

Fall 2016

# WE TELL OURSELVES STORIES

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WE TELL OURSELVES STORIES

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A Thesis

Presented To

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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By

Erin Sky Leigh

Fall 2016

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## In Order to Live

I have never seen anything supernatural—no monsters, no ghosts—but I can imagine what it would be like. I would wake in the middle of the night alone. The moon would be the only source of light, its beams peeking through the blinds to my left. I would turn toward it to center myself in those first disoriented moments of waking. I would see the outline of a figure against the window above my bed, like a shadow or an aura—black. It would have horns or possibly pointed ears; I would only be able to make out a rough shape. But I would see its fingers as it reached down to put a hand on my leg, and I would feel the chill that it brought as if it had sapped all the warmth from my leg with that touch. I would think more of the cold than of my fear and turn my body toward the figure, trying to warm my leg between the other and the mattress. Upon facing this creature, I would instantly sleep.

When I awoke, I would tell my brother and my sister. We would laugh about it; we would say it was creepy. One of them might even offer to stay with me if I was afraid. We would talk about it, maybe wondering if it was real or dreamt, wondering if it could happen again, and how we would know whether or not to believe.

Supernatural stories are fairly normal where I grew up and where my family still lives: a rural town in central Kentucky, right on the edge of Appalachia. It seems like everyone has a ghost story in that town, ones of their own and ones that have been passed down from generation to generation, from early life in Appalachia, when the mountains cast shadows deep enough to lose your sense of what's real. Crab Orchard is a good place for those stories to resurface—a ghost town itself, hollowed out, yet still clinging to the former glory of its healing springs and its famous theater. The town is a skeleton of what it once was: the springs are gone, the theater too dangerous and run-down to step inside. So, the people of that town fill it out again with unbelievable stories, reasons to make this town special again.

*I dreamt of Mom and Sissy last night. They took my hands and told me I would be with them soon. And when I woke, I was so calm.*

*I looked all over for her headstone at the cemetery, and just when I was about to give up, I saw her sitting there, smiling at me. And there it was.*

*It was a man. At the foot of the bed. I saw him. I think it was my grandfather.*

More often than not, ghosts stories become religious stories in Crab Orchard—blessings. They at once reaffirm faith and allow for the possibility of great evil. If one can be blessed, one can be cursed. If a spirit can act as a guardian angel, it can just as easily act as a demon. These stories present a clear evil; they make it obvious who the villain is.

I used to wonder why, if so many people I knew had stories of ghosts or creatures, I had none of my own. According to Dad's timeline, his experience with the supernatural started after a game of light-as-a-feather-stiff-as-a-board. He would have been about seven-years-old, maybe a little older—close to the same age I was when he first told me this story. He told me he had forced himself to believe he was dead, convinced himself so thoroughly that his life was over that he became like a ghost himself, and his sisters lifted him into the air using only their middle and index fingers. But when they set him down again, he was only vaguely aware of the ground beneath him, still damp with the morning dew. He had come as close to death, to the unknown, as a living person could and, in doing so, had invited the unknown back with him.

It is a good origin story—one I can picture frame by frame at the beginning of a television show or comic book with my father as the hero who confronts creatures from the darkness. He would spend each storyline

overcoming and outsmarting a different demon: the mysterious light that exploded in violent bursts in his cousin's bedroom, the large monster whose growl—part howl part human scream—had disrupted a campsite. The creatures he faced would be more difficult to confront the longer this chase went on, and despite his experience, he would always struggle. And, as with any good horror story, the monsters would be more than just monsters; they would symbolize a greater evil, the hero's true struggle: against his nature, his past. The ghost or monster is irrelevant; he is always fighting himself.

In an article published in the *Infant Mental Health Journal*, Alicia F. Lieberman claims that “all humans regularly spend some time throughout the course of our lives” in a “parallel universe” where the supernatural exists: monsters, ghosts, witches. Most of this time is spent in childhood, “when fantasy is more developed than logic.” It is an integral part of a child's development to confront the fears and impulses that create this fantasy. Children look to their parents in this moment to tell them that they are not alone and that they will conquer this danger together. However, Lieberman points out that children who have witnessed or experienced violence, who have come from abusive households, struggle during this stage in their development. The parent, who is supposed to be the protector,



becomes the monster of the child's fantasies. The child has nowhere else to turn to help him battle the imaginary threats or the real ones. The lines become blurred.

It makes sense to me, then, that a child from an abusive family would have an altered sense of reality as he matured. He might continue to see creatures or spirits into his adolescence or his adulthood because, since he had been old enough to imagine such things, a real threat had been present.

I have another origin story for my father. He might have been seven or a little older; he was a skinny child, and he had hard work to do. My papaw—his father—began teaching him his place on the family farm. That place was a quiet one and dirty and sweaty. There was no room for asking questions, for making mistakes. Papaw had been preparing that place since he had gotten married, since he had waited through the births of four daughters to finally get the son, the farmhand he didn't have to pay. And my mamaw, having failed him those first four times, was desperate to please him. So when her husband dragged her son onto the farm or into the back room for a few quick hits against his head, she said nothing.

I remember my papaw by the colors I saw around him: the too-bright green and yellow of Funyons bags and Mountain Dew cans, the

maroon plaid that made up the back of my grandparents couch. I would hide there with my sister when we stayed at their house, a time I find inexplicable given my father's childhood. We hid as soon as we saw Papaw's black Ford truck pass the house toward the barn. We knew we had time; he would stay there and drink for a while before stumbling into the house. And while he drank, we prayed that, this time, he wouldn't find us, this time we wouldn't have to see him at all. But when he did find us, as he always did, we would run into his arms and laugh like it was all a game of hide-and-seek.

But at the end of the night, no matter how many times he had slurred his words as he yelled at us for talking, for crying, for crying when we weren't even the ones he was yelling at, I always knew that my parents were coming back to pick us up. I knew that when he was mean, I would tell my mom and be comforted. I could tell my dad, and he would threaten his parents that they would never see their grandchildren again. When faced with the only monster I would encounter as a child, I had two champions to fight for me.

Of the numerous legends in rural Kentucky—the dead relative spotted briefly at the dinner table, the Hillbilly Beast in the woods—the one of the father who holds a rifle to his son's heart does not often get told. It's the

one where the son becomes old enough to work, and his childhood ends. He bales hay in the sweltering heat and, when the sweat runs into his eyes and he hasn't taken a break all day, he drops something. He messes something up. And then he's on his back, a rifle pressed against his chest, his father's dark, sun-burned body blotting out the light. "If you fuck up one more time, I'll kill you," his father says, and he believes it. His father keeps the rifle at his side the rest of the day. His mother says nothing.

And when the boy runs away to his sister's house, she takes him back, silently. His mother gives him back to his father, silently. She is silent as she hears his punishment. And when he grows old enough to fight back, to leave on his own, she will start taking punches too, and she won't talk about it. The town won't talk about it. But they will tell stories of stalking Bigfoot, of hearing a child's cry in the wind. They believe the stories without asking where they might have come from.

Dad says, "Let me tell you what I saw today." It's how he starts all of his stories: of Sasquatch, of a willow-the-wisp, of a person he saw who disappeared when he looked for them again. As a child, I would lean forward when he told these stories and gasp at the appropriate moments. I used to love the tension, then, between what could be real and what he was saying to scare me. But, mostly, I believed it. I believed that I could wake

to a spirit over my bed, so that I jumped every time I thought I felt pressure on my covers at night. But as I grew, I began to doubt that these stories were anything more than the other silly lies my parents told me as a kid: that they had Santa's phone number, that my eyes would get stuck if I crossed them. Lieberman would say I had come to terms with my childhood fears and desires and had learned to distinguish fantasy from reality. She would call my parents supportive during this psychological struggle.

I know I cannot cite Lieberman's findings to explain all of the belief in Crab Orchard; everyone who believes they have seen something unbelievable has not been the victim of abuse. But looking at an individual is different from looking at a town, and when I look at my father, I see the boy who kept his father's secrets because he knew no one would believe him, the boy who wanted to paint but was forced to strip tobacco, who spent countless hours staring at a rifle from over his shoulder, certain he would die. I look at my father as he tells me of a lady in a blue dress who was there and suddenly wasn't, and I know his stories have to come from somewhere.

## Nameless Places

My parents hung a photograph in my first childhood bedroom, a room I shared with the two of them and my brother and my sister. We slept in cots that we folded and put away in the mornings, or we all piled into one bed. Before I had anything, I had that photograph. A man and woman stand in the forefront, well dressed. It is their wedding day. They stand straight, unyielding, shoulder-to-shoulder. Neither smile. They turn their round, porcelain faces, their half-moon eyes, blankly toward the camera; their attitudes seem to match the colorless photo. They are surrounded by a world of black and white and gray, a world that matches my mother's description of Korea: "Concrete. Lots of concrete."

I don't know the names of the people in this photograph. If I had grown up with them, I might have called them *Halmeoni* and *Hal-abeoji*. I might have struggled with the Korean words, foreign in a mouth more used to saying "Mamaw and Papaw," or perhaps they would be only the first of many Korean words I would have learned to say. My grandfather might have told me stories from when he was a boy, half in English and half in Korean, and my grandmother might have taught me Korean songs. If I had known them, I tell myself, I would have called them every day I

stayed home from school sick and sung those songs back to them as I sat on my kitchen floor.

Their wedding photo is the only picture I have of the two of them, the only physical evidence that they existed together, so I cling to this image—so different from photographs of my paternal grandparents. In sepia, my mamaw's plain dress fades into the porch she sits on with my papaw; she becomes a blur, an extension of his dark presence beside her. But I knew that marriage. I can read into photographs of them every memory I have of his cruelty and her silence. To know the people in this wedding photo, my mother's parents, I must insert myself into their world and into the pale moon-like face of my grandmother.

I imagine her anticipation, her shaky hands as they grasped the flowers in front of her body. She would have felt the light sheen of sweat on her back, between her thighs, places she had never sweat before. She would try to imagine what he would look like in all black, waiting, but she could barely conjure the specifics of his face. She tried to remember every expression, every angle she had viewed him from since their parents had arranged the match, but she could not focus on an image. She could not focus. Yet, when she stepped to her side of the wedding table, when she faced him, she suddenly steadied. I imagine the firm set of her face as she

looks into the camera as a sign of her resolve, her calm sureness. Smiles would come later.

