

ABSTRACT

The History of the World: Or, Dewayne Boyce, As I Recall

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This creative nonfiction thesis is composed of a set of personal essays that reflect on the author's relationship with her family, primarily her mother and grandfather. It shows, through an often fragmented and lyrical style, the inheritance they give to and receive from one another, beginning with the traditions of storytelling and deception that are embedded in the text itself. The collection triangulates certain themes and preoccupations, leaving and later returning to the same ideas, people, and occurrences to find new insights and reflections. They are meant to echo an individual's reflection on his or her own life and family past, as one returns to familiar images again and again and recreates what one cannot remember. By the end of this collection, some hope is offered from the repeated cycle of family addiction and manipulation, though that salvation is only found in the same familiar patterns of behavior.

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THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD: OR, DEWAYNE BOYCE, AS I RECALL

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

My Grandpa D.B.'s obituary is in the August 22nd edition of the *Quay County Sun*. It starts, "Dewayne Mobley, age 72, of Tucumcari NM, passed away Wednesday, August 15, 2012, at his home in Tucumcari." It tells when he was born, who survived him, and when services will be held. The obituary gives the wrong hometown for my mom, and it includes the names of his stepdaughters, whom he hated.

I read that obituary and recognized nothing of my own Grandpa D.B. in it. It may say that he enjoyed gardening, but it said nothing of the hours he spent weeding without a shirt on, hours that turned into years of skin cancer. It says he has nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, but it doesn't say that only four of them were actually related to him, but he saw them even less than the others. It listed his latest wedding, but none of the others, and it doesn't say why he married Pollyanne Brady in 1998 even though they met in 1956.

That obituary is why I wrote these pages, which number in the hundreds by now and will, God willing, allow me to graduate with my Bachelor's. This was a man who told stories and, when he was alive, made a legend of his life. Even if he doesn't deserve it, I want to make a legend of his death too. This man who fascinated and repelled me all through my childhood, who sprayed me with a water gun and then called me H.C. because he was D.B., was meant for greatness, not the back of the obituary pages. Everyone knew it, especially him, but no one was ever quite able to help him get it. As always, I want to be his favorite grandchild in that sea of nine and give it to him in my own meager way.

The problem, of course, is that I barely knew my grandpa, or I knew only the old man who spent hours in his garden and loved his pets more than children. I only knew what stories had been passed down to me from my mom and my grandma, pieces of a man I idolized all the more for never having known him. But, of course, they didn't really know him either. He was largely absent from their lives, having divorced my grandma and left the family when my mom was only twelve. Stories are what they know of him as well, and so all we have now are stories that orbit around a dark sun that is still at the center of our universe. The obituary tells the truth, but telling the truth about Dewayne Boyce Mobley won't reveal much about who he is.

He died on the day I moved into college for my freshman year. My mom got the call from his wife Pollyanne in our hotel room, and when she started to cry I held her and looked into our vague hotel mirror and tried to make myself cry as well. The tears didn't come until two days later, but then I only cried for myself because my parents had just left me alone. I felt a lurking sense of guilt whenever my thoughts went back to Grandpa D.B., as on the first birthday I had after he died. It was his birthday too; he would have been seventy-three, I realized, because he was exactly fifty-five years older than me. I tried to atone by making a flower crown for my young cousin, who also shared our birthday, fourteen years after mine and sixty-nine after my grandpa's. I continued with this game of hide-and-seek until my junior year, when I took a creative nonfiction class. We were assigned a lyric essay, one of those intangible genres which I've attempted several times in this collection. I was trying to come up with a topic when I found two toy dinosaurs that a friend had given me. I busied my hands with them as my grandpa

did with his cigarettes, and my mind went to my young obsession with dinosaurs and the museum in Tucumcari where my mom had always taken me to escape from his stifling brick house. And then the memories of my grandpa that college had buried began to shift and resettle. I remembered the rock he gave me when I was four and followed him into his hedges. He told me it was a piece of shit, petrified dinosaur shit. I took it home and put it on my nightstand. I remember how he greeted me as his birthday twin when we got to his house and ignored my sister, and the nickname, H.C., that only he had ever called me.

I wanted to be better than the obituary, to do my grandpa the justice that it doesn't want to. Bret Lott says creative nonfiction is "for better and worse, in triumph and failure, the attempt to keep from passing altogether away the lives we have lived."¹ But I wasn't just trying to preserve my own life, as most memoirists do. I wanted to do that too, of course. I couldn't be honest about my grandpa without being honest about myself, and why I had forgotten him for almost three years. But more than that, more than any narcissistic sense of self-preservation, I wanted to preserve him. I wanted to take this man, who was nothing special but who perhaps could have been, and represent him so others would be as enchanted and intrigued by him as I was before he died. More than anything else, though, I wanted to make myself feel the full weight of his death—everything that was lost with him, and what the rest of the family might be able to carry on.

¹ Bret Lott, "Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction," *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 2, no. 1 (2000), 197.

I had all of Lynn Bloom's four purposes for the creative nonfiction essay.² I wanted to get to the truth of my grandpa's experience, and of my relationship with him. I wanted to figure out his place in my life, something that never made much sense to me. I wanted to "set the record straight," positioning him as more than the con man he is often remembered as. And I wanted to tell a story almost as good as one he would have told, because Grandpa D.B. was, among other things, a storyteller—one of many traits I think I've inherited from him, even if in diluted form. The source material for this entire thesis is those stories, usually told by mom to me as I grew up. I wanted more than anything to be a part of one of his stories and a part of one of hers. "Blue Monday" is an attempt to show what happened when I tried to be like my mom in one of the stories she told me about her young dating and married life. Although her stories were told as warnings against making the same mistakes, I wanted more than anything to repeat them. I looked through her yearbook to find the few pictures of her and imagined if she would have liked me then, if she would have noticed me at all from behind her black eyeliner. This may be the feeling that she has about her dad as well, so maybe that's why she does it to me as well. But the person you most want to please only ever tells stories that you aren't a part of.

My grandpa didn't care much for emotional truths or probably the truth in general, but he did place a very high value on a good story. He was always reading, usually those cheap James Patterson paperbacks whose spines cracked into white lines the further he got into them. His own stories, according to family legend, were much better than anything James Patterson could crank out, though. The ones my mom

² Lynn Z. Bloom, "Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction," *College English* 65, no. 3 (January 2003), 277.

remembers best are the scariest ones, like his campfire tale of Handy Andy the bear, who escaped from a mental asylum to terrorize blonde girls camping in the woods. Late at night when my mom and her sister were asleep in their tent he came in the person of Handy Andy to bring his story even more to life. At parties and family reunions everyone was transfixed to him, because every story he told was so fantastic it had to be true. My mom says they all just wanted to believe this man who was so handsome and who seemed so blandly uninterested in what everyone thought of him.

By the time I was born, my grandpa had stopped telling those stories. But during one of those summer afternoons in childhood when the only way left to entertain yourself is to sort through the trash your family still keeps, I discovered a book he had written. It was one of those treasures I hoped to find on those forays into my family's archives (some other lucky finds were an annotated copy of *The Joy of Sex*, and a short story my mom wrote in college about a pit bull). I cozied myself in a closet to read it and trace my fingers over its pornographic ballpoint illustrations. It was called "The History of San Lorenzo: Or, Bruce Blue Eyes, as I Recall," and it told the yarn of Bruce Blue Eyes, his mother, and his grandpa. They made the world and everything in it but got pushed out when the Anglos arrived. Sacagawea, a Tyrannosaurus Rex, and my grandpa, in the guise of Bruce Blue Eyes, all make appearances.

The book, which is really more of a folder, was strange to me. Each of its chapters told some tall tale or other, and the narrative was driven more by puns and sex than character. But there was something wholly original about it, maybe just because something like that would never be published. This was the only story of my grandpa's that I ever had, and I have tried, in some small part to make this collection of dissimilar

but still related chapters a cousin (or granddaughter, really) to that book. My second chapter, “How To: Care for Gillbert” in particular has some of its spirit of anarchy, and the feeling that nothing is quite right in the story because the teller is more interested in amusing you than in telling the truth.

I suppose I’ve given myself away here, because isn’t telling the truth supposed to be the primary interest of the creative nonfiction writer? Lee Gutkind refuses to change the names of those who could be offended by his writing, while Annie Dillard removes anyone who could be offended altogether so she doesn’t have to circumvent them to tell the truth.³ But for large portions of my grandpa’s life, I don’t *know* the truth. The man was a liar and a teller of tall tales, and whenever I ask my mom or grandma a detail of his biography they have to preface it by, “Who knows if he was telling the truth, but…” To write my grandpa’s life, I must use the truth that I know of him to lie. I know the facts of what he did, the details of his obituary. And I know his addictions—the pets he doted on, the Indian lore he appropriated, his alcoholism, how hard it was for him to love anyone. I don’t always know how those more essential traits played out in his life; I can only imagine scenes and incidents in which he may have exhibited them. There is a scene in his mother’s room and a scene on the submarine in “September Twentieth” that are both made up, but who’s to say they couldn’t have happened? Even in scenes that definitely occurred, like the death of his pet boxer Pooky in “Index of Addiction,” I have to extrapolate what my grandpa’s thoughts and actions would have been based on other family members’ recollections, my (limited) knowledge of his personality and behavior, and my understanding of myself. And anyway, if this were a completely factual memoir,

³ Bloom, “Complicated Ethics,” 278-280.

it wouldn't be worthy of Dewayne Mobley, that dirty old bastard and king of lies.

Thomas Larson exhorts the writer of creative nonfiction to be as honest as possible, but says, "I think any author must hold himself accountable for his memoir. And where else should he do this but *in the writing*. It seems so obvious. But still, few memoirists understand how co-creative accountability and remembrance can be."⁴

There is a more urgent ethical dilemma than something so simple as a lie, however. As I worked on this project, I had to ask myself whether it was appropriate to reveal so many private details about my family. I've always been a very poor keeper of secrets; classmates learned early on never to share who their crush was or why their mom was in the hospital (I touch on my gossipy tendencies in the Facebook section of "Index of Addiction.") This over-sharing extends also to my family, to those who might prefer that their secrets be left alone. Is it right to reveal, however obliquely, that my grandpa was sexually abused by his mother as a child? Can I really talk about my aunt's early career as a dancer, of sorts? I feel a sense of possession over these secrets—they are part of *my* story too—but I know, particularly for my grandpa, who kept his secrets until he died, that their original bearers may prefer them untold. But as Joan Didion said, "Writers are always selling somebody out."

First of all, however, I am selling myself out. Joan Didion also says, "Writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it in my way, change your mind*." This memoir is not a judgment of any of my family. Any sense of condemnation that I might feel for them—the mother who abused her son, the husband who cheated on his wife, the daughter who resents her father—is directed

⁴ Thomas Larson, *Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative* (Athens, OH, USA: Swallow Press, 2007), 107.

through these essays to myself more than to them I am imposing myself upon other people, perhaps, but that is only because, as my family, they have imposed themselves upon me. These essays are meant to show what we've inherited from one another. That is why I have to include all the details about my family, as horrible as they may be.

I did realize, however, that I don't have the right to tell secrets about my (former) friends in the same way that If I have the right to tell secrets about my family. I have changed the names of most people who aren't related to me throughout these chapters. Although this has the practical function of saving me from libel, it also demonstrates the distance I feel from those who *aren't* a part of my family. I know them so little, I might as well not even know their names. In one case, with someone I should have known better than anyone else didn't, I reveal only that he is a business major—not to show that his function is limited to what he's studying, but to show the blind eye I always turned to him. These other people are not the villains or even the focus of this story, though they are all worthy of stories in their own right. As William Bradley says, if a memoir has a villain at all, it must be the author.⁵ And I couldn't have been a villain without my family's influence.

I didn't have the goal of discovering more of myself at the outset of this project, however. I was confident that I knew myself well enough, that all I wanted to know more about was my grandpa. Because it is impossible to get to know my grandpa better without the use of my imagination, however, I necessarily got to know myself as well. "The Land That Was Promised to Us," for example, began as a travel story, as I described the trip my family takes to Maine every year. It had no additional significance

⁵ William Bradley, "OPINION: The Ethical Exhibitionist's Agenda: Honesty and Fairness in Creative Nonfiction," *College English* 70, no. 2 (November 2007): 207.

until I sat in a church service and my mind wandered to where I'll live when I graduate. As I say in the essay, I always had contempt for those who stayed in Arizona their whole lives. But sitting in that pew I felt a kind of contentment when I thought of going back home and driving in the gravel streets with mountains looming somewhere in the distance, always in view. That was when that essay turned into a meditation on the Trail of Tears, Maine, and why I am content with my exile to the West. These pieces seemed to come together without my meaning them to, as the patterns of my family's behavior were sharpened by my present circumstances. As Lott says,

And because we are human beings, as such we are pattern makers, a species desirous of order... Yet looking back at our lives to find that order—and here is the sticky part—must *not* be an effort to *reorder* our lives as we want them to be seen; rather, we are after, in creative nonfiction, an *understanding* of what it is that has happened, and in that way to see order, however chaotic it may be.⁶

I only became aware of the patterns that exist between my mom and me, and between her and her dad, in the writing of this collection.

“September Twentieth” elliptically approaches several of these patterns and parallels, although they are very present in “Blue Monday” as well. While I knew from the beginning that “Blue Monday” would be about our respective failed relationships (and the hope that might come out of them through another motif, our treasured pets), essays like “September Twentieth” and “Index of Addiction” only revealed their meaning to me after several rounds of writing. As Diana Raab found in a study with several memoir writers, it is the process of sharing narratives that allows many to become more aware of experiences that have been pivotal to them. While writing about certain experiences may not initially result in a coherent narrative, with continued writing

⁶ Lott, “Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction,” 193.

personal meaning becomes clearer to both writer and reader.⁷ “September Twentieth” and “Index of Addiction,” which connect us by our birthdays and our common addictions, had some through line from the beginning, of course. They have what Phil Cohen calls a “thematic structuring of the account around certain recurrent, self-referential motifs.”⁸ But what emerged from those stories was something other than those motifs. “September Twentieth” is about the way that my family fails to connect—we forget each other’s birthdays, we ignore each other, and we often hate each other. But we are still, despite ourselves, connected through our habit to imagine lives that take us out of our own. In “September Twentieth,” *Carrie*, *Twilight*, Tony Hillerman, books about fairies, and joining the Navy are all fantasies that we participate in. Without them, we sit in our dorm rooms eating cupcakes. “Index of Addiction” is, of course, all about being the piece of shit that the world revolves around, expecting others to love you, hating them, and punishing yourself for it all.

I don’t always state these meanings directly, largely out of fear that by spelling them out both my readers and I will miss the emotional truth that underlies them. I want these stories to be, as Michael Steinberg says, “more vivid than reality.”⁹ “Blue Monday” in particular goes beyond my directly stated interpretations to show my and my mom’s emotional states. I want my reflection in the plate glass window and the hairspray she wore in the 1980s to say more than I can or would ever be able to. I don’t know if Troy ever noticed my mom’s hairspray when they dated. But I notice it now, and its

⁷ Diana Raab, “Creative Transcendence: Memoir Writing for Transformation and Empowerment,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 46, no. 2 (December 2014): 188-190.

⁸ Phil Cohen, “Recognizing in the Inferno That Which Is Not: Reflections on Writing a Memoir,” *History Workshop Journal* 74, no. 1 (2012): 176.

⁹ Michael Steinberg, “Writing Literary Memoir: Are We Obligated to Tell the Real Truth?,” *Writing on the Edge* 12, no. 1 (2001): 17.

scent always brings forward a feeling of belonging and safety for me. I wanted to transpose that feeling onto her high school boyfriend, not by saying that he is secure with her, but by referring to the way she smells whenever he's with her. It's probably not true, but it has (I hope) an emotional truth that goes beyond the facts of their relationship.

I began the collection with "Blue Monday" because I felt that it most directly represents the parallels between my mom and me, and, deep in the background, our resemblance to Grandpa D.B. as well. Its preoccupations are perhaps the most central to the entire work, and I wanted the themes of acting in spite of yourself, lying to your significant other, and reparation through pets to frame the other chapters. Its reflections on the stories we tell, and the effects those stories have, also underpin what I am doing with the other chapters.

Going right into "Gillbert," then, made sense to me because it goes from post-relationship with the business major to seeing what it was like when we actually dated. The section provides more context for our conflicts, and I thought the parallel between my parents' pet and the pet the business major and I shared showed well some of the differences between our relationships (i.e., why I will probably not get married to the business major, while my mom is still married to my dad thirty years after the events of "Blue Monday.") "September Twentieth" seemed a nice middle piece because it is more meditative and less direct than any of the others. The conflicts that it sets up are explored more coherently in other chapters, both before and after. The reader has some context for what he or she is reading, but needs to press further to understand many of the dynamics explored in the story. I also think that "September Twentieth" is the closest approximation I have to the inner thoughts of my mom, my grandpa, and me. It allows

the reader a way to understand us at several different fragmented points of time that are referenced at different times throughout the collection.

“The Land That Was Promised to Us” sets up several questions about my family that I didn’t really explore in the first chapters. Both “Promised” and “Index of Addiction,” I think, get down to answering many of the questions I have posed earlier in the work. They answer for some of my family’s motivations in a way that the other pieces simply don’t. The purpose of “Index of Addiction” in particular was to answer *why* we all act in the ways that we do. The answer, of course, goes beyond addiction—addiction is a symptom, not a cause, and it can never be cured through punishment or treatment, as I attempt to show. It lays out, finally, all the central conflicts of my family, and ends by showing how they might inevitably continue.

My family may not be good. I am not good either, as I make clear in “Blue Monday.” But, embedded in these essays, there is the hope that we could be all right. “How To: Care for Gillbert,” “Blue Monday,” and “Index of Addiction” all bring forward what may be my family’s foremost preoccupation: our pets. “Gillbert” questions whether I could take care of anything, let alone a goldfish. I think it ultimately says that trying is good enough. Its unusual format is also meant to comment on the rigid structures (whether theological or animal) by which we try to live our lives, and why those fail in the end. “Addiction”’s “Pets” section gives my grandpa one of his few redeeming episodes, even, of course, as it follows his pattern of irresponsibility. And “Blue Monday” ends on a note of reconciliation between my dad, who doesn’t even like animals, and my mom, who loves them at times more than people. We may be self-destructive and obsessive and manipulative, but for animals we will give what we can.

Maybe for a reader, animals won't be the fundamental tug of this collection. Maybe it will be my grandpa's steak and beans, or his kachina dolls, or the books we read and the stories we tell. These deposits of meaning are what have lit up this project for me, as I discover significance in things I had never considered before. I will never be able to understand my grandpa better than I do now. But I can at least consider all the things and people he left behind, and how he left his mark on them and me.

CHAPTER TWO

Blue Monday

“How does it feel to treat me like you do? When you’ve laid your hands upon me and told me who you are. I thought I was mistaken, I thought I heard your words. Tell me how do I feel? Tell me now, how do I feel?”

— New Order, “Blue Monday”

I’ve always known I wasn’t good, but I didn’t enjoy it until I told my boyfriend I loved him that day he looked at me in the parking lot.

Let’s look at this differently. I’d always wanted someone to tell me they loved me. That way, I could say “Thank you,” the way my mom always used to when boys with feathered hair told her they’d always loved her. *You never say it first*, and my mom would tell me that it’s best if you never say it at all. Then, like my mom, you stop answering the phone when they call and when they’re at the door you make your little sister tell them you’re in Mexico, she thinks.

But he wouldn’t say it, no matter how long I looked at him to make the intimacy feel strange. So then I said it, “I love you,” and all he could muster was a meager, “I think I’m falling in love with you too.”

