept me at a distance. Being the normal one kept me on the outside.

All my life I've bounced from therapist to therapist, received half-hearted diagnoses but never anything concrete. I've spent months wishing I could just brush things off and not obsess over tiny, mundane details many people don't bat an eye at. I've

also spent months feeling totally relaxed and content. I deal with anxiety on a daily basis, but I never have trouble completing daily tasks or getting out of bed in the morning. I've seen people who struggle like that. I've lived with them. I'm more "normal" than they are. And I don't say that as something I'm proud of.

Coming from a family riddled with psychological disorders, being close to normal can make me feel inadequate. While I don't claim to want any of their problems, sometimes I think they'd understand me better if I shared their struggles.

But I still walk a fine line when it comes to my "normal-ness." By my family's standards, I need the least amount of help, but by the standards of other people in my life, I'm an anxious introvert. Having worked and studied in settings where many people tend toward extroversion, anxiety has made things difficult for me in many ways. Often, I feel like I'm attempting to navigate a social scene I don't belong in.

For example, outings to new restaurants or bars require copious amounts of research and overthinking. *How do I get there? Where do I park? What if there is no parking available? What's on the menu? What if I get there before everyone else? Do I just pick a table? What if they're already there and I can't find them?* And that's before I've been seated and listened to the waiter recite the specials.

I don't try to cover up my mental health struggles, but, as anyone who has struggled with anxiety knows, it's virtually impossible to explain how it feels to someone who hasn't experienced it. Instead, I've found that making simple excuses like, "I've got a migraine" (could easily be true — I do get migraines) or "I have to get up early tomorrow" (could also be true — the older I get, the more I've had to accept that I am

actually a morning person) are easier than trying to enumerate the number of things giving me anxiety and standing in the way of me attending a party or group outing.

My most recent therapist asked me if I feel guilty when I say no to invitations. I answered yes. When she asked me why, I couldn't come up with an answer, and she told me she thought it was because I was afraid my friends would label me a "bad friend" if I said no to things. At the time, I defensively shrugged her theory off, but now, I think she might be right.

I never want to be perceived as a "bad friend." I never want my introversion to become a barrier that prevents me from holding onto relationships. I never want my anxiety to rule my life that intensely.

But I also never want to be someone I'm not. I never want to try to cover up the fact that crowds make me nervous or that I'd rather stay home and watch a movie than go to a bar. I never want my anxiety to become something I'm ashamed of because it took so much work to accept it in the first place.

It's weird, being "normal" by one group's standards and the "outsider" by another group's. And I know, most people would argue that normal isn't really a word you can use to define people because *nobody* is normal anyway.

I still remember the day I "graduated" from my first round of therapy. Dr. Fischer gave me a box, wrapped in lavender wrapping paper and filled with colored words cut out and glued onto construction paper -- the tools she had taught me. I grinned and stowed it on the top shelf in my closet to serve as a comforting reminder of what I'd learned. My

parents, too, gave me a gift: a stuffed dog, ten times bigger than the Beanie Babies I'd been collecting with each successful appointment. I named her Jenny.

Little Cabin in the Woods

As a camp counselor, I played a lot of roles. Sometimes I was a drill sergeant, making sure my campers had their chores done in time for cabin inspection. Other times, I was a nutritionist, checking each tray in the cafeteria to make sure it included a fruit and a vegetable and reminding little Maya that, no, ketchup does not count, even though it's made from tomatoes. More times than I would have liked, I was a plumber, unclogging yet another toilet because the cabin's ancient plumbing couldn't handle the task. I combed tangles from hair, rubbed sunscreen onto backs, wiped tears from faces, and watched my charges roll around in the dirt after I had asked them to put on a new white shirt. Overall, my role was Mom. In fact, that's what some of them called me.

I worked at a fine arts camp that placed equal emphasis on providing an intense arts education and a "rustic" camp experience. In between ballet classes and violin lessons, my campers would learn archery, leathercrafting, camp songs, and teambuilding games (I always became the target when water balloons were involved). We took trips to the beach and painted rocks for the fun. We even had a ropes course on campus. I tried to teach them the value of a spontaneous dance party, one that didn't require leotards or the perfect shade of pink tights. Sometimes I believed that my job was to remind my campers that they were kids.