Or perhaps she had only met him once and could not remember his face because it seemed no different from the other dozens of faces she saw when she walked down the street. He could have been anyone. But it was not her future husband that she feared; she had been prepared to marry a stranger her whole life. She was afraid of his family, his mother, who might send her back if she displeased them. She would wake the morning of her wedding with dread, but also determination. She would sit at her vanity and focus only on the ritual of getting ready, painting the palest foundation onto already snow-white skin, arranging her hair around her veil in a smart, tight bun. She liked thinking of herself in those terms: smart, refined, disciplined. If she held herself straight and tall, perhaps her new family would think of her this way as well. When it was time, she turned to the camera, allowed her new mother-in-law to arrange her dress and her posture. She held her position: her first act as a dutiful wife.

I imagine her this way because it is romantic or tragic or both. It is how I might have responded to a happy marriage or an unhappy one, with just enough influence from movies to make it dramatic. And though I know I can likely explain my grandmother's expressionless face as a cultural difference, a Korean woman posing formally for a formal occasion,

I cannot help but give her the voice, the resolve, I never saw from my mamaw.

I know a handful of facts about my mother's parents. My grandfather taught English. My grandmother died when my mom was around thirteen. She had diabetes. My mom has it now. When my grandfather died, my mom was in the United States, and she cried in front of my dad for the first time.

I know that, at least as a child, I looked like my grandmother. The resemblance was enough that I mistook her school photo for one of mine. My mom claims she could see her mother's face in mine when I was only six weeks old. She came home from a date night with my dad, saw me sleeping, and insisted to him that I looked just like her mother.

From the way my mom parents, with lessons her parents must have passed to her, I can infer that they were fairly traditional, strict even. They expected things to be done: chores, schoolwork. They did not ask first.

My dad told me once that my grandparents fled from North Korea, but I have yet to find the courage to ask my mom if this is true. The subject seems too sensitive to bring up just to satisfy my own curiosity—just to have a good story to tell. I tell myself I don't want to take advantage of them, but really, I'm afraid she'll tell me that the story isn't



true, and the image I have of the two of them, running hand-in-hand over the border, having skillfully maneuvered around grand buildings and through forests, taking only what they could carry, will fade away in the truth.

Families don't call each other by names in Korea; they go by titles. Mother. Father. Uncle. My mother cites this, another cultural difference, as the reason she can't remember her parents' names. It would be disrespectful for me to introduce myself as Yon's daughter in Korea. It would have been disrespectful for her to introduce her parents by name. So, having possibly never spoken them, she forgot her parents' names.

I wonder what she called her father when he taught her English, when she sat at a desk in the front row of his classroom, no doubt excelling at the language. When he stood at the front of the room, his back to the chalkboard, did he ask her to call him *Seonsaeng* like the other students did? If she called him *Abeoji* by accident, would he blush, embarrassed that his daughter knew so little about how to behave in public, or would he have raised his hand, the way my papaw did, to strike his child even for a small mistake?

I like to think of him as lenient, the kind of teacher who introduced himself to his students using his first name. I imagine him bringing

learning games into class and candy for right answers; he was not a knowledge-is-its-own-reward kind of guy. He was full of praise, especially for his children, because he knew that praise more than anything would keep them in line, keep them seeking approval. He kept his children close because he knew times were changing; he knew they would choose their own spouses, and they more than likely would not live with him as he aged. When his wife died, and he was left with young children and teenagers, a single parent, he became the nurturer, a role that seemed to fit him already. He did not have room for cruelty amid all of their heartbreak.

I imagine my grandfather this way to match the discipline I attribute to his wife and to create a foil to the grandparents I knew. If my papaw would raise his hand as quickly as he would raise his voice, then my *hal-abeoji* would speak softly and handle his children gently. With only a few facts and a single picture of him, I can impress onto him all the qualities of the grandfather I wanted growing up, a man who would hold me in his lap as he drank tea, who would whisper stories to me of the family he left across the ocean—a man I would never hide from.

My mom does not talk about her parents without being asked, and I do not often ask about them. In part, I feel guilty, like a tabloid writer wanting details to unpack the lives of celebrities. I don't want to ask my mother to

relieve the pain she must have felt since she was just a girl and had lost her mother or when she became an orphan thousands of miles away from the rest of her family. Because I don't ask, have never asked, I am also responsible for not knowing their names or their real stories. If I had asked my mother when I was still small, when her brothers and sisters still called, she might have remembered, or she could have asked them. I would have gotten answers. If I had enough curiosity growing up to make them more than just the people in the photograph—the grandparents who died before I was born—they might not be nameless to me now.

But there's also something nice about having nameless places to fill. They have more possibility this way, more purpose, as they fill the role of the grandparents I never had. And when I look at the face of their daughter, my mother, in her own wedding photo, smiling widely, her body pressed against the man she loves, I know my stories for them hold truth.

## Tethered

A braid is such a simple thing. Three even strands separated and then woven together, (right over middle, left over middle, right over middle) and there you have it: a rope to bind yourself to someone else, to tether a body to yours.

Every morning of my childhood, my mother twisted us together. Her hands were buried knuckles-deep into the thick strands of my hair, but they were steady as she built the bond between us. I was a Rapunzel child with black hair so long I held it in my arms when I used the restroom. Every morning, Mom piled my hair high into a tight ponytail. She yanked my head around with the force of her brushstrokes, but she insisted that I hold my head straight. When she had smoothed out any imperfection, she would secure the hair at the top of my head with a long hair tie with two large beads on its ends. A crack would explode behind my ears every time her fingers slipped, and the beads knocked against her knuckles. Sometimes, she tied it so tight the band broke and beads scattered to the ground.

After she had secured the ponytail, she would braid the remaining mane down to its brittle ends. Mom tightened the weave with each twist, pulling her hands roughly in either direction. I could hear strands of my

hair pop and break with each tug. The farther down she braided, the more violently my head snapped back. I would step away from her, trying to hold the braid taut so her yanks would not shake my body. She would halt her work and pull on my braid until I stepped back. It was as if she was trying to remind me that she had bound us together, that I would not leave without her.

I would undo her work at the end of the day when I had just gotten home from school and she had just left for work. I would loosen those beads, so delicate and dangerous as they knocked against my own fingers. I would loosen the braid, from bottom to top, running a finger through its middle. As I untwisted, my hair would drop down to my legs. The skin of my scalp, behind my ears, at my temples, would sink into its natural place, relaxed.

I didn't know then how much that feeling—strain and release—would come to define my relationship with my mother. I did not yet wonder at the other ways and reasons she tethered me to her, except to ask why I still had to hold her hand when my siblings did not, when other kids my age didn't hold their parents' hands anymore. We were walking across a store parking lot at the time, and I scanned around to see that I was the only one being held. She turned to me and answered, "So you don't go anywhere," and tightened her grip, her bony fingers and her wedding ring

cutting into my small hand. I tried to wiggle free from her crushing fingers—uncomfortable and embarrassed—and she held me even tighter. I didn't know it then, but we were already stuck in a tug-of-war over my freedom.

Mom had a perfectly legitimate reason to keep me close. When I was two years old, she had let something bad happen to me. She had driven a car with her twin daughters in the backseat. She had been looking for the place to pay her water bill. She was nervous and jittery, symptoms of what I now understand to be her anxiety. So when she finally saw the right building, she turned toward it and forgot to yield to traffic, forgot to yield to the truck that hit the passenger's side where I was locked into my car seat, where I flew forward, and the seat in front of me rubbed burns onto my forehead and nose and tore open my right eye. I will wear the scars from these injuries for the rest of my life: across my forehead, my eye, and the bridge of my nose.

What I remember of that day comes in flashes: the blond hair of a paramedic, my father appearing as if from nowhere. Most of what I know of that day comes from what people have told me, like that my mother held me the whole time, soothing my bleeding face, that she never complained of a pain in her hand, so that it was hours before doctors discovered her broken wrist, fractured in three places.

Now, when I think about that day, after having experienced real regret myself, I think only of my mother. She must have thought she deserved the pain in her wrist. She would have held me right over the fractures so she could feel the weight of what she'd done. For years, when she looked at me, she must have seen the broken baby in her arms and feel the need to hold me tighter. She punished herself by reliving that day, and it drove her to want to protect me.

I can say this about her now that I am no longer a child standing in front of my mother, neck stiff against the hard pulls of a hairbrush, its bristles scraping my forehead and my ears. Now that I know what it's like to step away, I can look back and see the way her body must have tensed every time she thought of letting me get hurt again—the consequences of carelessness. But at the time, I could only tell that there was something strained between us, something uncomfortable. When I was five or six or seven—young enough to still believe that my private thoughts influenced the world—I believed that the tension between us was the result of not loving my mother enough. My father was the fun parent, the gentle parent, and I feared that my great love for him left less room to love my mother, that my mom and I were not close because I had chosen my father.

I thought if I said I loved her loudly enough, it would become truer. So when my siblings and I piled into our father's van for school in the

morning, I would blow kisses to my mother, who stood by the kitchen window. I would wave and make my hand into the “I love you” symbol, and before our van reached the end of the driveway, I would announce, “I miss her already.” As far as I know, she never knew I said it, which meant to me that it counted more, that it wasn’t just for show, yet it wasn’t true.

On weekends, when Mom was home from work and I would wear my hair down all day, I would go to her to braid my hair before bed. She and my father waited in front of the television for my sister and me to stand in front of them for a simple braid to sleep in. I went to Mom on those nights, knowing Dad’s hands would be softer, his braid looser. I went to Mom and let her fingernails scrape my scalp as she separated three even pieces. I let her yank each piece into place in a tight braid that would not come loose in the night. I went to Mom because I knew it would hurt a little bit, and that’s how I thought I could prove my love to her.

But despite my efforts, I could not stop feeling that things between us were forced: forced conversation, forced affection. These did not come easy for us. I remember, once, when Mom came into the room I shared with my sister to check on us at night, I threw my arms into the air for an embrace, calling her to me. I watched her go to my sister’s bedside instead and, while I can likely attribute this act to the fact that she couldn’t see me



in the dark, I couldn't help but feel slighted. When she woke me the next morning with an outfit ready for school, I turned away from her kiss.

