

Spring 2019

## Sunfish

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SUNFISH

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Spokane, Washington

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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

Megan L. Rowe

Spring 2019

THESIS OF MEGAN ROWE APPROVED BY

\_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

SAMUEL LIGON, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

\_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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## **THE SCARLETT LETTER IS R**

Dad always said people do right eighty-five percent of the time. The remaining fifteen catches up to them. A healthy portion of my fifteen percent was used up when I was young and powerless. I had a bad day that carried through my entire life. A man raped me, and so that it wouldn't be true, I dated him for an entire summer. You can't undo things that are already done, but I can tell you this much:

You can try.

Paul told me I looked out of place at an IHOP, that looking out of place suited me. I liked him noticing me, and he seemed to have thought this through. I had given zero thought to how I looked in an IHOP. I was on autopilot home for the summer and worked as a waitress. I really thought it was that simple. I hoped I didn't look like a college student because I could tell he was not.

Thirty minutes later, I went on break, planted myself in a booth, lit a cigarette and read through the horoscopes. *You may feel a bit anxious today, Aries, and it may be hard to settle down.*

Paul sat across from me. Hair longer than mine, curly. Smile like Jerry Seinfeld. He was somewhere between twenty and thirty, toward the higher end. He brought his food over: endless stack of pancakes, coffee. I already thought I was in love with him, so this seemed special even though this was what every cheapskate who comes into IHOP orders, which I already knew from being a waitress at IHOP for two weeks.

Is this okay? he asked.

I thought I would look cool if I didn't answer, so I sat and smoked while he attended to his pancakes, evenly distributing the pad of butter, the blackberry syrup. He put two creamers into his coffee, and when it was halfway down, he replenished the coffee from the carafe and poured in one more creamer.

I wanted to watch him eat pancakes. He was orderly. I was witnessing a map of his brain light up: He was nothing like me. I should have known he was a rapist. I should have known he was someone who would rape someone and then make her his girlfriend for a summer. What a specific type of fucker, but don't kid yourself.

There are a lot of them.

Valentine's Day, freshman year of college. I was in my dorm, eating an orange Icee, three other girls were in the room, including my dorm mate, Allison. We were watching

Sex and the City, brainstorming how we could make alcoholic Icees and take over the world. I was lying on my lower bunk, staring at pictures I had taped to the wall. Most of the pictures were from high school, and I looked happy, even though I don't remember being happy. My cell phone rang: Mom. She was crying. My parent's divorce was official. I asked for another Icee. Blue this time. Mom asked if I was enjoying college, she was sorry she upset me.

“You didn't.”

Halloween, or the day we wore our costumes to school, freshman year of high school. Kir was wearing a large, red felt 'A' on her shirt: Hester Prynne. I was wearing a maroon-and-yellow Sunnydale High T-shirt: Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Every year after this, we would coordinate costumes – our apex being Daria and Jane – but in this photo, I had asked, “Hester who?” If you look closely, you can see Kir rolling her eyes. I still have the copy of *The Scarlett Letter* she gave me the next day, with all her frantic scribbles. I brought the book to college and put it on the shelf above my desk, next to the other books I wanted people to think I had read.

I have heard Kir talk about this book so many times I can now talk about themes and motifs more intelligently than most people who have read it. If I had to put my finger on why she likes *The Scarlett Letter* so much, I would say because of how Hester was persecuted. Or maybe that's why I liked this book I hadn't read.

Summer after my first year of college, working at IHOP, I lived in the house Dad was renting on Shabonee. All streets in my neighborhood were named for native tribes.

Sometimes guilt makes matters worse. The houses in my old neighborhood were all named for trees cut down to build the neighborhood. People are mostly oblivious to the patterns they don't wish to see. But Mount Prospect was mostly nice.

The house Dad was renting was five houses down from my old house on Go-Wando. I am the sentimental type, and living so close to my home – still on the market – was painful. Because of this, I made a point to walk past my old house every morning, as soon as my hangover woke me. I hate my sentimentality, and I inherited this from Kir.

When we drove to high school in the fall, she insisted on leaving fifteen minutes early so we could look at the changing colors on the trees. She enjoyed talking about how one day, we would look back on how beautiful the trees were. She enjoyed talking about how little we were. Her father was a lawyer who regretted not becoming a philosophy professor. Privately I thought it was sad how much she wanted to please him.

She loved talking about how her dad's best friend grew up in my house on Go-Wando. She said families found each other in odd ways, like she was drawn to a place her dad loved instead of just becoming friends with me like a normal person. Her dad, who I also loved very much, talked about my house constantly. He was there when the strawberry wallpaper was put into the kitchen, and was distraught when Mom took it down. I did not like thinking other people had lived in my home, but did not tell them this because I couldn't figure out why. They did not accept anything at face value and they would have searched for an explanation. Not every single thing needs an explanation, was something I frequently shouted at them in my head.



Now when I think about my houses – on Lambs Court, on Maple Street, on Go-Wando – I like to think about the other people living there. I like to put different types of people in there like dolls and test whether things work out better for them than they did for my family.

Drunk at night, I sat on the front porch on Go-Wando and the light sensed me and flickered on. I regularly deposited beer cans in the front yard so the house wouldn't be sold. In that house, I never saw Dad hit Mom. In that house, I saw Mom, naked in her closet, crying, with red handprints on her back.

You can tell yourself you don't know something if you don't want to know.

The two weeks Dad stayed in the rental house we tiptoed around each other. He took me to restaurants. We had to dress up, sitting in silence. Restaurants attached to country clubs. Restaurants in the city with appetizers costing twenty dollars and up. I thought about whether my waitress looked like someone who belonged in the restaurant. I checked my phone to see if Paul had texted. Often we were bored with our food and only ate half. After two weeks of living with me, he moved in with his girlfriend in Evanston and left me there. Keep it clean, he said. He left some clothes in drawers like he might be coming back. My father likes me fine but I am a lot of work, more than he bargained for.

Be careful, he said on his way out the door. You're starting to sound like her. Not only do I sound like her, I look like her. Sometimes maybe I am her. No wonder he can't love me.

He would have to look at himself.

The night my father left the house he was renting. Kirsten came over and cried with me while we watched Keanu Reeves movies. We decided that Coldplay was the worst band in a long time and we were right. My father had left their CD on his nightstand. We played it one time through and then we cracked it in half. Kir looked in the drawer and found condoms.

We had only seen condoms in health class. We had practiced with bananas. We took one out of its package, stretched it, and rolled it over our feet like panty hose. We returned to the living room and skated around on the wood floor, *The Matrix* playing in the background. Kir got a splinter and we poured vodka over her foot and extracted the splinter with my eyebrow plucker. I said we could drink this also, but we didn't. After Paul raped me, I ignored Kir's calls for the remainder of the summer.

Growing up, I was loud and spirited, which was a nice way of saying out of control. I played "taste test" with my much younger sister, Beth. Blindfolded her. Poured Tabasco on her tongue. Told her that her hair was brown because it was rat poo. Chanted rat poo, rat poo. Did nothing when she ran for the scissors, cut a huge chunk out before Mom found her. Shrugged and said it was a game.

I am not saying I deserved what happened, but there are people who deserve it less. But probably a lot of people who deserve it more. What I'm saying is life is a crap shoot.

Constantly looking for explanations will only get you in deeper shit.

One week before I left for my first year of college. I eavesdropped on Beth's slumber party. The girls braided each others' hair and practiced kissing with pillows. I wanted my hair braided. I wanted a pillow, something soft to sink into. I almost went down there to curl up in my ratty *Beauty and the Beast* sleeping bag. To be a girl warmly planted. But I wasn't eleven. I went up to my bedroom and smoked Parliaments on my balcony. I could see the occasional car driving down my block, wondered what it was to be in that car, signaling, turning the wheel, letting it slide through your hands. What was keeping them from swinging their car into a ditch?

Routine.

Halfway through summer, I brought Paul to my sister's play, *Guys and Dolls*. He had already raped me. She had auditioned for the kid's version of Second City in Arlington Heights, and received the roll of Adelaide, one of the mobster's wives. I took a picture of her on stage. I screamed out "That's my sister!" at the end, which was something she had done at one of my ballet recitals when she was three. Her childhood was different from mine, and I wish I could be happy for her because of that.

Beth did a fantastic job singing with an accent. Mom was there and I didn't want to see her because she didn't approve of me living in the house Dad was renting or dating the guy I was dating, Paul. She couldn't know what had happened, but she knew something. Of course, she went out of her way to sniff us out.

"You shouldn't be dating my daughter," she said. "It's creepy and you know it. What's wrong with you?"

He smiled at her. At that moment, I hated him so much I thought maybe I could kill him.

"Mom, just leave us alone, okay?"

I was more scared of her love.

A week after Paul came into IHOP, we had our first date. We went to Wicker Park to play Whirlyball, which is lacrosse in bumper cars. A bunch of his friends were there and they were looking at me like I was young and stupid. I was good at running my car into a corner and taking five minutes to get out of it. I wasn't having fun and I wasn't good at faking it. I started to wonder how much I really liked him or if I was just bored or sad. I told him I wanted to go by abandoning my bumper cart, and sulking by the bar. The bartender wouldn't serve me.

When we got back to his apartment, we watched the *Chappelle Show* and he made me a drink with Malibu and orange juice.

Later, he handcuffed me to his bed. I cried and said please no. I was actually polite for maybe the first time in my life. Please no. Above was army netting and to the side he had tables with miniature battles set up with knights and mythical beasts.

I tried to focus on how beautiful the trees were, changing in the fall on the way to school. This was my first time and I realized I was just a kid and didn't belong here.

He took a picture of me with a Polaroid camera and held it above my head so I could watch it develop. I watched the colors bleed into focus.

After, he offered to drive me back to my house. Since he'd never seen it before, I directed him to my real house. My empty house. As I was getting out, he kissed me on the cheek and told me he would call me tomorrow. At the front door, I pretended to be fishing for my keys so he would drive away. After he drove away, I went around to the back and opened the above-ground basement window. I climbed up the stairs to my room. I lay on the wooden floor and went to sleep. The next day, he called me and we made plans to get lunch before my shift.

A girl is a house with all doors unlocked.

## **THE MONSTER**

I woke up in a bed at Resurrection Hospital. I had a morphine drip I could adjust by pressing a button. My window overlooked the football fields of Hersey High School and I could see fully-gearred boys running drills for summer training in the morning light, their bright orange water cooler propped on a metal bench next to sleeves of Dixie cups. I watched the players, their legs lifting to their chests, standing in place. Their practice appeared simple, a perfect outlet. I pressed the button.

I felt clean, but that feeling would vanish. A knock on the door, and without pausing for an answer, Mom and Dad were standing over me, telling me everything was going to be OK. Who was watching Freddy? They'd never been able to find a babysitter for him, other than me.