My days were scheduled. Wake at 6:50 to the sound of the loud bell outside our staff headquarters. Get campers out of bed, dressed in their uniforms (shirts tucked in, socks pulled up, hair brushed — always a struggle), and lined up for the morning flag ceremony. Eat breakfast in the cafeteria and check every camper's tray for a piece of

fruit. Supervise morning chores in the cabin, then usher each kid out the door to class. Work in the division office in the morning, then supervise lunch in the cafeteria. Gather campers back in the cabin for post-lunch rest hour. Send them off to their afternoon classes. Teach afternoon recreation (usually a random assortment of camp games), gather for the evening flag ceremony, eat dinner, and supervise the evening activity. Then hang out in the cabin with the campers, get them showered and ready for bed, and lead the nightly “bunk talk” which usually consisted of a question that each child got to answer (best part of your day, if you were an animal what would you be, etc.) and then a bedtime story or lullaby. I became famous for my a capella version of “Blackbird” by The Beatles.

Even though the daily schedule was rigid, each day was an adventure. Some of my best stories come from working at camp. There was the time a skunk died underneath my cabin, so we had to move all of our campers into a different one and wash every piece of clothing and bedding we owned to get the stink out. There was the time our division was on lockdown because an old man — who turned out to be slightly senile and completely innocent — had said something concerning to one of the counselors. There was the time a gaggle of moms from New York City all came to visit their daughters at the same time and ended up fighting with each other in the middle of our division. There was the flash mob we organized and got on video — a hundred tiny girls dancing to Lady Gaga at an art opening. And there was the time one of my coworkers accidentally stepped on the famous chipmunk that frequented our staff headquarters.

The camaraderie of being a counselor was as important as the time we spent with our campers. Our group of counselors was tight-knit and we helped each other through

crazy days and events. We worked as a team, planning activities, coming up with silly themes for the day (“Talk Like a Pirate” Day was one of the biggest hits), and troubleshooting each other’s camper problems.

I met my best friends at summer camp. I had never gotten to know people as deeply and as quickly as I did in that job. By the end of training week my first summer, I had formed a bond with two of the most incredible women I’d ever met. We spent all of our free time together, told each other tales of heartbreak, loved each other’s campers like they were our own, and stayed in touch even after the summer was over. It was a bond I was unfamiliar with, having usually been a part of a much larger group of friends. I wasn’t used to feeling so close to two other people. It was new and exciting, and it’s still one of the most important things I remember about that job.

And while it was fun, camp counseling was stressful. Sleep was elusive, we worked 16-hour days, and the only coffee we had access to was the secret stash in the back of the cafeteria kitchen. By the end of the summer, all I had to do was look at the cafeteria servers and they would disappear for a few moments, emerging with a cup of coffee to hand me while I loaded up my tray with French toast sticks. We only got one 24-hour period off per week, and any personal tasks had to be accomplished while our campers were in classes or after they had gone to bed. Our staff headquarters — the only building off-limits to campers — was the hub of activity during those hours, with people showering, checking their email, calling home, planning cabin activities, and sometimes napping. It was like our clubhouse, and the campers were envious of all the supposed “fun” that happened inside the forbidden building. There was even a camp legend that it housed a hot tub. In reality, it was only slightly bigger than the cabins we lived in, and

was furnished with old thrift store couches and armchairs. But we loved it like it was a four-star hotel, the only place where we knew we would be surrounded by adults.

And while I loved my coworkers, the real joy of the job was my campers. For four blissful, hot, sleep-deprived summers, I played with them, counseled them, and carried them. They were my babies, and while each one of them made a lasting impression on me, the one I will never forget – even after I have my own children to call me “Mom” – is Sophie.

Sophie was the youngest of our pack that summer, a mere eight years old. She had a wild black mane of unruly curls that wouldn't stay put no matter how hard you tried. One single curly-cue always hung directly down the middle of her face, as if dividing it, and her shirt was never clean. She wore glasses that were slightly too big for her, and her voice was raspy and deep. At any moment she could be seen sucking on the middle and ring fingers of her right hand. This was a habit her parents were apparently trying to break her of, so I began catching her eye and miming a signal for her to take her hand out of her mouth whenever I caught her doing it. She would look downward and slowly wipe her spit-covered fingers on her already dirty shorts.