I began to see these slights differently as I grew older—how I would ask for a glass of water, and she would set one in front of my brother; how I could do any amount of housework, and she would praise my sister for her helpfulness. As I aged and she tightened her hold, as I stayed home every weekend because she said I should not have fun two days in row, I convinced myself it must be cruelty that made her this way. By the time I was a teenager, I had the fully-formed thought: my mother hated me because I was a constant reminder of the car accident—her biggest mistake. She couldn't stand to look at me and remember, so she ignored me.

I was a teenager when I could form these words into the sentences I whispered to myself alone, but I was ten when those feelings first started. At ten, I had the first of two plastic surgeries on my scars from the car accident. By the end, the scar on my forehead became a long line, from hairline to eyebrow, but the scars on my nose and across my eye were the same. Doctors stretched my skin, removed its layers. I was stitched; I scabbed. They covered me in gauze until it felt as if they were trying to erase the accident all together and erase the blotch in my mother's memory. By extension, I began to feel that I was the thing she wanted to erase, that

if I left, she would have no cause for guilt or shame. I convinced myself that she believed that I would only ever be her burden.

I told myself those things when I was angry with her for other reasons. I was a teenager, and even teenagers who haven't gone through surgery or trauma clash with their mothers. But when we had one of those stereotypical conversations about responsibility or laziness, I had a scapegoat, a one-liner that exempted me from any blame. I would not have to examine my own behavior if, no matter what I did, my mother had already decided against me, if she couldn't help but hate me. I edited out the cruel things I would say to my mother, the reason I once caught her crying over the dishes, because I wanted to remain blameless. If I didn't acknowledge my own role, even in my memory, I could make every conflict about her. But, really, it was like I was reliving the morning I turned from her kiss, knowing it would hurt her yet feeling justified in doing it because I felt that she had hurt me. I told myself I was only reacting to her, the way she picked on me. I made myself the victim.

I have no doubt that my mother did single me out. I remember a day when I was fifteen, one of the few times I was allowed to go to the movies with friends and, this time, I would also be going with my older brother and his friends. I remember jumping into the air when my father told me I was allowed to go. But before I left, my mother pulled me aside and told

me that my grandmother had died that day. I shouldn't have bothered my father. I could still go, but I was not to say a word to my siblings. She didn't want to ruin their night, but she wanted to tell me what had happened to make sure I calmed down, that I behaved myself. I remember this day and know that I could not have imagined the way she focused on me.

I imagine she must have seen too much of herself in me—the behavior she would call “wild” that she wanted to keep me from. She must have remembered weekends she spent as a teenager, weekends where she flirted too much and broke her curfew. She must have feared that she would have a daughter just like her, and she wouldn't know how to handle it. So when she saw me jump into the air and run through our hallway and heard me talk too loudly to my friends on the phone, she must have felt the need to hold me back, to keep me from acting like her. If she could not do it physically now that I no longer came to her for braids then she would hold me back with her words.

This narrative, of our sameness, could be as fabricated as the one I created as a teenager, though this one works to understand her more than accuse. I like to think that after years of giving my mother the villain narrative, I am finally mature enough to sympathize with her, to see where our lives intersect. But, really, I am sympathizing with myself. I am the

one who sees her in me, in the way my muscles tense, shoulders hunched as I drive unfamiliar roads, the way I hit the gas pedal hard when I am nervous or frustrated. I see her in the way I grumble to myself that my roommate hasn't done the dishes, how I'll snap the word "lazy," though I had never said that I needed help. I see her in me, so I try to thank people for the things they do for me; I try to look back at my mother and forgive because I need to believe I can be forgiven as well.

I know that my mom is lying on the couch in my childhood home, wearing scars I put there. We both carry many scars, invisible, from the way our words have cut into each other. But the clearest one runs down her face in a line eerily similar to my own scar from her own accident, our roles reversed.

She tripped. When I say it like that, the act seems blameless. But the day she tripped, it was as if my hands had caught her at the ankles, my apathy becoming a tangible force.

It was the summer before my junior year of college. It was noon, but I was still in bed. I might have even fallen asleep for a few more hours if not for the sound of the front door opening, bags rustling. Mom had come home with groceries already. I lay in bed, predicting her scolding: didn't I have anything better to do? I thought of how many trips to the car she would have to make, and I stayed in bed. But I felt in the same way

people say you just know when someone you love is going to die that I was supposed to have gotten up. I was supposed to be there, and because I wasn't, something bad was going to happen. It must have been the same feeling my mom had the day of the car accident, a feeling that told her she shouldn't have gone out that day—clearer in retrospect. So though I felt something like dread, I wouldn't know what that feeling meant until after I let the scene play out.

I stayed in bed as I heard her open the basement door; I even stayed in bed when I heard the first thud, the unmistakable knock against our wooden stairs. But I jumped up when I heard her cry out—a voice suddenly helpless. I saw her blood on the floor surrounding the cast iron stove she must have hit; I saw her bleeding head as she got up and felt that I had made the gash myself.

When I think of the way my mother seemed to control me when I was younger, the way she kept me as if on a leash, I also think of the way I followed her through the emergency room the day she tripped, how I spoke for her to the doctors and scolded her when she tried to clean her own blood from the countertop. Guilt pushes that kind of insistence onto a person, the kind she would have lived with for over twenty years. I try to understand that now, with distance and time, with our scars mirror-imaged on each other's faces, our guilt worn physically. We are like the strands of

a braid, strained against one another, recreating the path laid out by the other, stuck, yet holding each other together, bound in more ways than one.

## Kentucky Living

When we leave Kentucky, strangers check our feet for shoes. They check our words for the twang of a southern drawl. They check our mouths for teeth. They ask if we've slept with our cousins or brothers, if we've drunk moonshine from mason jars and played banjos on our porches. They've heard we brush our teeth with Mountain Dew. They have watched a *20/20* special on us, so they know how hard life can be, and how much do we know about making Kentucky Fried Chicken?

When I first moved from Eastern Kentucky to a northern state, I would tell people where I was from and the first thing they would say was that I didn't have an accent. It was a trait I had corrected in myself over the years, a trait I had come to associate with stupidity. Yet, the longer I was away, the more I came to see how I had not lost this trait all together; expressions that I had never noticed for their markedly Southern quality slipped out, suddenly inappropriate. I would get comfortable, sliding next to a friend in the front seat of her car, and hear my voice say "might should" instead of "maybe;" I would hear myself ask for a Coke instead of a soda. I would turn away from my friends, exposed. It was charming, they said, the way I spoke differently.

To many, Kentucky life, small town life, can be summed up by this charming quality: the rhythmic pitch produced from a loose jaw. But there are those of us who have seen the same mouths that pronounce “oil” as “ole” later form the word “nigger” and express the sentiment that “I don’t hate niggers; I just think everyone should own one.” There are those of us who see the truth behind the old stereotypes, that a toothless smile comes from just months of meth use, that a meth bust down your street, or even five, would not be that surprising. There are those of us who know that the feet of a poor child might not be covered with shoes, or perhaps the shoes would be too big or too small, donated from the Resource Center at school. There are those of us who know that this child, who might be in special needs classes, is not the result of incest but of heroin, which is making a comeback in small, charming towns like ours.

When I go home for Christmas, I see how little time has changed this town. It might be prescription drugs this time that threaten the community; it might be a debate about displaying the Confederate flag that divides people, but the issues remain the same. And when I went home for Christmas the last time, after leaving and coming back, I recognized yet another symptom of a town lost in time: the way men treat the women in their lives. When my uncle, lying weighty in a recliner after consuming the food his wife had served him, set a plate heavy with chicken bones in my



hands, when he did not ask or even command me to remove them but wordlessly volunteered me for a chore my body was made for—serving—and when I cleaned up for him, scrunching my nose into a smile, because I had left home and come back and *city slicker* is as much of an insult as *feminist*, I became one of those who see how tradition can be as harmful as stereotypes.

When I returned north, no one asked me what it was like to see my hometown with new eyes. No one asked about the cousin of mine who is out of rehab again, one who used to carry pills to school in her compact. No one asked what it's like to pass a woman on the street who is balding, followed by her three children, all with special needs, all with lice in their hair, and know there is nothing you can do about it, this symptom of something greater than yourself.

But they do ask to hear that Southern drawl.

## Portrait of a Marriage

For my parents, the day begins and ends with coffee. First thing in the morning, you would hear the bubbles and spurts of our old coffee maker. You could sense the coming sun by the warm, acidic smell of Folgers through the house. The smell lasts for hours as pot after pot is brewed. And late at night, when you should be sleeping, you would hear the scoop of fresh grounds into the filter as it is prepared for the next morning.

On a typical day, my parents will wake, hours apart, in separate beds on separate floors of the house. They will each stumble to the kitchen—Dad in his bathrobe, Mom rubbing her waist where her sweatpants have created grooves in her skin—and they will not cross paths at all. They will turn on different coffee pots with different mixtures of grounds. They will settle onto the couch at different times to watch different news programs. They will drink deeply from oversized mugs their children have given them for Christmas over the years, the thing that bonds them as similar creatures. They will converge sometime in the early afternoon to discuss meals and kids and whatever news story is currently playing on the television. They might talk about religion or politics, and they might disagree a little. Before long, they will separate again, as Dad

paints and Mom leaves for work, but they will kiss each other before they go.

This separation, this living together apart, is a result of convenience more than anything else, they say. With Mom working nights and the years Dad spent on a teacher's schedule, they were getting no sleep when they slept together. Mom would wake him as she crawled into bed in the early hours of the morning, and Dad's snoring would keep her from sleeping. And when they woke at different times, each needing coffee, each needing their own blend, it only made sense to get a second coffee pot. It only made sense that they would eat meals apart. It was the practical choice—moving away from each other. It is not because they don't love each other, they say.