What’s worse is that he wasn’t my boyfriend, not at the time. I had broken up with the business major a month before, right after he helped me get my furniture and

vinyl records out of storage. It was the first day back from summer vacation. Over the summer, I'd gotten stung by a jellyfish in Chesapeake Bay and kissed a straight man in a gay club. The only problem with the club, I had thought at the time, was that it played Taylor Swift instead of New Order. But it was all fine, just fine, and I didn't need him anymore after that.

When my business major walked out from his apartment to see me again for the first time, I noticed he had lost weight, finally. I didn't get out of the car to get a good look. When he asked me if I was happy to see him I turned in my seat and said, "Of course," a good and kind lie.

It was better to do it this way, I told myself, because he wouldn't have time to get attached. I didn't touch him or make him carry my boxes up the stairs. He just put them in my car, and I drove him back to his apartment, looking at the graying pavement as I went. I stared and told the business major that I just didn't have time for a boyfriend this semester. He asked how long I'd known that, and when I couldn't say he got out.

But of course I left him his stale breadcrumbs. A mutual friend was going through a bout of depression, the kind everyone has or at least talks about having in college, and I asked my business major to be his friend. Wasn't that nice of me? They could drink craft beer as they wrote papers and complained about me together, relishing my absence as much as I did.

I didn't want to be absent, not really. I was still waiting for him to tell me he loved me. I sent him a picture of a book he would like, photos of abandoned houses and red gas stations that were like the ones he posted on Instagram, but better. I told my

friends that I wanted to buy it for him (I brought him up too often, more often than I'd like, and I worried they might start to suspect), but a photo would just have to be enough.

Then he asked if we could get coffee or something. I said yes, but only because I had missed him on my birthday the week before. It was on a Sunday, the worst day, when the hope of the weekend drains into fear for the week. He'd been one of the only people to text me my birthday morning. He sent me balloon emojis, my favorites. My birthday didn't seem very special to anyone but me and him, and maybe my mom. I'd never spent it with him because our first date was on the day before my birthday the year before, and I didn't want to seem too eager then by telling him I was turning twenty the next day.

So we met, at the same place where we had that first date, and we talked about the girls he had kissed that month. I called one of them Kevorkian, and he told me who Dr. Kevorkian was as though I didn't know. He had told me the last time we broke up that he would be the first to date again, and it turned out, nine months later, he was right.

We left the coffee shop when the girls next to us started talking about how precious preschoolers are. I just got up and walked away, and he followed me, like he always did. I led the way through the empty street downtown, away from my car, and he asked me why we couldn't be together. Then he kissed me, and a plague of grackles flew out of the tree to a place I couldn't see. I looked at myself in the plate glass window next to us, and I believed him when he said I was beautiful. I remember it, because I knew I would want to write about it, and the way each point in my lips reached for him like the blind to Christ.

A few hours later, I told him I loved him. When he muttered in response that he thought he was falling in love with me too, I held his fist to my mouth and felt like I was trapped under his dark eyebrows, which always lowered over his eyes when he wanted me to know he was serious. Without saying anything, I started the car and drove to my apartment. Checking to make sure the windows in my roommates' bedrooms were dark, I brought him into my room and fit him in the twin bed just like I used to do. We undressed as always and followed the same patterns with a new excitement because it had been so long, for me at least. His stomach was flatter now, but still the muscles in his arms shook when he held himself over me. I fell asleep when he was kissing me on the forehead or somewhere else, I don't really know, and he must have fallen asleep eventually too.

I woke up with that uneasy feeling of too little sleep but was happy to see it was dark outside, there was still time. In my sleep I'd been planning how to get him out, but I just whispered, "It's time for you to go." So he got up, groggy and dark, and looked back at me over his crooked shoulder when I closed the door behind him.

The next day, first thing, I called my mom to tell her about it. She asked me if we were going to start dating again, and I said maybe not, but it was fun anyway.

The same night someone asked me out, and I said yes. The next morning we were already eating breakfast burritos together, and I told him about my grandpa, how charming he was and the way a whole room turned to him when he came in.

"I guess that's why you're so charming too," he said, and ducked his head, before he told me he was just kidding.

I wasn't good, but I was happy. When the business major called me a week later to ask if he could give me a birthday present, I was with this other boy, studying in a place where we weren't supposed to be. I whispered to the business major that it would be strange to take something from him now, even though it was only three days after we'd been together in my car and my bed. I felt a satisfaction in telling him, like I was showing him that he wasn't the only one who could like me. He had no possession over me; I had the freedom that my mom had always said a girl needs in a relationship because boys are just so clingy. It's bad to be clingy; sometimes she didn't call a boy for weeks after a first date, even after they left messages with her mom.

I could have taken the gift, and that would have been worse than telling him the truth, sort of. He said he would just give it to someone else; it was pretty generic. I do wish that he could have told me what it was.

When my mom was my age, her boyfriend Troy was in a fraternity and she was in the middle of the ocean. She'd enlisted in the Navy at Las Cruces's strip mall recruiting office, where the ocean was still very far away. Pictures of cold steel ships in the water hung in the waiting room, and she thought of the summer three years ago when her family drove up the California coastline. When a man in a khaki uniform called her, she felt like she was just at the doctor's office to get another mole removed.

They gave her forms, and she wrote her Social Security number enough times to actually memorize it, even though she'd been trying to memorize it for years and had never been able to get the numbers straight. When the recruiting officer, whose face was shaved of every expression but lassitude, came back in, he told her it was time for the

drug test. My mom had smoked the weekend before, even though she didn't really like pot because it gave her the confidence and physical appearance of a manatee. It was better, she thought, to confess than be tested and found guilty for something she didn't even like. My mom didn't want to see the evidence for it; just telling the recruiting officer meant that it could still be false, that she hadn't ever really taken drugs at all.

When she told him, his eyes flickered just enough to show something had finally shaken him. He paused, and she could see what gears there were left in his head turning behind his dull eyes.

"Well, we could get you a drug waiver. More paperwork," he muttered, and she saw, maybe, why the man was so tired.

"There's another option, though," he said then. "You haven't taken a drug test yet, so there's nothing on record. It's going to be the same either way, since you'll stop using as soon as you swear in. You don't need a waiver."

"So I'll be OK without one? What if someone else tests me?"

"Well, you. Just stop using drugs and it'll be OK."

She knew that someone would test her, someone always did. She told him she would get the drug waiver, and my mom agreed that she would no longer take cocaine, speed, ecstasy, marijuana, heroin, or any illegal substance. She could still drink, though, even if she was really only allowed to in Juárez.

The next week, she went to a hotel in El Paso to swear in. When Troy asked her why they couldn't kick back that weekend, she said she needed to help her Grandma Agnes weed the yard. He knew that she was lying, but he only looked down at her in his

bed and curled a strand of crisp hair around his finger. She'd changed hairspray, and he was trying to get used to the smell.

When she thought about him on the ship it wasn't of them in bed together. When she thought of him he was always on a green lawn holding a football or, sometimes, in bed with a girl who had big hair. My mom, or Julie, as everyone called her then, was still dating Troy even though he'd broken up with her when he found out she'd enlisted. He wanted her to go to New Mexico State when she made enough money at Luby's. Julie would become his fraternity's sweetheart and then his wife and then have his daughter, Seneca.¹ They'd live in a house with cactus and gravel in the front yard and she'd spend Thanksgiving at his parents' house instead of hers, because he was an only child and my mom had a sister. But she was seventeen when she enlisted, and she missed when she was fifteen in California, where boys had first looked at her in her flowered bikini in Malibu and she'd gone to Knott's Berry Farm and ridden the rides alone. She knew all the boys in Las Cruces, and though there was more to it than that she wanted to know what or who was out there, in the middle of the ocean and all the other places she would see from the ship.

When Troy found out, he sat on her floor and asked her why she'd want to leave for so long. She looked at the Aerosmith poster on her wall, tracing her eyes over Steven Tyler's arms and legs and settling on the paisley scarf he wore on his wrist. Julie asked him what the big deal was. She told him that she'd be in Las Cruces for another year anyway, because they hadn't figured out what her job on the ship should be yet. With

¹ When I was little and I wanted any sibling but the one I had, I thought of Seneca as my long-lost sister. She would have been ten or eleven years older than me, and she had in my mind all the wisdom and kindness that a twenty-something half-sister should. But I envied Seneca too, because when my mom dreamed about her a long time ago Seneca took some of the love that only should have been mine.

Steven Tyler in front of her to say it was OK, she said she loved him, but that she had to move out of Las Cruces because her mom was making her pay rent after graduation.

Anyway, she hated Luby's and didn't want to work there forever.

“But why didn't you tell me? You know I had to fucking find out from *Neil*?”

Troy asked. He had been the last person she'd told, but that was just because she'd been avoiding him so she never had a chance to say anything. Steven Tyler was telling her it was OK to cry but she wasn't so sure. If she stayed she wouldn't leave, so she got off the bed and went into her bathroom. When she came out he was gone, and he hadn't left anything for her.

They got back together two weeks later, when he came with flowers in his car and asked her to prom. Over the next year, she worked at Luby's and drove to Juárez on the weekends, and Troy lived in a dorm and took world history. It was practice, she realized, for when she'd be gone.

Bob Rose was first. He emptied a beer bottle over her head for going out without him. She was with her friend Eileen in a dirty bar in California. Julie liked bars like that because there were sailboats outside them and a dock that went over the water. Once we walked by one of those bars when we were in San Diego. There was a girl wearing a peach tank top and smoking a cigarette by herself on the deck. I remember her eyes, which had black eyeliner on the bottoms so it looked like she'd been crying a little bit but it must have been on purpose. My mom pointed at her and said she used to be just like that girl. That scared me, because this girl didn't look like she'd ever have much to do with me, a ten-year-old in a Tinker Bell T-shirt. I realize now that when she showed her

to me, and whenever she tells me these things about her past, they are a warning, but I have always taken them as encouragement—to become that lonely girl in the peach tank top, because she knows the truth. Now, even though I wear black to bars, I wonder who might be watching me and I try not to laugh too much, because it’s always better to be a little far away.

It must have been a similar bar then, one with a marlin on the wall and peanuts on the floor, where they all serenaded Eileen with the Dexy’s Midnight Runners song. Julie was shouting “We are far too young and clever!” and imagining the horns when Bob Rose came behind her and the wet crashed like one of the waves she always avoided over her head. Two weeks later, he bought her the diamond earrings that I lost when I was thirteen. He said “I love you,” and she said, “Thank you.”

But then there was the division officer, Gordon Hunt, who said he liked her hair blue when someone reported her for dyeing it. He was tall, but not as tall as she thought he was. The veins stood out in his arms because he worked out and went surfing, and Julie always followed them up and down with her eyes when he was close enough. She wished she was as bold as Barbara Stanwyck, just so she could reach out and grab him when he got close enough.

Instead, when her friends yelled as he went by, “Look, Julie, it’s Lieutenant Hunt!,” she ran to find the nearest set of stairs below deck. She was embarrassed with men, but they thought the mouth she pinched at one corner meant disdain and not fear. That was one of the things that she told me and I never believed, because my fear of men repels them while hers somehow always attracted them.

But he did ask her out, in a steel corner when she was on watch, and she said yes because why wouldn't she? When my mom tells this story she talks about how afraid she was of him. She couldn't even say yes when he asked her, just nodded, blushed, and walked away. When he tells it (and not as well as she does) he only remembers thinking she was a "stone cold fox."

Their first date was in Hawaii, and New Mexico cactus and brown bricks seemed very far away as she danced to New Order in the light. Troy had never wanted to dance with her, but Gordon stayed out even longer than she could. He liked New Order, and she couldn't quite tell him that her favorite band was still Aerosmith, and that she hadn't even heard of Joy Division. Gordon leaned over, just a little bit, to whisper, "How does it feel, to treat me like you do?" and somehow she heard it even though everything else was so loud outside the two of them. She pinched the corner of her mouth again and smiled a little bit as she realized that she wasn't treating him any differently than she wanted to. He was twenty-six, she was nineteen, and in him there was more of the world than she'd ever seen before. He'd used the word "interminable" when he talked about the line outside, and she looked at him more often than he looked at her. She never really knew what he was thinking, so she believed every word he told her. It was good to like smart guys, she would tell me.

"Blue Monday" is not a love song, but if you listen to it the right way it can be. If you love the mystery of another person, it's a love song. If you love that you can hurt them, it's a love song about you. And if you love the feeling of love, how it's like dancing in a crowded club in Honolulu with someone you don't know yet, then it's a love song. When I was in the fourth grade, my mom played it for me so we could dance

together. I just followed the beat and jumped up and down (I'm not a much better dancer now) and I didn't know what the words were anyway. Because who listens to New Order for the words? You listen to New Order so you can dance to what a machine sounds like.

Julie and Gordon stayed together in the military hotel on the beach in Honolulu. The other officers were staying on the same floor, and her friends were on the ship. Gordon would go in first, taking the elevator to the fourth floor. She took another elevator to the third, where she climbed the stairs to their room. Sometimes they stayed in the hotel even when it was sunset, because everyone they knew was on the beach. It was fine for her to break the rules as long as someone else was doing it first, as long as she wouldn't be the one who would get in trouble. And she'd never had such a good reason to break the rules as she did now. This, she tells me, was the exception that proves the rule. I've never really known what that means. If it's an exception, doesn't it show that the rules were wrong in the first place?

He surfed on the North Shore, and she watched him from her blanket. He'd bought a surfboard there on the beach, had just walked into the store and given them his credit card. Julie didn't even have a credit card, so he bought everything for her. It seemed like he could do anything, and so could she when she was with him.

That night they walked together on the beach, and sand fleas bit their ankles. They had been together for two weeks. She didn't want to go back to the ship, where everything would be secret again and the straw and sand would turn back into metal. As they walked and she thought of the bunk she would go back to soon, and the friends who would ask her where she was in Hawaii, he told her about Paris, where he'd lived as a teenager. He told her about how Hawaii had been colonized. Next to him, Julie felt like

one of the shells on the beach being turned up and over by the water. He kept looking forward, and he said he thought he was falling in love with her before reaching down to slap at his ankle, where the sand fleas were biting him.

My cruelties to the business major weren't over yet. The other boy (who was, naturally, also a business major) ended things with me over tacos. He said he was just burned out on dating. I was nice and all, but he just didn't have time for a girlfriend right now. A month later, he'd gotten back together with his very sincere ex-girlfriend, whom my friends reassured me was actually a slut. He was too nice for me anyway, the kind of person who jumped off cliffs for fun and called Jesus his best friend. But because he was more attractive than I was, I tried to do the same things. I climbed onto roofs downtown and watched Disney movies with him. I danced in his car when he played a song I didn't know very well, and he took a video of us on his phone. I showed it to my friends, and they reminded me that I'm a bad dancer and I really shouldn't do that kind of thing in front of people I'm attracted to. Although I am a terrible dancer, that couldn't have been the only thing he didn't like about me. Whether he knew it or not, he saw through my efforts to shed old cynicism through easy happiness.

A block away and five days later, I saw my old business major again. And this is where I go from bad to worse.

I was at In-N-Out Burger with two of my friends. The business major was sitting on a red stool, and he'd gained some of his weight back. He didn't look at me, even when I stared right at him. My friends told me to ignore him, but I had had several glasses of

wine, and its plumness was still rich enough to reassure me that whatever I felt like doing was absolutely all right.

They dropped me off at my apartment and told me not to text him, to go straight to bed or to Netflix. But instead I stood on my couch and summoned him from the depths of my cellphone, to tell him that I really missed him and that he should come over. Whether I really missed him or not didn't matter; the wine said I did, so I did. At the time, I never regretted drinking too much alcohol. If nothing else, it teaches you something you didn't know about yourself before.

He surprised me by saying yes, but of course I wasn't really surprised. He always came and went as I needed him, and anything he said in protest was a very temporary annoyance. He might have been the one to date someone else first, but he thought of me the whole time he did it. When I dated someone else I didn't think of him at all, or I thought of him only to hope that he would see me with this other person and know that I wasn't thinking about him at all.

When he came that night I looked down on him from my apartment window. His arms, which always seemed too long for his body, were tucked into himself as he looked at the ground. I saw the scalp beneath his rapidly receding hairline and took a last gulp of wine.

It wasn't that night, however, but another one during this break from all rightness I'd given myself, that he told me about my friends, the ones who had left me for him (Although I had, perhaps, equally left them to him). He was rubbing his thumb between the knobs of my spine, and I was wearing a thin robe, the thinnest thing I owned, so it felt like there was nothing at all between us. The wine we were drinking, which always

prefaced and then accompanied these guilty encounters, made the ends of my skin keen where he touched me.

“What did they say?” I asked him.

“They wouldn’t want me to tell you,” he said.

“Well, they think you hate me, so it’s not like they’ll know I heard it from you.”

Helpless as always in the face of my logic, he told me what they’d said. I had gotten in a car accident six months before this, when the business major and I were still dating and he’d been the only one to comfort me when I totaled my car. The girl (let’s call her Angelica) who had accompanied me across the three lanes of interstate and into the median had bruised her knee. I had never asked about it, and now she complained to business major that I was insensitive. Her boyfriend (Logan seems a good fit for him) also thought I was immature. The last time I’d been at his apartment we’d danced in the living room of his too-expensive apartment to New Order, and then during the summer he had texted me to say he missed me, and missed dancing with me.

“Did you defend me?” I asked the business major, although I knew that he never even defends himself, even against me.

“Well, no,” he said

“Did you say anything?”

“Not really.”

“Did anyone say anything?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, did you think anything, at least?”

“Well, yeah, she bullshitted!” He always used profanity abruptly and somewhat inappropriately, like a child wielding words just learned from Roget’s Thesaurus. “She just had a bruise on her knee, and it’s been like five months!”

I wondered whether he had agreed with her at the time, had said that I just didn’t care a jot about other people’s bruises. He probably did.

When my dad told my mom he was falling in love with her, she said she was falling in love with him too. I’d always assumed she just said “thank you,” again, but when she told me the story again she loved him just as much, and I was a little disappointed in her.

On their next date, at a Denny’s on the beach where they ate mahi mahi, he said he was in love with her. She said she loved him too. When she’d told Troy, she could only say it five months after he’d first told her. The last time she’d said it was two weeks ago, on the phone with him, say good-bye the way she does to me now when we’re done talking.

The following afternoon at his brother Pete’s house, Gordon spent an hour on the phone in the other room. She made small talk with Pete, who worked for the post office and wore more cologne than she had smelled in all her life. He let slip that Gordie (she hated that—it made him sound like a character in *Leave It to Beaver*) was on the phone with Ellen.

“Who’s Ellen?”

“Gordie hasn’t told you about her yet? She’s a great gal! They’ve been dating for a year now! One smart cookie, that one,” he said, his eyes slipping to the room where Gordie was holding his hushed conversation.

What? she thought, and instantly hated Pete, this man who was young and already getting fat and liked Ellen more than he liked her. Julie had not been cheated on before. She felt in that moment like the two boys whom she’d dated at the same time, who had both shown up for tater tots at Sonic while she was working. She had somehow kept them apart long enough to get them both their tater tots. Julie didn’t like either one of them much, and she certainly didn’t want to be like one (or both) of them. But when she’d done that it hadn’t been serious; she’d never told them she loved them.

“What are they talking about for so long?” she asked the fat and stinking Pete.

“Oh, they’re probably figuring out Thanksgiving plans! Gordie’s supposed to go see her family in San Diego for a week! They’re great people, all of them!”

Julie had already imagined a Thanksgiving spent together on a beach in California. They would sit in the waves and in the afternoon find turkey, somewhere, and then go back to their hotel room for the night. She had wanted to see him more than her family, but she regretted that now because evidently he loved someone else, didn’t really love her at all.