Sophie was from Manhattan, like many of the other campers whose parents treated art camp in the woods of northern Michigan like a really expensive daycare. These pre-teen campers flew across the country by themselves, carried rhinestone-encrusted iPhones, and wore Coach sneakers with their camp uniforms. Knowing Sophie's backstory, I expected another privileged eight-year-old with helicopter parents and a tiny violin. But Sophie was more than that, and, less than a day after her arrival, I realized she would be my biggest challenge.

Each day with Sophie was a fight. She refused to shower. She refused to brush her teeth. She refused to eat her apple at lunch. She refused to follow the chore chart in the cabin. She was mean to the other campers and standoffish with staff. But she was also smart. Each camper was allotted two phone calls home per week, but Sophie found a way to work the system by instructing her parents to call the camp office instead. When they called, she sat on a stool in the corner, speaking in rapid French because she didn't want anyone to know what she was saying. She questioned my authority constantly, prompting me to make a phone call to my own mother to say, "Sorry for ever being a pain the ass."

I learned to practice patience, though I wasn't always good at it. Once when Sophie started screaming and crying during morning chores, I snapped at her and told her to finish her job or she wouldn't get to have ice cream the next time we went to the ice cream stand. The other campers stared. After that I tried to anticipate my frustrations. I started excusing myself from the cabin and slipping into our staff headquarters building to vent to another counselor.

I felt guilty about all the attention I devoted to Sophie. I sat with her in the cafeteria at breakfast and waited for her to finish her cereal after the other campers had gone back to the cabin. I pulled her aside in the middle of cabin games to talk about playing nicely. We went for walks when she got angry or upset. I worried that the other campers would notice and get jealous. I also worried that I couldn't give Sophie what she needed. No matter what intervention I tried, it didn't seem to help. It wasn't until Sophie told me she had never made friends in school before that I understood why her special brand of difficulty deserved so much of my attention.

We were sitting on a bench by the lake after one of our cool-down walks, and she was staring straight ahead, fingers in her mouth and her too-big glasses slipping down her nose. I stared out at the waves, too, and waited for her to talk.

Eventually she took her fingers out of her mouth slowly and said, “I don’t want to leave.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“I don’t want to go back to school.”

I remembered with a pang how at the beginning of the summer she referred to every other camper she met as “my friend Abby” or “my friend Maria,” even when those campers showed no interest in being her friend. In that moment, I realized Sophie was not the oblivious, messy child I had thought she was. She was painfully aware that she was different. And that hurt me on a level I wasn’t expecting.

When I was eight years old, I never would have made it through two weeks at camp. I was too anxious to spend even a long weekend away from my family. I would have cried in my bunk at night and refused to participate in activities because my stomach hurt. I would have been the crazy homesick kid, the one the counselors had meetings about and didn’t know how to help. Knowing this, I admired Sophie and all her messiness. She exhibited a courage I had never known as a child. She tried – and sometimes failed – to make friends, to initiate games, and to lead the other campers in singing her favorite camp songs. But even when she failed, she was having an invaluable experience. Camp for Sophie wasn’t about being an eight-year-old prodigy or perfecting her plié. It was a chance to feel included for the first time in her life.

During the last session of camp, after Sophie had left, I got a phone message. *Sophie wants you to call her on her birthday*, the slip of paper read. I laughed to myself — it was a totally Sophie-esque thing for her to do, instruct me to call her to tell her happy birthday. A few days later, on her birthday, I called her. Her father answered and seemed surprised when I asked to speak to Sophie.

“Maddie!” she said, after her father handed her the phone.

“Hey Soph!” I said. “Happy birthday!”

“I knew you would call! I miss Cabin One so much! How are my friends?”

She filled me in on her family’s trip to the Hamptons, told me what flavor of ice cream she picked for her birthday, and talked about the new school she was starting at in the fall. She didn’t stop chatting until I told her I had to go back to the cabin. I couldn’t believe how different she sounded. She was a different kid from the one I had met on her first day of camp, when she wouldn’t take her fingers out of her mouth or share the sidewalk chalk with other campers. All the outbursts, all the frustration, seemed worth it. Sophie had needed camp as much as the other campers, but she had needed it in a different way.