"I'm supposed to be checking on Mrs. Humphrey's cat," I said. "If I'm going to be stuck here, can someone do that?"

Mom said, “Why, Rebecca? Why?”

I stared at her like she knew. Maybe that was unfair. Dad looked guilty, said nothing, stood looking punched.

My reason was childish: to force them to notice. I knew the swallowing wasn’t my parent’s absence alone, but blaming them was easier. I take the easy route and come by self-hatred honestly.

This hospital wasn’t the easy route, but on the paper-wrapped pillow while they bickered behind the drawn curtain, it felt like relief. I extended them the same courtesy they showed me and pretended I couldn’t hear.

Swallowing objects didn’t start when I was young, like with Freddy. The swallowing began as an accident at Aunt Ruth’s house eight months ago, when Grandpa Frank died and she was hosting the wake.

My aunt’s house was organized, spotless. She only had nice, antique furniture I was afraid to touch. The dining chairs had ivory upholstery that wouldn’t last a second in my house. The dining room was beautiful in its stillness and seemed the best place to avoid relatives telling me how much I had grown.

My aunt was shuffling room to room, moving vases out of the way of sticky fingers, probably Freddy’s. Her house was the last place this should be but she lived closest to the grave site and insisted on hosting. Right after he passed she “threw an emotional fit,” the quickest way to get Mom to relent.

She straightened a doily on the center of the table and placed an ornate wooden bowl in the middle.

“Don’t touch!” she said.

And then she marched off.

There was a bunch of grapes in the bowl, and I grabbed one. Just then, Dad walked in with a small basket of linen napkins.

He shrugged. “On duty.”

I popped the grape in my mouth. It was plastic; I panicked and swallowed.

Dad questioned me on the ride home.

“Did you eat a plastic grape?” he said.

I pretended I couldn’t hear him.

“Did you eat a plastic grape, Rebecca?”

“Accidentally,” I said. “I thought it was real.”

We made eye contact in the rearview mirror, Mom snoring in the passenger seat and what-a-wonderful-surprise Freddy gurgling in his car seat.

Dad was tired. I was tired.

“Don’t tell your mother,” he said.



Four days later, I saw the grape after a long trip to the bathroom. I analyzed the grape before flushing: a perfect little globe, floating along.

This was around the time my parents had concluded Freddy was autistic because he couldn't hold eye contact – one of my aunts had said something to Mom at the funeral. I thought this was an overreaction – he was only two – but they transformed into the crazies who thought the MMR vaccine caused it, and stopped vaccines for all of us.

So I had to transfer to St. James. Publics don't tolerate that nonsense. All the kids had known each other since they were Freddy's age. Kelly, who ran the eighth grade, said Dad killed Jesus even though he's hardly even Jewish and we have bacon practically every Sunday. I offered to eat bacon in front of her but she looked at me like I had three heads.

“I don't know any Yiddish.”

“What?” she said. “Ew.”

My situation was fercockt.

I have always collected marbles, different colors and sizes, some opaque, some clear-yet-tinted, others clear with swirls of color.

I stored them in a wooden box with a hinge lock. Back when I had friends, I didn't share my marbles because I worried they were babyish. The box lived under my

bed, but every day I selected one to keep with me. Rolled the marble around, warmed it with my hands, squeezed tight. Pictured its color resting in my hands.

I was lying stomach down, elbows propping me up on the Berber carpet in the living room, reading ahead in *Frankenstein*.

“If I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear...”

I let the blue-green marble roll out of my hand to turn the page, but the marble was close, balanced between beige carpet fibers. Freddy was hobbling around and Mom was in the hallway vacuuming.

“Anything on the floor that shouldn’t be?” she said.

She was about to come through with the vacuum, and I knew she would be angry if my marble was in Freddy’s range. The marble was smaller than the grape by half. The moment after swallowing I thought Why? I didn’t know, other than some vague feeling of this was who I was.

The marble came out with a little plunk! It was a satisfying noise. The expulsion didn’t hurt at all – the marble could have been larger and that would have been okay. The feeling evaporated when I realized the logistics of retrieval. One thing to see a fake grape circle the toilet, entirely another to part ways with my marble.

I did what I had to do: grabbed the netting for the fish tank. Later, when Ariel died, I felt partially responsible, but she was old for a goldfish and if anything, my

parents forgot to feed her in the hubbub of Freddy's behavioral therapy appointments and sensory play activities.

Watch as Freddy speared orange Playdough with a plastic chopstick. Watch as Freddy rolled a ball three inches. Watch as Freddy raked his fingers through colored rice. Excessive clapping for the simplest tasks. My only victory? Their clapping made him cry.

I fished out the now darkly-tinged marble, and plopped it into the bathroom sink. I closed the drain and filled the sink most of the way with piping hot water, squeezing Herbal Essences Plum Blossom body wash under the running water. I let the marble soak for an hour, then opened the drain, dried the marble on one of the decorative hand towels no one uses, and returned it to my wooden box. No one asked what I was up to.

I folded my plaid, pleated uniform skirt and my white, Peter Pan-collared blouse. I laid them carefully on my wooden dresser. I stared into the mirror, standing in my off-white training bra and plain, yellow underwear. I straightened my headband, studied my nose from every angle (Why is your nose so big?), noticed the dark fuzz blanketing my upper lip. I smiled quickly; I could not stand my smile. Still awful, better not to smile.

I watched my tears trail down, one into the other. I didn't know why I was crying, but I couldn't stop it. I pictured the green-blue marble, resting in the wooden box under my bed. I swallowed my ache with a Lisa Frank unicorn pencil sharpener I found in my dresser drawer. I took out my planner and wrote "Lisa Frank" under the date.

I had a few smaller swallows before landing myself in the hospital: a two-by-four Lego, earplugs Dad had bought to block out Freddy's night terrors – they floated like

buoys when they came out – a pog, a tea egg, my Tomaguchi, a hair clip with a metal butterfly.

When I was worried about a difficult swallow, I coated the objects with vegetable oil. I was aware the objects were getting bigger, sharper. I wanted to push my limit. This was something I could be good at. My secret talent.

The worst one besides the light bulb was Mom's engagement ring. Mom took her rings off when she washed dishes, put them in a dish on the windowsill. Freddy had been napping but stirred, so she ran up to check on him. While she was gone, I grabbed the ring, washing it down with Dr. Pepper.

She noticed it was missing once she finished the dishes. She turned the house upside-down searching for it. I could tell she was worried Dad would notice, but when he came home, he didn't.

They had been fighting more and more. The walls were thin and I stayed up late reading Mom's trashy novels. I knew they disagreed about Freddy: what to do about him. Dad thought he was fine, that he would grow out of whatever this was, that Mom was making a mountain of a molehill as she "always does." Freddy's therapy was costing too much. He wanted his life back.

"What about *my* life?" Mom said.

They never discussed me.

That ring hurt and Mom was making me nervous. I did my best to sanitize it, using a toothbrush and toothpick to clean the setting. I hid it under a couch cushion.

“I swear to God, Rebecca, I looked here a hundred times,” she said.

I couldn’t look at Mom without thinking *poo-hand*. For days, when I wiped I saw smears of blood on the toilet paper. I swore the whole thing off. My hobby wasn’t worth the pain.

I knew when I babysat Tuesday nights they were going to couples’ counseling. I found one of the bills opened on the kitchen counter – from Cynthia Mesmer – and looked her up in the phone book. They always told me they were going on a date.

Barney was the only show Freddy would watch. I popped “A Day at the Beach” into the VCR. When the “I Love You, You Love Me” song started, he looked at me and attempted to sing the song, but I felt an absence where I knew a feeling was supposed to live. My parents didn’t know that Freddy looks at me. I waited for the VCR to auto rewind and start up again. I let the tape loop, ignoring the list of suggested activities for Freddy’s development.

Late, long after my parents had returned home, I took the light bulb from Freddy’s Barney lamp on his bedside table. Freddy was screaming, and he doesn’t scream like a normal toddler. Freddy screams like someone has lit him on fire. *I’d give him something to scream about*. Freddy was afraid of the dark.

When I took the light bulb, I knew it was too wide to swallow whole. I snuck into the kitchen and cracked it like an egg on a Pyrex bowl. When I was younger, Dad and I made Mickey Mouse pancakes every Saturday. He had me crack the eggs, and when a small piece got in the bowl, he taught me to fish it out with the tip of my pointer finger. He put Nutella on the ears, blueberries for the eyes and nose, and used Hersey's syrup to paint the smile. He used to do anything to see me smile. His sunshine. His sugar plum. Mom never minded I was Daddy's girl – it made her smile, too.

I found a tiny, tiny piece of glass, licked my pointer finger, and picked it up. I looked at it on the edge of my finger before placing it on my tongue, swallowing. After, I went for the bigger pieces. I didn't use vegetable oil. My hands were shaking as I swallowed the filament, the base.

Dr. Ventachalam, who cut the light bulb out, assured me that this wasn't the first light bulb he'd seen. He explained that when one swallows a light bulb, there are small implications, such as trace amounts of mercury leaking into the body. The mercury was not enough to do real damage. The true threat was the sharpness of the shards.

"The light bulb pieces made it to your upper GI tract," he said. "Most of the bigger fragments will pass, but a smaller one lacerated the tract. We had to cut out a section of your bowel," he said. "If this surgery had been delayed, you would have died of sepsis."

I stared at my turquoise hospital gown. I remember thinking as a kid, whenever my parents were making me angry, I would just run away, and then they'd be sorry.

Once I got all the way to Keeper's Pharmacy, bought some flying saucers. I hung out on the bench for about an hour thinking now they'll be sorry, but they never showed up. I walked home.

"Look at me, Rebecca," he said. "This is serious."

When Dr. V left, I examined my scar. It was a straight, vertical line down my belly with a C shape around my belly button. He told me it's called a white line cut, a linea alba. I liked tracing the neat line, the curve, even though my skin was tender. The bristles from the stitches felt like Dad kissing me on the cheek when he hadn't shaved in a while. Dr. V gave me the stitches that disappear on their own and I liked picturing them sizzling, absorbing into my skin.

I loved my scar, was anticipating making up dozens of lies about it. Maybe even tell someone the truth, have the words by then to explain the swallowing and whatever lives inside. Right now, I was surrounded by people who knew the truth, but they couldn't have the answer to why because I didn't either.

Nurse Pat took my blood pressure and put the clamp on my finger to measure my blood oxygen level. She placed a pill in one hand and a Dixie cup in the other. I asked her what it was for and she said my Potassium levels were low. I popped the pill, chased it with water. I thought about all my objects I'd chased with water.

She wheeled me away; when I asked where I was going, she said, “Dr. V feels it would be prudent to have specialists observe you in the Psych Ward – at least for a while. It’s protocol when someone does what you did.”