Julie didn’t talk to Pete again, but waited for Gordie to come out. When he did, she picked up Pete’s AARP Magazine (why he had an AARP Magazine she did not know) and absorbed herself in an article about osteoporosis.

“Ready to eat?” Gordie said, and she curled her lip.

“No.”

“So, you wanna go on a walk?”

“I’m pretty tired.”

“Do you wanna go back to our hotel?”

“Maybe.”

And then he started laughing.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

She knew he would go back to the surf, with the board he bought on the beach, and forget anything she said to him now. So she left him laughing, and smoked a cigarette in a bar with Eileen.

All that time, of course, she was still Troy’s girlfriend too, and when she told me about dating many men at once I always wondered if that could ever happen to me.

One day, I saw the business major in the library. That was where we’d first met, by the way, when he’d pushed a slip of paper into my hand with his name and number on it and said he liked my style. I said later that I hadn’t noticed him there beside me, but of course I had. I notice everyone who could notice me.

He stood above me again in the library, as he had that first day when I read Heidegger with the spine held out. When he looked at me, he never turned his whole head down. Only his eyes pointed down, toward me, and he looked just like my dad when he came with a brush for my hair when I was little. It always hurt, getting my hair brushed, and now I avoid doing it when I can.

And the business major asked if we could talk. I said sure, sit down, and he said no, later.

Later, then, when I'd finished the homework that I always chose over him, I went to his apartment for the first time and we talked.

His room was blank, unlike mine, which I cluttered with old sunglasses and fake flowers to make myself look interesting. He had one magazine on his desk, and I wondered where he kept everything. The only thing to look at was the black hair that curled out of his bathroom sink.

I sat at the empty desk and now I looked down on him, as he lay back on his blue blanket on the bed. If he were a woman, his pose might have meant sex or death, but he just looked like a boy trying to find a place to sit. And he was wearing that ball cap, the one with the bear on it and the rim that's too long. He looked like one of the characters from *The Sandlot*, before they chew tobacco for the first time.

"Why do you always sneak me out of your apartment at three in the morning?" he asked me.

It was true, of course. I sneaked him out before my roommates could see him and know what I was doing with my door closed at night. They were both too good, and I could only apologize for him later, not explain what I was doing before I was willing to stop. But now that I think of it, I don't think I've ever told them about this. They think I've stayed well away from the business major, that I've done the right thing always. They were once holding a conversation about what a healthy sexual relationship looks like at our kitchen table. When they asked me what I thought, after they'd been puzzling over it for hours, I just said, "Two consenting adults." Maybe that's the problem.

"Well, do you want me to have to tell them what's going on?" I asked him.
"What would they think? It's not like we're dating or anything."

“Ok. Then what *are* we doing? You said you loved me. Is that even true?”

I had to stop and think for a moment. How would I approach this, tell as much of the truth as I could and not let him reject me? I got closer to him, and I turned my moment of indecision into an hour in bed with him.

When I was bored of all that, I turned my back to him and let him kiss my shoulder. There was always so much I hoped for when he touched me, and by the end I only wanted to sleep. But he never let me. Maybe that was really why I let him out at three in the morning.

“Well, I’d better go,” I said. “I have a ton of homework to do.”

“Why can’t you just stay?”

I laughed and found my shoes, and then he was up and with his ball cap on between the door and me.

“People who love each other don’t act like this.”

“Well, sometimes, people who love each other can’t date. And other people don’t understand that, so you have to keep this stuff a secret.”

He’d gained weight again, and his stomach was closer to me than any part of his body except that stupid hat.

“If you love me, why can’t you date me? People who love each other date each other. It’s not that complicated.”

“Oh, but it is!” I laughed and touched his chest. I hid myself from him and let him think he saw everything. “Last year, when we were dating, do you remember how I was super sad all the time? Yeah? And how you thought I was depressed or something?”

He turned his head to the side and took my hand off his chest, so I continued.

“Well, ever since we broke up I’ve been happy! I’m not all stressed out all the time. I even like my homework!”

“Oh, please. You were not depressed because we were dating. You’ve always been depressed, and if you think you’re happy you’re just lying to yourself,” he said.

“Do you remember Valentine’s Day? When you drank that whole bottle of red wine and said all that shit about how you were cursed to never love anybody?”

I did indeed remember that bottle of wine, which I’d drunk alone in the dark as the business major slept through *Sleepless in Seattle*. We had had a dull Valentine’s Day (my first with a real boyfriend) that I had planned for myself. I was feeling unhappy, and I wanted him to feel responsible for it. I had wanted him to say he loved me. What was so hard about it? Was I unlovable? When he still wouldn’t, I created a complex of emotions that was probably too much for the simple business major to contend with.

“You don’t even know what I was talking about,” I said. I wasn’t really sure how to explain Valentine’s Day without also explaining what I was doing now.

“I know you better than you think you know yourself. What about your grandpa’s depression? You said you had it too.”

I laughed and assured him that I didn’t. A small part of me wondered whether he did know me better than I knew myself, but I knew that everything he thought of me was just something I’d given him, little pieces of a false and overwrought personality that would make me seem more interesting than I was. Maybe if I’d let myself be happy and simple with him I could have, but I had never thought that was what boys wanted. My

mom had always said to tell the truth to your friends, not your boyfriends. They didn't deserve that much from you.

Perhaps the reminders of my ersatz depression had convinced him, finally, that he didn't want to date me. He told me he didn't love me and walked me through the darkness of his apartment to his door. The lights from his modem blinked, and I wondered when I'd be there again.

When my mom was a teenager, she always wanted her parents to get back together until they actually did. Then her dad lived with them again and she had to build rock walls and stay at home when there were parties at the Pit, and she would wish them apart again. Julie's wishes did always come true, and eventually her mom left Dewayne for good.

Susan, my grandma and Julie's mom, had always believed Dewayne when he said he loved her, because why wouldn't she? She loved him, and he was the most handsome man she'd ever seen. She loved him so much that she didn't believe her daughters when they said he only gave them sour milk. The daughters loved him so much that they blamed their mother for it and never him.

When my mom had been married for four years, she and Gordon left California and the water and went back to Las Cruces. She told herself that New Mexico was cheaper, that they just couldn't afford to live even in the most squalid Californian apartments. And besides, it was home. Gordie had gotten a job there at White Sands, where Dewayne once thought he could work as an engineer. Gordie had a college

degree, though. Dewayne didn't. And Julie would finally go to New Mexico State to become a forest ranger and take care of the animals our family loves.

But then she failed biology and chemistry, and like everyone else in Las Cruces she couldn't do quite what she wanted. She changed her major to secondary education when her friend Gina did and started taking English classes instead of science classes. They were easier, and she found she remembered that she liked reading. Her creative writing class might have been her favorite. The professor told her to write what she knew, so Julie wrote a story about a twenty-something who moves into a Hispanic neighborhood and starts a tomato garden. She got to write about animals too, and she made the pit bull in the story the hero because she had always loved pit bulls. She liked telling stories about people who were like her but not quite. That way, they could have enough of her emotion without incriminating her in what they did. Every story that she ever told me was about herself, and this woman who once set a car on fire when she was fifteen and joined the Navy when she was seventeen and tried to run away from her wedding when she was twenty-one became my hero. But I always told myself that if I had a wedding when I was twenty-one I would actually succeed in running away, because I would never get married but date a string of men, each more attractive than the last.

My mom hadn't wanted to get married either, though, which was why she'd almost run away. But she remembered it was Gordon standing there and not some man she was afraid, and still that feeling that with him she could do anything she wanted.

Later she learned that that wasn't quite true, or not as true as she thought it was. She realized when he stopped cooking her dinner. He used to ask her what she wanted to eat, and the full refrigerator of groceries made her feel like she was living in a real house.

He even made her breakfast sometimes, which no one had ever done in her family. And they would go walking on the beach in California, like they had when they were first in Hawaii, and the sky's orange plumes made it feel like she was where she wanted to go.

In Las Cruces she didn't always want dinner, and the Weight Watchers cookbook he'd bought only had recipes with cauliflower or cabbage. She was in class or at work or with her friends, and he sat alone with the food he'd made for them. When leftovers stopped filling the refrigerator she thought he was throwing threw out what he'd made. Really, of course, he just wasn't making anything at all.

In Las Cruces they saw each other on the weekends, when the friends they made at work during the week came to their house to dance to Depeche Mode and New Order. My dad was the DJ, and only because he loves control can I believe he was ever behind a turntable.

But even at the parties they were separate. In the loft of their house, he flipped through records to find his favorite remix of "Enjoy the Silence." She hated remixes because they sounded like violating a dead body, and she would go to the kitchen with a beer and two friends so it could sound like the song was still the same. In her stories, though, these parties were always perfect, and I felt a vague guilt for coming to interrupt them. The parties were only perfect because they put a room of people between them when he tried to play old love songs that they used to dance to. Gordon didn't dance at all now, though. He just stayed up there, turning the records that I keep in my apartment now and watching everyone else dance.

On the weekends when they didn't have a party planned, she said she had to go to her dad's. He lived in San Lorenzo in a house he had built himself, with walls he'd

painted red. This was when he was dating a neighbor, right after he'd divorced Patience, my mom's favorite of all his wives. She took the longer way from Las Cruces to get there. That way, she could go through Hatch and buy him green chile in a bag.

That was the first time she spoke to her dad and felt like more than the kid who drank sour milk and lied about her boyfriends. There was a bench built into the wall that he'd tiled with pieces of blue and green he'd found in Gallinas. She never knew where he found those small treasures, or whether they were really stolen. But it was on that bench underneath the one kitchen light (he turned out all the rest) that they talked, and for a little while she thought she knew him.

Her dad was the only one she told about Troy. When they moved back to Las Cruces, she'd known her old boyfriend was there. He was working in a Harley-Davidson shop now, she'd heard from Gina. They hadn't talked since they'd broken up six years ago, a month before she got engaged to Gordon. In high school they could only drink in the Pit, but now that they were old enough they saw each other in bars, especially during the holidays when everyone came home and Las Cruces felt like itself again, with all her old friends and rivals in the streets. It was at El Patio before on New Year's Eve that he finally sat next to her and asked her how she was doing. Her friend June had just left, and Julie was just wondering whether she should finish her Chardonnay and leave when he came beside her. His hair was shorter now; it had always been as long as hers, and feathered with her hairspray. But he smelled the same, and his deodorant filled her nose and made her remember Steven Tyler and Seneca.

“Hey, Julie.”

She bit the corner of her mouth and finished the Chardonnay. There was a scar on his hand that hadn't been there before, and she watched it as he moved to touch her shoulder.

"You look good," he said, and her throat filled with something tight and hard. She wished that she'd never seen him in her life.

He asked if he could sit down, and she nodded. He asked how she was doing, and she told him everything. By the end, his hand was in her hair and she'd forgotten that Gordon would be home now and waiting for her, because it was the New Year's Eve they'd agreed to spend together.

"I still have our rings, you know," he said, and she remembered the place she'd put their corsage, with the photo of them in front of the rainbow. It was in the box she'd gotten as a graduation gift from a dry cleaner's, the one that I always looked through to find all the things she'd kept from high school and wonder what she'd thrown away. The rings they'd given each other as a promise at prom had been so light, and she was so heavy next to them.

Letting him touch her, she remembered the night she'd left, and all the times she'd come back to Las Cruces new neon clothes and wondered where he was.

My mom told Dewayne how all that had felt; she hadn't thought she could tell anybody. And then he put his cigarette down, the smoke floating before her and into her clothing.

"Your mother and I lived in Norfolk before you were born. She might have been pregnant with you then, actually," he said. "We might not have known though, not that early. It must have been '63, '64."

He took his beer to the trash and got another one out of the fridge. Since Patience left it was mostly beer and beans, and the steak bones he kept for the dogs.

“We had these neighbors. Shit, the husband was never home. He was running around, gambling probably, or drinking. He hadn’t learned to drink at home yet. So the wife asked me to take her trash out, and I fixed the washer once when it flooded her house. She’d left all her panties in there too, and I was knee deep in them with a screwdriver in my hands when she came in with a vodka tonic,” he said. “I don’t like to say no, so we messed around. He was gone, so we used her house. And it wasn’t so far away that Sue ever got worried.”

My mom had known that he was unfaithful, had known as long as she understood what sex was. Women always let their hands and eyes stay with her dad too long, and she always wanted to protect him from them even though he preferred them to her.

“Anyway, we were about to leave Norfolk. I’d gotten out of the Navy and we were headed back to New Mexico. This neighbor though, she wanted to say goodbye. But her husband was home, sleeping in the bed where I usually fucked her. So she came over to our house. Sue was upstairs, packing or counting money or something, God knows. And we were in the living room.”

He blew his smoke out, up through his lips toward the light, and my mom wondered why she had ever quit smoking. He knew he’d give her one if she asked, but his look would tell her that smoking was bad for her.

“She was sucking me dry, and Sue comes down the stairs. She didn’t know what the hell was going on. She barely knew what a blow job was. All she saw was me,

patting our neighbor's head because she was sad we were leaving Connecticut. I told her to go upstairs, and she forgot all about it."

And then he stubbed out his cigarette and Julie closed her eyes, which were almost the same color as her dad's but greener, just like mine are greener than hers.

"Don't fuck around with him, Julie."

She didn't know whether he was talking about Gordie or Troy, and she didn't ask.

That night in bed Julie heard a cat. Her dad had cats, but they stayed silent and streaking when strangers came. This cat wanted to be found, wherever it was. So she took her flashlight into the dark, and she followed its insistent meow outside the house and into her dad's garden. She was careful not to step on the petunias he'd just planted. The cat was under the shed where he kept his potting soil, and she crouched down on the cold ground to see it. Its eyes reflected green from the crack under the shed, and she was reaching for them when her dad came behind her.

"Let me," he said, and bent down, one of the steak bones in his hand. They kneeled, the flashlight making rings around them, as she cried.

"You just gotta wait," he said.

When they'd waited long enough, it came out to lick the bone. They saw that it was a kitten, small and white, with the blue crossed eyes of a Siamese. She pressed her paws into the dirt and curved her back for them. My mom took her up and they went back in, saying nothing.

Over the weekend, the Siamese stayed in her lap. My mom tried to find the rest of the litter, but there was only this one, who had escaped everything the desert had for it.

The dogs sniffed her back and huffed their approval, stalking away to find some less-loved prey. Dewayne fed her wet steak, and the kitten slept with Julie at night.

When the end of the weekend came, her dad asked her if she wanted to keep the cat.

“We already have two, and the dog. I don’t think we can keep another one,” she said.

“That cat doesn’t want me. She wants you. Even if I’m the one who feeds it, she won’t choose me.”

“How am I supposed to drive a cat for two hours? And you know how Gordon is with animals.”

“He’ll get over it. Just give her a towel, and she’ll fall asleep. Take the cat.”

So she did, and in the car my mom realized the cat didn’t have a name. She looked like a sphinx so Julie named her Cleo, in that mismatched logic that connects words that belong together but have never been combined.

When she got home, Gordon was making dinner.

“I didn’t expect you back so soon! I was cooking some pasta for us,” he said

“I have a kitten.”

She brought him the towel where Cleo was curled and told him her name.

“She was just outside at my dad’s house, and her meowing woke me up. She’s a Siamese, so she meows a lot.”

She knew he hated noise, preferred cats to be seen and not heard, but he took the kitten into his arms and scratched her behind the ears.

“I guess we’ll just keep her too happy to meow, then,” he said.

I wonder if it will ever be so easy for me. When I look at my parents and how they are now, I'm not sure I want it to be.

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CHAPTER THREE

How to: Care for Gillbert

“I should have known better. Nothing can be changed, the past is still the past, the bridge to nowhere. I should have wrote a letter explaining what I feel, that empty feeling.”

—Sufjan Stevens, “Should Have Known Better”

A. “Get a large enough tank. The minimal tank size for one goldfish is 10-15 US gallons (56.7 liters) (Remember, they grow to about 10-12 inches, and sometimes over!) and you will need to add 10 U.S. gallons (37.8 liters) onto that for each additional goldfish.

Please read about all different kinds of goldfish; common goldfish, comet goldfish, and other single tail goldfish need ponds or huge tanks. Don’t get single tails, unless you have a 180 gallon (681.4 liter) tank lying around.”¹

1. It’s April 1st. An undergraduate who thinks well of his own cleverness has acquired, through dubious means and for even more dubious purposes, 42 mason jars and 126 goldfish.² These fish are only somewhat luckier than their brothers, who were swallowed whole by 14 fraternity pledges the week before. They swim together, 3 to a bag, and knock against the sides of their plastic.

¹ All goldfish care instructions taken verbatim from “How to Take Care of Goldfish,” wikihow.com, accessed 1 Dec 2015. I have, however, made grammatical corrections where absolutely necessary.

² I do not know the original number of goldfish and mason jars, but do know that it was truly a daunting sum.

2. The clever undergraduate pours each of the 42 bags into an individual mason jar. He screws each lid on after the fish and watches them swirl in their watery homes. Those that do not make the passage he flushes in the toilet.

B. “Make sure your tank has some scenery and light. Goldfish don’t require light; light is only for seeing the fish better and making its colors ‘pop.’ Keep your aquarium lit for around 8-12 hours each day. Think about putting a rock or wood centerpiece with some artificial greenery into your aquarium. The rock or wood will give the goldfish nooks and crannies to explore, and the artificial plants won’t accelerate plant growth in your tank. On the other hand, real plants are beneficial because they help absorb some of the ammonia, nitrites, and nitrates that accumulate in the aquarium because of waste and natural wear and tear.”¹

3. The clever undergraduate places the 42 mason jars with 126 goldfish in the office of Dr. Magnus Donaldson.² Dr. Donaldson is best known at his mid-sized Baptist university for translating his assignments from the original Greek to conversational English. He wants his students to read these translations and no others; there’s a rumor going around that they’re better than Lattimore’s. Donaldson, who graduated from Duke Divinity School,³ will occasionally help promising undergraduates matriculate at his alma mater via a recommendation letter that is usually written in English.

¹ “How to Take Care of Goldfish”

² Original name changed to protect identity and sanity of professor. In addition, most of the facts of this case are falsified or completely fabricated, and Dr. Donaldson’s exacting standards of academic research could lead him to denounce me and perhaps sue me for libel if I were to retain his real name throughout this document.

³ Name of school also changed; see above.

4. Dr. Magnus Donaldson discovers 42 mason jars holding 126 goldfish in his office. He sighs and closes the door, then opens it again and steps in. This must be some kind of jab at Thundercat,⁴ whom he makes frequent mention of on Facebook and in the classroom. He has often suspected his students, most of whom are friends with Dr. Donaldson on the social media site, of mocking Thundercat in secret. They would know that Thundercat could not endure the presence of 126 goldfish in 42 mason jars in the Donaldson home. The feline, who has been known to suffer from acute attacks of asthma, may very well have suffered an aneurysm from the combined stimulation of the 126 goldfish.

5. Dr. Magnus Donaldson enters his office and begins to arrange the 42 jars on his desk. He has to put them on top of his leather-bound *Summa Theologica*, and only worries later that they might leave rings of water on the cover. Once he has counted all 42, he leaves his office again to go to Wal-Mart, locking the goldfish in behind him.

C. “Feed your fish 1-2 times daily. Be careful not to overfeed them, only feed them what they can eat in a minute; the label on the food is wrong. Goldfish can easily overeat and die. Underfeeding is always preferable to overfeeding. Just like humans, goldfish want diversity of nutrition. Feed your goldfish pellet food most of the time, live foods such as brine shrimp some of the time, and freeze-dried foods, such as mosquito larvae or blood worms, every once in a while. Remember to soak freeze-dried foods in a cup of aquarium water before you feed your goldfish; freeze dried foods expand in a goldfish’s

⁴ Name changed.

stomach, causing them to have problems swimming. Feed your goldfish at the same time each day and in the same spot in the tank.”⁵

6. Dr. Donaldson does not frequently go to Wal-Mart, but he cannot think of another store that will sell enough food for 126 goldfish in one place. At Duke there had been many places that sold enough fish and cat food to feed a menagerie. He locates the pet aisle, just past the canned goods, and selects 2 large jars of Tetrafin fish food. He also selects 1 box of 200 sandwich bags and praises himself for his foresight.