When I was a little girl watching the news with my father, one of those fluff stories they always do at the end focused on how relationships fail. The point of the story was to say that most relationships won't last more than four years. I have read that estimate since then, but I always think of that news story, of the shots of couples lying together at the beach or sitting on a park bench. The passion dies after four years, the reporter said, and a relationship cannot last without passion. The reporter interviewed singles to hear how they had ended long-term relationships for that very

reason, and he interviewed couples as if to break the bad news. “How long have you been together?” I remember him asking. “Three and a half years,” they answered. We were meant to put the pieces together. I remember promising myself right there that I would never marry a man I hadn’t known for four years. I would be safe then, I thought, from the passion dying.

My parents knew each other only a year before they got engaged. They worked together in an appliance factory, passing each other in the cafeteria, sneaking glances down the assembly line. It sounds like it wouldn’t be romantic, the way each gesture would have been punctuated by concrete floors and metal parts, yet the beginning of a relationship is always romantic. They took a year to get to know each other during breaks and on weekends and allowed that the things they didn’t know they would find out sometime over the rest of their lives.

I have one picture of my parents’ wedding day. They didn’t hire a photographer. They barely had any guests. In the photograph, my parents stand in the middle of what appears to be their living room, a couch and armchair visible in the background. My dad has the same dark brown beard he would wear for the majority of my childhood, and my mom has the same clear skin she has now—the kind that almost refuses to show signs of aging. They are dressed plainly; Dad wears a dress shirt but no

suit, and Mom wears a simple dress with puffy sleeves. But despite their modest setting, their lack of splendor, their faces are bright. They have their arms around each other, and it seems as if their whole bodies are leaning toward the other, and they are smiling.

When I look at the photo, I am surprised to see the wide smile on my mother's face, the way her cheeks are lifted so high they nearly shut her eyes. She looks like a woman very sure of her choice of a partner. She does not look like a woman who would question or doubt the purpose or usefulness of marriage. Yet, at the time the picture was taken, she had already been divorced once. She had already been cheated on and abandoned while pregnant. Perhaps he has said the passion had died. She had already raised a preteen son nearly by herself. The woman in the picture has every reason to be skeptical, to believe that her feelings wouldn't last, yet she smiles.

I hold this woman's smile next to the image I have of my mother now, the one standing over the stove, shouting at me to get out of the kitchen. In this running image, my mother has a toothbrush sticking out of her mouth as she tries to get ready for work without burning dinner, as she tries to also finish the laundry, which she will forget in the washer, which will sit, damp but clean, for days until the mildew smell will force her to wash them again. This version of my mother is trapped by her marriage

and by tradition. She says, “I never thought this would be my life,” as if the woman in her wedding photo never existed. This version of my mother makes me think that, before they were married, my dad must have cooked for her and cleaned for her. He must have impressed her with how domestic he could be, and she must have thought they would always share responsibilities. Or, perhaps, she had found him so handsome or so charming that she didn’t mind taking care of him then; she wouldn’t have known how she would feel about it after nearly thirty years together.

As if to warn me of this fate, my mother has pulled me aside every time I have ended a relationship to tell me there is nothing wrong with the single life. She misses it, she says, the independence. When it was just her and her son, she felt in control, like she had taken back her life from her first husband. She made her own schedule and her own rules. She tells me this as if to give me permission, to let me know that there are choices storybooks leave out. She tells me this because she knows how my dad has been preparing me for a husband, how, when I go home to visit, he’ll send me to my brother’s room to gather the dirty dishes that have crusted over with time and neglect, dishes he doesn’t expect my brother to clean or even to return to the kitchen. Mom knows that Dad has told me, and, by example, she has shown me the domestic option, the one that adheres to gender stereotypes, so she tells me I can do something else.

Neither of us blames my father for being traditional. When I think of my grandmother, I can see where my dad got the idea of what a wife should be. She was a homemaker and a cook. She put heaping piles of lard into her meals, so everything tasted delicious. She never worked. She seemed to live to serve her husband, who abused that loyalty completely. So when Mom held a job, and Dad would do the occasional dish or make the occasional meal, he thought he was very modern. When the meals of his childhood did not taste the same without the Crisco, he thought it was fair to complain that Mom had done something wrong. He thought I would not find a man if I didn't learn how to cook, and I would never find a man as helpful as him. It's funny how we're always the heroes of the stories we tell about ourselves.

On a typical day, Mom seems content to cook and clean and work her job. She cares that her husband is fed and happy. She makes her kids favorite meals when they come to visit. But on days when Mom has been cooking all day, when she says she feels like she will never make it out of the kitchen, I know she thinks of those single days and might even regret leaving them behind.

When I asked my father why he married my mother, he said he couldn't imagine his life without her. He thought about what his life could be—as

an artist or as the teacher he would be—and it all dissolved if he tried to take her out of it. I asked him what he would have done if she had said no. Would he have shot himself or cut off his ear like the artists he has taught me about? “No,” he said, “but I would still love her.” It is the same answer he gave me years ago when I was a child, and I first started to see dissatisfaction within his marriage. I asked him, then, what he would do if he and Mom divorced. “If your mom left me,” he said, as if that were the only way their marriage would end, “I would still love her.”

When I told Mom what he said about marrying her, that he only saw his life if it included her, she laughed. She said it was hard to believe she ever felt that way about a person. It seemed implausible or fanciful to her after their thirty years of marriage. Those thoughts are for the young, she thinks, and not for her.

I am sitting on the couch next to the man I’ve told I will marry in two years. We will fall short of the four years I had promised myself but not by much. Tonight, we are watching a movie he has already seen but that he thinks is important for me to watch. At some point tonight, he will slide to my side of the couch and lay his head on my shoulder. I will stroke his hair or his beard. When my nose grows cold, he will open his mouth as if to swallow me and hold my nose between his lips, breathing warmth onto



my face. After a few hours, I will go to bed alone while he plays video games. I will wear extra layers to stand in for the warmth of his body next to mine. At five or six in the morning, he will stumble off the couch where he has likely fallen sleep, undress, and fall in bed next to me. We will sleep until my alarm goes off, and I go to work.

Tomorrow, I will wake hours before he does and spend that time getting ready. Ten minutes before I need to leave, I'll slide a hand on his calf to wake him gently. He will bolt awake, thinking my hand is a spider. He will drive me the fifteen minutes it takes to get to my work; he'll pull up in front of the building, and wait for me to get out. He might forget to give me a kiss before I leave, but I always stick my lips or my cheek out to him if he does. I will walk away from him and toward my seven hour shift, one that overlaps with the shift he'll work five hours later in a building twenty miles away. I will take the bus home, where I will wash dishes and make a meal for myself that will last until he gets home. Our paths won't cross until the next morning after he has come home to find me asleep, after he has played video games and fallen asleep on the couch, and after he has awoken to a bright sun that sends him stumbling into our bed.

I asked my mother recently why she married my father. It was the same question I posed to him, yet I hesitated to ask her. I wanted and didn't

want to know if she could remember her answer, if it satisfied her, years later, knowing she wouldn't always be happy, knowing so much more than that smiling woman in the wedding photo. With that question, I was asking her if she would do it all again, if she even would have married my father. In a way, I was asking her to tell me if it was all right if I wanted to get married someday, if my life did not look all that different from hers. I wanted to know if the days I spend, comfortable if not passionate, like her days with my father, were enough to make a marriage.

“Well,” she started, “I had never met anyone like him before. He was just so different. You know, your father, he's just so unique. There's no one like him in the world.”

## A Time for Noodles

We eat soul food at my house—real Southern dishes, like biscuits and gravy, eggs and gravy, fried chicken and gravy, tomatoes and gravy. Grits. Green bean sandwiches. Cornbread. My mamaw—renowned for her lard-filled dishes that my dad compares everything to—always said Mom’s soup beans were the best she’d ever tasted.

“I was just saying how I wanted some of Yon’s soup beans,” she would say as she ground cornbread into the bottom of her bowl.

My mom’s name is Yon. In South Korea, where she is from, it would likely be spelled like Yŏng-suk. It was one of the most common girls’ names in the 1950s and one of the first things she was asked to Americanize when she moved here.

There are actually quite a few Korean mothers in the region of Kentucky where I grew up, each having followed a military husband or their parents’ wishes. These mothers cook squid in a bright red sauce and bring brown, gelatinous blocks to their family dinners. They bring *janchi guksu* noodles to birthdays and weddings and ask their daughters, “When can we eat noodles?” to ask about their plans to get married. These mothers make fish sauce and bean cakes and share it family style.

I have never tasted this food.

We may have eaten more rice than the typical Kentucky household, and there was almost always a package of seaweed somewhere in our cabinets. My siblings and I enjoyed Yan-Yans as treats long before Pocky became popular and wrapped rice and soy sauce in seaweeds as snacks, but otherwise you would never have known that the woman who prepared our meals had spent the first twenty-some years of her life in Seoul, South Korea.

Mom doesn't make Korean food except for the occasional holiday when my brother asks for a seaweed wrap—*kimbap*. Made with blanched and seasoned spinach, sautéed carrots, pickled radish, egg, and seasoned rice, *kimbap* takes hours to prepare and roll. Instead, Mom makes the dishes of my father's childhood: sweet butter roll, pumpkin roll, and chocolate sheath cake—sweets she never quite got a taste for.

Even in food, we do not have a language to talk about Korea. Mom hardly ever talks about it, choosing instead to burying her childhood experiences in my father's. I do not know if she misses Korea, if it still feels like home, but the way she holds her memories close and to herself tells me that she wants it to remain hers, so I do not ask.

For many years as a child, I didn't know what South Korea was. I remember asking my dad if Korea was a different state than Kentucky or a different country; I knew even then to go to him with my questions. I

expected him to shake his head and brush my question off as something a child would ask, but he said yes. I did not yet have a concept of continents.

I imagined the aunts and uncles who called every now and then living in teepees. South Korea was foreign and distant, a part of my mom's past and, therefore, primitive. I saw them as shirtless and tan, cooking fish or some large animal over a fire outside their huts in land that was either forest or desert plains. Heat swelled from the ground, creating visible waves in my image of them; I only ever envisioned South Korea in the summer.

It took years for my mom to correct me—"Concrete. Lots of concrete"—and that was that.

I was maybe eight years old the first time I tasted kimchi. Kimchi, cabbage or radish pickled in red pepper and other spices, comes in gallon jars where the vegetables have been stewing for months. Upon opening a jar of kimchi, if you do not smell or taste a sharp tartness, close the lid and allow it to ferment for another week or two. Kimchi is not a food for the impatient.