I heard judgment in her voice, but would I feel any different in her shoes? I felt like we were wheeling to some new place where I would be living with the repercussions of my life. That the doctors and my parents would put some stamp on me now that couldn’t be smudged off. I could scream and no one would say anything about it.

“GOD-FUCKING-DAMNIT!!!” I screamed.

Nurse Pat did not react, except to sigh. Then she injected a vial into my IV.

When I woke, another doctor entered my room with a cursory knock on the sliding glass door. This room had no window, overlooked nothing, smelled oversanitized, saturated in rubbing alcohol. This room had no privacy. I felt like an animal in the zoo. I wanted to apologize, this had all been a misunderstanding. I had done some crazy things, yes, but I wasn’t really crazy.

“Rebecca, this is Dr. Keller,” she said. “I’ve spoken with your parents, and we all agree that you should be kept under observation, just a little longer.”

“Your parents are scared, Rebecca,” she said. “And we all just want to get to the bottom of what’s been going on with you.”

She wanted to know how long the swallowing had been going on.



I told her less than a year. I didn't tell her it felt like always.

"How do you feel when you make the decision to swallow something?" she said.

I looked at my fingertips for answers. I thought about how we all have unique swirls, but being special felt like a curse. I'd bit my nails till there was nothing left. My cuticles were inflamed and bloody. Everything felt raw and desperate. I wanted to tell her all I wished was that it hadn't gotten this far. I wanted to say the thing that would get me released.

"It just happens, I guess," I said.

The hospitalization was scaring me. I no longer had a morphine drip for my pain, but they gave me sedatives that felt like the same thing.

Sedatives. Sleeping. Eating. Talking. Rinse, repeat.

Mom and Dad come to visit. They tell me it's my birthday by whisper-shouting *Happy Birthday!* Who are they worried will hear?

"I lost track," I said.

Dad laughed, said I sounded like an old person. Ha ha.

They explained they couldn't bring me anything, but I had presents waiting for me, when I come home. The way they said *when you come home* seemed to stick to the

roofs of their mouths. They sang Happy Birthday but halfway through Freddy started screaming so they stopped. Mom kissed me on the forehead, brushed stray hair behind my ear.

“Bonnie is fine,” Dad said.

“What?”

“Mrs. Humphrey’s cat,” Mom said. “We’ve been checking on her. Freddy even played with her for a bit.” I could hear pride in her voice. Freddy was the good kid, now.

Dad coughed like he was choking on whatever he wanted to say, whatever he thought he couldn’t say.

“That’s nice,” I said.

“We’ll see you soon, Kiddo,” Dad said. He looked more tired than I’d ever seen him. I wondered what type of home I’d be returning to. The nurse entered and gave a half smile when Mom informed her it was my birthday.

“She’s officially a teenager!” Mom said with feigned enthusiasm.

“How exciting,” the nurse said. “That’s a big one.”

Dr. Keller told me I would be released, but recommended I regularly meet with a therapist to check in, to monitor my compulsions.

“You will have to have honest conversations with your parents,” she said. “You have to tell them what’s been bothering you, open the opportunity for healing.”

“You know now what’s been going on with you, but you have to act on that,” she said.

I knew I wanted to go. That’s what I knew. It had only been a week, but the stretch of scheduled monotony felt like years: Sedatives, waking up foggy, blank-eyed nurses placing trays of gravy-drenched meats and vanilla-chocolate swirled pudding cups on my tray with their latex-gloved hands, nurses standing outside the door while I showered, knocking every two minutes, “Everything okay in there?”, tired and apathetic, talking with Dr. Keller without hope of guessing the correct words, more sedatives, separate visits from Mom and Dad with their cheery misery, more sedatives, more fogginess, something like opening my eyes underwater, more trays of food. On and on and on. I wouldn’t have known how long it had been if Dr. Keller hadn’t told me. I would have guessed longer.

“How are you feeling about your release?” she asked. “Do you feel ready?”

I shrugged but realized I should summon some enthusiasm.

“I think I’m fixed,” I said. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Hm,” she said.

I managed not to cry. Maybe I should have cried, maybe it was the preferable alternative to pushing everything swirling in my brain down, down.

“The sooner you realize you have control, the better, but I don’t think you would benefit from being here any longer,” she said. “There’s only so long...” she gestured around with her hand “someone can stay in a place like this.”

“I want better for you, Rebecca,” she said. “More importantly, I want you to want better.”

I left in a wheelchair, hospital policy. I was wearing the same clothes I was wearing when I was brought in; Mom forgot to bring new ones “in all the chaos.” One of the nurses was pushing me, apologizing for bumps.

When we got outside, she said, “Well, there you go.”

I nodded, thanked her. I felt like we were playacting, that once I was out of the hospital, I was a normal girl, nothing to worry about. We faced each other.

“I hope to never see you again,” she said. “What I mean is, take care.”

Her ID badge said Nurse Miller, but she could have been any of the nurses bringing me plastic cups. I learned early to forget names.

Mom and Dad were standing outside the Chevy; Freddy was in his car seat. Dad opened the door for me and I climbed in. He shut the door and both Mom and Dad got in their seats up front. Mom told me to buckle up, and everything was normal and bizarre.

Freddy looked me in the eyes.

“Hey, Mom, Dad, Freddy is looking at me,” I said.

“I know, sweetie!” Mom said. “He does that now, don’t you Freddy?”

I did not say: He’s been doing that for months. Freddy was three now, eye contact or no, did he even know I was his sister?

“Here we go!” Dad said.

We drove in silence – aside from Freddy’s stray, nonsense words – for the first ten minutes. Dad leaned his head back, gestured at Wendy’s, asked if I was hungry. He knew Frosties were my favorite. I shook my head, though I was famished.

Seeing the outside world felt odd. The grass was startlingly green. The car’s air conditioning chilled me and my clothes felt scratchy against my skin, constricting. I felt like I no longer knew how to fit into the world, that I could not pass for normal.

Mom leaned around her headrest, cleared her throat. I knew that gesture.

“We set up an appointment for you with a therapist,” she said. “Her name is Cynthia Mesmer, she came highly recommended.”

“Recommended by who,” I said. “You?”

Mom turned around, stared straight ahead. Dad readjusted his grip on the steering wheel.

“I know a lot more than you think I do,” I said.

We drove the rest of the way in silence.

When we got home, I could see in the corner of the living room what must be my presents. Freddy rushed to the TV, and Mom put on the Barney tape. I could hear the rewind noise, that seemed to go on for five minutes. The tape started, and Mom was studying the TV screen as if this replayed episode was going to deliver important news. Dad saw me looking at the presents and told me to go ahead.

I unwrapped the presents under his watchful eyes, carefully peeling off the tape, unfolding the paper so that none of it ripped. The paper screamed cheery, girly. I won my personal battle: none of the paper ripped. Such a perfect job, the paper could be reused.

Then I noticed what I'd unwrapped. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. On the cover a man was holding a cane, standing on a cliff, facing the other direction. Facing away from the reader, the viewer. Dover Thrift Editions. My mom had proofread my book report. I received an A. The paper hung on the fridge for at least a week. I knew this wasn't their fault. I knew they meant no harm.

"I have this book," I said. "I already have this one."

## **RED RUBBER BALL**

T.J. was burrowed in the front hall closet, considering each item as he sorted through the layers piled on the floor like he was an archaeologist attempting to date fossils. In a way, he was: light windbreakers covering winter jackets and mittens covering sunglasses covering beach towels. We knew our mother had trouble parting with stuff, but now realized she was a hoarder.

With each item, shouting over his shoulder, “Anyone want a yellow plastic poncho/dryer sheets/Windex/Clorox wipes/a picnic basket?”

Beth said, “Why would I want that?” And I said, “Not worth shipping.” T.J. moved all but the child-sized poncho to the “decide later” pile. That and “Could come in handy” were big with him.

Beth was pitching most of what she found in Mom's junk drawer, tossing unopened battery packages, Ricolais, receipts, keys, and who knows what else into a large, black garbage bag, the type you put right to the curb.

I was carrying the record player – found buried under a box of report cards in a pile in the corner of her bedroom – to the living room, along with her record collection. We needed music and we'd already canceled the internet. Not our smartest move, but in our defense, our mother had never died before. We didn't understand the order of operations.

I didn't get to choose the first thing. I watched the doctor use his stethoscope to listen to Mom's heart, because it wasn't beating, and pronounce her dead at 8:12 p.m. T.J. ran out of the room right before. I cried into her hair, pretending the body meant something if no one was there. Later, T.J. told me he has to perform time-of-death probably five times a week, if he had to watch someone do it to Mom, it would have ruined him.

Beth said she found something. A receipt in the junk drawer, dated two weeks before Mom was hospitalized, from the market around the corner from her apartment. She'd purchased Fig Newtons, laundry detergent, and a pack of batteries.

Written on the back of the receipt in her neat cursive was: "Take me out on the Sunfish. Toss me in the water. No Rainbow Point." The instructions for her ashes.

"What if we hadn't found this?" I said, flipping through her record collection.



Probably Mom had scribbled on the receipt to remind herself to tell us, and we hadn't made conversations like that easier on her, changing the subject the moment she tried.

T.J. directed her attention to their standings in our family's fantasy football league. Beth talked about the new edition on the neighbor's house at the lake. Bruce, Mom hated him. I told her about the annoying interview verbal tics of my coworkers at the newspaper.

"He always says, 'I gotcha, I gotcha,'" I told her, sitting beside her at one of her chemo treatments, cocooned in an afghan my grandma had crocheted while she was pregnant. She gave up on whatever she was going to say, nodded.

The last six months, she dealt with chemo-brain. The doctors doused her as a Hail Mary, drowned her – more her idea than theirs.

Only days before she died, she tried again in the palliative care wing, – "Ally up at the lake" – and I interrupted her by asking if she wanted me to read aloud her favorite book, *Little Women*. She shook her head no.

"Remember I used to tease Beth she was named for the one who died?"

I said a bad word. She rolled her eyes.

"Beth was the sweet one."

I asked her if she wanted to watch home videos. We had converted the VHSs to DVDs five Christmases ago.

“Too sad , your father.”

Even when they were married, Dad made fun of Mom. His favorite story was when they had broken up and he was on a date at a drive-in – something like Sonic, but not Sonic – and Mom spotted him and threw herself on the hood of the car, screaming, “You bastard!”

“You married her,” T.J. always pointed out.

After they divorced, Dad acted as if he had ended up with Mom in a way entirely out of his control – especially in front of his new wife. Mom gained a lot of weight and Dad joked during one of our weekly dinners he was going to buy Mom a thong for Christmas. He squirmed and chuckled and we watched the snow fall outside of Portillo’s.