7. Dr. Donaldson returns to his office and distributes the food to his 126 finned charges. Their individual flutters of movement combine to create a golden wave in his office and he feels somewhat overwhelmed. From his bookshelf he takes a blank notebook and begins to write 42 sets of instructions for the care and keeping of the goldfish. They read: 1. Take lid off jar or poke holes in it to let oxygen in. 2. Feed a pinch of food twice daily.

8. Dr. Magnus Donaldson opens his theology colloquium, in which the students are currently reading Saint Boniface, with an offer of free fish. Assenting students, who are eager as ever at the prospect of free food, are offered instead 126 goldfish in 42 mason jars.

9. Logan Donagan⁶ is eager to go to Duke Divinity School so he can discuss the sacraments with fellow academics. The discussion group he started a year ago is not as eager to take up topics of Christological sexuality as Logan knows his future classmates will be. He accepts from Dr. Magnus Donaldson 1 mason jar with 3

⁵ “How to Take Care of Goldfish”

⁶ Name changed, for reasons that will become clear.

goldfish and asks him how Thundercat reacted to their sudden appearance.

Donaldson laughs uncomfortably, remembering that Logan has never asked about Thundercat before, and tells him to come by his office between 5 and 8 pm that night.

10. Logan Donagan's mother Ruth reminds him that he needs to be in his suburban hometown that night for a court deposition. Logan eats a microwaved hamburger patty and gets into his used Mercedes to drive the 1 hour and 30 minutes to his gated metroplex neighborhood.

D. "Add more fish. Hopefully, if you have more than one goldfish, your goldfish are all the same type. Unfortunately, goldfish are known to eat other, smaller fish, and can overeat, keeping food from their peers. If another fish is smaller or slower, it doesn't stand a chance. So you really want to add more fish, huh? All right, White Cloud Mountain Minnows or Zebra Danios it is (if your goldfish isn't humongous) However: these fish live in schools, so if you're buying extra fish, you need to at least buy an extra half dozen. So in short: Keep your goldfish with similar goldfish. Any new fish brought into an established aquarium should be quarantined beforehand. If they have any diseases, you don't want those to spread to your healthy fish."⁷

11. Remembering the 3 goldfish as he drives by a billboard for Patty's Fried Catfish, Logan Donagan sends out a campus-wide alert. Who will take the 1 mason jar and 3 goldfish? Fellow theology majors and graduate student colleagues fail to respond, and Logan reasons that they must be at mass. A business major with a passing interest in theology is the only friend who responds. Logan only knows the business major because he (the business major) is dating

⁷ "How to Take Care of a Goldfish."

one of Logan's friends. The business major's girlfriend thought she might want to study theology, but she changed her mind when she joined Logan's discussion group. Theology, to her, has too many rules that quite honestly just seem made up. Logan doesn't usually associate with business majors, but this one says that he would have studied theology if his parents hadn't made him take finance instead.

12. It is approximately 7:45 p.m., and the business major finds the professor in a sea of 22 mason jars and 66 fish. Dr. Donaldson passes the business major 1 jar, 1 plastic sandwich bag of food, and 1 instruction sheet. "Feed them twice a day, and make sure you take the lid off when you get to your apartment," Dr. Donaldson tells him. "Ok," the business major says, and shuffles out of the office, peering into the 1 mason jar at the 3 goldfish.

13. The business major places the jar on the coffee table in his apartment and feeds the fish, counting out 5 flakes for each of them, which is 15 flakes total. The water in the mason jar is getting brown. He takes the lid off so the 3 goldfish can get a little air, and the fish start to rise to the surface, almost like they can't even help it. Although he has all the best intentions, he has never had a fish before and doesn't understand that 1 mason jar is not a good habitat for 3 goldfish. He sees that 1 goldfish—or brownfish, really—is having some difficulty. He is smaller than the other 2, and he looks as though he's been drained of all his bright orange color. The brownfish swims to the surface of the water before dropping to the bottom again in a swirl of goldfish and brownfish

feces. A friend who enjoys smoking pot and bungee jumping⁸ comes to the business major's dorm room to see the fish. The bungee jumper and his girlfriend name the fish Herbert, Hubert, and Rufus. The brownfish is Rufus. The business major doesn't think the names have any particular significance—although they do remind him of 3 aging vaudeville performers—but he respects the bungee jumper's sense of humor over his own and keeps them. He does not imagine that Logan will care about their names. The 3 people go to a bar, leaving the 3 fish in their jar on the coffee table. The business major posts a picture of Herbert and Hubert on Instagram. He posts a picture on Instagram every day at 9 pm. His reliability has earned him 1,148 followers. Most of his 777 pictures are of walls and Whataburger. Occasionally he posts a picture of his girlfriend in front of a wall or Whataburger, but he rarely photographs animals. The picture of the 3 fish receives 99 likes.

E. "Fix cloudy aquarium water. Sometimes even when we put forth our best efforts, things still go a bit awry. Water can turn yellow, green, or even white. If you notice it straight away, it's not a big deal. But do get to cleaning your tank! Each color of the spectrum signifies a different problem. It could be algae, bacteria, or even just decaying plant matter. Don't get too alarmed! With another cycle and a water change, your fish should be fine."⁹

14. The business major brings his girlfriend to see the fish because he knows that she likes animals (perhaps, he sometimes thinks, more than she likes people, or at least more than she likes him). He once told her that he had read that the key to

⁸ Often, though not always, in conjunction.

⁹ "How to Take Care of a Goldfish"

happiness is kindness; she looked at him skeptically and asked him whether he really thought he was kind. Because he is going to Austin for the weekend (one of his Instagram photos has been selected for an Instagram art show), he will need his girlfriend to take care of the 3 goldfish. Logan Donagan has not yet volunteered to take them back. When the business major tells her about the fish as they eat in the dining hall, however, his girlfriend is not at all impressed by the fact that he rescued the goldfish from Dr. Magnus Donaldson's office.¹⁰ She asks him whether he has even taken the lid off the mason jar. She takes out her phone to look up the proper dimensions for a goldfish enclosure. Mason jars purchased in bulk by a clever undergraduate, she discovers, are criminally small environments for goldfish. She asks whether he has cleaned the jar yet, and he says that he would not know how to do that if he tried. She demands that they go to Petsmart to provide a proper ecosystem for the 3 goldfish before they literally choke on their own sewage.

15. The business major's girlfriend drives them to Petsmart in her mid-sized sports utility vehicle. Although she peeled off the sticker saying "[Mid-sized Baptist University] Dad," the careful observer can still detect its outline on the rear window. The mid-sized sports utility vehicle is black, and the same model is driven by at least 8 different sorority members on the campus of her mid-sized Baptist university. This fact both bothers and reassures the business major's girlfriend. After several misdirections from the business major, they arrive in the Petsmart parking lot. Before arriving, she looked up several instruction guides for the care and keeping of goldfish. She has decided to buy 2 goldfish bowls, 1

¹⁰ And, by extension, from Logan Donagan.

bottle of water dechlorinator, 1 bag of gravel, 2 plants, and 1 bowl ornament.

This last is optional, however, since she has learned that goldfish are notorious for cutting their fins on fishbowl ornaments. She locates the fish care aisle, just past the hamster aisle, and wavers between a full aquarium and 2 plastic bowls.

Although Wikihow.com warned goldfish owners not to use bowls for 1 aquatic pet, let alone 3, the least expensive aquarium costs \$53.99. She weighs the welfare of the fish against the balance of her checkbook and chooses her checkbook.¹¹ She finds a tube of Tetrafin fish feed (guaranteed to brighten goldfish scales), a bag of gravel, and a bowl ornament that says “Girls Only.”

The business major tails her through the store, scrolling intermittently through his Instagram feed. After consulting the internet’s fish care advice (She threw Dr. Magnus Donaldson’s instructions immediately), she buys 2 goldfish bowls, 1 bag of glow-in-dark gravel, 1 “Girls Only” ornament, 1 tube of Tetrafin goldfish feed, and 1 bottle of water dechlorinator for the sum of \$47.53. She strides purposefully into Petsmart’s empty parking lot, and the business major takes an Instagram picture of her from behind.

16. They arrive in the business major’s living room. Two other business majors are playing video games, one on the communal television and the other on a laptop propped on the table where Herbert, Hubert, and Rufus swim in their mason jar. The business major’s girlfriend asks whether he has really been keeping them like this. She wouldn’t keep children, let alone goldfish, in such a debased environment. “They’re coming to my room,” the girlfriend says. “I’ll

¹¹ This is a choice that she both regrets and accepts as inevitable.

carry them,” and hands the business major the plastic Petsmart bag. “Ok,” he says, and follows her out the door.

17. It is only a 3-minute walk to her dorm, a convenient distance when her dorm’s visitation hours end at 2 a.m. She holds the mason jar steady, watching the 3 fish to ensure they aren’t disturbed by her walking. The business major follows her. He’s not sure about the dress she’s wearing; the red and white polka dots are a bit clownish, especially with the daisy-print cardigan on top. She climbs the stairs to her all-girls residence hall and swipes herself in. “Can you get the door?” she asks the business major. “Sure,” he says. They board the elevator, which shudders before proceeding to the 2nd floor, where the business major, his girlfriend, and the 3 goldfish get off. She smiles at passersby, mostly girls wearing Frozen pajamas and carrying bowls of oatmeal. When they enter her room she sets the 3 goldfish on her standard wooden desk and steps into the adjoining bathroom to assemble their home. As she is opening the glow-in-the-dark gravel the business major comes from behind to hold her around the waist. There is something about this room that makes him very forward. She rolls her eyes and continues to pour gravel, but the business major turns her around, saying “Hey.” *Oh, Hey*, she thinks. He’s not giving up. She sighs, puts the goldfish bowl next to the mason jar, and accepts the business major.

F. “If a fish has died, take the proper measures. First things first, dispose of your fish in a way that won’t stink up the house. You can bury it, or, if you feel so inclined, throw it in the compost heap. Do not flush the fish down the toilet! Grab it from the tank with a plastic bag around your hands, invert the bag, and tie it up. How you clean your

aquarium depends on your situation. If only one fish died, hopefully it was a parasite that you saw quickly enough so as to avoid it spreading to the other creatures in the tank. If all your fish are dying or dead, you'll need to clean out your aquarium entirely with a bleach solution. Just 1/4 of a teaspoon for every 1 gallon (3.8 liters) of water should do the trick. Let it soak for an hour or two to get rid of all the toxins. Then remove the water and let it dry out.”¹²

18. It is 40 minutes later, and the business major has to go. His Instagram art show will start without him, he knows, and he still has to drive 1 hour and 30 minutes south. The business major's girlfriend escorts him down the stairs and to the front door. When she goes back into her room, glad that she won't see him tonight, she looks at the mason jar. Although she removed the lid during the business major's 40 minutes, Rufus, the brownfish, has died. He floats on the surface of the jar's fecal water. If the business major were still there, his girlfriend would have made a production, blaming him and his entrepreneurial hormones for Rufus's death. As it is, she calmly pours him into the toilet and flushes, experiencing the slight thrill of watching a once-living creature swirl into the toilet's indifferent water.

19. She won't let it happen again, however. She only needs 1 bowl now, for the 2 fish that are left. The names Herbert and Hubert are, she decides, comic but not significant. She doesn't like the bungee-jumping friend or his girlfriend anyway, so she decides to rename them Gilbert and George, after the vulgar 1970s art duo. She likes the idea that they went from being in a theology professor's office to bearing the names of the creators of "Sonofagod Pictures." The two goldfish do

¹² "How to Take Care of a Goldfish"

swim in their own shit, after all. She dechlorinates the new goldfish bowl, but she realizes that she has neglected to buy a net, and decides to simply pour the fish, dead fish water and all, into their new bowl. She arranges them on her standard dorm room bookshelf next to a copy of *Madame Bovary*.

20. The girlfriend visits Logan Donagan's apartment that night. He is back from his deposition and he has his arm around his redheaded girlfriend's shoulder. The crowd at his apartment gathers on the wraparound couch named Tabitha¹³ to discuss whether sex, if it is sacramental, should be saved until marriage. Logan's home-brewed beer makes the conversation more profane than discussion of the sacraments otherwise might be. When his redheaded girlfriend brings her own blue beta fish, Neptune, to his kitchen counter Logan recalls the 3 fish that the business major rescued. He asks the business major's girlfriend¹⁴ if she's going to give the 3 goldfish back. She looks around the apartment, beer bottles stacked on countertops and books by St. Anselm scattered on the floor. No, this would not do. She tells Logan (she is trying to be more assertive with him lately, reminding him that she has her own interests, including art history, film, feminism, and prose writing, and that theology is not the only thing) that Gilbert and George belong to her now. Logan shrugs and pulls a hip music video up on his flatscreen TV. Then they play drinking games and Logan becomes drunk and refuses to arm wrestle his redhead girlfriend because, in the business major's girlfriend's opinion, she very well may beat him.

¹³ Name not changed.

¹⁴ The business major, remember, is at his Instagram art show.

21. The girlfriend is studying in her room when she receives a Snapchat from her honors mentee, who wants to meet Gilbert and George. The mentee arrives and asks where the fish are. The girlfriend says, “Right there! Next to Madame *Bovary!*” When told their names, the mentee asks if Gilbert is spelled with two “l’s.” The business major’s girlfriend says that it is, wishing she had thought of that.

G. “Fish don’t actually have a 3 second memory. They remember a lot of things, and you can prove this by watching their immediate ‘swim to the top’ reaction when they hear the feeding flap open! Many fish are very intelligent; some species from the cichlid family have the same amount of logic as a 5 year old human child.”¹⁵

22. It’s spring break. The business major’s girlfriend is flying home to the southwestern state which she never much liked until she came the southern mid-sized Baptist university. She had bought the \$454 ticket on her dad’s credit card to console herself after she and the business major broke up in January. They got back together 1 week later, but she still needs the consolation. Later, she even invited him to come with her to her southwestern state,¹⁶ but his parents wouldn’t let him come because they had already bought tickets to Cirque du Soleil. The business major is aware that she considers Cirque du Soleil low art, and he feels painfully the judgment she has for acrobatic performers. With the business major going to see his acrobats, she doesn’t know what to do with Gilbert and George over spring break. So she makes a desperate (but eloquent, she thinks) plea on

¹⁵ “How to Take Care of a Goldfish.”

¹⁶ She even went against her better instincts and bought him a travel guide to the southwest for Valentine’s Day.

her dorm's Facebook page for someone to take care of them for the week she is away. A classics major and a Russian major tell her to leave the fish alone; they can survive up to 2 weeks without food. But can they go up to 2 weeks without people? She doubts it. She has decided that the more aggressive goldfish, the one who eats all the food and bites George's tail, is Gillbert. She gets another Facebook comment. Ken Park,¹⁷ a freshman, volunteers to take them for the week. She accepts his offer, in all caps.

23. On the Friday before her departure, she enlists the business major to help her carry Gillbert, George, and their accessories to the all-male dorm where Ken Park lives. Down the elevator and down the stairs he follows her, carrying the accessories because she as always has the 2 goldfish. "Who is this guy?" he asks. The business major's girlfriend wonders whether he might be jealous. She also sometimes wonders whether he really even likes her. It is easier for her to imagine that he likes making out with her than that he actually likes her. So is he jealous of her making out with someone else, or is he jealous that she might like Ken Park? Ken Park is a boy who plays the cello, torments freshman girls, and gets drunk on the weekends. Even if she wanted to like him, she probably couldn't. But she feels that way about the business major sometimes too. The business major isn't worried, however. He only asked because he thinks that his girlfriend hides things and people from him on purpose, just so she can feel like she has secrets. They arrive in the building, and she waits in the lobby for Ken to arrive. She is sometimes embarrassed to take the business major here, because it

¹⁷ Name changed, so as not to incriminate a murderer.

is where honors and theology students play pool. Business majors don't really make sense to people like them and her, so they (both the honors students and her) tend to ignore them. Having him with her, she feels very misunderstood in this place where she is supposed to belong.¹⁸ Minutes pass, and she wonders where Ken Park could be. Too many honors students are looking at the business major. She doesn't realize, of course, that they are probably only looking at the 2 goldfish swimming in the bowl in her hands. She messages him on Facebook, and Ken Park pops up from behind a couch. "Sorry, I was taking a nap," he says. And this is who she was entrusting Gillbert and George to?

24. Over spring break she doesn't think about her fish much. She doesn't think about the business major either, except when her 2 friends from high school ask if she's going to break up with him again. When she returns, reluctantly, to her southern mid-sized Baptist school, she lets a day go by before she asks Ken Park to return her fish. He replies after 32 minutes to tell her that one of them has died. "I did the best I could," he says. She goes to retrieve the survivor, alone this time.

25. Gillbert is alone now. At least she thinks it's Gillbert, because he is frantic and has a moustache. Now he swims into the sides of his bowl and bites her finger instead of biting George's tail. She imagines his little heart¹⁹ beating and echoing against the 4 sides of his 1 plastic container.

H. "Let the water temperature change as the seasons change. Goldfish don't like temperatures over 74 degrees Fahrenheit (24 degrees Celsius), but they appear to like seasonal changes where the temperature dips to the high 50s or 60s (15-20 degrees

¹⁸ Even though, of course, this is a boy's dorm and really he belongs there more than she does.

¹⁹ Fish do have hearts, right? I'm sure they do.

Celsius) in the winter. Understand that goldfish will not eat below 50-55 degrees Fahrenheit (10-14 degrees Celsius).”²⁰

26. It’s summer. Breaks are the times that the business major’s girlfriend thinks of Gillbert the most, but usually it is only to think of what she’s going to do with him. She feels guilty about that. Her mom suggests that she drive Gillbert home in an ice chest. Although Gillbert has proven himself to be hardy, she can’t imagine him surviving a 15-hour road trip. And what if she got in a car accident? She could see him flying out of the ice chest, arcing through the air, and landing with a splash on her dashboard. No, she couldn’t risk that. It was bad enough that she had to put her own life on the line to get home. She didn’t want to risk Gillbert’s too. She scrolls through the friends and acquaintances who were staying at the mid-sized Baptist university for the summer. There aren’t many. She doesn’t have many friends, she realizes. She could think only of Logan Donagan and Angelica Donovan.²¹ Logan was obviously too irresponsible for a goldfish; his own roommate had moved out the month before, unable to live any longer with beer and theology. If Logan couldn’t take care of a roommate, he certainly couldn’t take care of a goldfish. Angelica it was. The business major’s girlfriend asks her if she would be willing to take the fish. Angelica’s response is made of approximately 13 caveats. Buried among them, however, the business major’s girlfriend sees an agreement to take the 1 goldfish. She cleans his bowl a final time, writes a brief instruction manual for Angelica, and places him and his 4 accessories (net, gravel, dechlorinator, and sponge) into 1 wine box. It is raining

²⁰ “How to Take Care of a Goldfish”

²¹ These two (both of whose names have, of course, been changed) would, much to my surprise, soon begin dating.

outside, and she hopes the water won't disturb Gillbert. When she arrives at her mid-sized sports utility vehicle, she places Gillbert's box in the passenger seat and steadies him. "Chill," she tells him, as he chases his tail through the bowl. She drives away, keeping a hand on the box as she bounces and he sloshes over potholes in the road. When she arrives at the house Angelica is renting from a philosophy professor (naturally), the business major's girlfriend settles Gillbert into a windowsill. She sends a Snapchat to her mom, who tells her that a window will be too hot for a goldfish. She moves him next to the toaster.