At once spicy and sour, crunchy and juicy, fishy and a vegetable, kimchi stood out in bright red against the starchy Southern food on my plate, by the mashed potatoes and the pork chops. At first, I ate my meals

with a bowl of water next to my plate so that I could rinse the pepper flakes from the vegetable before placing it in my mouth. It may have been the least Korean thing I have ever done. Even after graduating to full bites of the red-flecked slices, I did not feel more Korean, but I made my American father proud that I was being more adventurous.

We ate kimchi with almost every meal. We drove to the Korean grocery store an hour away and bought two gallon jars. Sometimes we would forget one and let it ferment too long. The peppery juice would fizz until it squeezed around the lid and left a sour trail through our refrigerator.

Mom eats kimchi plain. When I was a child, she would use chopsticks to lift the kimchi from the jar. She hefted chunks out from the lip and bobbed them up and down, letting the juice shake off before plopping it into the pink bowl I ate cereal out of in the mornings. She would eat a bowl of kimchi for lunch. Sometimes she would throw kimchi into a bowl of soup or add the kimchi juice to Ramen noodles..

Sometimes she handed me the bowl of kimchi to place on the table for us to share. She might also have handed me a fork so I could lift the veins of vegetable the way she did with chopsticks. She might have thought of a time she shared a bowl with her own mother and thought of telling me but, remembering that I never knew her mother and never knew

anything outside of Kentucky, chose to keep it to herself. She might have sensed the divide between us even as we shared.

Wonton soup has been the one consistent Korean dish in my house. It was, in many ways, the perfect balance between Southern and Korean meals, always served with a chicken sandwich. I did not even realize it was Asian until I saw it listed as a side on a Chinese restaurant menu.

You make the soup by laying a thin wonton wrapper in the palm of your hand and placing a filling of *bok choy* and rice noodles in the center. You dip the tips of your fingers in egg and use the moisture to hold the wonton together as you press it closed. Boil them in chicken broth filled with scallions and, if you have sealed the wontons correctly, they will hold their shape.

Since I was a teenager, I have made wontons side by side with my mother. “You’re going to want to know how to do this someday,” she said, meaning when she’s not alive to make them for me. It was the first time she had hinted that she had wasted chances to pass her culture on to me. Our knuckles met several times as we brushed our fingers through the egg and onto the powdery top of the wonton wrapper, caking our fingertips as we went. Though we used a spoon to lift the filling into the wontons, our hands still carried their slightly oily trace.

The first time we made the soup together, my wontons fell apart in the broth. Mom pointed out why without scolding—I had filled them too full. She called me to help her the next time she made the meal. Koreans learned through trial and error.

There is a reason I can remember the handful of Korean foods I have eaten in my home so clearly, yet I reduce the foods of my Southern heritage to biscuits and gravy. I can imagine the feel of a seaweed roll in my hand, grown soft and flexible from the warm rice inside. There's a reason that wontons feel heftier in my hands than cornbread does. I have grown up with cornbread, with soup beans, with collard greens. I can dole out the ingredients for mashed potatoes without measuring and can name the best fried chicken in any town I've lived in. Each time Korean food touched my plate, it was punctuated by its differentness—its exoticism. It was the *janchi guksu* I was missing, and the fish sauce and the mother who could explain what each of them meant for me when the time came. It was the only way, I thought, I could prove that the Korean side of me, the invisible side, existed at all.



## The Gentleness of Others

I was sixteen staring at the night sky through the windshield of a barely functioning pickup truck. It was that time in early September where the changing season creeps in during the night with its first chill. I had worn a jacket that night when I crawled out my bedroom window, lifting the glass inch by inch so my parents wouldn't hear it creak. I had darted behind the shadow of every tree until I reached the edge of my parents' property, certain the full moon would expose me in its blueish light. Within minutes, that beat-up gray truck had pulled to a stop in the middle of the road, and I had climbed in. I hadn't put on a seatbelt, wanting to keep up the charade of being dangerous. We had parked behind a church building, wedged between one of its walls and a gated fence, facing the road. And when I lay back, my legs bare and white against a man's tanned body, I looked toward the sky, where shooting stars scattered down, and imagined this was what romance was like.

I was the girl men loved to corrupt. In many ways, I was the stereotypical "good girl": straight A's with a teacher for a father, no partying, no drinking. I wore this goodness so plainly I believed it drove the boys at my school away from me. I believed it made me unwanted. But when I met William, four years older than me, and I whispered the word

“virgin,” I felt for the first time the drive some men have to take any small innocence, to be the one to transform a girl into anything he wanted. He said as much, that he would train me to do things exactly how he liked; I was a blank slate, and that was what made me appealing.

He wanted to be in charge. He would yell if I didn't respond to his text messages fast enough or if I didn't react to his status online. When we were apart, he gave me chores to do: practicing blow jobs on suckers or hot dogs, timing myself as I masturbated. When we were together, he would undress me, then lay me on my back and press a hand against my forehead, his thumb between my eyebrows. He laughed because, with only one hand, he could keep me from moving. Occasionally, he would ask me what I wanted to do, but only because he wanted to hear me say that I wanted sex, he wanted to know that he had changed me, and I played along. I knew, on some level, that the unease I felt stemmed not from my naïveté but from dislike. I did not like doing the things he wanted, but I wanted to be able to say I had done them. I wanted credit for being adventurous, for being willing to do anything. I wanted to wipe away the title of “good girl.” I wanted to be corrupted.

If I had met William a few years later, when I had broken out of those high school years where everything felt uncertain, I might not have fallen so easily into him. I would have heard other men call me “baby” the

way he did; I would have heard all the same things, and I would have known their purposes. But as it was, I was sixteen. I had barely started wearing makeup. I barely talked in school, instead listening to thinner girls with longer eyelashes tell the boys how often they shaved their privates. I watched these girls because they had the boys' attention. They seemed so different from me, like they knew what it took to be desirable, and I wanted to join them, to be wanted.

I could see William for one day out of the week and be protected for the rest from feeling like a wallflower—what I was afraid I truly was. I would walk into school, my neck and chest covered in bruises shaped like his mouth and his crooked circle of teeth, and dared someone to ask me about them. *Ask me about my passion*, I wanted to say. I wanted to perform my new identity as a sexual, desirable girl.

When it ended, because of course it ended, I had to transform again to avoid being called sweet and innocent. This time, I would transform into the girl who didn't care. This girl didn't ask men for relationships, even if she wanted them. She didn't care if the man she slept with also slept with someone else; it was enough to have been chosen by him in the first place. He had called her a "bad girl," and she had laughed at how false that was and how maybe it was becoming true. She didn't care that it might take her a couple shots of whiskey before she said yes to a man she

didn't like, who had been begging for hours. She didn't care because to care risked losing them, risked admitting to herself that she needed them to feel worthy the next day. Here was the proof that someone could want her over anyone else. That's what she wanted.

If I could talk to that girl, now, I would treat her gently, something she doesn't know how to do for herself yet. I would not try to tell her that what she's doing and what she thinks she's doing are two separate things; she wouldn't want to hear that. Instead, I would tell her of the gentleness of others. I would tell her about the night I went home with a man from a bar, still too drunk to get home myself. I would tell her how, in general, this is not a smart move, but she wouldn't listen. I would tell her that I know what it's like to crave attention and fear losing it, as I did when this man invited me to his apartment, and I asked if I could just sleep there. I wondered briefly how I would get home if he refused, as if I expected him to leave me on the side of the road. But this man expected nothing more than to offer me comfort. He put on a movie that I chose and gave me a glass of water; he sliced an apple for us to share and offered to sleep on the couch. I would tell this girl, this younger version of me, how she will meet men who will wait for an invitation, will wait to know without a doubt that she wants it, before they will kiss her.

I would tell her about the night I almost had a threesome with a girl I barely knew and a man who was a stranger to both of us. I would tell her that I know what it's like to feel like giving in is inevitable, that when this man began unbuckling his belt, I was already wondering how I would explain my behavior the next day, even to myself. I would tell her that the girl I was with looked at my face instead of his, and she saw the way I had resigned myself, and she said no for the both of us. I would tell her how this girl who I barely knew walked me home in the rain, how she would check on me the next day, when we had the time and space to laugh about it.

I would tell the girl I used to be, the girl who wants so much to stop caring so she can never hurt, that she will learn from others how much freedom there is in caring. I would tell her that she will have other defining moments with people she won't ask to define her but who will anyway by wanting her differently and without expectation. I would tell her there are other ways that she is wanted, and despite what she thinks, she has chosen the least satisfying.

## Waiting for Tragedy

I am at the point in my relationship where I am certain that the man I love is going to die. I will see a text that says, “Headed home” and count the twenty minutes I know it takes to get to our apartment from his workplace. Sometimes, I will watch a video very loudly to keep out the thought of what his body would look like laid out on a stretcher. If too much time has passed, I will stare at the walls and ceiling and wonder if the car accident I’m sure he is in will have been caused by him or the other driver and if he’s being taken to the hospital now and if someone will have the sense to see that most of his texts are from me so I must be his girlfriend and they should call me, or if they’ll just call his mom because that’s easy to find in his phone. I imagine his face, that straight and perfect nose, swollen and twisted. I imagine his blond hair blackened by blood.

Something will happen. A text shakes my phone, saying “Stopped at my parents. Be there in ten.” And I will have ten minutes to undo my body from the tangle I’ve coiled it into and pretend that my hands were never sweaty. And, still, the heartbeats I feel in my ears and my feet won’t calm until he’s opened the door. Even after he has changed into pajamas and taken his place beside me on the couch, I will have this tingle in my spine that fears his absence. We will spend much of the day with our

bodies twisted next to each other on the couch as we sink lower and lower. When he asks, I will rub his feet, and when I ask, he will brush my hair, but all the while I will wonder why I cannot separate my happiness from loss.

I was raised on worst case scenarios. My dad has never hesitated to tell me a hard truth but only when it's hypothetical. Before the two surgeries I had as a child, he made sure I knew that when you're put under anesthesia, there's always a chance that you won't wake up. I didn't know how high or low that chance was, so I imagined it was as commonplace as births or deaths: *255 babies are born every minute. 100 little girls won't wake up from their surgeries every thirty seconds.* It still doesn't strike him as odd that he told me, at ten years old, that I might die from a simple procedure. "Well, that's the truth," he said. And now that he's older, going through his own surgeries, he reminds me again. There's always a chance.