“Come on,” he said. “Come on.”

What I remember most of the divorce was telling my cousin George Dad was sleeping in the basement. He converted the pullout to a couch every morning so we could play N64. No one had to tell us the divorce was something our mother didn’t want. The closest anyone came was Grandma, constantly: “We treated him like a son.”

I couldn’t see more than two feet in front of my face, the list was too long. Clear this room, move onto the next. Cancel credit cards. Call a crematorium. Call the church. Get quotes from European Crystal Banquets, Palm Court and Bristol Palace Banquets, decide based on the cheapest and assume the food will suck regardless.

Format the obit for the Trib. Why did people get the title “Dr.” in obits? Who cares my grandpa was a doctor, that my brother is? What prayer to put on the prayer card and what image to put on the back?

Here was a fun one: At what point do we stop calling? Who gets to find out on social media? I wasn’t making the correct decisions, and making the correct decisions was important.

There was nothing on the internet about our mother’s death, like we had a “no spoilers” pact. There were a few things – most toward the end – about our mother’s illness.

On my Instagram, she’s sitting on a hospital bed wearing street clothes, holding a binder that says, “Cancer can suck it!” No caption. When friends met Mom, I heard the same thing: You make so much sense now. I always took this as an insult, like I wasn’t my own person.

A picture of her getting a massage while everyone else participated in the Gilda’s Run made it to T.J.’s Facebook. The caption said, “Some run, some walk, some...stay behind and take advantage of the free physical therapy tent while everyone is gone.”

Another item on the list: We should cancel Verizon, but there was comfort in listening to her voicemail message. We were all staying in T.J.’s apartment – just across the street from hers, she moved there when she started treatment at his hospital – and I heard Beth leaving her a voicemail the night before. When was the right time to tell my siblings I’d been recording her voice for over a year?

I needed to write the eulogy. I volunteered and immediately regretted it. If I hadn't, the priest – who hardly knew her – would be saying something by default. He would have taken a moment to address her role as beloved mother and daughter – basically anything he could comb from the obit – and spend the remaining time droning about God's plan. In grade school I was an altar girl to pick up cash from funeral tips and get a pass from class – I knew the drill. Note to self: Tips for alter kids.

I did not want to talk about God's plan, but the funeral planner with St. Raymond told me I would have to at least mention this. Once I'm up there, not much she could do, and yet I had no idea what I would say about Mom.

She loved to laugh at herself, would she want me to talk about how she ran her Chevy Venture into a fire hydrant on the sidewalk because she said it snuck up on her? Or the fact she was constantly on storm watch and would warn us about a tornado three state lines away? Or how about how she always told us "I love you and I like you" because she thought hearing the latter was just as important, if not more so?

There was also the problem of how I would even these words out.

I found what I was looking for: Red Rubber Ball by Cyrkle.

I took the record out of its sleeve. Mom told us on a winter afternoon – days before Christmas when the sun hits the snow and blinds – the first album she purchased was Red Rubber Ball, bought with cash from babysitting the neighbor kids while their mother attended prayer group. When she first fell in love with the song, she didn't know she was actually falling in love with Paul Simon, who wrote the lyrics. She said a lot of love is like that. Maybe I should say that.

I had a call coming in from Dad and I walked into the spare bedroom.

“How’s it going over there?”

When I didn’t answer, he said something about his vacation – he was in a city that wasn’t Tuscany, but was like Tuscany, “you wouldn’t have heard of it” – but offered to fly into Madison. “If you want.”

What cost more, a month in Fancy-Tuscany or the experimental treatments T.J. pleaded for?

“I wish anyone was my dad but you,” I said.

“What about Elon Musk?”

Dad’s house in South Carolina was entirely outfitted with solar panels and he bought the first Tesla model, upgrading along the way. He thought doing things like this made him good. He was one of those people who sorted people’s personalities incorrectly. Elon Musk: chaotic good.

I laughed and hung up.

“I wish you’d get trapped in a cave in Thailand,” I said to my phone.

Beth asked who called though she knew by looking at my face.

I liked the sounds of spinning right before the music started and how close a record player came to being a time machine:

This record was sleeved, put in a box with other records. The box was placed in the attic of my grandparent's house on Lonnquist, my parent's first house on Lambs Court, second on Maple St., third on Go-Wando, Mom's condo on Regency Ct., until it reached her apartment on Madison.

Mom played the record over and over, placed it in its sleeve, and one day the children she couldn't possibly imagine listened to Red Rubber Ball while sifting through her possessions. I guided the needle to the record. I am much older than she was.

"Get this, three people called Mom a sexy alligator," T.J. said, reading the inside cover of Mom's yearbook. "Three."

"Gross," Beth said. "But that tracks."

T.J. told us Mom received the superlative "best smile." She had been proud of her teeth: how they were perfectly straight aside from the bottom row no one saw, how she never had a cavity.

Beth and I sat down next to him. There was a picture of her in a green and yellow cheerleading outfit, arms in a 'V.' Hard to picture Mom as a cheerleader with her irreverence and constant sarcasm. One person – a boyfriend? – addressed her as "Sister Golden Hair Surprise."

"See you at the lake xx"

He didn't sign his name, probably worried my grandma would initiate an inquisition. Grandma was like this even with her granddaughters.

"Does he have any tattoos?" was always the first question.

Mom would have loved us all under one roof like this, being sentimental. If she were here, we would have some context. If she were here, we wouldn't be doing it. But I loved sorting through Mom's things, touching things she touched. I loved her intentions, how she bought hundreds of dollars in scrapbooking supplies for our unfinished baby books. Did the way we treated her after count for anything?

We had been cared for messily, incredibly. More than we deserved. Good or bad, we don't often get what we deserve. Mom was born destined to die in this tiny apartment in Madison, Wisconsin, as inevitable as each of us coming into this world.

At some point, Mom picked me up and took me into her arms, put me down, and never picked me up again. That's how a record player works, the same as the Earth on its axis. Wobbly, but mostly reliable.

## LAMPSHADES

I've been talking to myself since I can remember. The words come out like a sneeze, and the relief I feel is like the aftermath of a sneeze. If I don't say these things to myself, I might say them to other people. One place that's good for getting it out is in the hall closet. I whisper into my father's garment bags. *Pocket square*. Nonsense that's always bubbling on the surface, needing a voice. A flurry of blinks or throat clearings can place that impulse on a shelf next to my mother's hat box, but I'll have to take it down again before long. The closet fills with forestalled words, and eventually I open the door and everything comes tumbling down.

I can whisper sometimes. In my doctor's waiting room last Wednesday, I hugged my knees to my chest and whispered into the gap between them, and when I looked up, my neighbor – an older boy who's a bagger at Dominick's – was staring at me. *Cotton*



*swabs*. He looked at me in three different ways: Like I was weird, like I was a girl, and like he was surprised there could be a convergence of those identities.

I've been getting attention from boys and men lately because my body looks like something that should be touched. I like how my legs connect to protect what's private, how skirts are lampshades that dim but can't cover.

My mother says the kids at school aren't nice, so she keeps me home. I tell her they are the same ones who go to church, but she says people behave differently in different places. Just like I do.

My father left us when I was a kid. I remember that he wore suits, but maybe that's only because I can see them through the cellophane in the hall closet. He left his aftershave and my mother keeps the bottle on her vanity next to perfume bottles and wrinkle lotions. Sometimes I spray the cologne to pretend to be close enough to smell him: clean, threatening.

Yesterday, I was at Dominick's picking out mushrooms so my mother could make soup from a recipe in *The Art of French Cooking*. I dropped the carton, and it bounced away. The bagger-neighbor bent down to pick it up, handed it to me and asked if I was okay. I smiled without blinking and said yes. I took the carton from his hands.

My mom wandered over, shopping basket hooked under her arm, and said we already had the mushrooms, we just needed the cream. I blinked several times and hissed *bow tie*. He said I don't think we have those.

Tonight, a light shines into my window. I blink and blink and whisper *quarter-round* into my pillow and feel the warm pocket my breath creates against my cheek. I allow myself reckless hope: that those lights are from my father's car. When you're half-asleep, anything can seem possible or even probable. I used to think that was how he would come back, as headlights sweeping into our driveway one night.

But these lights are stationary, coming from our neighbor's driveway. I sneak down the stairs, holding my whispers, drawn to the light. I sneak out the side door and see the bagger boy's father, parked in his driveway, sitting with his headlights on.

I watch as he turns off his car, pausing again, and then makes his way to the front door. He opens it and walks into his living room, turning on the lights. From where I stand, I can see the back of the couch where he sits, and the TV, which he has turned on. He gets up, turns the lights in the living room off once more, and sits back on the couch. He flips through the channels for a while until he pauses on one.

A woman sits on a couch with her legs splayed. A man is watching her with his penis exposed. She looks like she's happy to have an audience. She's using her fingers to spread herself. She's smiling like she's found something.

I sit on the stoop of my side door a little longer, feeling like the woman being watched and the man watching her. And the bagger's father watching both of them. Finally, I creep back to my bedroom. I blink over and over, succumb and mouth *shoe horn*.

Tomorrow night I will sit on the front steps while my mother flutes the mushroom caps in the kitchen until they look like the onion domes of Saint Basil's Cathedral. The

bagger will walk past my stoop, his work apron draped over his shoulder. He'll look up and I'll motion for him to come over. I'll move my legs apart to draw the curtains of my skirt and slide down my underwear. We'll pause there, neither of us knowing what's next, until my mother calls me in for dinnertime.

## **BELL BAY**

We had left the newspaper for Bell Bay campground fifty minutes ago, and Ally was drifting in and out of sleep since. These days, she was tired no matter how much she rested. Sitting in the cup holder between us was Ally's mom, and I'm in trouble about that, how much I don't know.

I accidentally made pretty great plans for us. Pre-Ally me had reserved a spot at Bell Bay campground on Coeur d'Alene Lake, probably assuming I would be burnt out

from the crime beat and in need of an escape. In journalism, disconnecting is essential to survival.

Good spots can be reserved up to a year in advance, and I had spent most of today packing and marveling at how much can change in a little under a year. I've never gone camping with a girlfriend before and Bell Bay was a different thing altogether, but I wanted her there, no doubt in my mind.

I was hoping she would go for it, that maybe a trip would do her some good, getting away from her normal surroundings for a weekend. She always spoke so fondly about the time she spent at her grandparent's lake cottage in Wisconsin, like that place was something even more than a home. Even though I'm North Idaho and she's Chicago suburbs, we're both lake people.

I've seen the Atlantic and Pacific, and oceans, I get them. How people can be blown away when faced with something that seems to go forever, something so unreal. But for people like us, lake people, we admire something of the opposite, how real lakes are. Something about slipping underwater feels like visiting your past versions because no matter how many places you visit, you always seek out that body of water.