27. Angelica and the business major's girlfriend are going to a concert 1 hour and 30 minutes south. It is raining, and the business major's girlfriend is driving. She is on the interstate, and they are playing the album they are about to hear live, *Carrie and Lowell* by Sufjan Stevens. The business major's girlfriend is in the far left lane, and she sees 11 white and black signs reminding her that the left lane is for passing only. She likes to follow rules, so she signals and moves into the middle lane. As she is moving, Angelica says "Uh oh," and the business major's girlfriend looks over to see that an 18-wheeler is also moving into the middle lane. She corrects her mid-sized sports utility vehicle, but for some reason it does not stop moving when she straightens the wheel. It spins instead like Gillbert in his bowl, and she hits 1 concrete barrier and 2 cars and ends on the right side of the 4-lane highway. 1 police officer and 1 tow truck come. 1 car stops. Angelica has 1 bruise.

28. Angelica's mother comes and meets them at the Burger King where the tow truck driver from New Jersey has taken them. He tells them to eat a burger, but

the business major's girlfriend is a vegetarian and she gets an egg roll later instead. Angelica's mother takes them to the concert, and Sufjan tells them that death is the refinery of life. He tells them that his parents built funeral pyres for his deceased pets, whom they had named for the figures they were reincarnated from, like Queen Victoria, the rat with 12 tumors, and Gandhi, the goat with one horn. Sufjan's dead had to kill Queen Victoria when her life was too much for her. He hit her over the head with a shoe. The business major's girlfriend cries and nods and laughs as well. The next morning she holds a guinea pig named Moonshadow and the business major drives 2 hours and 30 minutes to pick them up.

I. "Go through at least one fish-less cycle before introducing your goldfish. A fish-less cycle involves adding ammonia to a tank and keeping track of the nitrate levels to make sure the water is safe for your goldfish to live in. Sadly, many fish die once introduced into a new tank because of ammonia and nitrate poisoning. Make sure that you add dechlorinator, because the chlorine in tap water will kill your fish."²²

29. It's fall semester. The business major's girlfriend retrieves Gillbert from Logan's apartment (where Logan and Angelica are now co-habiting; see Note 22). In reality, she went to Logan's apartment to get her record player from him, but Gillbert happens to be there too. She is appalled by the conditions the 1 fish is living in. His water is as brown as when she first got him, his plant has disappeared, and a long strand of fecal matter is trailing behind him. He is, however, still swimming as frantically as ever. He has learned to follow

²² "How to Take Care of a Goldfish"

movement from one side of the bowl to another; she puts her finger in the water and he bites it.

30. It's two days later, and the business major's girlfriend is about to see the business major again. He's been texting her all day as he drives from his suburb to the mid-sized Baptist university. She has already been back for 4 days, and she is offended that he didn't come to see her sooner or to help her move in. He is aware of this, but he was working for his dad and was unable to drive to her 4 days early. When she meets him at his new apartment, she's made up her mind. She'll get her ironing board and mop out of his storage unit and then break up with him. She surprises herself and does it. He says, "Ok."

31. The business major's ex-girlfriend has 1 lunch with Logan and Angelica. Logan asks her if Gillbert is still alive. When the business major's ex-girlfriend says yes, he says that he would have flushed him a long time ago. Then Logan Donagan calls her new friend Brittany "wildly Republican," and the business major's ex-girlfriend wonders where he gets off.

32. She cleans Gillbert's bowl 1 time each week, though sometimes she doesn't have time and she cleans it once every 2 or 3 weeks. Once she has cleaned the bowl, she turns him back over into his clean water. 1 time she does this and, when she looks into the clean water, he is gone. She lifts her mascara, lifts the rug, rummages through the trashcan, and opens the medicine cabinet, but she cannot find him. He is gone now, she realizes, though there is no body. She looks at herself in the mirror and calls herself a traitor. Then she begins to pour out his water, reasoning that a disappeared fish will not need a home. As 1/2 of

the water leaves his bowl, Gillbert emerges from under the glow-in-the-dark gravel. The business major's ex-girlfriend's heart pounds and she feeds him a pinch extra. Gillbert lives in 1/2 a bowl of water for the next 1 week.

J. "Turn off the light and let them get some sleep. If you thought goldfish didn't sleep, you'd be wrong. Well, sort of. They don't have eyelids and they don't really stop swimming, but their bodies sort of hibernate. You can tell when you notice a slight change in color and reduced activity (they'll stick to one side of the tank)."²³

33. Gillbert lives now on the kitchen counter in Apartment 1008. Each morning, unless she forgets, the business major's ex-girlfriend feeds him a pinch of Tetrafin and tells him to have a good day. He's already eaten the new plant she bought him. She's been feeding him less because she thinks his food might be making him meaner. Now he barely moves at all. Sometimes, when his tail goes still and his head tilts forward, it actually seems like he might be asleep. His eyes stay open, though.

34. It's New Year's Eve. The business major's ex-girlfriend has given Gillbert to a new friend, Brittany, for safekeeping. She doesn't see Logan and Angelica anymore. Brittany is cleaning the bowl before she goes out for the night with her brother, who is visiting from New York. When she puts Gillbert back in the bowl, he begins to spin in circles. This is typical, but Brittany is surprised when he starts to flip in the water. He keeps going until she thinks he won't be able to go any longer, and then he stops. He switches on and off like a fluorescent light, and she leaves him in the dark. When Brittany comes back in the morning, he is floating in the bowl alone.

²³ "How to Take Care of a Goldfish"

CHAPTER FOUR

September Twentieth

“And the tales you have taught me, from the things that you saw, makes me want out your heart, please, please, from behind that locked door.”

—George Harrison, “Behind That Locked Door”

2012: Helena in Her Dorm Room

It’s September 20th, and it’s the first birthday that I don’t get a letter from my grandpa. They were always ripped from a notepad and written in a shaky block script that I needed my mom to decipher, but she’s not with me anyway so I suppose it’s just as well. I eat a cupcake in my dorm room and finish my calculus homework. I am wishing that I had friends who would give me manicures or something. I remember then that it’s his birthday too.

1939: Jeanne in Her Hospital Room

She’s fourteen and having a baby for the first time. Her grandparents won’t come to the hospital, and she’s lying alone in a room that looks the color of hay. She doesn’t really feel much, but pulls the blanket tight in her hands anyway and screams. She has to make pain when she doesn’t feel any.

1953: Dewayne Sees Corn in the Sky

“Where’d she put it, Dewayne?”

I am where she sometimes puts me at night, when dad has gotten back and she doesn’t want him to know she still sleeps with me. Having Robbie here, just behind me, feels wrong. This is our place, mine and mother’s, even though I’m doing something she wouldn’t want me to be.

I’m underneath my mom’s bed, and I keep telling Robbie to shut his damn mouth. Even when she drinks a lot she can be a light sleeper, and he’s always too loud. Then I feel the whiskey bottle and slide it out, backing out of the cavern underneath her. If she heard, she might invite me in and then, acting like she’s asleep, take down my shorts and touch me until it hurts. Robbie isn’t supposed to know about that. She says I can’t tell anyone, but I would never want to anyway, not ever.

“You got it?”

“Get the hell out of here, Robbie,” I whisper, and we dash across her carpet out of the bedroom. I think she turns around as we’re leaving but I shut the door and hope that she’s too drunk to notice us.

“How much is left? Can we drink the whole bottle?”

I shrug. I don’t think he’s ever even tasted beer before.

“Let’s go outside,” I tell him, and we go to sit in the dirt patch that Joanne and Sherry have been leaving their dolls in. I pop off the head of a blonde little girl in a blue dress and throw it over the fence.

“Gimme a taste, Dewayne.”

“Shut up. It’s my birthday, I get first taste.”

I unscrew the cap from the Jack Daniel's and overturn it into my mouth. I like the way it burns. It feels like I can breathe fire and burn everything right up. I remember reading that the Cherokee believed that fire is what takes care of us. I guess when I think about it we wouldn't even be alive if it weren't for fire. My mom doesn't like Indians because they remind her of her grandparents, but I'd rather live with them than with some bullshit cowboy.

“Gimme some!”

He snatches it out of my hand and I fall on my back. The stars are shimmery tonight, and I think of the constellations we read about in school. I wish I could know them without every having to study at all.

“The stars are saying that it's going to rain soon.”

“Bullshit,” Robbie tells me, before he takes a drink. He gulps up but spews it all everywhere after he holds it in his mouth and his face goes red. You just have to swallow it. I knew that.

“See, I told you. It's raining.”

He coughed and gave me the bottle. “I've had better.”

I take another drink and ask him if he knows how stars were made.

“No. Who gives a shit, anyway? You got any cigarettes?”

“The stars are all actually corn. Indians used to eat nothing but corn, all day long. Corn on the cob, corn mush, cornstarch, creamed corn, corn and peas, corn meal, corn syrup. A whole lot of corn.”

“Their shit must have been pure corn,” Robbie says.

“I reckon it must have been. One morning two old farts get into their breakfast corn and it’s all gone. They look all around in everybody else’s corn but they can’t find theirs anywhere. They’re starting to hate all their neighbors, which is bad because Indians always love their neighbors.”

“Indians scalped people, moron.”

“Only when they deserved it. But then they went behind their teepee and some of their corn meal was on the ground. They got closer to it and saw huge humungous dog prints in it,” I say, running my fingers over the bottle of whiskey and its raised up letters. “This was a monster dog, not some German shepherd. I’m talking dog prints bigger than your stupid head, with claws the size of your arm. So they figured it must be a spirit dog. They thought the spirit dog might eat them next, so they got all their leather drums and turtle shells and rattler tails and made just the biggest racket you ever heard to scare it away. They did it all night long until they fell asleep.”

“You’re gonna put me to sleep too.”

“But then as they were snoring and farting they heard something that sounded like a million locusts. It was the spirit dog. He was big and black with pointy ears and a tail that was about the size of a whale. And his eyes were bigger than the moon. But he didn’t want to eat them at all, even though he had the sharpest, whitest teeth. He went straight for the corn and scooped up a fat chunk in his mouth. But the old people were greedy, so they got their rattler tails and chased the spirit dog away. He got scared and started running. Oh, he had wings too, they looked like hawk wings. He started running so fast away from the Indians that he started flying, but as he got up in the air some of the

corn fell right out of his mouth. But the people were so greedy they didn't deserve it anymore, and the corn started sparkling and became stars."

"That's a stupid story. Stars can't be corn; they aren't even really yellow."

"You don't know shit, Robbie."

1978: Julie Sees Tony Hillerman

My dad always eats steak and beans on his birthday. I don't like steak and beans, but we all have to eat it and wish him happy birthday all day long. His birthday just means we do more chores than usual, because he keeps asking us, well, don't we love him enough to weed the backyard?

I'm in the kitchen when my mom gets home from work. They're back together right now, which I always think is a good thing until I realize it means we *all* have to live together again. He shows up in the kitchen some mornings in a white T-shirt and asks me whether I've had breakfast yet. When I say no, I haven't, he tells me I should make some then. She also keeps a pack of cigarettes in the junk drawer for my dad even though she thinks smoking is bad for you. She's a nurse and I guess she sees a lot of cancer, even though she just works with babies.

"Where's the steak?" she asks me.

I look through her purse like it might be there. It always smells like antiseptic and grass, but there's no steak.

"Don't you have it?"

"I thought I asked you to go to the grocery store, Julie!"

I remember then that she had, and I hadn't listened because I was reading *Carrie*. I was at the part where Carrie's mom says that her boobs are like "dirty pillows," which made me laugh because then I knew why Ricky always calls them that. But mostly *Carrie* is not very funny.

"Can you go get some now? I have to make the brussels sprouts."

Even when she makes steak and beans she *has* to add brussels sprouts. Gag me with a spoon.

"Ok, I'll go," I say, slipping on my clogs. I had hoped when school started that clogs would make Vicky Gonzalez like me, but she hadn't even talked to me yet and she was kind of scary anyway. When I think of Chris Hargensen, the bully in *Carrie*, I picture Vicky's face. Vicky's Hispanic, and she has huge boobs.

The Albertson's is a fifteen-minute walk away from our house in Fairacres, where pecan trees used to grow up in a big orchard. I used to buy my dad's cigarettes there, too, until they stopped letting me when I turned ten. I grab my book before I leave, just in case I might get a chance to read it on the way to the store.

"Take some money with you, Julie. Here's five dollars, should be enough for two steaks."

I take the five-dollar bill and walk out of our gravel yard into the asphalt. Sometimes I think I'm a little like Carrie. When I imagine the neighborhood she lived in (I always think of where the characters live in books before I can think of the characters), it's just like our neighborhood, even though she lives in Maine and not New Mexico. I can't remember Maine very well, even though I went when I was a baby, but Stephen King puts almost all of his stories there. He's one of my favorite authors. His books are

really scary but they're actually smart too. I don't read dumb books. I haven't even read a picture book since I was five. *Carrie* isn't a story like most stories are; it's all letters and news stories that tell a whole story that makes sense, but you still have to put pieces together too. I wish I could write a book like that.

The Albertson's just got those doors that slide open when you get closer to them. When I go in I grab a basket and go through the paperbacks aisle since I need to get my dad a present too. I run my hands over the covers. I like to think of book covers as world coats. That seems like something an author would say. The romances all have the same coats, big hair and sunsets. Then there are the mysteries, all cloaked in black cats and cemeteries. I used to read those but I truly do prefer horror now. I don't really like monster stories or science fiction, but I still like fantasy. There was one author, H.P. Lovecraft, that some of the boys in my class were reading. Then they'd act like slugs or octopi or something and pretend to suck Vicky's blood. Sometimes I wish they'd do that to me too, even though they're disgusting.

In the mystery section I see some books with Indians on the cover. Or maybe not Indians but the kachina like my dad has, in front of desert and a yucca plant. That looks like something he would like. I wonder if he'd ever read it. It was called *Dance Hall of the Dead*, and the back cover says it's about Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, a Navajo who solves mysteries on the reservation. I hope that he'll like it more than anything. I pick it up and go to find steak. I'd get the cheapest ones they had, because that was what my mom always did.

When I get back home Sonja is doing cartwheels in the front yard and my dad is smoking on the porch. He's wearing a Steelers hat over the hair he says is blonde. I put

my hair next to it sometimes and say, “Now *that’s* blonde,” and then he swats me with whatever he’s holding. Usually a book.

“Where you been, Chuy?”

“Mom told me to go to Albertson’s. She needed stuff for tonight.”

“Well, I needed you here. I told you already to get more rocks for the wall,” he says, putting out his cigarette and petting Pooky’s head.

“I’ll do it now,” I say, and walk past him to get inside.

“Are you forgetting something?”

“Happy birthday, dad.”

2008: Helena Loves Vampires

I’m fourteen today. Or tomorrow, really. But that just means I’ll be fifteen next year, which means I can start driving with my parents in the car and boys will notice that my eyes are green and I shave my legs. Since it’s practically my birthday, I stay up late reading *New Moon*, the second, and absolutely my favorite, of the *Twilight Saga*. I imagine the day that my own Edward will come to me out of some hazy Washington woods, just sparkling with lust. I want to experience as much of my birthday as I can, just like Bella experiences the full depth and breadth of human passion when Edward leaves her sitting on a tree stump in the woods. I wish there were forests here. I hate Arizona. It’s not mysterious enough for vampires.

But then I fall asleep at 11:45 p.m., because I am not yet an adult who is capable of staying up past my bedtime.

A ringing phone wakes me up. I had fallen asleep on the couch cradling my black and white tome, and I rise in a fog of vampire-laced dreams.

“I’m fourteen now,” I think to myself, as I trip over the coffee table to get to the phone. I do not stop to think who could be calling me at this hour, but I know that it must be someone for me.

“Hello?” I croak, holding our gray brick of a home phone to the mass of hair clumped over my ear. My hair had turned curly last year, which was annoying because now I actually had to use my hair straightener to straighten it, instead of just running it through my already straight hair like everyone else did.

“Is your mom there?” some man says.

Sheesh, no happy birthday?

“Just a second,” and I drag my feet over the tile floor to my parents’ room. I know that my mother does not take interruptions to her sleep very lightly but I risk it because it’s my birthday and I have done far, far worse things on my birthday that went unpunished (The September 20th when I took scissors to my grandparents’ birthday presents because they were “too pink” was one particularly proud moment in my fourteen-year career).

“Mom? Someone wants you,” I say, pushing open their door. The sound of a ruffling down comforter signals that I’ve awakened it.

“What?” she heaves a sigh, as though she knew this was coming and I am only fulfilling her inevitable sense of disappointment. I walk to her side of the bed, around the still-slumbering dad mountain, to thrust the phone into her face. She takes it and turns away from me.

“Hello? Really? What time? Everyone’s OK? She’s OK? A girl? How’s Sonja doing?”

My mom is remarkably awake this time. When I was little she banned my sister and me from going into her room before 7:30 on weekends because she “wasn’t human when she’d just woken up.”

“What happened?” I ask into her ear, as soon as she hangs up.

“Your aunt’s husband doesn’t respect people’s sleep, is what happened. I don’t know why he couldn’t just call in the morning.”

“Yeah, but why did he call?”

“Sonja had the baby about an hour ago. Go back to bed.”

I return to my couch and my *New Moon*. I have a cousin, fourteen years younger than me exactly. She was going to be exactly like me, at least if my aunt’s horoscope had anything to do with it.

1962: Dewayne Is Trapped in Water

We move where we can’t be seen. My head hurts here, and I go to my stash in the bunks when I can get away, although really I can never get out of here at all. I’m there right now, though, because no one needs me on my birthday. Tom came by with a bottle of whiskey earlier that he’d bought while we were in Scotland. I think I’ll share it with him tonight and drink to the light of the bulb we prop on a metal table.

It’s sometimes easy to start imagining what’s on the outside, all the things that would eat us or, maybe worse, just pass by if we somehow got pushed out of this tube.

The only things we can see are each other and the familiar round walls, though.

Whatever's outside just keeps swimming like we're a big ugly fish too.

There are red lights in the control room that make it look like the world is ending. I think of the purpose that the men had in *Das Boot*, the idea that they were going to win some war for some family waiting for them. There's no reason for us to be in the sea here, and I think of all the people who are on land, the women who are just walking around out there and are so far away that sometimes it's hard to imagine them anymore.

I go into my bunk and unscrew the whiskey with my pillowcase. When I smell it, it goes straight to the roof of my mouth, and I can already feel the silver burning before I lift the bottle to take a drink.

“What are you doing, Mobley?”

I knock it behind me. It falls out of my hands, and rich brown liquor spills onto my gray Navy sheets.

“You're on duty right now, Mobley.”

My CO had been shadowing me all day. Someone must have told him it was my birthday.

“What do you have there?”

The golden brown alcohol is spreading and turning my gray sheets black. I feel it on my pants. I look behind me because the jig is up, now, Dewayne, as though it mattered one way or the other. I smirk up at him and stand to salute, the bottle resting plain behind me.

“I would have offered you some, sir, but you made me spill.”

1986: Julie Fears Foreigners

I'm taking a picture with strangers right now. I don't know how I get myself into all these goddamned messes, but when a horde of Japanese tourists (although I guess they aren't tourists, since this is their own country, but really they seem like tourists everywhere to me, all cameras and white New Balance shoes) came up to me and made the camera-button motion with their fingers I just smiled and nodded. That's what I always do, isn't it though, just smile and nod and wait until I can leave. I cock my head at the camera and lift one side of my mouth in some approximation of a smile, and they thank me and go away, waving behind them for miles. I wonder what mantelpiece I'll be hanging on next.