Like Sophie, I needed camp for reasons I didn’t see at the time. I had taken the job as a sophomore in college, a music education major eager to work with young people in an artistic environment and desperate not to spend another summer in my hometown. Even though I was already in college, it was my first time spending an entire summer far away from my family. It was my first time traveling on my own. I had anticipated that the position would hold many challenges, but I hadn’t imagined it would be life-changing.

In the time that I spent working there, I came to find my passion for mentorship. I also overcame some of my introverted tendencies and learned to function as part of a team. By my final summer, I had worked all the way up to Assistant Director, a leadership role I never imagined taking on when I first started as a counselor. I formed relationships with people who are still integral to my life, even though we only worked together for seven weeks at a time. I learned to let go of control when I needed to. I practiced being professional in situations when it would have been easier to just freak out.

I never went to summer camp as a child. But that doesn't mean my life wasn't changed by one.

Not Quite Love Scenes

1

The first time I met John, I couldn't believe somebody's eyes could be that blue. I also couldn't stop staring at them while he introduced himself in between mouthfuls of Chinese food at our first staff dinner. I listened to him explain his musical philosophy and plug his band while I ran my tongue along my teeth, checking for sneaky pieces of broccoli. When prompted, I offered small pieces of information about myself, never tearing my eyes away from his.

"He looks like Prince Eric from *The Little Mermaid*," my friend Mickey said, a few weeks later.

Yeah, if Prince Eric could see into my soul, I thought.

Then I found out John had a girlfriend and all of a sudden his eyes seemed less blue.

2

John was always opportunistic. Once he called me because he had seen my car in the parking lot of the grocery store on his way into the office. He was craving Oreos.

"Regular or Double Stuf?" I asked, turning my cart around and heading back toward the cookie aisle.

"Surprise me." I could hear his wide, toothy grin.

I bought him Double Stuf and delivered them to his office that afternoon.

"I knew there was no way you'd get me regular Oreos," he chuckled.

I threw a cookie at his face as if I wasn't flattered he found me so predictable.

3

I've never been the kind of person who can make out with someone in a parking lot and then pretend it never happened. Unfortunately, John was exactly that kind of person. I learned this when I eventually forced him to talk to me about "that incident" on a chilly May afternoon as we walked through the northern Michigan woods.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked, somehow still sounding gentle, even though I knew he was frustrated.

I stared down at the brittle, brown pine needles beneath my feet. A few small blades of green grass were finally starting to show through. I felt bad stepping on them. "Well, what do we do now?" I countered.

"I think . . . we're friends, right?" That was always his go-to answer.

"Right," I replied. That was always mine.

4

John taught me how to play the mandolin. He had only been playing for a few months, but he had pretty much already mastered the basics. He carefully bent my fingers into the correct shape, placed them onto the thin, sharp strings, and called out chord names while I clumsily strummed along. He taught me old folk tunes, occasionally accompanying me on the guitar – another instrument he had taught himself in mere weeks – and singing along. He was patient when I second-guessed myself, and he didn't scold even when he could tell I hadn't been practicing.

He bought me my first pair of new strings when I had worn out the original ones that came on my instrument. He taught me how to change them. I think he wanted me to be good enough to play along at his speed, for us to be a duo. He didn't realize I just enjoyed watching him teach.

5

John had let me down enough times that I should have seen this one coming. I listened to him explain over the phone why, once again, he was unable to make our plans work. I unpacked my overnight bag and put away my tiny, travel-sized toiletries one by one. I halfheartedly threw one shoe across the room. I looked at the clock and realized I had spent a full hour waiting for his call, even though I knew what he would say.

I picked up the shoe I had thrown and put it next to its mate in the closet. Those shoes were too nice to waste on a stupid weekend trip anyway.

6

At the beginning of every month, I helped John pick out new clothes from the kitschy subscription men's clothing site he loved. We would huddle over his laptop in our usual coffee shop, debating which color cardigan to buy for him. I always opted for the more exciting colors, especially when it came to pants, and though he scoffed at my suggestion that he own a pair of mustard cords, he bought them anyway.