I was drawn to this woman with a sad look in her eyes because despite that, she cackled wickedly and I could see her will and strength. When I learned about her mom, all the pieces came together: how she could be bright and sprightly one moment and far away the next.

She brought something out in me, the need to protect. I'd associated that notion with backward thinking most of my life, but now I know when the impulse comes from a

real place, wanting to protect someone you love is as natural as breathing. But I found this instinct right at the moment I was powerless. Her mother would, and then did, die.

I've been immersed in death for years. I remember the difficulty in the beginning, the excessive drinking, traveling from one hangover to the next. You can live like that when you're young, though I cannot recommend it. But at some point, you start to care less, and less. Somewhere in my body a switch flipped. The place where I internalized the faces of the family and the corpse floating in water vanished.

But when I started dating Ally, and noticed she jumped any time she had a call from one of her siblings, everything came back, and I'm not at the point in my life anymore where I can drink it away and pretend the only reason I feel so shitty the next day is what I did the night before.

When I speak with next-of-kin, their tears right in front of my face aren't what bother me. I've seen their months down the road – not the few days following when Ally was in a fog writing her mother's obituary and organizing her mother's belongings with her siblings, or the funeral itself, or even the weeks following the funeral when friends and family sent casseroles and pots of chili – the time after that, when Ally had to return to reality even though she was obviously ill-equipped to do so. The way she has to just carry herself from one place to the next.

I found out about the recordings weeks ago, when I overheard Ally talking to her best friend late one night, when Ally thought I was asleep. When she finally curled into bed after what felt like hours of crying, I lay awake.

The recordings were the first I had heard of Ally's mother's voice, but that voice was so much Ally. It hadn't been my fault I overheard, but it was my fault when I went back and listened to more of them.

She caught me twenty minutes into the drive, when I called her Ally-cat.

"You don't call me Ally-cat," she said.

This is where I made my big mistake. I acted guilty as hell.

"You!" she said.



The session last week we spoke about the recordings. I brought the recorder every session and though I summarized the content of all of the calls accurately, I never hit play.

"I'm not saying you should do this, but how would you feel if I took the recorder for any amount of time?" Michael said.

When I found out Mom was sick – not just sick, dying – I started recording our conversations. The thing about my mom is her voice. It's not beautiful or melodic. It's like a parrot's squawking in a thick Chicago accent. She doesn't really sound like anyone else, except maybe I sound like her, I'm told.

Before she died, I recorded twenty-two conversations. Sometimes, I wake with a pruned thumb. I haven't sucked my thumb since I was eight.

"I need it for my job," I said. "Besides, the files are on my computer as well."

Michael looked frustrated. “This is a thought exercise,” he said. “Let’s say you emailed me the files, and then deleted them from the computer and recorder.”

I told him I would never do that, what would happen if *he* died? He contended he would leave instructions for his wife in the event of his untimely demise.

“You have instructions for your wife if you die?”

I know down to the millisecond when she told me she loved me. Before she was sick, I was overwhelmed by Mom’s love.

“Well, most of them are just, tell patients I died, but in this case the instructions would be more specific, if that’s any incentive.”

I took a moment to consider. “That leaves room for error,” I said. “My final answer is no, Regis.”

“Ally, what would happen if you lost those recordings?”

When I didn’t answer, he asked me would I like to be able to share the burden of my grief with others?

“Honestly no,” I said. “Why would I want to put that on other people?”

“What about Matt?”

Matt is a truck guy. Matt is Idaho. He’s not Idaho-Idaho, but I also don’t believe you can ever completely separate yourself from where you grew up. His Ford F-150 is evidence enough. In any case, he’s definitely not a talk about your feelings guy.



“If I told him I saw you on Tuesdays, he’d probably say he doesn’t believe in you.”

“Like the Easter Bunny,” Michael said. “Sounds to me like you’re not doing a great job of believing in him.”

“Sounds to me like you’re not doing a great job of believing in him,” I mimicked in a professorial tone.

I’m not sure about him, if I loved him because I needed a distraction. He makes me laugh. Even as a friend, he has only known me after she was sick. If I have changed, he doesn’t know, which makes everything easier.

To what extent do my moods affect him? I thought of T.J., the doctor in the family. Do no harm. What a terrifying expectation. She died in his hospital. I picture him walking past the last room she was in and I want to scream. My baby brother being tortured. There is no other word.

None of the people in Spokane knew her well. They can feel sorry for me in an abstract way. They don’t know the contours of the loss: a spiky peach pit lodged in my throat.

My aunts reach out to me frequently, but I don’t know what to say to them. They’ve lost their sister. Though counterintuitive, it’s been difficult for us to help one another, and I feel like we’re on a slowly sinking ship and no one is carrying the bucket to bail us out.

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I want to show her Lake Coeur d'Alene. I know she's been several times before – and she agrees how beautiful the area is – but I want to show the lake to her because that will mean something different.

I guess the other thing about lakes is while they're getting to know you, you get to know them. Even exchange. Oceans are too big and rivers change quickly. Lakes you can meet when you're eight and still show off the same spot when you're 35. I could dip my feet while sitting on the dock and feel fish nip at my toes whose great-great-great-great grandparents did the same thing. Over the course of a summer you can watch minnows become frogs become minnows.

I love her, and she says she loves me. I am not the type of person to question that, but I do. A rational person looking in might say she needs me as a distraction. Even if she does, well.

I know part of what drew us together, as friends at least, was we were both outsiders at the paper. These days we're not, in fact, we're good friends with a lot of the folks, but in the beginning, different story.

She's just a Chicago girl randomly planted in the Inland Northwest. Came here for grad school and took the job before she even graduated. She's loud and a little much and people honestly didn't know what to do with her. Her laugh is alarming and witchy. She laughs often and loudly, even now.

I didn't know what to do with her, honestly, but she could tell I was on my own in the newsroom and just decided we would be friends. That's what Ally does, she decides she's going to be friends with someone. You look at the people around her and you can't

help but see they love her. Sometimes despite themselves, they love her. An eye roll. Did she just say that? A smile.

I grew up in CdA, and prior to the Spokesman I worked for Coeur d'Alene Press , a small paper in Odessa, Texas, and the Lewiston Tribune. Landed at the Spokesman because I realized if the Press was never going to get better, I should focus my efforts on the Spokesman reporting Idaho.

The fact that I keep to myself doesn't help, but the real answer to why I was an outsider is Idaho. I was born in a small logging town called St. Maries, and related to about sixty percent of the town. Everyone there was either in logging, worked at the diner, the bait and tackle, or was a homemaker. My parents were both teenagers who dropped out of high school and I lived with them in a mobile home. And when I tell people who grew up in Spokane I was from there, they safely assume all of that.

We ended up moving around a lot. My parents kept trying to upgrade our situation, and then we were kicked out of places. One foot forward, two feet back. I lived in Coeur d'Alene, Hillyard, Post Falls and way up on the South Hill, by where the Target now stands. I made myself good at football and basketball so I could make friends fast. The difficult thing about being an adult is I'm not sure now how to make friends without tossing a ball.

When a town like St. Maries is brought up, all of the worst of North Idaho is assumed: Alt-Right, Aryan Nation, three-percenters, Proud Boys, who knows what else. But if I had to describe the people in St. Maries, I would say they just "believe what they

believe” and really don’t have much interaction with the outside world. Most of them wouldn’t even recognize those labels, outside of Aryan Nation.

None of my family has any connection to those groups as far as I’m aware of, and my great grandma only died five years ago – that’s what happens when you live in a family with a high generational turnover rate. My mother’s mother? Teen mom. My grandmother’s mother? Teen mom. As far back as I know, teen mom, teen dad. There’s not much to do in small towns like St. Maries. I’m a freak of nature where I come from, 35 and childless. I should be a grandpa by now.

People would probably hate me there if they knew things like I went to school with the kid whose dad keeps introducing measures in Idaho to ban Sharia law and yeah, I’m still friends with his son, Jared. We played football together for three years and there were times his family knew mine didn’t have anything for dinner and they invited me over. Am I supposed to wipe that? Jared thinks his dad is off his rocker anyway.

When I was a kid, I did what I had to do to survive, but the reason they were the people to offer was because we were close. I had no idea how his dad felt, of course – I mainly heard complaints about Clinton, and that would be most anywhere in Idaho at the time.

There are other people in the newsroom who live in Idaho, of course – holdouts from when we still had an Idaho bureau, photogs who have been with us forever, and Spokaneites who moved to Post Falls for lower cost of living. But they’re not seen as Idaho-Idaho. I don’t join in on the kick-the-state games, so it’s assumed on some level that I condone it.

Probably because she didn't grow up with all of the Washington Idaho shit, Ally decided to get to know me. There aren't many people left who don't make assumptions.



A few months after she finished her third chemo treatment, I flew to Madison to spend the week with Mom. I did not know it would be the last time I spent with her outside of a hospital, but on some level, I knew it was a possibility. The second that became a possibility, I had to consciously interact with her as if I had no idea that was a possibility.

It was something like playing a guessing game with someone on Death Row over their last meal. In this manner, we decided we would go to the zoo. Something she liked enough, but not something so over the top that it screamed, "This Is Your Life Donna Dhein."

It hadn't been a particularly sunny day, but it was nice enough and maybe because it wasn't as crowded, a lot of the animals were out and active.

Most of the other animals received our fleeting attention, like the paintings you glance at in a museum to get the full "museum experience" because who knows when you'll be back. But we were there to see the giraffes, her favorite.

When we got to the giraffe enclosure, one of the giraffes stretched its neck into the adjacent enclosure and was licking the camel's hump. You could tell by looking at them – the camel was just lazily chewing the whole time – this was nothing new. Mom said I should videotape it, so I got away with videotaping her.

Mom looked at me and said, "They can do that, since they have such long necks."

She named him Bernie for his burnt orange spots. There was something childlike about her, like now that she knew she was dying she had selected that as the best way to live.

And Mom said, “They’ve decided to be friends.” She had a satisfied, almost determined look on her face, like that settled it. Like at that moment, she had everything figured out.

We sat on a bench for 30 minutes, watching the giraffe lick the camel’s back, then we got up and she said, “I think I’d like to go home now.” So we did.

This is a video recording I have with her permission – the rest of them she wouldn’t have approved of. And even with the steroids making her face puffy, she had the most beautiful smile in the world.

But when I was videotaping it, I was devastated. I need to keep the record straight, I do not want to begin romanticizing or blurring details. Let me be clear: I will be honest because my mother didn’t need any embellishments.

When I was taping Mom talking about her new giraffe friend, it had just dawned on me that she would never again go to her favorite place in the world, her parent’s cottage on Lake Geneva.

When they had switched her to palliative care, one of the nurses asked her if there was anything they could do for her – anything at all – anything in the world – you name it – what do you want Donna?