When my family found out my mother has type 2 diabetes, Dad told me she might lose her feet, a fact he failed to mention only occurs in extreme cases. When I was a child, he told me the mild winters we experienced in the South meant that end times were near; the Bible predicted the reversal of the seasons as a sign of the rapture. Everything, to

him, seemed to be about how things could go wrong, as if he wanted to be prepared.

My mom, he thinks, has always been much worse. He cites the fact that, when they were dating, she owned two cars: one to get to work in and the other in case the first wouldn't start when she needed to get to work. More than preparedness, her focus on catastrophe seems to come from anxiety. Once, she interrupted a nurse as she was drawing her blood to run home because she thought she had left the stove on. She calls home most days of the week from her commute to work to double check that yes, the coffee pot is off, the stove is off, the oven is off, just like they were when she double-checked ten minutes earlier.

Dad believes I am just like my mother, that I have not learned to look toward the worst thing that could happen, but that the instinct exists in my blood.

According to *The International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, death anxiety is the emotional reaction a person suffers when confronting his or her own mortality. People with death anxiety are hyper-conscious of death—its inevitability and power to conquer their lives. Their turmoil arises from the lives they've built, good or bad, and the knowledge that a great power can take it all away.



Many factors affect the level of death anxiety a person feels. Younger adults usually have higher levels than older adults. Women experience higher levels than men. Those who feel grounded in their faith and religion experience less death anxiety. When you believe in a higher power that has determined your fate, that you will go on living after death in a paradise, that you have been saved, you aren't as afraid of what comes after your last breath.

Death anxiety lives strong in those who have started to question God—those who doubt. Though as a child I prayed with my father nightly, I was never religious. I prayed to Santa as often as I prayed to God. I learned the stories of Moses and Jesus from the Charleton Heston and Franco Zeffirelli movies but couldn't name any other characters from the Bible. Beyond attending a week-long Bible school one summer where I learned to sing *Jesus Loves Me*, I'd never set foot in a church. My family stayed home on Sundays, which I did learn was a day of rest.

By the time I was a teenager, music had replaced my prayers. I comforted myself at night with songs by *The Killers*, repeating their chant over and over: "Everything will be alright." In college, I briefly played with the idea of becoming religious but felt more compelled to join the community than to learn anything substantial, so I gave up again. I still believed in a Christian God and in the savior Jesus Christ—I had the

basics. I occasionally prayed in my car or in the shower—anywhere that didn't require the majority of my attention. Mostly, I did a lot of apologizing for not caring more.

I don't know when it happened. It wasn't something someone said, though I joined a program of artists, and they said many things. I didn't have a breaking point. I lost faith the same way I had lived in it—without epiphany.

The only prayer I have maintained in my faithlessness, one I utter to myself without being conscious of it, is the same one my father led me through every night. It starts, "Please bring Mommy safely home." I repeated that line to my father every night of my childhood. And, while it was meant to comfort me, to assure me that a higher power had the ability to keep her safe if I asked, it also implied that He could just as easily ignore her, allow her mind to wander and her car to swerve. This prayer held, side by side, belief and the possibility of loss that lies right at its edge.

On October 30, 2015, Jessica Smith Moberly left her house and didn't come back. Her middle child had a field trip that day, and she was meeting her at the elementary school only a few miles away. She had gone to that school more times than she could count, and she planned to go countless more. But, that morning, she must have been running late. Her husband or

her mother must have kept her home, would have gotten her going in one of those laughs she held in the middle of her short nose, just shy of a snort. I like to think of her laughing that morning.

A few years before, the city had constructed a bypass not even a mile from her home. The bypass was meant to speed up traffic to connecting cities and to keep semi-trucks from crossing through the small downtown area. Everyone said they were just asking for trouble having those big trucks on those narrow roads. They were glad to be rid of them with the bypass.

The bypass has a speed limit of 55 miles per hour. It creates an intersection with several side roads that have two-way stops to get across. One intersection divided downtown with the more rural part of town—the part where Jessica lived. On any other day, she would have stopped at the intersection, checked both sides for traffic, and then gone forward toward the school.

I don't know if on October 30, 2015, she stopped at the sign. I don't know if she looked right and then left and then straight ahead before hitting the gas pedal. I don't even know if she was wearing her seatbelt. I only know that her daughter had a field trip that day, so she drove forward and into the path of a semi-truck going at least 55 miles per hour.

Jessie was my first tragedy. I had been to funerals before and seen older relatives wither and fade. I had a friend whose mom collapsed at home and died, but even she had been old and unhealthy. Death had not been shocking. Death had not been unexpected.

Jessie was only twelve years older than me.

I have two images of her in my head. The first is a teenager with an eyebrow ring. She is thin and holding a cigarette and being cool before I had much of a concept for the word. She would bring me jewelry and allow me to repeat the latest anti-cigarette lesson I had heard in school. She said she knew, and she would try to quit. For me.

She is older, approaching thirty, in the other image of her that I carry. Her body has grown soft and heavy from having three children, and the roundness of her face and features gives the impression that she will be a very sweet person. This Jessie is still trying to figure out if I would make a better friend for her kids or for her. She said I'd have to come over sometime when the kids were gone so we could drink together and play the games our grandmother had taught us. But, though I had known her all my life as my cousin, she had started to refer to herself as my "Aunt Jessie."

Another cousin of ours made a similar remark the day I found out what had happened. On October 31, 2015, this cousin posted on Facebook

that her beautiful cousin, Jessica Smith Moberly, who had always been more like an aunt to her, had died the day before. “Please keep her babies, wonderful husband, and our whole family in your prayers,” she said. “I would give anything to be at home with my family.”

I remember pausing as I read the Facebook post. I held completely still, my mind working to make sense of something that didn't make sense. I knew people lied on Facebook all the time, especially when there is some kind of inside joke. I considered calling someone over to try to find the humor. I only managed an “um,” but it was loud.

When I made the call across the country to my parents, my first question was, “Is this true?” I followed with, “Why didn't you tell me yesterday?” I wanted the knowledge and the answers. I searched for the accident on local news websites. I wanted things to make sense. I found her quickly. The website did not include any pictures of her or her car, just the semi-truck stopped on the bypass. I spent several seconds doing the mental math to figure out if they had reported her age incorrectly on the website. They hadn't.

That day, I went to my last class of the week and allowed occasional tears to run down my face. Sometimes I let them sit on my cheeks. A friend drove me home and a few gasps escaped as I told her what was wrong. But I waited until I got into my apartment in my

bedroom on my mattress. I laid several tissues onto my sheets to catch the tears and snot that would no doubt collect beside my face. It was the last logical thing I could do. I lowered my face onto the tissues and audibly wept.

To experience loss, I think, is enough to make anyone fear it.

Death anxiety is selfish. You're worried about your own mortality—the chance that you won't get to wake up tomorrow. There isn't a word for the anxiety you feel around the possible death of others, the way you can picture your boyfriend's body mangled when he is five minutes late getting home. The closest I can find is separation anxiety, but even that doesn't quite capture the obsession and the fear of death. Perhaps the word does not exist because, unlike your own death, someone else's is not inevitable to you. Though that person will die one day, and you will die one day, he may outlive you. You no longer have anxiety over his death if you are no longer here.

If a word for it did exist, it would be selfish too. So much of grief centers on the self—trying to figure out who you are without this other person, reconstructing your own personality. You would be forced to look at who you really are. The word would be driven by your fear of the answer.

I stare at the clock and try not to move as I wait the unbearable minutes for the man I love to come home. I read every text message I received within the last twelve hours. I check Facebook profiles for sappy “RIP” posts just in case someone has heard before I have that he has left this world.

But I do this for me. I worry because worrying means it isn't real yet. I worry so that maybe I will not lay my face on a blanket of tissues to catch my own snot, maybe I won't hear a noise from my throat as if I am both gasping and growling, only to get up the next day as someone else. I do not want to rebuild myself from tragedy. I think of our life together, and I think of what I have to lose.

If I could die in his place, I would do it. I would push him aside and into life rather than continue to have death chase me from all sides.

But I wouldn't be doing it for him.

## The Act of Storytelling

I began my performance in front of a mirror. My father wedged both of his hands in my armpits and lifted, holding me in front of the mirror to stare at my own face. I have reenacted this scene many times since, seeking out mirrors as if expecting to see something new. But I have never experienced my reflection quite like I did that time, when, each time my dad set me down, I asked him again and again to lift me just one more time, to let me see that face that had just been remade. I had just survived a car accident, which had left the top right portion of my face burned and ripped in what would later become a scatter of smaller and larger scars. At two years old, I couldn't quite recognize what I felt when my father held me in his arms to face new blurs of red and pink flesh. I wouldn't recognize this feeling until much later for what it was: pride.

It was the same feeling that I would get when I entered school, and my classmates pointed to my forehead and asked what my scar was and how it got there. I would take a deep breath, rise up to my full height, and launch into my story. Though I remembered very little, I was thrilled to tell it, thrilled to see their eyes widen by the end.

I held these moments close to me: the "Wow!" right after I finished my story, the visits to the plastic surgeon who took pictures of my face and



gave me shark teeth for being brave, the boys at school who called me tough. Sometimes, I would stare at a new friend until she asked about my scars, needing her full attention before I could give her mine. The attention I got from talking about my scars, from simply having scars, meant to me that I was special.

Looking back, the need to be special, to be different, drove so much of what I would do. I had an older brother who, according to my parents, had a genius-level IQ and was so brilliant that the school principal repeatedly tried to move him up a grade. I had an identical twin sister, which meant that we received many shared presents on our birthday and were often called “the twins” or “the girls” instead of by our names. She had escaped the car accident with only a cut on her thigh about an inch long. Though I loved my siblings, I was hyper-aware of being overshadowed by them even before I had the words to describe it. It was my scars that set me apart from them, from anyone, and, though I couldn’t name it at the time, I was afraid they would be the only things that ever did.