Every once in awhile, he'd end up with a shirt that fit weirdly or a sweater that was too bulky, but most of the time, my picks were spot on.

He's the only guy I've ever picked out clothes for. Sometimes I still send him pictures of plaid shirts I like. I pretend he buys them.

7

John was a master at pairing ice cream flavors. When we went out for our ritual afternoon coffee on Thursdays, he would glance sideways at the ice cream tubs in the corner of the café and say slyly, "Which kind should we get today?" I always let him pick, and he would join me at our table with two perfectly complementing flavors. Java chunk and brownie batter. Raspberry rendezvous and blueberry cheesecake. S'mores and cookie dough. He always let me have the last spoonful.

8

John told me about her in our favorite bar.

I think I had been expecting it, but I still stared down at the foam in my beer glass as he said her name. I shifted my weight and felt the bar stool wobble beneath me. I wondered why I had matched mustard tights with a floral dress.

Finally, I looked up and told him I was happy for him. She was great. They were great. This was great. He smiled sadly at me as if he'd been dreading this conversation, as if he knew how upset I was pretending not to be.

He paid for my beer and that made me even sadder.

9

I asked John if he could help me pack my car the night before I was scheduled to move. I had a twelve-hour drive ahead and I wasn't about to haul a bunch of giant boxes full of books down the stairs at six in the morning.

He lugged all the heavy things for me, helped me fit as many boxes as possible into the tiny backseat of my car, and cracked jokes the entire time while I wiped sweat off my face.

We said goodbye in my empty bedroom. He had to go catch a movie with a friend. I was a mess after he left, but I knew he was probably doing fine. The kind of fine I hoped I would be eventually.

10

I called John recently in a moment of weakness.

"I need relationship advice," I blurted out.

"Oh really?" He drew out the "really," as if to sound much more interested than he probably was.

I rambled about the man I was seeing, about how unsure I was that it would work out, about how impossible dating seemed. We hadn't talked like this since I moved away, but all of a sudden it was like we were back in our coffee shop, and I was telling him tales of failed romance over steaming mugs of dark roast and day old donuts.

Back then we didn't acknowledge that he was one of those failed romances, and we didn't do that on the phone either. He gave me his standard advice and I tried not to remember that he was the one I was still getting over.

It Takes a Village

I was raised by a tribe of women. There was Sally, with spiky hair and mismatched earrings, whose son was my childhood best friend and who let me watch Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles at her house even though she knew my mom wouldn't allow it. There was Liz, warm yet sarcastic, who treated me like a daughter even though our families only saw each other a few times a year. There was Leeann, always sunny and optimistic, who wrote me a poem on my thirteenth birthday.

And of course there was my mother, strong-willed, nervous, and artistic, who had been faced with the task of raising three daughters by the age of thirty. The women who helped raise me were her best friends. Some lived far away, some moved away eventually, some lost touch, but all of them treated me like their own and still do.

My mom was a stay-at-home mother in the nineties, but she was also a feminist. These were two conflicting aspects of her life that she worked hard to reconcile. She struggled to occupy the role of "housewife" when she had long imagined herself working and helping support her family. So she sought the advice of other women in the same position.

Sally and my mom were joined at the hip for most of my childhood. They were both artistic, free spirited, and independent women who had suddenly (and perhaps reluctantly) adopted the term "housewife." Sally's son and daughter were close in age to me and my sister, and our playdates were just as fun for our mothers as they were for us. While Sally approached parenting with a more liberal style than my own mother, I still felt safe and loved in her home. She taught me and my sister how to make rubber bugs in

candy molds, and she didn't mind when we stripped down into our underwear and chased each other through the hallways.

Later on, Sally and her family relocated to Colorado and our families began making annual visits to see each other. During one visit in my preteen years, Sally encouraged me to pursue my love of music. A singer herself, she smiled at me as we sat on my living room floor and flipped through my parents' extensive CD collection. She pointed out the albums she loved, the tracks she hoped she'd get the chance to perform someday. I watched her and thought I had never known anyone so cool.