It's important to know that all of Mom's nurses and doctors loved her. It's also important to know that she was always a smart ass to them. Even when she was on the breathing tube and couldn't speak, she would give someone the middle finger, just as a way of showing she was still there.

And my mom rolled her eyes and said, "A stuffed giraffe?"

And we all laughed, but I bolted up and said, "I'll be right back!"

I had been in the hospital gift shop a couple days prior, just trying to distract myself. So I knew that they actually sold stuffed giraffes in there. And I couldn't have bought it quick enough, back to her room triumphant, and everyone laughed.

"Donna, you got your giraffe," Nurse Sarah said.

Mom hugged him tight and said "I love him." And she named him Bernie. I swear, when Mom hugged him, that was the happiest moment of my life.

And when the drugs were making her so hot that it hurt for us to hold her hand, hug her, touch her skin, she held Bernie and whispered "Love."



I reserved Bell Bay because it's the campsite my family visited nearly every summer, the closest we ever came to going on vacation.

There were a handful of summers my family was camping because we were between places. That's what Mom called it, between places. Dad never called it anything. I remember eating fried eggs and hot dogs for weeks. You get sick of toasted

marshmallows when you begin to realize they're part of what's keeping you full. Can't stand them now, but I noticed Ally put a bag in her backpack.

The arrangement between Dad and the campsite custodian: We would stay for free, so long as Dad took on most of the maintenance responsibilities. Making sure the outhouses stayed clean and stocked. Cleaning out what other campers left behind. Dad has never shied away from work others didn't want to do, he couldn't afford that. I tagged along, holding open a plastic garbage bag, carting a wagon behind me for the things we could use. Dad was never trusted to collect the camping fees.

It was unusual, having so much fun, feeling like I belonged to this lake, literally my front yard, but also knowing we were in trouble, and how much, and how long. Making friends with other kids who were there just for fun, just for a few days. Showing them around to the best places to fish, the rock you can jump from, the hidden bay where we smoked Virginia Slims I snuck from Mom's purse. Paranoid they knew exactly what I was and hated me for it, or worse, pitied me.

But that was only spring or summer, and during the colder weather we only stayed at shelters a few times. Schools changed frequently, but I was rarely absent, Mom saw to that. I could see the other kids were worse off, and I lived with a feeling of guilt and gratitude.

Having a truck is both impossible to say and easy to explain: a truck means there's always somewhere to keep your stuff.

I knew – without even asking her – Ally had never lived a day like this. She knew my family was poor, but she had no idea I was taking her to one of the places I grew up.



I am nearing one of the highest points of the drive, only a few minutes from camp, and even though she seems to be sleeping well, I need to wake her up.

“Hey Ally,” I say. “Ally! Sweetie, wake up, you need to see this.”



The sharp intake of breath, no matter how many times he’s seen it, but he realizes as she does that it’s more beautiful this time. He can understand why people pair off, as he appears to be doing, how when you see something with someone you care about, it magnifies.

She cannot believe – trees, water, mountains – how transformative some places can be. And this man, so patient, going out of his way to show this to her. She can tell by the way he is looking at the lake she is in a rare moment where she and another person are seeing the exact same thing at the same time. She forgets to be angry and she never really was.

Moments, by their very nature, pass. It’s their job. But in these seconds Ally clings to the feeling of awe of this land and this man, she closes her eyes and stores it with a smile.

He looks over at her.

“Happy,” she says. “Thank you for taking me here.”

He clears his throat. “Thank you for coming with me. It means a lot.”

When they pull into the campsite, Ally digs through her purse for her wallet.

“Put it away,” he says. “They only take cash and I’ve got exact change.”

Ten years ago, when he first came back to the camp, he went to the custodian’s campsite directly to pay. He looked much older, but it was the same man from when he was a child.

“I’ll be here two nights,” he said. “I just wanted to pay you in advance.”

If the old man recognized him, he didn’t give himself away.

Two summers later, the camp had a new person running the site.

As he hauls the cooler, places it by the picnic table, she asks him if he minds if she walks down to the pier on her own, just for a few minutes.

No, he does not mind. He never expected she would help set up anyhow, and he’s used to setting up by himself, easier that way. As he takes the poles out of their pouch, he thinks, Home for a few days. What his mom always said, but back then “few days” was faulty math. This part, setting up camp, always got to him, no matter how many times his tent rose, no matter how he tried to push down the swelling in his chest.

And the feeling of pride, as well. It was just a few days, he would return to an apartment he paid for, and would continue to pay for, to a landlord he never dodged and who had no reason to distrust him.

But he would always live with the fear that somehow all of this would be taken away. He learned from his parents people like him were always one bad decision or stroke of bad luck from losing everything. A hungry dog stalking in every alleyway. Matt, you do not belong, never will.

Hadn't Ally experienced that, her mother a lifelong nonsmoker dying of lung cancer? Unfair, fluke. Matt resents the naïve security most people live with, but hates even more the day their world topples. Not something he would wish on his worst enemy.

He goes back to the truck to get the envelope with his cash so he can clip it to the pole outside their site and notices Ally's voice recorder. Every time he thinks of her mother, he feels a sinking in his stomach. He will only ever know her in stories told and a voice suspended in a moment that no longer exists.

He presses play even though he knows he should leave well enough alone.

"Can you check on your brother?" she asks. "He seemed distracted today and I'm worried about him."

He hits pause and rewinds three seconds, hopefully covering his tracks. In all the bits and pieces he's heard, this mother's concern is solely for her children. She never complains, even when it's obvious she is barely catching her breath. So scary to hear her deterioration by pressing play, play, play. Occasionally better days offering false hope. Avoiding the recordings near the end like stopping your favorite movie before that scene. But then, Ally stopped recording months before her mother died. He suspects she knew enough to protect herself.

He looks towards the lake and sees her running down the pier. She is running to and from simultaneously. Her flight is the most beautiful, miserable thing he has ever witnessed. One day she will leave him because she'll realize she can only ever associate him with this time in her life. He is already remembering her as he witnesses her sprint towards the inevitable.



She remembers learning to dive.

She is bounding three boards at a time, the white-washed wood bouncing under her feet. Her feet are the same feet that have carried her everywhere. Her mother felt them first.

Her mother had her kneel with one leg and positioned Ally's arm streamlined, hugging her ears.

Ally feels the drum of anticipation before she reaches the water. She would start all over again if she could, she would be born again and live her entire life from the start to have more time with her. There probably is a way to do this, she thinks, but with a condition attached that she cannot know what she knows now. Still, she would do it.

Her mom put her arm in front of Ally's stomach so she would have to dive over it, a reverse limbo to prevent a belly flop. Ally's pink stomach stung from the flops earlier in the day, the sunburns from the accumulation of days spent in endless sun.

Her feet spring toward air and water so rapidly she hovers.

Her mother taught her head first, legs straight.

What does she love, her body in flight, first contact with water, or is the relationship too tangled?

Someday maybe this will be one of her lakes. If you can't always know when something is ending, you also can't know when it's beginning.

## FLORENTINE FUCHSIA

*My soul cries out*

*With a joyful shout*

*That the God of my heart is great*

The altar boys enter first, then the pastor, at which point everyone in the church stands. They stand without consciously sending the message to their muscles to stand; the neurons have a quicker path. Most people cruise through Mass on autopilot, sit-stand-kneel-repeat. Beth and I are sitting, conspicuous in the front pew, patterns delayed.

We picked “Canticle of the Turning” because it was her favorite, but the tone is wrong. I should have stuck to classics like “On Eagles Wings” or “Be Not Afraid.” Those were the songs used in the first funeral I remember, for Father Loftus. A big deal was made. One of the girls in my third grade class, Ashley, cried like he was a relative. Church songs are emotionally vampiric, and I want everyone to cry.

In church, she braided and unbraided my hair, golden like hers once was. I knocked my Mary Janes against each other, against the pew in front of us, and they

squeaked. Itching at my white tights. Fussing with the red satin bow on the front of my dress.

“Mary sang this song while she was waiting for Jesus to be born,” Mom said.

I turned my neck toward her. She kissed me at the curl of my neck, just where my hairline ended. Where a child will always smell like she did when she was a baby. And smells as her mother did. And her mother did.

*And my spirit sings*

*of the wondrous things*

*that you bring to the ones who wait*

For T.J., there is nothing familiar about carrying a wooden casket with his uncles.

His hands are young. Mom said moisturizing your hands and neck was the most important because those were the first places people age. That and teeth. T.J.’s hands don’t look young because he took her advice – *we are* young. I had been feeling old recently. I’m only in my early 30s but I was a few steps behind most of my friends on the life itinerary. Today I feel impossibly young. T.J. makes his way down the aisle, and I know in a matter of minutes, I will be called up to the lectern to “say a few words.”

Matt is sitting in the pew behind me, and he squeezes my shoulders. He’s never been to a Catholic church before, he grew up going to one of those mega-churches where

the lead priest wears a guitar the whole service and uses “fellowship” as a verb. Fellowshiping involved pepperoni pizza from Pizza Hut, so Matt fellowshiped a lot. Matt never met Mom, but she would have found that funny and told him Jesus isn’t meant to be cool. Mom was a firm believer that children weren’t meant to be entertained constantly. She brought us along to most of her errands and made us watch her soaps with her. *General Hospital* was her favorite.

I spoke with Michael on the phone yesterday as prep. I was used to sitting across from him in his office, and I found it difficult to concentrate on what he was saying without his face. I hadn’t realized how much of my interactions with him centered on facial expressions. He has an expressive face, which is interesting because when I first went to see him, I didn’t think I would be able to become a client because he has a red birthmark that blooms across his entire face, and I found trying not to look at it distracting.

A friend had recommended him, and when I asked why she hadn’t mentioned the birthmark, said she forgot. I didn’t believe her, but I don’t think of his birthmark often, though I did when I was talking to him on the phone about the funeral.

Michael told me it didn’t matter what I said, just that I had chosen to say it.

*You fixed your sight*

*On your servant’s plight*

*And my weakness you did not spurn*



Beth is squeezing my hand and I'm crying. Her nails, my nails are a bright fuchsia. This was Mom's fuchsia. Florentine Fuchsia. She never cared about having her nails painted or wearing makeup, but when Dad took her on a date, she painted her nails Florentine Fuchsia.

I held Mom's hand carefully in the palliative unit because Beth had finished that one and was working on the next. Beth has a steadier hand than me. T.J. stood at the window.

"We need to get you moved to another room," T.J. said. "This just looks out at an office building."

Mom looked out the window as if she had just noticed it was there. I picked at a small amount of polish on her cuticle. I traced my finger where her wedding band used to be.

"Tell him stay away," she said.

"Dad?" I said.

"Not here - not funeral."