Throughout school, I watched for any opportunity to talk about my scars, making the car accident the subject of every elementary school personal narrative. I told anyone who would listen what I could remember: a blond paramedic telling my mother she could hold me, sitting in my father’s lap as he held a sponge to my forehead, or maybe I had dreamed

that. Maybe I had dreamed watching the doctor sew my eyelid back together, but I told it anyway. The car accident and my scars became the ultimate icebreaker—the subject of the first question I would get from a girl and her mom standing next to me in the toy aisle—and in becoming so, they also became the ultimate legend I could spin about myself. “Look what I’ve been through,” I seemed to say. “You’ve never gone through anything like this.” I needed people to know the thing that made me different so that I could feel special. I spun a narrative of strength and endurance even from my kindergarten seat, daring the boy next to ask me what had happened.

I judged worthiness by how much a person had been through and assumed everyone else did the same, so I created a hierarchy of suffering with myself at the top. I kept the idea of that hierarchy in my head long after my narrative changed, long after I saw suffering as a symptom of shame. Sometime after my tenth birthday, I dropped the prideful act of my childhood and adopted a shameful one about my scars. They became something to hide—proof, I thought, that I was imperfect.

The summer before I was to start the sixth grade, my parents planned my second plastic surgery. These were corrective surgeries to cover the scars on my face. The first had been simple, stretching the skin of my forehead across the wide expanse of my largest scar and shaping it

into a thinner line running from my right eyebrow to my hairline. I walked away from that surgery with two Band-Aids on my forehead. I did not expect to leave the second surgery the way I did: layered in three different types of gauze, wrapped like a turban around my head and strapped under my chin. The bottom layer was sticky and yellow and peaked through as a rectangle down the bridge of my nose. It was transparent enough that I could see traces of scabs bleeding through the yellow cloth. My entire forehead was a scab; they had scrubbed the first layer of skin away.

At eleven years old, beauty was still an indefinable thing—at least in terms of where I belonged on its scale. But during those weeks when my head hung heavy with bandages, my skin scraped and raw, I felt for the first time what it meant to be ugly. I lay on the couch all day and watched television. I would ask for painkillers to help me sleep because even my pillows could not make the bandages comfortable. I would wake with blood crusted black across my nose and cheek and fear that, in my sleep, I had ruined everything and would have to go through the surgery again. I trained myself to look down when I went to the bathroom, down at the blue linoleum rather than the mirror that stretched more than half the width of the wall. I spent those weeks avoiding my reflection, wondering if I would ever want to look up again.

I'd like to think that if this had not happened in the middle of puberty, when I was just starting to consider what it meant to be a woman, what it meant to be feminine, that I would not have fallen so easily into the role of victim. Perhaps if it had not happened right before middle school, right as my body and my desires started to change, I would have bounced back. But, with other girls my age, I was learning that girls needed to be beautiful, not strong, so I abandoned the survivor story I had told so many times for one of quiet shame.

This change did not happen quickly. I was in high school before I started to hate my parents for forcing the surgeries and to resent the people who asked about my scars. But I resented them for the ability to say that I resented them. They would start, "Can I ask you a question?" and I would roll my eyes, knowing immediately what that question would be. I would frown and drop my voice low and tell them, in as few words as possible, my trauma. But I held these moments as close to me as I had the words of admiration in my childhood. They served the same purpose, fueling a new story I could tell about myself—that I was mistreated.

I told my friends about an old boyfriend who had called me "Scarface" and how he had pointed to the way the scar across my eyelid opened one eye wider than the other. I told them of the time I walked into a beauty store, and a sales associate immediately asked me if I would like

her to show me how to “cover that up.” I told them that people had told me all my life that my scars were the one way they could tell me apart from my twin sister. But for every bad joke or reference to Harry Potter (“Harriet Potter”) there was a person insisting that she had never noticed my scars, that she couldn’t even tell I had any scars, which was, to me, equally outrageous. I called these people flatterers to their faces and liars to my friends. I didn’t need pity, I told them; I didn’t need to talk about my scars at all. But as I told them, I left out the most crucial part of the story: how much I enjoyed telling them my complains, how even as people said insensitive things, I was figuring out how to work the experience into my next conversation. I drew attention to the thing that I said made me uncomfortable because I felt powerful with their attention. I was still looking for someone to tell me that I was special, but I only tried to be special through my suffering.

I cannot say that I have fully climbed out of this cycle. When asked, I can still recall anything said about my scars, endlessly ticking the insults off on my fingers. I am still tempted to use these words to shock people, to dominate a conversation. But I see it now for what it is: a performance of pain, proof of the power retelling stories can have on the way we see ourselves. I told people I was a victim—of my parents’ decisions, of

inconsiderate words—so that I would never have to consider what else I could be.

One night, I sat at a bar with some strange girls and a new friend who had might as well have been a stranger too. I walked to the bar with one of the girls. She was very pretty—petite with a dark brown pixie cut. We both ordered vodka cranberries, though she made hers a triple. In the orange glow of the bar and the first flush of intoxication, we faced each other.

“Can I just tell you, I think your scar is beautiful,” she said. I stumbled. “I’m obsessed with scars,” she said. “They tell a story, and I think they’re beautiful.” She mentioned the story of her own scar—a childhood accident while playing. I searched her face and couldn’t find any evidence of a scar until she pointed to a faint line across her right cheek.

“Oh,” I said, “I didn’t even notice it,” and I absolutely meant it.

## Random and Spontaneous

My best memories of my childhood happened in the dark. There is something special about nights during a Kentucky summer, how the humidity drains away yet somehow leaves the grass moist and soft in a way it could never be in the sun. I'd spend those nights running barefoot through the yard, watching the sky. "The moon is chasing me," I'd say.

On these nights, my brother would take a break from his video games and run laps around the house until he set off the motion sensor light. My dad would roast marshmallows and allow them to catch fire, so they burned the way he liked them. My mom would sit behind him and rub his back, and we would stay like that until we heard howls in the distance.

I wouldn't see a coyote until adulthood, and even then only once. But on those nights, with Dad pretending that the coyotes had only come out to eat me, the threat was enough to finally send me inside. It was enough to keep my twin sister there.

Dana did not entertain the same romantic notions of nighttime that I did. In a favorite family story, when asked for kindergarten placement what she would do in a dark room, she simply answered, "I don't go in that room." She took a similar approach to the outdoors at night. While the

rest of us watched for shooting stars, she watched from behind the screen door, too scared and too lonely to be anywhere else.

One night Dad coaxed her out of the house to toss around a foam football. We stationed ourselves along the stretch of our driveway—my sister and brother and me—and took turns trying to catch the ball our Dad would spiral toward us. Dana ran with us and laughed and blamed us when she missed. But she stopped when a bat swooped down and struck our foam football midair, and she screamed.

My father laughed. My brother chased after the bat, probably already dreaming of the kind of pet it would make. And Dana ran to the garage, where she climbed into the cab of our mother's truck and stayed there. I followed her.

I know we talked in the cab of that truck and probably sang to each other, but I don't remember trying to convince her to come back outside. I don't remember wishing I could play again or even thinking that I could be anywhere else. I don't remember being anything but content to sit next to her switching the overhead light on and off, our feet dangling over the edge of the seat, taking turns holding the stick shift like Mom never let us do. I must have sensed even then that it was my job to be what she needed.

We were born soul mates. A one pound difference, six minutes apart, we have never been separated by much. Scientists have no



explanation for twins, why an egg splits to become two. It's just luck, I think. Random and spontaneous luck.

Sometimes I like to think a higher power knew we needed each other. Or, as I like to tell Dana, I made the decision. Because I was born first, the larger and stronger child, I have always assumed that I had control over that original egg, that I would have been born regardless. In this version, I am the power that knew we needed each other.

I told her that story as if to give weight to my actions, to show the great responsibility I faced in taking care of her. If her life started with me, then I would insert myself where I was needed. I would face darkness and bats and wasp stings for her.

The wasp stings came from a day we climbed the steps of the playhouse our father had built for us. We climbed to the top of the stairs with our brother, wearing our father's old t-shirts like dresses. In the corner created by the playhouse's roof and wall, a wasp had built its nest. We didn't notice the nest before its owners noticed us. Two wasps whizzed around us. I remember clearly each wooden step I ran down, taking them quickly, yet knowing, as if by instinct, I would need to go back.

Dana stayed frozen at the top of the playset. She screamed and cried, though the wasps hadn't touched her. We had never been stung before. The fear was enough to hold her in place. I climbed each step again.

I didn't try to yank her away or snap her out of her stupor. I didn't say anything to her. I simply shoved her behind me and threw my arms out. I must have yelled, "No," in some dramatic way I had seen on television. My sacrifice, after all, was partly a show: a performance of bravery, of what it looks like to be the older sister.

Still, I had no idea as the wasps stung my arm and my elbow, as I wailed for my father, as he pressed touch-me-not leaves onto my stings, and Dana watched next to me, how much this moment would embody our relationship for years.

People who have lost their twins, either at birth or later in life, report feeling incomplete. Something is missing, and they feel that absence every day. It holds, then, that sets of twins experience a sense of wholeness that cannot exist without the other.

I have always looked at my relationship with Dana as complementary. If she was frightened, I would be brave. If I was dramatic, she would be logical, the scientist to my writer. If I wore makeup, she would swear she was terrible at all things girly. If I was shy and slow to make friends, she would make friends for the both of us. I always knew

who I was when I stood next to her. I always knew I had someone who would make up for that missing half, those things I couldn't be. But I didn't see how restricting that could be.

In our senior year of college, on a night just a few months before we would leave Kentucky, leave each other, we walked to our dorm together. My cheeks were flushed after drinking with friends, but my body shivered. Dana held my arm. She guided me to our room. She had long ago conquered her fear of the dark and had moved to fearing the people who lurked in it, waiting for vulnerable girls on college campuses. She wanted to be the sober one to walk me home at night. She wanted to be the one to protect me.

I had reached the complaining stage of intoxication, the one where you make jokes about all the ways your parents messed you up. That's what parents are for, I remember saying—to blame. And she said she blamed me more.

I remember the instant indignation, the sobering shock sent through each of my veins. I insisted she explain in a way that she would say is just like me to do. And, like I knew she would, she gave in. We sat side-by-side in our hard-backed dorm chairs in the early hours of the morning, so she could tell me all the ways that I had failed her.