In order to connect with more women who shared her same parenting beliefs and struggles, my mother joined an email list for "Feminist Mothers at Home." The women from "The List," as my mother would come to call it, swapped stories, encouraged each other, and gave advice on what to do when someone's teenager came home smelling like weed. They wrote back and forth constantly, a web of women connected by feminism and the advancement of the internet.

Sometimes I would overhear my mom retelling some woman's parenting horror story to my dad late at night and I would think, "Thank God our family isn't like that." I didn't think about the crazy stories she might be telling them in return.

I've never asked my mom how much she told these women, many of whom I'd never meet, but I have wondered how much they knew about the struggles I faced growing up. Sometimes it bothers me that perhaps on a day when my mom was particularly frustrated with my adolescent unwillingness to talk to her about my problems or my terrible grades in AP Chemistry, she might have sent off a long, rambling email

about the particulars of my life to a group of women who, in my own selfish opinion, had no right to chime in on how to “raise” me. They weren’t my mothers. They didn’t know anything real about me.

My mom did meet and become close friends with several of the women from her list. These women, despite living on various ends of the country, became very real people in my mother’s – and my – life. They made trips to visit and sent birthday cards. Their friendships with my mom extended far beyond the original email list. My feelings about these women were different. They had a right to know about my life. They were living, breathing beings who hugged me, asked me about how school was going, and came to see me when I got the lead in the school play, so I didn’t mind if my mom told them all about my problems.

Liz and Leeann were – and still are – two of the women from The List who have had the greatest impact on my life. While they’ve both lived six hours away from my hometown for as long as I’ve known them, they’ve made trips to see our family at least once a year since they became friends with my mom. They drove up for every major school musical, helped plan mine and my sisters’ graduation parties, and wished us well on every single birthday. They’ve also provided an extra layer of support to me and my sisters as we’ve moved into adulthood. When I was living far from home for the first time after college, Liz’s house became my halfway point on long trips back to my parents’ place. She would make up the guest bedroom for me no matter how late in the evening I arrived, and we’d spend hours eating pizza, watching TV, and talking, the same way she and my mother would. Now, as an adult, I can see the reasons my mother was so attracted

to these women in the first place. I can see their importance not only as mothers, but as friends.

Liz and Leeann both have daughters of their own, girls with whom I played and joked and danced as a child, and anytime all of us are together at my parents' house, it feels like a giant reunion. Even now, with all of the kids grown up, it feels the same. We hug each other, wear our PJs all day, and squeeze as many people on the couch as possible. My dad, outnumbered by twice as many women as usual, cooks for us, and we sit on the porch, drinking wine, gossiping about reality TV, and laughing so hard our bellies hurt. At night, as I lie awake in my childhood bedroom, the sound of my mom and her friends talking and giggling floats through the open window, and I think about how many years they've done this. How many tears, dilemmas, and triumphs they've witnessed in that time. How lucky they are to have each other.

No matter how long it's been, we pick up where we left off. All of us, the daughters and the women who raised us.

Sometimes, when I think about having a daughter someday, I worry that I won't be able to provide her the same examples of strong women that my mom gave me. I've had plenty of close female friends, but I don't know if any of them will still be in my life by the time I have children. At age twenty-seven, I've moved around enough that many of my strongest friendships have deteriorated due to distance.

The closest thing I've had to a group of friends like my mom's is the women I worked with at summer camp during college. We were a tribe, strong and driven, raising our campers the best way we knew how, temporary mothers for a few weeks out of the

year. And while even then I saw the power that comes with sharing the task of caring for children with a group of women (albeit not as a mother myself), it's not something I've been able to hang onto outside of that shiny, bright, dreamy summer camp world.

I've tried my best to hang onto the strong, solid relationships I built with my fellow counselors, but, with so many miles between us, it's hard to feel like a connected group. And the farther away from those female friendships I get, the more I admire my mother's connection to her own group of women.

As an adult, I struggle to maintain important friendships like those modeled for me as a child. Without a roommate or spouse, I spend much time alone in my own apartment. Most of my longest-lasting friendships are with people who no longer live near me. I have friends nearby, but they're new. On top of that, I pride myself on being independent and taking care of myself, on not needing to lean on others when I probably should. I try, probably to a fault, to solve my own problems without the help of my friends. I don't have a tribe of female best friends surrounding me, lifting me up, and the fact that I'm somehow getting by without that makes me feel like I'm stronger.