"Try not to move much, Mom," Beth said. "I'm going to screw up your nails."

One day, Mom went out on the Sunfish with her wedding rings on and when she pulled the Sunfish onto the dock, realized they were lost. When she told Dad, he said it didn't matter. He didn't say anything about replacements.

I learned about divorce when Princess Di died on T.J.'s birthday. We were having a party at the lake house but Dad couldn't make it because of work. I don't know how much is because of work or how much is because of other things, but I still think about it.

T.J. hears me crying, stops moving toward the altar, and my uncles stop with him. They just stand there, the casket getting heavier.

There are videos of all of our first steps. My parents bought a video camera just before their wedding and it made it all the way through to my graduation. Along the way, their wedding cassette was partially taped over with episodes of *General Hospital*, but the very beginning still exists before an abrupt cut to Sonny Corinthos pondering his marriage with Carly. In the beginning, my father stands at the altar in oversized, brown, plastic frame glasses. Though he is far away, you can tell he is nervous. Then my mother walks toward him. His shoulders relax down his back.

*So from East to West*

*Shall my name be blest*

*Could the world be about to turn?*

T.J. and my uncles lower Mom at the altar, and T.J. sits on the other side of Beth. The planner is making her way to the lectern.

"Now, Donna Dhein's daughter, Ally, would like to say something."

I walk up to the lectern, and with full view of the church, I can say for sure, he is not here. Even though we had asked him to stay away, I think *coward*. People often can't get what they want because they aren't sure what that is. I didn't want Dad there, but I need him. I need to know he is sad. If he could hear my thoughts, he would start humming Rolling Stones.

I make my way through the things I have written in my notes, which are meaningless. A joke about mom's bad driving, bad dancing, general clumsiness. But how she was the most loving, wonderful mom and a good, kind person. All of which is true and mostly bullshit, because it could be said of most moms inside most families.

What I don't say, what I can't say, is this:

There were countless small and large terribles. There were times I felt empty and alone just being in proximity to my parent's marriage. Times I hated Dad because he was cruel and selfish. Times I hated Mom because she was weak and pathetic. Times I was scared because she wouldn't get out of bed. I have overheard conversations which have made me a different person.

A few weeks before they told us they were divorcing, I was reading in bed when I overheard Dad say, "What do you expect? We haven't had sex in two years."

I am still hiding my head under a pillow.

I'm sad to say between my parents, the bad far outweighed the good. Mom did her best to protect all of us, but Beth, T.J. and I have trouble giving and accepting love,

trouble trusting anyone but each other. Michael has found dozens of kind ways to point to this. We always thought our close relationship made us special, but did not consider the consequences. Everything else I said, how she was funny and clumsy and loving – all of that is true, as well.

Dad always says let me tell you the bad stuff first, or else you'll never believe me when I tell you the good. And there was good, but let me tell you this: There were times I watched Mom, hand starfished on the Daily Herald comics, shaking the nail polish bottle with a smile.

## SUNFISH

We had never opened the cottage for summer. In the past, Grandpa had been in charge, and after he died, our uncle. This year, the task rested on our shoulders. All of our aunts and uncles had offered to help, or in the very least, to be there, but we needed to do it on our own. This summer, we had a mission: to spread your ashes from the Sunfish.

We walked into the living room, and the first thing I noticed was the fireplace Grandpa had cobbled together with rocks from the shoreline. My grandpa had been a man who wanted to do everything with his hands, probably why he loved his sailboat and passed that love onto his children and grandchildren.

On the mantle was a picture frame fashioned with seashells you made for Father's Day when you were young. In the picture, you're wearing a daisy bathing cap, sunglasses, and a yellow one-piece with a peter pan collar, giving the camera a big thumbs up and the cheesiest grin, while Grandpa, back to the camera, hunched over, loops the rope around the cleat.

This picture could be the Sunfish's maiden voyage, but maybe the two of you had already taken out the boat a couple times. When the people in the picture can no longer tell the story, those left behind make their own. When I looked at the picture, all I saw was something new, something good, had begun.

I passed by that picture my entire life never seeing it head-on. Despite the picture's role in my periphery, I had memorized every detail without ever knowing. Above the mantle was a painting of a sailboat, with words underneath, "Give us this day our daily breeze." As far as I was concerned, that sailboat had never not been there.

Oldest of seven, your sisters and brother called you MamaDonna. You helped Grandma so much I wonder how much you got for yourself. That never seemed to bother you. When you died, Grandma began calling me every night.

"My beautiful, beautiful baby girl," she cries into the phone. "She was so little, I was terrified to hold her."

The Sunfish was resting on the trailer in the musty garage. None of us had a car capable of hauling, so we were going to have to carry the boat down to the lake together. We put the black cardboard box – we are told you are in here – in the cockpit, the dagger board leaning against. T.J. carried the mast and sails over his shoulder while Beth and I lifted the hull.

We trudged slowly through the small lake community, making our way to the pier. Too early in the season for cars to be in the driveways, but I pretended everyone had their faces pressed to their windows, peaking from behind curtains, breath held.

Most of the people who lived here had known you since you were a girl. Likely, one of them had taken the picture on the mantle. My grandma wouldn't have taken this

photo, she was afraid of the water and rarely went down to the pier in the sixty some odd years my grandparents owned the cottage.

Even with Beth on the other side, the boat felt heavy, but that was fine. I thought about the Stations of the Cross reenactments during Lent, how the burden of heft sublimated loss. I remembered the patterns of the carpeted kneelers leaving red impressions. How lucky we are to have the physical body existing sensation to sensation. But most of all, I thought of all the sacrifices you had made for us, especially the ones we would never know about.

Carrying the boat, I was thinking about the picture and Beth said, “Let’s lay it on the ramp.”

My body made the correct movements to follow what she was saying even though I was barely registering. I looked up and sure enough we were at the pier. The picture was taken on this ramp. We were standing in the way of the camera.

T.J. began rigging the boat and I calmed, lost in the surety of his work. He was the only one of us who had rigged the Sunfish on his own. I knew enough. I had seen the figure eight of cleat knots and masts propped up time and again like flags claiming new territory. I was certain I could do it, if called upon.

“I wish I had paid attention,” Beth said.

T.J. pulled his stopper knot and looked over at her. “I can teach you, if you want.”

“I don’t want to learn from you,” she said.

Once you get going, nothing else matters. Sailing is flying: Watch how any bird uses the wind and it's easy to understand the green and white Sunfish Grandpa bought when you were three.

I know how wind knocks. How it whip-cracks a sail and sends you flying. How your eyes tear and the sun paints the water. Watching you sail is the same as sailing.

Beth was the first to reach into the box. Beth, your baby. I remember her always sneaking her sticky hands into yours when she was little. How jealous I was, having lost that easy connection. I tried to sit in your lap when you breastfed her.

“Mommy, mommy, will you read to me?”

With people we love, we lose them and grieve them millions of times before they die, millions of times after. There's no other way to access love.

She put her hand over the side of the boat and you slipped through her fingers. T.J. was steering and told us to duck just before the boom came swinging our way. You would be part of the lake, where children would explore, spending hours touching the rocks on the bottom one at a time as a way of knowing, and knowing as a way of loving.

One day, you went sailing, pulled the Sunfish back on the dock, and never went out again. The losses we don't grieve because we don't know.

I took a handful and held my palms wide like I was preparing to feed a bird, and I let my hand go into the water.

T.J. brought Beth's hands to the tiller.



“You’re going to have to steer,” he said.

He reached his hand into the box, threw you to the wind and you caught on the breeze.

I made a wish for a picture of you at age three. A wish for your first time sailing the Sunfish, that we could be the wind filling the sails. We could be the needle touching the record. We could be a sticky hand, snuck in yours.

I let another handful scatter, the wind, the water, and the boat cutting between.

### **CIRCLE GAME**

You died this morning. The doctor told you that the best predictor of a stroke is a stroke.

Turns out she was right, that last one got you. Of course, how many times did I lose my house keys and you said, “Where’s the last place you had them?”

It’s always the last thing that gets us, but it’s everything along the way that prepares us to be gotten.

The second to last effectively took you from us. I prayed for you to die. Your left eye followed me around as I opened the drapery or freshened vase water. I was there because Tommy wasn't. Sometimes I was brave and massaged your hand. I fell in love with you again for five minutes: same old love, fresh for lack of use. Sad to say, I've spent my life doing this. Your current wife watched us from behind her trashy novel as if we might pick up together. Karen. As if she hadn't been the one to steal you sixteen years ago. As if I didn't know someone had to be willing to be stolen. I did know what a favor she'd done me, doing that.

You weren't a bad husband and I wasn't a bad wife. Even the betrayal in the end was a cleverly disguised escape hatch for both of us.

When we were married, you complained that your mother confided in me. It is true I knew things about you that you didn't. You have to be a mother to understand there are things a child must not know, secrets can be entrusted to someone who loves the child enough to understand. There is a child version of you who I never knew but still protect. While your mom was carrying you, she was still mourning your sister she couldn't carry to term. I can now whisper this into the void you might hear. She thought it had something to do with your sadness, like grief might travel through blood, circulating to the plaited heart-rope of who you would become.

After our divorce, your mother and I commiserated. We looked through old albums and I gave her some pictures of us young and happy. Now my secret: I kept the negatives, they can always be reprinted.

There was a photo of us with Tommy when he was just starting school. We were sitting on the front steps and Tommy was clutching his bag to his chest. The neighbor girl took it, I can hear the echoes of her telling you to smile. I cannot trust my memories; maybe it was some other time, someone else telling you to smile.

I remember that bag from Tops, I said. I traced the white border with my pointer finger. Tops was a department store walking distance from our first home. We only had one car; I visited to escape the house. We were both miserable and we couldn't admit this or understand why. The love was real, I never doubted.

Your mother lost you for three minutes in Garafalos. She found you talking to a man who bolted when she approached. Those days, people weren't paranoid about child abduction, but your mother could see down the path of what could have been all the same.

"What did he *say* to you?" your mom asked.

You didn't know.

"What did he say?"

You grabbed a bottle of V-8 off the shelf and put it in the basket. Later that evening she poured you a glass and you slurped it like soup.

She watched you like a hawk from then on. Small moments make us. Your mother changed, yes, but you became who you were for being so closely guarded.

“He still drinks V8 every morning with breakfast,” I said.

One day, I took Tommy to your mom’s after school, and she told me she had a recurring nightmare where there’s a gap between the elevator floor and the floor of the building.

What building? I asked.

A dream building, not important.

In her dream, you’re a baby and you wriggle out of her arms and fall into the gap. Maybe an elevator shaft, she said. She can hear you falling and she screams. Her legs won’t move. No one will take her to you and they tell her you never existed.