Tonight we're supposed to eat Italian. Don said he knew of a place in the suburbs of Tokyo, outside the tangle of streets and Buddhas. There's nothing that I miss more than Italian food, unless it's Mexican food. If I think too much about my dad's tacos and the jar of fat he keeps for them on his kitchen counter I'll start to cry. I'm starting to feel and smell like a shark with all the fish I'm eating, and right now I just want some beef.

It's my dad's birthday today. I pretended to myself that I forgot, but really I'd never be able to. I was keeping track of the hours to know when I should call him—it was best to do it in the morning, before he'd had too much to drink. It's 3 here, so that means that it's still yesterday in New Mexico. I could call him later, but I might be out by the time it's his birthday there. Gord was supposed to send my dad the Tony Hillerman books I picked out for him, but I'm sure he forgot all about it. God knows what that man does all day; he should have time to send my dad a birthday present, since he doesn't have a job. I'd have to call him too.

“Sumimasen!” Another group pushes past me, following their flag-waving fearless leader. Why did they have to travel in such big groups? I wait for them to pass; I can’t and don’t really want to push through them. Everything is so slick here, except for the people. They are sharp and jabbery, and sometimes I want to take scissors and stab them all until the only slickness left is from their blood.

I haven’t really talked to my dad since before the wedding, when he told me that he would come if I waited to have it until April and did it in New Mexico. I booked a March wedding in Balboa Park, San Diego. Sonja and my mom were bad enough; I didn’t need my dad hobbling me down the aisle too. I don’t think he minded not being invited or anything. It’s not like I’ve been to a lot of his weddings. I wonder if he’d want some sake, and I remind myself to ask him when I call.

2004: Helena Joins the Military Squad

Today even John Fish is letting me win in four square. It’s not because it’s my birthday. Usually he makes fun of people on their birthdays, and Mr. Fish has to yell at him or something. It’s because I’m wearing my mom’s old Navy uniform, and Nick Motonawa is wearing a Marine uniform. So I get to be in the king square, even though usually I’m the first one out. I never can hit the ball, especially when the boys act like they’re going to slam it and then just tap it into a corner. I don’t understand how they do it. Even when I try slamming it they usually just laugh at me and get me out. I never hit the ball just right. It hits me before I hit it, actually. But today I have my mom’s Navy badges, and the shoulder pads make me look older, I think.

I wonder if Nick likes me. I think he's nicer to me than he is to a lot of the other girls, and I don't think he ever would have let Ellen be a part of the military squad (that's what we're calling ourselves) even if she were wearing an Air Force jumpsuit or something. Nick and I were the only ones who came to career day in military outfits. John gets to be part of the military squad too even though he's just in a baseball uniform. Every time one of them passes me the ball my heart jumps a little bit. One of them *must* like me. My mom always says that boys liked her most when she was in the Navy because there were 80 girls and 1,000 boys on the ship, and half of the girls were lesbians anyway. I guess they liked her uniform too. I like the idea of boys thinking about me even when I wasn't right in front of them. I wonder if John is thinking about me right now.

When we go back to class Nick and John let me go first, too. I smile over at the other girls and imagine how jealous they are, hoping they care. I'm not sure that they do, and I brush some hair off my shoulder pads.

2011: Dewayne Is More Than Sixty-four

People think I like country music because I'm old. I don't listen to that Kenny Fatty or Marlon Wayans or whatever shit there is now.

When I was a kid I didn't think I'd ever die but I didn't think I'd be seventy-one either. I have one of those cases with pills for every day of the week. They are pink, blue, and white, and I can't believe they do anything. Sometimes I take extra, and wash it down with rum and Coke.

My skin pulls away from my arms now. It used to be tight. I used to be one hot little shit, wasn't I.

Our house smells like dog shit. I want to sell the car, and there's always that worry inside me where no one else can see it that I've spent too much this time. If I spend more, I don't think about it.

Pollyanne feeds me steak and frozen pies. That's what we're having today too.

I never used to be this tired, so I have to make myself stay up late. Pollyanne doesn't try to get me to stop drinking with the medicine, but I still hide her cigarettes in the garage. She's so small now, smaller even than she was when she was fourteen. I always think she's going to get better but now when she coughs it shakes her whole body like she's a bird in a wind that's taking her up.

I wonder when my daughters will call me today, and if I'll talk to H.C. since it's her birthday today too.

2012: Lana Loves Flowers

I'm four. I want fairies at my birthday party, but mom says they can't go outside of flowers because they die when a human sees them. I still want to see one. I would make it not die, and I would ask it to tell me its favorite animal and TV show. Then it would give me a gift. Wesley says only he gets presents from the tooth fairy but I want them too. One time I tried to take a tooth out with a string but I couldn't make it come out before it started to hurt me.

Mom gave me a present earlier so I could wear it to my birthday. She said it's from my cousin, but I don't know who that is. She said my cousin's in college in Texas,

but I don't know what that is either. So she showed me a picture of her on the phone. A cousin is a person with green hair, but it doesn't grow like that because only fairies have green hair for real.

Anyway, when I opened the present it was a crown made out of pink flowers that were bigger than my head. I wondered whether there were any flowers inside it but I couldn't find them and then my mom made me put it on my head so she could take a picture. I WOULD NOT smile because I do not smile for pictures.

2015: Let's Be Friends?

It started when we went where Angelica wanted to go for breakfast, and they didn't have pancakes. I'd asked to go somewhere with pancakes, because they're my favorite food and it's my birthday. I ask why we can't go somewhere that will serve pancakes, and she tells me that it's because we need something fast because everyone has a lot of homework to do. I don't, though.

So I get a tortilla with beans in it, because I'm a vegetarian and I won't order anything else on the menu. Although, of course, I'm sure this tortilla with beans has lard in it too, but it's really all about what other people think I'm eating, isn't it?

Then we drive back, and I'm on the outside seat and everyone else is asleep. I'm sitting too close to Emily and I feel like I can't get out of this metal tube, and I want to get out. I am still angry with her for losing her ID last night, because I wanted her to drink with me now that I'm finally legal.

We get back to Waco and Lara drops our passengers off one by one before returning to our apartment. She gathers her Latin and leaves me alone, and I lie on the

couch and check my phone. I suppose that I should do homework, so I gather my things and go to a coffee shop, but there is a bridal shower going on and there is nowhere to sit. I leave.

On the way out I see Ellie, who had been with us last night, and she asks me with her eyes to sit with her. There is a boy wearing New Balance sneakers next to her. He says that he is a graduate student in biology, and he says that our university is too white for his liking. But he's white too, so isn't he a part of the problem? I don't ask that though. He tells us we are conservative because we go to this school, that we don't know what we're talking about when we say we're liberal. I wonder whether I should like him, and I decide that I do not, but I still laugh at everything he says and nod in agreement when he says that Waco is a terrible place to be. I am looking for an exit when my mom calls, and I abandon Sydney, thinking, well, maybe she likes him and it's just me.

My mom wishes me happy birthday and I complain about New Balance. She makes sympathetic sounds, but I know she would have done what I did. Then she tries to get off the phone and says she'll let me get back to my friends, even though I don't know where they are.

Ellie calls, and we commiserate, but she still gave him her number. I do my homework alone in a garden and hope that someone else will call me. Then Angelica¹ texts me, reprimanding me for drunkenly divulging her illicit acts to everyone who was at my birthday. She is angry, I can tell, and she acts like I have jeopardized her future in academia even though I know that is ridiculous. She will get into Duke, and she does, months later when we aren't friends anymore and I have to hear it from someone else. I

¹ Name changed

consider responding angrily, but I don't. I apologize instead. I won't do it again, because she doesn't ever tell me anything else that I could spread.

Before I go to bed, I remember that my cousin is seven now, and my grandpa would be seventy-four if he were still alive.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Land That Was Promised to Us

“Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike. They’ve all come to look for America.”

Simon and Garfunkel, “America”

When I first heard of the Trail of Tears I thought it was about people walking on water. Stories about Jesus were more familiar to me than stories about Native Americans. God has a way of taking everything over in my mind whether I want him to or not. But it might have been the cartoon Alice I was thinking of too, who flooded the country with her tears until there was just an island left with a dodo, a turtle, and her. A Trail of Tears didn’t seem so bad. I sometimes tried to make one myself. It seemed fun to be able to cry enough to make a river. There, another allusion. Justin Timberlake.

I picked up details about the Trail of Tears later. I saw the backs of Native Americans in blankets like the ones my grandpa had hanging up in his house and a dusty road. But really they would have been wearing trousers and suspenders and would have had short hair, not the braids Native Americans always had for me. They were Americans then.

In the fifth grade, my teacher Mr. Whalen told us more about it. All I remember is the old people who were too weak to keep going and died on the way from Tennessee of Florida or Georgia to their new land. Elizur Butler, a missionary doctor who

accompanied the Cherokee on the Trail, thought about 4,000 people had died. That was about one-fifth of their whole nation.

That nation had its own (written) language and culture. Books and newspapers and estates and all those other hallmarks of supposed civilization. They had all that and good land, too. So white settlers, the truly civilized, looted their farms, burned their homes, and lived on land they considered their own. The Cherokees didn't *belong* there. And so the white people did what all civilized people do, and took to the law to help them. State governments took up the charge and passed laws to deprive the Cherokee of sovereignty over their lands. This was America, and there couldn't be any other civilizations but that one. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned some of those laws, in both *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* in 1831 and *Worcester v. Georgia* in 1832. President Andrew Jackson may or may not have said, "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it."

The Choctaws went first, in 1831 when the U.S. Army took them out of their Deep South lands in Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana to the new Indian Territory, where Oklahoma is now. A blizzard and epidemics of disease and hardship made it the worst of their three migrations. A Choctaw minko, or chief, was the first to identify it as a "trail of tears and death" in an article published by the *Arkansas Gazette*.

The treaties that the government had made with the tribes and nations were null and void, except, of course, for the 1835 Treaty of New Echota, which traded Cherokee lands for \$5 million and the new Indian Territory (which, despite the treaty's promise that that territory would never be a state, officially became Oklahoma in 1907). It also agreed, in Article Eight of its body,

that a sufficient number of steamboats and baggage-wagons shall be furnished to remove them comfortably, and so as not to endanger their health, and that a physician well supplied with medicines shall accompany each detachment of emigrants removed by the Government. Such persons and families as in the opinion of the emigrating agent are capable of subsisting and removing themselves shall be permitted to do so.¹

Congress approved the treaty, although 16,000 members of the Cherokee nation signed a petition opposing it.

The Treaty agreed to let the Cherokee go alone to their new “homes.” When only 2,000 of them did, President Martin van Buren sent General Winfield Scott and 7,000 soldiers to take the rest of them in 1838. Far from the peaceable migration described in the treaty, the soldiers invaded homes and farms, burning and looting them and taking their tenants to prepared stockades. Families were forcibly separated and taken to those forts, which held them until they started the march West. Fort Buffington, Fort Scudders, Fort Cumming, Fort New Echota, and fourteen others in Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina were erected with the captivity of the Cherokees in mind. They filled with excrement and acts of abuse against the Cherokee. Women and children were raped and hundreds of the sick and elderly died there, before they ever set out on the trail. The hastily constructed wood walls (only one of the stockades, at Fort Marr, still stands today) stood over them as they waited for something worse. They were 200 feet wide and 500 feet long, and the walls were eight to sixteen feet high. There was only one gate out. Even if they were there, they were still home.

Then the soldiers who had rounded them up pushed them out. The route took place in several waves between October 1838 and March 1839, when the last of the

¹ “Treaty of New Echota,” accessed March 29, 2016, <http://www.cherokee.org/AboutTheNation/History/TrailofTears/TreatyofNewEchota.aspx>.

Cherokee arrived in Oklahoma. Along the way, as I learned in the fifth grade, the young and the old died of diseases like cholera and the road's exhaustions. The death toll is estimated between 4,000 and 8,000 people.

Most of them made it, of course, and established the new Cherokee Nation in the dried plains of Oklahoma. That was where my Great-grandma Jeanne was born. Her mother was Cherokee. No one knows who her father was, but he was probably white. She was raised by her Cherokee grandparents until she was fourteen. I don't know the names of her mother or her grandparents.

My ex-boyfriend the business major liked to talk about his family history. On a date he told me one of his ancestors had been among the soldiers who herded the Choctaws along their Trail. He knows the man's name, even though I don't remember it now. He was a colonel, who had a plantation in Virginia but moved to Texas after moving the Choctaw to Oklahoma. I told him that he probably stabbed one of my ancestors with a bayonet—my grandpa had perhaps falsely said we have Choctaw heritage too—and he rolled his eyes and said his great-great-great-grandpa was a good person.

My family once came through Oklahoma when we were driving east and stopped in the Oklahoma City visitor's center. I posed next to a cardboard cutout of an anonymous chief (though perhaps he had a name, and I just didn't see it), and I had my mom take my picture with the camera I'd gotten for my birthday. I'd dyed my hair red that summer, and I look like a clown with my arms crossed next to him.

We drive through Oklahoma almost every time we make the trip East. We fill our car with ice chests and bathing suits to drive from Arizona to Maine, where we sun ourselves on the cold beach and compare our arms to see who's brownest. It's always my mom, of course, who turns a shade of tanned leather in the sun, her freckles standing out black on her thin brown arms. But most days in Maine, there is no sun. On those days we stay in the Liberty Bell, the graying house we rent by the beach, and watch the rain fall outside. It's warmer back home, so warm in the summer that we make our vacations where we can't predict the weather at all.

I know the landscape of that beach better than any other, saving, perhaps, that around my own Arizona home. The rocks mottled with algae and laden with seaweed climb up on the south side, becoming impassable farther from the beach's old familiar sands. I climbed those rocks in search of sea stars back when my feet did not mind their sharpness or the barnacles that sprouted in their fetid tidepool waters. Green strands of kelp float in those pools, the water passing and waving through them with each shift in the wind. And occasionally a crab scuttles through the water and we chase it, though more often it is an empty shell that rattles empty from one shelf of rocks to another. And then, because you can't climb the rocks as far as they go, you come back down, to the beach, where the water laps at you and the tide will come in almost to the staircase and then out again, farther than I could run without stopping. In my memory the tide's change takes place in an hour or less, the sea fickle in how close it will come to its pale worshippers.

In making sand castles, it is best to dig beneath the dry sand farthest from the water. There, the sand is still damp from high tide. The sand that is too close to the

water is still too wet, too in love with the sea. It will stick to your plastic molds and leave your crenellations in ruin. And the dry sand that lies far from the water will collapse as soon as you lift your little plastic castle. There is none of the water to keep it in place, and the sand blows away as soon as the wind's fingers touch it. You must follow the beach's slow curve to find the best sand, but come back to the blue umbrella to the right of the stairs to build it. That is where your family roots itself, moving farther and then closer to the stairs with the tide.

The beach is not long. Walk in its sands far enough north, and you will come to the old shipwreck. A coal ship crashed on the beach more than 100 years ago, and its keel still lies under the sand like a whale's blackened spine. It gets smaller every year, washed by the waves which pool around each of its beams. But it may only be that I've gotten bigger, and the wreck now looks like a boat and not a sea monster's skeleton. I once found a sand dollar beneath one of the beams that juts out of the wreck like ribs, and I kept it until it broke in our bathroom in Arizona.

And then, at the beach's end, there is the river that feeds the ocean. Its waters are warmer than the ice that comes down from the Arctic to feed the ocean I bathe in. Fishermen stand here and cast their lines into the green, hoping to catch a fish before it escapes into the open water.

I learned to walk on that beach. I was chasing a marbled pink ball in the sand, and the wind that's always shifting around there took it away faster than I could crawl. So I took to my feet, knowing that that was what the Big People did when they needed something. But I went even slower that way, and I only got the ball when my mom handed it to me.

And then there was the summer, a few years later, when my mom took our rainbow umbrella to the beach to shield us from the same wind. My dad anchored it in the sand using several of the rocks that slope between street and beach, but the air still ripped at it, tipping it over and rolling it away. I wailed and held it in the sand, but it was much stronger than I was. My parents laughed as I cried, worried that the umbrella would roll into the ocean and be gone forever.

Houses crowd each other by the beach, elbowing for the highest view. The old chipped and graying homes I remember from decades ago have been replaced by towering mansions built by Montreal investors, who purchase lots before they even see them. They haven't even seen the shipwreck yet, or eaten the blueberry pie.

In this place the forest has to be carved to make way for the houses. They are the color of the ocean in the morning when the sky is still gray and we don't know whether it will be a beach day or not. They are houses with two stories, black shutters, white doors, and green lawns. They're the houses I always wanted to live in when I younger and I knew Barbies would never live in a brown stucco house like mine.

My mom still wants to live in one of these houses, and she walks through the crosshatched and perfect neighborhood to find the house she would live in if she could. And then on Ocean Avenue she finds the house (it has a round white window on the second story, and that is the only way I can remember it) that her grandparents owned before they sold it and moved to New Mexico, to the West. They sold it when two of their children, Sonja, the prettiest, and Philip, the funniest (that is how value for their eight children was measured—how beautiful are our blonde and lanky daughters, how much can our skinny sons make us laugh?) died in a car accident on their way to the

beach. They were minutes away from the house, but their drunk friend rolled the car and because they were sitting by the doors they were the ones who died. Their brother Dennis was sitting between them and lived. This is our heritage; our blood is on this beach. My great-grandpa's ashes were scattered here. We die there, but I don't think we can live there, not anymore.

My whole life my mom has talked about the house she wants in Maine. Her regret tastes to me like the blueberry pie we buy down the road from the beach. It is sweet, something to be picked at and savored until the sugar the small round berries have been soaked in turns my stomach.

I last went to Maine two years ago, and I said proudly that this would be my last summer in the Liberty Bell. My mom wouldn't speak to me for the rest of the day. This is the Promised Land that she believes we must return to after long exile.

But until we can stay, we drive. We pass through New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire to eat lobster and blueberry pie. My mom says we drive so we can bring our beach chairs and umbrellas with us, but it's really because it has to be hard to get there. Maine is worth more than a plane ride.

Each year as we move East and the green starts in Arkansas I wonder why we live where it only rains in the summer. I try to read a Russian novel in the backseat but flowers in West Virginia distract me. One year we had flowers in Arizona, when it snowed so much in the winter that the water flowed down to us in the valley in the warm spring and made orange and blue bloom along the roads. I picked the flowers and watched them die in a jam jar that spring, and I've never seen them again.

But here there are so many words for water: brooks, streams, creeks, runs, rivers, kills, lakes, oceans. We pass Beaver Kill on Interstate 86 as we enter New York, and I ask my mom why it's called that. It's only another word for creek, she says, and I watch the rounded rocks shed their water as they pass beneath us, and then I can only see more cloaks of trees, their greens assaulting my eyes. There are too many kinds of water here, and they must borrow from other lexicons to name them.

We are seeing all the country that isn't ours, the alleyway from our exile to the Promised Land. In Ohio, when we take the Midwestern route, there is a skeet shooting competition, and men in camouflage hats fill the lobby of our Best Western and look us up and down as we carry our orange suitcases behind us. At a Dairy Queen in the Texas panhandle the boy comes out from behind the counter to give me my smoothie and tells me that they don't see people like me around here. I'm wearing my uncle's Morrissey T-shirt from 1991, and I have been in a car for days. In a White Castle in Tennessee the boy behind the counter asks me again if I don't want a drink. He comes to clean our table twice and offers me a free soda. I look to my mom to answer him because I'm fifteen and don't know how to talk to these boys. And of course I remember these flatteries, and hearing that I'm something brown and exotic, years later.