Of course, my mother and her friends aren't so different from me. They're independent, they value alone time, and they try to solve their own problems. They rely on each other, but that doesn't make them weak.

I learned a lot from watching the women I grew up around. I saw them support each other. I saw them take care of each other. I saw them love each other's children. And while I'm technically done being "raised" by them, I think I still have a lot more to learn.

Graceland

Before I learned how to ride a bike, I learned how to use my family's stereo system. It was housed in a tall, antique wooden cabinet in our living room and it consisted of multiple shelves of equipment. There were dozens of black shiny knobs, rows of buttons, red and green lights. I didn't know what each button did, but I knew what to press and in what order. My dad taught me how to load the six-disc CD changer with albums, adjust the speaker volume and balance, and control it with the remote, all before I was even tall enough to reach the middle shelf. After dinner I would rifle through my parents' old wooden crates of CDs, pick out Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen, or The Police, then pull over a dining chair, balance carefully, and place the discs in the order I had deemed appropriate for the evening.

My mother gave me my love of making music but my father gave me my love of listening. His carefully curated collection of CDs was the center of my world as a child. A self-professed music nerd, though he'd never played a single instrument, my father was devoted to his music library. He listened. He hummed along. He picked the right album for each moment. That was all he needed to feel connected to the art. He couldn't pick up a guitar to play along with Jimmy Page, but he knew every word, every instrumental break, and every live version of his favorites. He took me to see live music whenever one of his favorite local folk artists was playing and he carefully selected the music for our three-hour road trip to my grandparents' cabin each summer. He spent his daytime hours as a software engineer for a big corporation, but outside of the office he was a 1990s hipster who drank craft beer with his dinner and alphabetized his discs in vintage soda

crates in our living room. For a few years during my childhood, he even had a ponytail to complete the package.

While my friends were listening to Raffi and Disney movie soundtracks, I was listening to Van Morrison, Eric Clapton, and Pink Floyd. I learned all the lyrics – some I probably shouldn't have known as a six year-old – and sang along with my dad while he chopped vegetables or wiped down the kitchen counters. Every day I looked forward to our post-dinner tradition of music in the living room, the stereo booming, my mom sitting on the couch with a book while my dad, my sister, and I spun in circles across the slippery hardwood floor.

Paul Simon's *Graceland* was usually the last album of the night. It was our dancing album. My dad, though he was tired after a full day in the office, always managed to find enough energy for this purpose. He swung his arms during "The Boy in the Bubble," stomped his feet in time with "I Know What I Know," and mimed the brass section during "You Can Call Me Al." My favorite song, though, was "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes." I loved the a cappella introduction, the chanting, the repetition, and the way my dad would croon the line, "Empty as a pocket." I loved the way the drums entered and the way my tiny body could easily bounce up and down in rhythm with them. While my dad twirled me around the living room and occasionally flipped me upside down, I pictured the glittery diamond-encrusted shoes that I wished were real. I didn't understand the lyrics yet.

That album meant love. It meant hugs and kisses and tickle fights before bathtime. It meant lying in a tangled heap on the floor with my little sister while Dad

pretended to fall asleep on the couch after the final notes of “All Around the World or the Myth of Fingerprints” sounded.

My dad introduced me to many albums as a child, but *Graceland* has been the most influential. It got me through the death of my grandfather, countless final exam weeks, and a move across several states. It inspired a multimedia project I did in college. It was the only thing that kept me sane when the boy I loved stopped loving me back. *Graceland* was always there for me.

One summer, I embarked on my first solo road trip from northern Michigan back to my hometown in Minnesota. The drive was twelve hours and I was woefully unprepared for it, having stayed up until three in the morning drinking whiskey with my friends the night before. Fighting a killer hangover, I miscalculated my arrival time going through Chicago and found myself stuck in two hours of rush hour traffic in a 1999 Chevy with no air conditioning on one of the hottest days in June. I sat in my motionless car, wiping sweat away from my eyes and staring wistfully out the window at the vehicles moving freely on the other side of the interstate. I plugged in my old iPod from high school and let the drums and choruses of *Graceland* soothe me. I listened all the way through the album twice, and even though the traffic sucked and I knew I wouldn't make it home until two hours later than I had planned, somehow I was calm while Paul Simon sang to me.