I was watching Tommy climb the tree in her backyard while she was telling me this and I thought to myself *what if he falls and breaks his leg or what if he falls and breaks his neck*, but then I told myself *he won’t fall, and if he does, he won’t be hurt, and if he is, he won’t die*, so I was half-hearing her, but I understood what she was saying.

I told her I dreamed I gave birth when I was seven. I woke and was inconsolable I couldn’t find the baby. Sometimes I wonder if my body was too frightened to become pregnant after that.

The story in dreams is never the plot, but the emotions we don’t allow ourselves to feel awake. That’s the terror of dreams: how alive we are.

There wasn't anything either of us could have done. That doesn't make it easier, and you're the only one who can understand. Still, it didn't make us punish each other any less. His heart stopped in the middle of football practice. His coach saw him go down. Neither of us was even there.

When you called me in the middle of the night because you were having trouble sleeping, and told me if you went back to sleep, you wouldn't wake again. I stayed with you until you fell asleep, picturing you in that recliner, the only item of furniture you kept.

I thought this was because your mother had recently died. I didn't attend the funeral, but I mourned, and you knew without asking. I didn't understand losing a mother, but I understood loss. You also lost the only person who loved Tommy nearly as much as you and me, and the woman who was capable of buttressing you through that loss, because I couldn't.

Even though you never mentioned her during our conversation, she was present in everything you said. And somehow, through her death, you were able to speak to me about Tommy in a way you never could when we were married.

Perhaps if we had been able to say those words then, they would have saved us. But who can know all the paths we could have taken – the only one we have is the here and now, with me, shivering under my blanket in bed, crying off and on, talking to my dead ex-husband. Crazy old lady – I don't care.

On the phone you asked me if I thought about how things might have been different if Tommy had been an open adoption. We were old parents – especially for the time – and Tommy’s birth mother had insisted on all records remaining sealed. We were so happy to finally be parents – after living on a list for years – that we never thought through the consequences.

How were we to know Tommy had a condition? if we had known about a history of heart disease ... if we had known.

Still, we cannot regret anything, you said. I don’t.

You asked me to help you, you tried therapy for years – I had begged for couples counseling but you said no. Then again, those were different times – nothing worked.

I said I didn’t know what I could do, but I would try.

I took you to a hypnotist in Chicago Heights who I heard about from a friend from our old neighborhood. I imagine you told Karen what you always told me: I have to work late. Maybe I was no better than she was, but weren’t you mine first? The office was the hypnotist’s apartment. Turkish coffee was spitting on the stove in her kitchen. She gestured for us to sit and asked us what brought us. She poured the coffee into a miniature cup, gesturing would we like some?

Shouldn’t you know? you said.

She’s not a fortune-teller, I said. He’s having trouble sleeping.

It’s more than that, you said. I knew this, but had trouble putting my finger on the more.

I have a glass harmonica, she said. It was one of Ben Franklin's inventions. He wanted to capture the pure sound created from running his finger around the lip of a glass. He wanted to harness the sound, control the sound.

Certain frequencies of music trigger different areas of the brain. There is something troubling you and you don't know what. The brain always knows. When we sleep, we dream because our brain is trying to problem solve. No sleep, no solutions, and the cycle self-perpetuates. She paused. I want to give your brain a chance to solve, if you'll allow me.

The glass harmonica was in the corner of the room. Glass bowls nested inside each other, graduated in size, spinning on a rod, every few bowls golden-lipped. She dipped her hands in a crystal bowl of water and began to play, but I couldn't recognize the song, only the purity of the sound, so full from such a light touch, excruciating. The apartment wasn't set up for good acoustics; the warbling echo was pushing in on us. It kept spinning and spinning with nothing to stop my racing thoughts.

Someday you would die. Whether I decided to stop loving you this very second, or continued to love you the rest of my life. Whether Karen left you, you left Karen, or you stayed together out of stubbornness and routine, you would die. Through your betrayal, you had remained the most important person in my life. And you would die. Which I couldn't say, sitting close to you in this woman's apartment. Of course you would die.

When we first got together, I constantly played my Joni Mitchell record. You said jokingly I enjoyed being sad. I laughed and Joni Mitchell said, "Yesterday a child came out to wonder." Before I fell asleep that night I realized you were right, even though you



meant nothing serious. I enjoyed being sad too much. But you were sad, too. I loved you even more in the end when I knew I would lose you. Maybe that's the only way I could love you.

When the music stopped, I looked at you and the look felt exactly like a Sunday morning sleeping in, turning our heads toward one another. Tommy bounding into our room, jumping on the bed.

Better? she said.

Not worse, you said.

After saying our goodbyes, we stepped into the Chicago fall air. Winter air most everywhere, but it didn't feel cold to us. We were natives, couldn't imagine living elsewhere. You shook your head and laughed. That was wild, you said. You seemed better, lighter. Perhaps sleepless nights could be passing moods like clouds momentarily blocking the sun. Maybe you would be fine. Maybe I had found a way to help.

I thought about reaching for your hand. I wanted to say Let's trick ourselves again like we could when we were young and all this hurt didn't lay between us. Possible for two seconds, something I could shake off like déjà vu. You walked toward your station wagon in the opposite direction. We can only look behind from where we came.

## INTO THE MYSTIC

The police said when their dad's car went into the side rail, that he'd been listening to *The Essential Van Morrison*, the CD playing when they got to him. He'd been on his way home from the track. Seventy-two dollars stuffed into his pockets, a good day.

The house was buzzing with fruit flies. Dishes had overtaken the recliner in the living room, the bathroom sinks, the upstairs shower-tub. Some of the food had swirled down the drain at first, but eventually bigger pieces clogged it. When the shower's water rose too high, they used one of the bowls to bail the liquid into the toilet and flushed. Sometimes the toilet handle needed that jiggly thing.

When they ran out of dishes, they bought more dishes – at Target, Goodwill, Walmart. Half-eaten casseroles of every variety in Pyrex containers were slid under the

couch, the beds. The neighbors had ceased sending casseroles weeks ago, had stopped asking for their Tupperware back.

The smell was horrible, but they had electricity, running water, cable television, which meant they had *Judge Judy*, *Maury*, *Good Morning America*.

Kelly followed American Idol. Lee DeWyze—an asshole from high school—won, sang ‘Beautiful Day,’ running through confetti. She nudged Tim, who was asleep on the couch. Nothing.

“TIM!” she shouted, and he startled awake. “Wanna go to P & Me’s?”

Their mom was upstairs. They had never been told *not* to leave, but this rule was implied by the way she moved about the house: slowly, thoroughly, like a night guard.

He looked at what he was wearing, sniffed the shirt, and shrugged. “P & Me’s ‘s fine with me. Did that asshole win?”

“Of course he did.”

Their dad’s car was a red Jeep Grand Cherokee. The doors slammed shut whether he meant something by it or not. The car could drive on snow, ice, slush.

With its dusty black and white striped awnings, P & Me's was the structural equivalent of the girl who went to bed with her makeup on. People they knew in high school would be at this bar, gawking or apologizing or talking about Lee DeWyze.

They ordered a pitcher and another. They laughed about their dad's betting habits, how he'd pick a horse based on which one reminded him most of their mother by looking at the horse's hindquarters.

One of the assholes at the next table was wearing a BELLEEVE T-shirt, his arm around some girl with Disney villain eyebrows.

They had another pitcher, talked about how DeWyze got kicked out of high school.

"I hope he gets a nasty Meth addiction."

Kelly heard Disney scoff and gave her the middle finger.

"Goddamn, what do we have to do to make them leave?" Tim said.

The solution was that they would leave.

Their dad always pulled over to the side of the road when he saw a car with flashers on. He didn't know anything about fixing cars. "If they need a jump, give them a jump," he said. Often, these cars did not need a jump. Their dad would say, "We've got granola bars, if you want em."

They stumbled into Keefer's pharmacy. Growing up, Keefer's had been the place Tim and Kelly bought nickel candy like flying saucers.

Keefer's stocked trade magazines and geriatric supplies, *Fly Fishing Monthly* and at-home catheters. The candy under the glass looked decades old. No one was up front. They perused the greeting card stand. Funny anniversary. Late birthday. Just saying hello. Blank inside. Romantic Father's Day.

They walked through the general aisle.

"Do you think we should bring something home for Mom?"

"Like what?"

"Maybe a soap dish." His laugh was mean. Kelly had that meanness, too.

The Jeep had one of those overhead sunglass cases and their dad had Raybans before they were cool, just like he wore Abercrombie button-downs before LFO. When Kelly was seven, she had an iridescent unicorn sticker she gave her dad. He put the sticker on the side of his sunglasses. The sunglasses were recovered from the Jeep; Tim wore them, when the sun was bright and the snow reflected pure white, while the sound system blasted *The Essential Van Morrison*.

They walked home. The wind made their skin thin. Kelly put her hand in Tim's jacket pocket because he used to do that with her when they were young. She wanted to keep him close.

The bare maples and oaks all looked the same on those tree-lined streets. Neighbor girls who'd pressed their hands into wet cement, and signed their initials with a twig, were now away at college. Kelly and Tim could feel the sucking warmth of the girls' hands going in.

They'd probably touched every tree on this route, let spin their whirligigs.

When Kelly and Tim were children, their father had built them a treehouse, equipped with a play kitchen. He made it out of cabinets he found discarded on the side of the road during bulk trash day. He made a sink, an oven, an overhead microwave.

They climbed the ladder to the treehouse, found a six-pack of Old Style on the shelf and popped them open, drinking them even though the beers made them gut-sour. They threw the empties out the window.

Kelly went into the kitchen, put on an apron the size of a dishtowel, put a waffle and a piece of broccoli into a plastic bowl. Put an apple and sunny side up egg on a plastic plate. She found a knife and spork. She turned the wooden knob to preheat the oven, put the plate and bowl in, closed the oven door. Tim made a ding noise and she took the food out with an oven mitt.

Kelly presented the bowl to Tim, kept the plate for herself. Tim pretended to eat, slipping the food through the gaps in the floor. Kelly followed his lead. Together, they cleared the dishes to the counter, putting the overflow in the sink.

**READING LIST**

- ◇Tell me a Riddle by Tillie Olsen
- ◇The Collected Works of Grace Paley
- ◇You Think That's Bad by Jim Shepard
- ◇Baby's On Fire by Liz Prato
- ◇Monogamy by Marly Swick
- ◇Empty House by Nathan Oates
- ◇Little Women by Louisa May Allcott
- ◇Tell Me How It Ends by Valeria Luiselli
- ◇Bluets by Maggie Nelson
- ◇The Mothers by Britt Bennett
- ◇The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion
- ◇The Shell Collector by Tony Doerr
- ◇Kiss Me Someone by Karen Shepard
- ◇Citizen by Claudia Rankine
- ◇The Weight of Things by Marianne Fritz



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