She said she was ready for a life without me. She told me I didn't let her make her own mistakes, that I tried to impress mine onto her, so she was never allowed to just live. She said she was being held back from the person she could be. She said a lot of other things, but the only one I really heard was, "I can't wait to be away from you."

She must have sensed, before I did, that we would not really know who we are until we were separate. She must have been feeling for years that need to make room for each other, to fit into categories, to satisfy people's need for there to be a smart one and a pretty one, and she must have hated it. She must have been tired of being defined by what I wasn't.

At the time, I wouldn't have told you that I needed space. I wouldn't have said I regretted telling her not to date a certain boy or to keep her virginity. I had been trying to live out the mistakes for us both, to be the experiment that could afford to fail. I could date first and mess up first and to tell her what she should do when her time came. I would make the messes; I would take every sting before it got to her, even if she was looking for a chance to prove she could handle it on her own. It all went back to control, to thinking I was responsible for her actions, to thinking that what I did mattered more if I did it for her.

Now, Dana draws her eyeliner like I've always done. She adds glitter to her lash line. She wears dresses and dates and drinks and dances.

She is the girl who gets sick at parties. She doesn't hold back; she doesn't censor herself. She doesn't bother worrying that she is copying me or that I will try to stop her.

When she calls to tell me she's overwhelmed, to cry, to say we shouldn't be in relationships unless we live together, I sit in a rocking chair she has never sat in or seen. I do not tell her what to do. I listen, swinging my legs over the side, and know exactly who it is I need to be.

## On Breasts

I was never the tallest girl in my class. Or the shortest. I was never the prettiest or the ugliest, fattest or thinnest. I might have been the smartest or tried to be. By middle school, I might have been the quietest. But from the time I was eight, I was always the girl with the largest breasts.

One of the benefits of starting to show signs of puberty at eight is that I had an almost complete lack of awareness about my body. I did not have enough questions to be self-conscious. At seven, I had insisted on bathing myself more as a way to avoid my mom's nails scraping shampoo against my scalp than any body consciousness or shame. I would stand with my feet in the water and the curtain pulled back, facing myself in the wall-length mirror, and bounce. I delighted in the way my body rose and fell, each mound of baby fat a test for gravity.

When nubs began to form on my chest, I was convinced it was the bouncing that made them and tried to push them back in. It was the same way that, years later, I would try to push pimples back into my skin or get rid of redness by rubbing until my skin turned pale and then red again. When my new breasts wouldn't retreat into my body, I stopped bouncing in the bath. I stopped to avoid causing any other irrevocable changes. I have always been afraid of my own power over my body.

My dad bought my first training bras, plain white ones. He had suggested the garment to my mom at the dinner table one day, but she didn't like the idea. I wasn't old enough; she wouldn't get them. He bought them whether she agreed with him or not, maybe because he thought the item of clothing was harmless or maybe because he had already reported to the school counselor, a friend of his, that other girls my age were starting to take notice of my body. Other girls were accusing me of stuffing a bra I didn't wear yet. Regardless, I wore them more for the novelty of the thing than any support I imagined they gave me. I wore them to feel like an adult woman wearing a bra, but I left them at home just as often, ready at any moment to prove that I couldn't stuff my bra if I didn't wear one.

I didn't know yet that breasts were desirable and enviable or that girls made theirs appear larger to be desirable and enviable. I didn't know yet that the flat-chested girls who would remain flat-chested even throughout high school had likely already considered shoving tissues and toilet paper against to their chests to make them look like mine—mine, which were only nubs noticed in the bathtub.

Once even my mother could not ignore that I needed to wear a bra, she would buy all of them: sports bras with tropical prints, lacy and frilly white ones. Briefly, it became a fun mother-daughter exchange where she

would come home from the store with small hangers, and I would pick my favorites from the bunch. She would bring bright colors and ones I could wear with white tops. She handed them out like treats, and they felt that way.

But she bought me the same A cup until I was thirteen. Like every child transitioning from elementary to middle school, my body had changed over the summer. By thirteen, I had moved from the girls' clothing department to juniors', and clothes fit my body in a way that was more flattering but harder to identify. I attributed my new shape to the juniors' clothing when in reality I had more than doubled my cup size. Doubled and still squeezing into a 32A.

I was still unaware of my body. It was only after a girl on the bus demanded my bra size and insisted that I was a C at least that I actually thought about my breast size. Somehow, in that moment, all of the numbered and lettered sizing made sense. It was only then that I demanded to go bra shopping with my mom.

Perhaps she did not notice the way those bras seemed to shrink against my growing chest or the way t-shirts expanded across them and distorted the lettering: *I NEED SUPERVISION*. Perhaps she did not notice the way my breasts bounced when I walked without the support of an



underwire. Perhaps she missed the days I bounced in the bathtub, and she pretended not to hear the splashing.

Maybe she was angry that my breasts were as large as hers. Maybe that would explain why she lashed out when I asked for a B cup, still a size too small, and shouted about my growing size. Bra shopping with her from that point on became a shouting experience. “Oh my God, girl,” she would say. “Look how big. I can’t believe you’ve gotten this big.”

Or maybe her fear just looked like anger—fear that she would lose me to the men who now saw me differently. It was she, after all, who made sure my dad knew that a food court worker was staring at me too long as I got my food. “Did you see him looking?” she said as she turned her eyes from my dad, to me, and then to the man behind the window to the kitchen. Somehow her look felt like an accusation—undirected, so I accepted it toward me. I ate my meal in silence and only looked up once to see that man raise his eyebrows at me and smirk. I was 12. I could not be unaware of my body after that point.

It was also my mother who I ran to later that year when two Mexican men circled around me as I searched for sunscreen in Walmart. They moved closer, hips first and crouching to my level, whispering in Spanish. Their bodies swayed in a way that didn’t need to be translated. I ran across the store to my mom and grabbed her arm. I hung onto her and

told her and looked behind me to see the men rounding the corner behind me.

I have fear too.

I feared, as I stared into my plate at the food court and hid behind my mom in the grocery store, that I had somehow caused my own discomfort, that my body and breasts had asked for the attention and brought those men to me. I feared that the fault was on me for attracting them and that my mother would always look at me that way. I feared the men who wanted me and the mother who shielded me, because the body and breasts belonged to me, and I was the only one who would be responsible for them.

Now, years later, I wear the tops that I know would make my mom jab a skinny, long-nailed finger into each breast and tell me to cover myself. I hold my breasts in my hands and try to measure how many hands it would take to cover them entirely. I own the right-sized bra. I learned to love my body maybe as a reaction to my mother's disapproval; I learned to show it maybe because she didn't want me to.

But those fears are still there. Still, when I walk toward a restaurant or a bar with a low-cut top, I stare at my skin and blame it for the way my body stiffens and the way I imagine hands grabbing me or attacking me. I

feel the weight of responsibility for my body and long for the days I could be unaware and bouncing.

## Making a Connection

Women like to tell me stories. I have one of those faces, they say, that makes them feel like they can tell me anything. It's because I smile at them, even though it's my job to smile. It's my job to make them feel welcome, to feel heard, so they will sit in the chair in front of me and allow me to brush the hair from their faces, to touch makeup to their skin and their eyes, to cover their wrinkles, so they will buy the product I lay out in a line for them. But most women don't care about this superficial start. They see my round face, the softness of my jaw, and feel safe telling me anything.

They are wrong if they think that I won't remember them, that they are just passing faces out of the many I see every day. I remember the thin, black eyebrows of the woman who told me her husband had poisoned her. I remember how blue her eyes looked as she said that no one believed her, how her eyes watered as she said doctors treated her like she was crazy. She lost everything to the pain. I remember the obese woman with the walker who mourned having to buy plus-sized clothes, who hadn't been able to move much since she had woken from her coma to a husband who had left her and hospital bills she couldn't pay. I remember the lines in her pale face, lines that might have appeared during those months spent

sleeping or the months after she woke as she struggled to repay what she had lost in that time. She lost her house. She loved that house.

I remember the wet, throaty voice of the woman who just lost her husband, how she couldn't focus on products she was looking at without telling me that material goods don't matter and nothing like the death of someone you love will show you that. She had so much crystal. What good is crystal when you're alone?

Though I listen to these women as I pat creams onto their cheeks or as I stroke their bangs behind their ears, I do not share stories of my own. I am the type of girl who can only tell a sad story when she is drunk. After I have been warmed from the mixed drinks and shots I take in doubles, I feel fine telling the first kind face I see her about my mom's disapproval or beauty standards I can't meet, and I don't feel self-conscious because I know I won't remember her face. I drink and forget, safe from making any real connection.

I keep my stories to myself because I fear that sharing too freely will make me "That Girl," the one who only talks about herself, who isn't happy unless she's miserable, who forces her sadness onto others. This girl is too emotional. She drives away her friends and her partners. I have shared apartments with That Girl. I have seen That Girl at school and among my coworkers. That Girl makes people uncomfortable.

But when these women face me at the makeup counter, they are not worried about being That Girl. They are not ashamed to talk about their tragedies; they seem compelled to share them. They look straight into my eyes, into that sweet face they can tell anything to, and lay themselves bare. I am the one who tries to cover them up again, who spouts lines like, “Look on the bright side,” as if to cut off the intimacy they extend, so ready to escape their vulnerability.

These women come to me with their stories, demanding a real connection, real intimacy, without the guise of alcohol to hide behind. It could be that desperation has led them here, that their tragedies have stripped them of trust and intimacy in so many others that they look for it elsewhere. Perhaps now they know how quickly their lives can turn, and they feel the urgent need to advise, to warn, before it turns again.

But I’d like to think it is not their tragedies that define these women. I like to think they know exactly what they’re doing—letting someone peer into their weaknesses—and I like to think they are comfortable with it. They have grown too old, lived too much, to carry the burden of being a woman with a story who shouldn’t say too much. They don’t play that game anymore. They see me, my eyes darting for an exit, and they remember what it’s like to be young and uncomfortable with openness. They see a face, round and full and smiling. They see a version of

themselves, years ago, and they show her what it's like to be a woman  
who claims her story.

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