My mother wants the East, but she belongs in the West. Her mother was born in Iowa and went to New England, and her father was born in Texas and stationed in Connecticut. That's where they met, of course, at that dance where the white-winged nurses flew to the arms of their Navy beaux. But they couldn't stay East, because who does? We go west, all of us, because that's where we belong. We left Louisiana when I

was eight so my mom could get back to the southwest. She could have gone to Maine then, but she wanted her home. Not where the trees are green and every road passes over a creek, but in places where the land is nothing but dust that we draw in until it blows up and away. No sandcastles here; they'd collapse.

It takes us five days, give or take, to get to Maine from Arizona. It took the ancestors whose names I don't know a year to get from Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia, or Alabama to Oklahoma. From there, we went to Texas, then New Mexico, then Arizona. We keep getting pushed farther West, and every time I go East again I know it can only be temporary, that all that green isn't for me. Even in Texas, where I go to school, the codes are too strict and the families are too old. It's not wild enough for it to be my own. It's only in the dust that whatever shifting roots I have can settle, at least for a short time. The dirt isn't packed yet in the West, though it's getting harder the longer I go.

I used to think that everyone who moved back home was a coward. But you aren't a coward if you have to go there, right? That's what I'm telling myself now, as I get ready to move back home to Arizona. It means that I've given up everywhere else. It's too hard to live there. The desert, even though there are rattlesnakes and every year brings another water shortage, is easier, if only because I know it. There are rules everywhere, but not there, not really. When I go back it will be to accept that I'm no better, that I'm not smart enough to go to an Ivy (still, that image of green) for graduate school, I'm not ambitious enough to walk in the streets of New York or Chicago, I'm not talented enough to win a Fulbright and live in cultured Europe. It's just where we end up when we give up. It's where we go when we realize what we're not capable of, when my

mom knew she couldn't afford California anymore, when my grandpa knew he didn't belong in Connecticut.

Sometimes I feel happier about going back. I was walking on the rocks at In N' Out and they reminded me of the rocks we use at home to give some variety to the dirt. There's gravel in every yard in Arizona. Your feet get used to the gray and red rocks but not the stickers that hide between them. I walked on In N' Out's big rocks and ran my hands over one of the palm trees that's been transplanted to Waco, Texas. *What are you doing here?* I think, and there is a part of me that's satisfied to see it's yellowing at the edges, pieces of bark falling in a halo around it. This isn't a good place for us, and we know it. *Let's go back*, I tell the palm.

Grandpa D.B. thought he knew the desert. He was born in Texas, outside the Indian territory where they'd been brought but close enough that the dirt looked the same and the water still tasted like slate had been ground and dissolved into it. He lived on a submarine in the Atlantic, and when he was let out of the Navy with a few stripes lost he shook himself like a rat and went back to New Mexico. Sure, he went to Maine too, even after he and my grandma got a divorce. He got along with her siblings—Sonja, Philip, Dennis, Jerry, Sydney, Shelley, and Eric—better than she ever did. It seemed that he belonged with them, up there in the East. But he always went back to New Mexico. When he was there he, like his parents, never settled in one town. He went from Williamsburg to Las Cruces to San Lorenzo, until he died in a pink hospital in Tucumcari.

My grandpa had a painting on his wall of a man looking out on a desert valley. The mountains were pink, as they only are during sunset in New Mexico, and he wore a white blanket around his shoulders (This man is what I imagined when I imagined the Trail of Tears, before it became a collection of facts). Next to it hung the same man and the same landscape, but it had grown cluttered with telephone wires and white smog. He was wearing a motorcycle jacket, and his hair was in a braid, but he looked the same as the first one to me.

I never asked my Grandpa D.B. about those paintings, or about any of the pottery or arrowheads he had in his house. The black and white Mimbres figures and turquoise stones had a mythic quality to him, and to me too. He was making them all a part of his history, though they weren't, not really. He stole rocks and pieces of pottery from campsites in Gallinas, New Mexico. They weren't handed down to him. He wasn't the heir to Navajo or Apache or Mimbres nations. He claimed them, though, as you can claim anything in the West, and he decorated his walls with them. Hopi kachina wearing feathered masks danced next to patterned Navajo rugs, creating my grandpa's own landscape, one he could claim was his own until it was taken away from him like the Indian in the painting.

We got back from a trip to England and my mom told him she loved being in a place with so much history. We saw Stonehenge and the place where the Battle of Hastings had been fought, the things you read about in history textbooks but don't seem as real to you as the unadorned and ahistorical mountains. Our historical markers only go back to the 1840s, and most people ignore them anyway. We just have Tombstone, a place named for death and most famous for its Boot Hill cemetery.

“That’s ridiculous,” Grandpa D.B. said. “We have all kinds of history! People have lived in the Gila Cliff Dwellings since the 1200s!”

My mom rolled her eyes and tightened one corner of her mouth. He didn’t get it, but he was right. My grandpa wanted more than anything to be primal. He was the first. He was smarter. He was older. He wasn’t rich and he wasn’t successful because he, like his ancestors, had been displaced from what was rightfully his.

My grandpa’s ancestors weren’t from the West. They didn’t live in the Gila Cliff Dwellings in New Mexico. They went there because they had to, walking on water from Tennessee (or Mississippi, or Alabama—who knows where they really lived?) to Oklahoma. Some of them drowned, but all of their names are lost. Whatever homes they had in swamps and greens were traded for the dust and the shards of a people they weren’t a part of. They didn’t leave us anything. We are as dispossessed as they are, still looking for our old homes in the East and not finding them in the West.

CHAPTER SIX

Index of Addiction

“I read the news today, oh boy, about a lucky man who made the grade. And though the news was rather sad, well, I just had to laugh. I saw the photograph.”

—The Beatles, “A Day in the Life.”

Attention

My aunt used to be a stripper, an occupation I occasionally consider taking up when I survey my collection of useless half-skills. Unfortunately, my dancing is not even half a skill, and the hands or eyes of dozens of men would never convince me my body was right.

I don't think she regrets it, or at least most of it. She kissed a sitcom actor and went on a date with a guy who played a superhero, so it seems well worth it to me. And to be told, officially, that your body was good enough to be put on display, should be reward enough for us all. When Aunt Sonja stripped she came to see us every Christmas and bought my sister and me tricycles for our birthdays. Now, as an apartment manager and mother of two, she never comes to see us and, if we're lucky, we get stale cookies and Facebook messages once a year. I miss her, which means, I suppose, that I miss stripping.

When my aunt was nineteen, she moved to San Francisco to be a model. Everyone in New Mexico told her that she had a strange and ugly face—her forehead was too big and her eyebrows were too light for her to be pretty. Her dad had always called her funny looking, saying that her boobs were too small for anyone to get his hands around. In San Francisco they called her beautiful and she had a series of lovers, who, if they had lived in Las Cruces, New Mexico, would have ignored her. She told me about one, a male model, and said the sex was great but nothing else was. My mom says never to date anyone prettier than you are.

Modeling let her be seen—her vocation—but weekly city magazines didn't pay the rent or the drug dealer. Luckily, meth kept her from being hungry so she didn't have to worry about paying for food or gaining weight. Not eating really is good for body, soul, and checkbook. But a friend (if there are friends in California) who wore Hermès scarves to casting calls said that she should try dancing. It would help support her acting career; it's what all the girls did. Sonja had always thought she was a good dancer, but she wasn't sure that she was good enough to do it for money. Her friend laughed and told her to come to with her to work. My aunt's hair was red then, and somehow curly, and she looks like a teenage Irish prostitute in the photos my grandma has in her hallway.

When Sonja saw the dancers on the main stage she knew that she could do what they were doing. When she undressed in front of a man she always waited for his eyes to look her over before climbing into bed with him. That had happened the first time with Cam, and it was better than the sex, especially because sex on drugs was not as good as she really thought it should be. On the street, she always imagined what men in suits or those shitty rainbow hats saw when they looked at her, and she turned so they could see

her hipbones better. When they asked her to suck their dicks for free she remembered it long after, keeping each piece of attention in a secret token box where no one else could see it. So she got a job dancing, and lost more weight because that was what they liked in that neighborhood. When she moved to Los Angeles to be an actress because modeling was dead she kept dancing, and her tips got even better.

She wasn't a very good actress though. She was better when she wasn't talking, in a photograph or on a pole. When she talked you could see that she didn't really know her characters, how they were different than she was. And her body didn't imitate the patterns of a wife or a runaway as well as it danced. She wanted people to see her and no one else. On *Carnivale*, she once played a mother who died on a Ferris wheel and told the main character to look after her son. She got ten seconds of screen time, and she talked about it for years.

My aunt met her husband at work, and when she got pregnant shortly after her body was the ugliest it had ever been. Even though she hated it, she flaunted it. But when your body's like that, it confirms everything you've ever thought about it. At the Elks Club pool in Tucumcari, she took her tank top off so that her white belly was out in the open. The old men in trucker hats stared out her as she lay by the pool in the 4th of July sun, which always seems hotter than any other day even though I know it can't be. I watched her and the twin braids that fell over her bra and growing belly.

"Why don't you get in the pool?" my aunt asked me. I was twelve, and my hair was blonde from the summer. My forehead, which I tried to keep covered in hair, was almost as big as hers was.

"I didn't bring a bathing suit."

“Just take your clothes off!”

I was wearing Hanes underwear covered in purple butterflies, and I wasn't wearing a bra because I didn't need one. I rolled my eyes and scooted closer to the pool's edge, where some girls who looked about thirteen or fourteen were talking about the boys in their class. Earlier my aunt had tried to get me to wear a tank top without another shirt on top. I'd tried it, but just for the car ride, and then I put my V-neck back on, where it belonged.

Sonja called out to the girls in the pool.

“What kind of music do you girls listen to?”

They turned around and started to laugh. I wanted to dive to the bottom of the pool and never come out.

“We like Rihanna,” they said, after conferring with each other.

“Do you want to swim with us?” another asked, looking at me.

“I keep trying to tell her to get in the pool!” Sonja said. “Don't you want to be a bathing beauty too?”

Three of them climbed out of the pool, their long dark hair stuck to the swimsuits that stuck to their bottoms. They left a trail of wet footprints behind them as they stalked to the basketball court to sun themselves.

“Why didn't you talk to those girls? They were being so nice!”

“They didn't want to talk to me.”

“They kept staring! Of course they wanted to talk to us!”

I thought of my aunt's belly rising like Mount Fuji by the pool. That was what they were staring at, not me.

“Whatever,” I said, and went to find my mom.

The next week was my last time ever at Vacation Bible School. I was about to be in the seventh grade, and junior highers didn’t have to sing or learn the ABC’s of salvation anymore. As usual, I hadn’t talked to anyone in VBS all week. I made crafts by myself so no one would laugh at them when I was done, and I stood at the back so no one could see my hand motions to the songs. I’d always wanted big hands, but when I got them they felt like flippers, and I tried to keep them hidden.

When my mom picked me up on the last day I was ready to leave. I ran from the church door to her car, waving goodbye to my small group leader.

“Were you saying goodbye to those guys over there? They were checking you out,” my mom said, when I got in the car.

While I had of course obsessed over boys since the age of six, when the divine Chris Tilley sat across from me in Mrs. Rathbun’s first grade class, no one had ever confirmed my hope that they noticed me too. Trevor Johnson, the only boy in the sixth grade class, seemed more interested in Green Day and roofing than he did in me.¹

“They were not! They were just looking at my outfit!”

I was wearing a wolf T-shirt that I’d won in a reading contest at the library² underneath a blue flowery dress. I looked like a Dungeons and Dragons fanatic who had been forced into her grandma’s apron to bake apple custard. I knew that three fifteen-

¹ Even when I coincidentally became interested in Green Day and construction as well, Trevor failed to notice me. It’s something unpredictable but in the end is right, I guess.

² Won for reading the most of any participant in the Sierra Vista Public Library’s summer reading program. The wolf was purple with green eyes, and the caption said “Creature Feature: This Summer at the Sierra Vista Library.” It was my favorite article of clothing for longer than I’d like to admit.

year-olds were probably not checking me out. But that didn't keep me from staring at them as we pulled out of the parking lot. They might *like* me.

Camels

My grandpa didn't like filters on his cigarettes. When my mom or aunt went to buy his cigarettes for him he told them to get Camels or Cools. He didn't like to feel like anything was being kept from him.

Everyone smoked then. It was just something to do with your hands. Sometimes I wish I had a cigarette when I'm pushing down my cuticles over and over and can't stop. It's something to get you away from yourself, out of your body and onto a stick.

My grandpa smoked one and a half or two packs a day. The outline of his lighter and carton had worn pale outlines on the back pockets of his Wranglers. Ashes were ground into the carpet, and sometimes one of his pets ate a cigarette butt that he'd forgotten beside his bed. The packages we got at Christmas smelled like cigarettes, raw and smoky. My mom would leave our gifts outside to air them out, but when we went to his house we all smelled like it, whether we were inside or outside.

I remember when my grandpa tried to quit smoking, after the moles on his arms had started to multiply in what was his first of several encounters with cancer. The packages we got at Christmas and birthdays didn't smell like smoke and ashes anymore. When we visited him, he was even crankier than usual, turning the spray gun that he usually reserved for his pets on my sister and me. I hid in the back room and watched VH1 to avoid him, and then he found and sprayed me for watching too much TV. I asked my mom why he was being so mean and she laughed at me, having endured much worse

in her own youth. She said that he thought I liked reading more. He was disappointed in me.

The next time we visited, I'd gone from VH1 to basketball. I practiced every day at home and tried not to go to New Mexico with my mom and sister because I might get rusty from a few days off.³ But she told me I could bring the ball with me, and as soon as I got there I dribbled up and down his driveway, imagining an audience's commentary or at least my basketball coach watching me. When my grandpa came out, he called me his basketball star, and I smelled cigarettes on his breath.

A few years later, when I was a senior in high school, my grandpa got cancer. They found it in his bones first and tried to fight it there. But it was everywhere, and only months into chemo did they realize that it had started in his lungs. He didn't stop smoking that time. He took his medication at the same time that he flicked his lighter, which tore at his thinning skin. When his wife Pollyanne started smoking too he told her to stop, asking her, haven't you learned? She just hid her cigarettes in the garden, in the weeds that he used to pull.

Day in the Life, A

It's easy enough to find the last song on a record, especially when you play it again and again and the groove in one spot is going gray from the needle. In 1970 my grandpa found "A Day in the Life," skipping over "When I'm Sixty-Four," lifting the needle to the record's edge and leaving it there. He might have missed the opening pulse of guitar, but he probably always heard "I read the news today, oh boy."

³ I had an idea that if I practiced enough I could play for the University of Arizona, having been to a basketball camp there a few weeks before. I was encouraged by being named "Most Improved" on my team, having gone from being unable to dribble the ball to being able to dribble it five times in succession.

In 1970 my grandpa listened to “A Day in the Life” every morning when he woke up, just like McCartney who woke up, got out of bed, and dragged a comb across his head. Dewayne got out of bed after five minutes and twelve seconds and dropped the needle again as he went to the mirror. He stared at his blue eyes that looked like they were getting paler and picked up a comb too. It stopped, he dropped the needle, and he went downstairs to find a cigarette in the kitchen drawer beneath a deck of cards. His wife, Susan, would turn the volume down and he would slam the drawer closed.

“Turn that back up!”

“The girls are still asleep!”

And then he would turn the volume back up, just in time for the suspended E note that meant that the song was almost over.

He listened to it for weeks and months, every morning when he got out of bed and over and over until his wife was at work and his kids were at school. I know how he feels, or I sometimes wish I did: that feeling that a song has the answers for what you’re feeling, or at least knows how to put it into music, which is feeling and more than feeling at once. I make songs about love even when they’re about taking out the trash. My grandpa made a song about life a song about death.

Lennon’s verses are partly about Tara Browne, the heir to the Guinness fortune who died in a car accident when he was twenty-one (the age I am now, and the age my mom and grandma both were when they got married). Lennon fictionalized the accident and said that he “blew his mind out in a car,” maybe because he “didn’t notice that the lights had changed.”

And that's what my grandpa did, though I doubt it's just because he wanted to feel whatever Lennon was feeling in 1966. He took the pistol from under his bed and held it until he worked up the courage he needed. But then he made a mistake: he went out of his bedroom to do it because he didn't want to ruin the carpet. In the tiled kitchen he chose, his wife saw what he was doing and hurtled toward him, her most precious and hated thing, and put her hand on the mouth of the pistol just as it fired. The bullet went through her hand but since she pulled the gun down it went through the wall and not her husband's head.

Dewayne Boyce Mobley hated himself almost as much as he loved himself, sometimes maybe more. My mom said he was just the "piece of shit that the world revolves around."⁴ Everyone had better love you, but that doesn't mean they should. When they love you, that means they don't know you. It means they want to put their hand up between you and the gun, and it means they will keep coming back to you even when you cheat on them and call them names like Sue the Jew or Sonja Shit. You get them to love you with the tables you make with tile found in riverbeds, and with stories about Thunderbirds (the cars and the creatures). They have to love you because you're beautiful and you read books and you know your history, even if you have to make it up. They have to follow you and save you because who else would they do it for? But you're tricking them, aren't you? Because you aren't all those things. You're a fake who says he would have made it if he tried but knows he never would have. You moved back to New Mexico because it was easy and home, not because you had some scholarship. You never had that. If you'd applied you wouldn't have gotten that. So if someone loves you

⁴ She got that from Anne Lamott. Nothing we say is ever original, even when we convince ourselves it is. Piece of shit, etc., etc.

it's because they see your strange blue eyes and listen to you talking but they don't smell the shit underneath it, which is pushing from under you and it will get out eventually, you know it will. If someone loves you, it means you can't love them.

By the way, the song's not about suicide. Blowing your head out, according to John Lennon, just means getting really high on LSD.

Driving

My great-grandpa Les was a mechanic. Access to nice things was limited in Tucumcari, except for the cars that oil barons and cattle ranchers drove into town sometimes. Les himself drove an old truck, which pulled a trailer behind it he took when he played the violin in Oklahoma and New Mexico. But his son Dewayne, when he got to go to the shop where Les worked, liked the Cadillacs and the new red Lincoln Cosmopolitan with the smoking engine that came in on his birthday. He thought of himself driving it on the beach somewhere; he'd never been to the beach but he thought he'd like it. He'd buff the red so it looked fresh as a cherry, and he'd never get it like it was now, the fender dented and the engine coughing like his mother at night.

When he got older Dewayne bought those cars for himself, whether he could afford it or not. Each year he got a new one, looking for something like that Cosmopolitan. He had a '57 Chevy, two Austin-Healeys, a '69 Corvette Stingray, a 1970 Opel GT, a '68 GTO, a Datsun 240Z, 260Z, 280Z; a Chevy van; a Volkswagen camper; and many more that spent a year in his garage before they got sold too. He drove them up the coast of California and across the country to Maine, avoiding Texas if he could.

He always sold them or traded them in and rolled up to the trailer where they were living, late, in whatever he'd bought this time.

When my mom was a teenager she got high and then got on the freeway, where she could drive as fast as her Buick Skylark would go. She'd drive to her boyfriend Troy's house or just keep going on I-10 to El Paso, past the university campus and past her dad's house. She liked to feel that she could take herself wherever she wanted to go, even if she died.

Every year, or every other year, my family drives from Arizona to Maine and back again. The drive has gotten longer over the years as my mom stops earlier in the afternoon, her back and knees hurting from the car seat. But we keep doing it anyway, going back to the same places the same ways.

Facebook

I always liked imagining the lives of those who were more popular than I was. They were the girls who had ten full fingers of nail polish (not just the one fingernail my mom allowed me) and the boys who didn't talk to girls at all because girls were stupid, even, apparently, at the age of six. Even when I had friends I never thought I did, and I constructed a fantasy of myself surrounded by admirers who piled in sleeping bags on my floor every night to paint toenails and tell stories about their mothers, all of whom were more generous than my own.