It's an interesting phenomenon to feel ownership over a piece of art you didn't make. I know this album is important to more people than just me. *Graceland* is widely recognized as one of the best albums of the eighties, and its unexpected commercial success in 1986 marked a miraculous comeback for Paul Simon, whose music career was

presumed dead by many following his split from Art Garfunkel. It represents Simon's musical renaissance through the discovery of different genres and styles from South Africa, as well as collaborations with native South African musicians.

Of course, when I first became familiar with *Graceland*, I didn't know any of this. I just knew that I liked it. But as I grew older, anytime *Graceland* would come up in conversations or pop culture references, I felt strangely possessive. It was *our* album, my dad and I. How dare anyone else lay claim to something so precious, so engrained in my childhood? How could they possibly understand the significance?

I don't remember the first time my dad played *Graceland* for me, but I'm sure it happened before I could even appreciate its importance. Perhaps my dad was listening to it in his old Volvo the morning my parents brought me home from the hospital. Perhaps it was playing the moment my dad knew I would be a musician, the first time I pulled myself up onto a piece of furniture as an infant and began to move my head in time with the drums. Or perhaps "Homeless" was one of the offbeat lullabies my dad used to sing to me at night while my mom laughed and shook her head in the hallway at his tendency toward songs with less than comforting lyrics. I like to think my dad knew *Graceland* would be "our" album before it even was.

I think it is human nature to assume that our own personal connections to music, art, and literature are unique. But it's also human nature to connect with other people over our love of these things. When we meet another person with the same favorite album or painting or book, we hold onto it for dear life, praising the fact that we have something in common with another person, never mind that it's not something either of us actually created.

And so, though I have no artistic claim to the album itself, *Graceland* became this bright, shining beacon in my life, one that I was sure nobody else could access on the same level. They hadn't seen my dad do his signature moves along with the title track. They hadn't somersaulted down the long hallway in my childhood house during "Under African Skies." They didn't know how every time I put on the album the sights and feelings — the color of the living room walls, the feeling of the slick floor beneath my fuzzy socks, the way the ceiling wouldn't stay still after I had spun around for an entire song — came rushing back over me, like one of those movie flashback scenes shot in sepia tone.

When vinyl started making a comeback and I got myself a crappy little turntable, *Graceland* was the first album I purchased. My dad didn't own the vinyl when I was a kid — he had made the full conversion to CDs by then —but I felt the need to experience the album in its first incarnation. I gingerly placed the well-loved record onto the table, lifted the needle, and listened as the first few buoyant notes of "The Boy in the Bubble" echoed throughout my living room. I read the liner notes, examined the grooves, let the warm wash of sound seep into my skin while I sprawled across the floor. And for the first time in a really long time, I just listened. I didn't dance. I didn't check my email. I didn't do homework. I didn't do anything other than pay attention to the notes twisting together and floating through the air above my head.

I heard *Graceland* in a new way. Sure, it was still full of nostalgia, but I was able to listen to it and think about the way that it must have impacted others on their first listens. I imagined people playing the record at their weddings, on road trips, or during a difficult breakup. I imagined my dancing scenes fitting alongside these other scenes, a

puzzle of moments connected only by this album. I realized that other people placing significance on this one thing didn't make my experience with it any less valid.

That's one of the coolest things about art. It's personal and universal all at once.

I know that record and all its crackles by heart now. I know the progression of the tracks and I can sing the starting few notes of the next one in those precious silent seconds in between them. I can anticipate when to flip the record over before it's stopped turning. That album is a constant when the rest of my life is not.

When my dad helped me move from Minnesota to Washington, he let me pick the music. I scrolled through his iPod, full of Springsteen, Zeppelin, and Clapton. We had twenty-one hours to kill and plenty of albums to play through. Eventually I landed on *Graceland*. My dad smiled as the first familiar notes wound their way out of my crappy car stereo.

"Good choice," he said.

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