Facebook let me be part of that party on the floor, but invisibly, of course—which is what I wanted anyway.⁵ I never wanted to *talk* to anyone, just to see their new hairstyles and know what they did on vacation, so I could speculate about how much

⁵ Even when I went to sleepovers I never talked.

money they had and how many hours they spent with the friends who all worshipped them. With Facebook, I could be a worshipping friend too, even if I'd never be a worshipped one.

When I made my Facebook account, I was supposed to be doing geometry homework. It was after my parents had gone to bed, and they thought I was in bed too. But as a thirteen-year-old I had gotten a lot of practice staying up past my bedtime to do nothing in particular. I had lingered on the website before, worried, as ever, that I wasn't worthy to enter this private blue global club. But I was being welcomed, so I finally committed. Facebook asked me all the questions that a friend would have, if I'd had a friend at all, or at least a friend who wanted to know how old I was and whether I was single and looking for men or women.

And after answering some questions about myself—always something I enjoy anyway, talking about myself—I was in. It took me a year to add any friends or add a picture (I only wanted to see, not be seen) but when I did I got a whole new social network. The home schoolers who seemed to live at each other's houses came to *my* house too, through the PC in my parents' bedroom. The people I'd admired from afar eight or ten years ago were there too, their belly button rings and pregnancies strange next to my memories of them in the fifth grade.

And then my friends—or, if not my friends, at least the people I knew from school, because I still wasn't sure I had real friends—started getting on Facebook too. I had heart to hearts on Facebook about relationships and the people I hated⁶ with the people that I never talked to in class. Here is a sample Facebook conversation from

⁶ With whom we were carrying out simultaneous conversations

August 8th, 2009, with a boy that would have been tolerable if he'd liked me, but annoyed me because he didn't.

Me: "I'm mad at you right now"

Nick Vandivort: "why r u mad at me?"

Me: "Because you can be a tremendous jerk. Ha! Just kidding...ok, now I have to guess who you like. i am really schizo right now"⁷

Nick Vandivort: "Haha u don't know her...but u can ask around I'm sure u can find out."

Me: "No, mariah already told me it was Nicole, in the camp, with the candlestick.

Nick Vandivort: "Ugh ugh ugh...man...I thought I can trust her,...Tisk tisk. Awww u guys talk about me? Now answer a question...how did u guys get in the conversation? HMMMM?"

Me:⁸ "Oh please. Do not try to fathom the mysteries of girl. But she does have this thing (with me, at least) in which she kind of brags that she is

⁷ I hoped, of course, and against all sense of reason or evidence, that he might like me.

better friends with people than I am. I don't really understand or care about this, but whatever.⁹ And this is how you came up.

P.S. NEVER trust Mariah with a secret. and don't tell her I said that, if you know what's good for you."

I'll spare you the inanity of the rest of the conversation; it mostly consists of me trying to figure out various romantic configurations and Nick not responding. This was what I wanted, though: a personally impersonal kind of friendship, where it was OK if I gossiped about Mariah because there's no way she would overhear me.¹⁰ These people's Facebook profiles became more familiar to me than their actual faces, and I waited every day to get back home so I could see what they'd posted on Facebook, even though I'd only seen them thirty minutes before.

Now I have a phone, of course, and social networks have multiplied, so that I'm not bound to Facebook for my virtual slumber parties. But even with Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and whatever the hell goes on on Yik Yak, Facebook is still the first app I go to. Even while I'm writing this I have it open on my computer, and I scroll past everyone's faces and wonder what they're doing and why they didn't invite me.

⁸ This is where I get nasty. Know that in sharing this I am also sharing my soul (because, really, what is my soul if not my Facebook message conversations from six years ago).

⁹ Of course I care about this.

¹⁰ I didn't know what a screenshot was.

Lying

When we lived in Louisiana my family rarely went to my grandpa's house in New Mexico. We only drove and never flew, and since driving to New Mexico meant going through Texas, we tried to avoid the trip. I was six or seven, my sister about four, the first time we drove there I think we were going on the way to Disneyland, because Tucumcari would not have been a final destination.

Grandpa D.B. and his wife Pollyanne¹¹ had once lived in a charming homemade home in San Lorenzo, out in the country where coyotes sometimes ate his dogs. Their garden teemed with rabbits and their guesthouse had two whole shelves of children's books just for us. While their San Lorenzo home was enchanted to me, to Pollyanne it was too far from family and from Lowe's.

They moved back to Tucumcari shortly after they got married. Their wedding was also in Tucumcari, the dead-end town where they'd met when they were in high school, when she was fourteen and he was seventeen. It was where she grew up, and it was where Dewayne's father had finally divorced his mother. It was the town Dewayne was trying to get out of when he joined the Navy. Maybe going back felt like starting from the beginning, but for us it meant spending time in a town where the biggest attractions are the Elks Lodge and the motels that used to house drivers on Route 66.

My sister and I were too young to appreciate the motels, the Blue Swallow or the Motel Safari. We spent most of our weekend in Tucumcari in opposite corners of my grandpa's new brick home, which was nothing like the one he'd painted yellow and blue in San Lorenzo. I cloistered myself in the bathroom and made concoctions out of Mary

¹¹ And the wife before her, Patience.

Kay shampoos, disposing of them carefully after I'd marketed them to an imaginary audience.

My sister wasn't as good at cleaning up after herself. After she took the pictures out of their photo albums and the curtains off their rods, she blamed the mess on her imaginary friends Max and Yay-Yay. Even after being sprayed by the water gun she wouldn't confess. My grandpa said he would keep her friends and scapegoats with him in New Mexico for a makeshift boot camp so they would learn never to take the rods out of a grandparent's curtains. According to Olivia, however, they managed to strap themselves to the roof of our minivan all the way back home to Louisiana. At home they were already causing trouble again, sneaking cookies and eating all the Chewy bars.

On our next trip to New Mexico, Olivia took her place in the bathroom, unrolling toilet paper until she was surrounded in white like an imp in an igloo. Unlike me, she left the mess as she'd made it. Her past misdeeds made her the obvious candidate for arrest, but again she denied any involvement with the scene of the crime. Barring the fetus in my aunt's womb and the pet Pekingese, though, it had to be her. But, having grown tired of all the accusations and denials, I turned myself in in my sister's place.

I was the honest one. When Olivia stole mood rings from hotel gift shops, I turned her in. When she hit our aging Siamese cat over the head with *The Little Mermaid* VHS tape, I was the one who presented the evidence against her. Whatever my sister said could pretty much be trusted to be a lie, and whatever I said was naturally taken as gospel truth. I embellished, sure, especially in the accusations I made against my sister, but the facts of the case were always essentially true. So when I said that I was the

culprit, I was trusted, though my mother, aunt, and grandparents didn't believe me, not really.

“But why would you do such a thing, Helena?”

“Are you *sure* it wasn't Olivia?”

I held fast to my convictions. It felt like a kind of game. I could change what had happened in everyone's minds but my own. It was easy to see why Olivia always did it, but her power over the truth was slipping. You can only lie so often before everything you say seems false. But develop a reputation for honesty and everything you say will be true.

As Olivia took pictures out of the old photo album again, I congratulated myself for sacrificing my wellbeing for my sister's. Lying was good for everyone, really. And besides, I didn't get punished for the crime because no one really thought I was guilty. So when my ex-boyfriend, years later, asked me if I loved him, I said yes. That was another helpful lie, and nobody would get hurt from it at all. And when people ask me what I like doing, I cast about until I can't find anything and so make something up (sure, I love writing! I love school! I love you!) Isn't that helpful, because it gives people something to know and love about me? And now when people ask if I'm a Christian, I say yes, and if I'm an atheist, I say yes, and if I don't know what I'm talking about, I say yes.

Isn't that the case for everything I write down? Isn't it just grasping for something I can't really feel but think I should say anyway, like when I made myself cry on the day my grandpa died? Writing all this down is educating myself in how I should

really feel, so maybe I can start to feel it. But there's nothing wrong with it as long as everyone, sometimes even me, believes it.

If I lie enough, hopefully it'll make me into a good person. If I lie enough maybe I can convince myself that I love someone and not just myself. If I lie enough I can tell myself that I know someone like my grandpa, who lied so much we all had to love him for it. It was easier to live in my Grandpa D.B.'s adobe brick lies than anywhere outside them. You could ask him how work had gone and he'd tell a story about the cat in the sewer drain, not the customer who'd shortchanged him and gotten him in trouble with his boss. But then maybe a cat would show up and you'd have to believe him, even though you really didn't know where it came from. When he met another woman at the bar he told his wife that his car had broken down in the next town over and he'd stayed to fix it. When he first met my grandma, his first wife, he told her that his dad was in the oil business. There was truth to that, because his stepdad owned a gas station, but she believed that he was the son of a magnate. How could he not be? He'd once punched a man for saying "Fuck" in front of her.

Everything I say is a lie, so nothing is. You have to believe me, because there's truth in here somewhere.

Men

The first dream I can remember having is the one where my mom gets abducted by aliens. I don't remember what the aliens looked like. I just remember the woods and the blue light that couldn't get past the trees, and knowing that it was all real. The aliens weren't the scary part anyway. They were just doing what they had to do. They

wouldn't take her unless they knew she belonged with them and not me. Later, in Maine, I looked down on her from the window of the Higgins Beach Inn. She was bringing McDonald's for the kid cousins, and she didn't know I was watching her. Her face was out of the shape it had for me, and, godlike in that window, I thought there was no way she was my own mom. My own mom: M.O.M.: my own mom: M.O.M., a *mise en abyme* that keeps going but is never very convincing because one of those moms has to be wrong.

My mom hated her mom. Maybe she didn't hate her. My aunt hated her mom. I think she did hate her. My grandma, their mom, has a board on her wall with two frogs. It says, "Before you find your prince, you have to kiss a few frogs." My grandpa was a frog. So was Michael Mutter, her second husband, whose sons called oatmeal "oakmeal." Her third husband, Grandpa Bob, must be the prince, though he yelled at her about leaving New York for New Mexico and he lost his thumbnails to cancer. They hated her because she always thought she was a princess and not a mom, so she was always looking for some prince. Or working at the hospital.

"She's why we are the way we are," Aunt Sonja says.

Sonja, always dramatic, says she became an alcoholic at thirteen. My mom, the responsible older sister, waited until she was fifteen.

My mom wanted to be better than her mom. She told boys she would go to parties with them and came late, with her friends, instead. She cheated on her boyfriend Troy to get him to break up with her. He always ran his hair through his hands, and she just couldn't deal with it this week. They'd get back together next week anyway, it was fine. You couldn't be available for them on the phone or in person or in bed with them

because then they'd think you liked them more than they liked you. My mom had seen her mom when she looked at her husband (my mom's dad, my Grandpa D.B.). It looked like she was a plant trying to follow the sun and soak up its food, but the sun kept avoiding her. So the plant kept turning, dumbly, just following its instinct—if plants even have instincts—but the sun went in circles until it left. My mom didn't want to be like that. She wanted to be the sun for someone else. So all my life that's what she's been, and now no matter what I do I'm just a plant trying to get at her too. Maybe I'm like that for everyone else too, who knows. I just know when I think of her dying it's like there would be nothing left to even cry for her.

Pets

Every year or maybe three months my grandpa found a new pet. My mom never pays money for animals now because they are too easy to find for free. Especially when pets have babies, even though the babies always somehow disappear after a few days or minutes in the yard. But even the disappeared ones are better than people, even though they're more expendable because there are so many of them.

My mom knew this because a hippie couple moved in behind their stone house in Truth or Consequences. They had two male German Shepherds who barked through the night and fought during the day, leaving patches of fur and some skin in the hippies' chain link backyard.

“Their balls need to be cut,” Dewayne told Julie, when she asked why they always fought. She heard the small one whining and wanted to help it, but its pink and black muzzle scared her too much to climb the fence. Maybe she could get some big scissors

and cut their balls for them and they'd want to play with her. She had a feeling that wouldn't be allowed though so she decided not to.

"If those were my dogs I'd beat them," her dad said. But she knew that wasn't true. Dewayne wouldn't even beat the Pekingese that bit Julie's face. It was her fault, after all, because she'd gotten too close to it when it was trying to get away from her. He used a spray bottle on his dogs and cats but saved the belt for his kids. As it should be.

But when the hippie neighbors asked him how to get their dogs to stop, all Dewayne said was "How should I know?" Julie watched them and her dad, and she knew that he wasn't as brave or as good as she thought he was.

He wasn't good to their people, but he could always be good to animals. He fed his boxer Chanté and his mutt Bear with the scraps from his table. They were fat from steak bones and beans but somehow I didn't notice when Bear crawled into bed with me once and took my glasses off the side table. When I woke up and they were gone I was in trouble. My mom and Grandpa D.B. asked me how I could have lost them, and I was sent on a one-girl search party through their cluttered house. But when I don't wear glasses I get a headache, so I gave up my search to lie on the couch in tears because I couldn't read *Harry Potter*. Then my grandpa threw the glasses on my lap. They were bitten and mangled, the sides bent in and the lenses pocked by teeth marks. "You shouldn't let the dogs get to your stuff," he said.

A calico cat named Patches once followed the family up a mountain but didn't manage to follow them down. Julie asked if she could hold the cat as they hiked, and her parents told her that Patches would find her way. But Patches chased a rabbit into the

woods and didn't follow them again. Julie waited on the trailer stoop for her until her mom told her to come so she could sleep. But Julie couldn't sleep, how could she? Later, the boxer Pooky, one of a long series of them, was left to wander the campgrounds while the family slept. Julie wanted Pooky to stay inside, but her parents said she smelled too bad and they wouldn't be able to sleep with her in the trailer. But in the end, they couldn't sleep anyway because someone knocking woke them up.

"You got a boxer."

"Yeah, why?"

"I hit a boxer with my truck."

And so Dewayne went to find her. The truck driver followed him, but Dewayne told him to go to hell. He walked along the road, turning his flashlight off when he saw her, blue under the moon. The black blood was already done spreading around her. Dewayne couldn't even tell where it was coming from, because she looked perfect. He hoisted her over his shoulder. Her body bent, but it didn't break.

He carried her into the trees and dropped her, taking the shovel he'd brought with him (Why did he have a shovel in the camper? Was he waiting for this to happen?) and chipped into the caliche. Caliche is hard and white and doesn't take the shovel, but when he'd made a cavity just big enough for her, she rolled her in. He sat beside her there, not going back to the trailer until gray started to shine through the pine trees and they turned from black to green.

Sun

I remember my grandpa with a black back brace bending over the weeds. He didn't pay attention to New Mexico water rations and his garden was always green. Orange and yellow lantana crawled out of the gravel next to pansies and clovers I didn't know. He found a cat in his garden once and gave her to us because he already had too many. He told me to keep my eye on the ground and on the sun, because I'd always know where I was going, and when I pointed I could only use my chin. That's what the Indians did.

When he was younger he undressed to put on tanning oil and then put his clothes back on. But he didn't lay out like girls on the roof. He had to work outside, because getting the sun shouldn't be that easy. You had to earn it. That was why Indians were so brown, because they worked outside and only went into their teepees to go to sleep. He liked to watch himself turn brown. He never got sunburned. His moles only grew up and out, like they were drawn to the sun and wanted to get off his skin to go see it. That was the first time he got cancer.

My mom never wears sunscreen. She puts her arm next to mine, and mine looks like the moon. She has a freckle on her forearm the size of a tick, which shrinks when she lifts her hand. I imagine it swelling with blood.

I feel the sun's heat on my own skin and look down at the golden hairs on my arm. During the winter they turn brown, and I wear long blue sleeves to cover them. The sun feels like it's curing me when I lie out in it. In Arizona the sun has a heat that I've never felt anywhere else. It reaches into me and warms me, and then it burns like hell. That's when everyone goes inside, but I stay in the sun until I turn pink.

Whiskey

I don't even know what my grandpa most liked to drink. I don't know if he had a favorite beer or cocktail, though I'm sure he did.

The first time I saw a drunk person I was running in the street in New Orleans. My family was on the other side watching me, and in the memory I'm wearing fairy wings but it was probably just my pink sweater from Old Navy. I was looking over at my parents when I ran into him. His head was bent and he smiled at me and said "God bless." My heart felt like a shell inside me, and I ran across the street again, the feeling of his flannel shirt still on my cheek. It was December, and I was six.

I later saw my mom get drunk with my aunt, and I whispered to tell my sister what they were doing. They sent us to bed but I stayed up to listen to them. My mom never laughed that much with me.

When I got older, I was allowed to stay with her when she drank. I've learned that alcohol makes it safe to talk. When she got drunk at my high school graduation party she told my friends that I didn't know how to train my dog. He only misbehaved because of me. "Dogs are just like their masters," she said, looking right at me.

The first time I got drunk I was with a friend. He's Logan Donagan somewhere else in here. I knew I would get drunk that night, had planned it for weeks after he first said he was going to have a party to celebrate the beer he'd brewed himself. I had two beers on his couch. There were a lot of people there, and theology majors were singing in rounds in the corner. I was wearing something ridiculous, a shiny blue skirt that was too small for me and a shirt with a 70s collar that I'd found in a thrift store. I didn't know how to dress for other people then; I do now.

I didn't really like the beer, but I said that I did. When I stood up, I swayed and almost fell. I felt like I was walking on water. I felt like the most beautiful person in the room. I felt like everyone wanted me and just didn't know how to say it yet. My friend and I danced. We thought everyone was looking at us because we were sexy, but when Matthew Garcia went to catch me it was because I almost fell over a table, not because he wanted to put his arms around me or anything. I told people that they should chase their dreams and touched a boy on the chest. I felt like every cliché was true. Logan Donagan's depressed roommate kissed his girlfriend on the couch. I wanted to put myself between them, but I had just told her she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen (she was). Then our only sober friend, the one I'd touched on the chest, drove us all home and I went to bed without brushing my teeth.

I don't drink often. When I do drink, I ask myself why I'm not an alcoholic. I feel powerful, like I can tell everyone exactly what they're feeling and it's actually true, for once.

The Weeknd sings "When I'm fucked up, that's the real me." It's obviously true, but I'd never thought of it like that. That's the way the best lyrics are. I tell my friends about it, and they say that's not how alcohol is supposed to be. I think there's something wrong with them, but then I agree.

Women

My grandpa had one mother, two sisters, four wives, two daughters, and three granddaughters. I don't know how many women he slept with, or how many fell in love with him. After he got divorced the third time his neighbor, a woman, came over with

flowers, as though he were a widower. He took them from her and closed the door. Then he went to find Pollyanne, his last wife.

A few weeks before he died my mom asked my grandpa what his own mother had been like. She'd never heard much about her, and since she'd died at forty-five of cirrhosis of the liver she never really knew her. In the hospital room with the blue curtains, my grandpa had to put his teeth in to answer.

“She was a bitch and a whore.”

And then he took his teeth out again.

After he died she learned a little more about her grandma. Jeanne Aldridge had gotten married to Les Mobley when she was fourteen. They had three children together: Dewayne, Sherry, and Joanne. Les had moved his family from town to town, trying to get his wife away from the men she found everywhere. One of the men she found was her own son. She molested Dewayne because sometimes in a small town there was no one else. She died the day before my grandpa did, on August 14th.

There's a picture of her at the sanatorium. Her second husband took it, I think, but I could be wrong. She's not looking at the camera, exactly, but you can tell she sees it from behind her sunglasses. Her hair is curled, and she has long red fingernails. It's black and white, so you can't tell they're red, but I'm sure they are. She's lying back, getting a tan on a lounging chair, and a cigarette dangles from her left hand. Her legs are exactly like my mom's, and like my mom she wears black shorts to show them off even though they're too skinny and she hates them. She's a child at forty. I want to be just like her.

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