

THESIS

WHAT WE CAN'T AVOID

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

WHAT WE CAN'T AVOID

What We Can't Avoid is a memoir that explores the narrator's excavation of family dynamics, and who her parents are and grow to become as she comes into adulthood. This memoir is a collection of personal essays that come together to create four chapters. The first is a focus on the narrator's mother, and her journey through infidelity, divorce, and an emotionally abusive relationship. The second chapter looks at the father, his affair, the effect of his career as a doctor in the Army, and the tension between his ego and his love for his family. The third chapter breaks away from the parents and zeroes in on the narrator and her older sister, exploring how girlhood and family trauma inform the coming into adulthood, and how these sisters may break away from the roles they were assigned in their family unit. The fourth and final chapter offers a brief look at how each member of this family might move forward from the fracturing that has occurred over several years, and how they might each achieve self-actualization and empathetic perseverance.

DEDICATION

For my mother, my lighthouse in the storm, and for my grandmother, the ship that carried me
through.

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INTRODUCTION

This memoir experiments with varying forms, relying predominantly on short-form flash writing to emphasize the theme of the narrator's personal restraint. The memoir also opts out of chronological storytelling, instead utilizing fragments to highlight the fracturing of the family unit. Two major informants of these choices are Jo Ann Beard's "The Fourth State of Matter" and Lydia Davis' collection of flash pieces, *Can't & Won't*. Davis works within the hyper-short form, challenging the audience to read deeper between the lines of what might otherwise be considered mundane subject matter. Beard's essay weaves multiple scenes/themes across a few selected moments in time, letting the narrator's processing of grief guide the structure as opposed to the chronology of events. I see both strategies largely informing how I approached this project. While writing *What We Can't Avoid*, I was less concerned with telling the audience this story as an order of events, but rather as an emotionally arduous process of character exploration, which as many of us can attest to is frequently nonlinear. I also believe that short form writing works well with this project's interests in how I've tried to frame the narrator. This narrator is one who largely operates as the "good girl," creating a somewhat self-assigned antithesis to the explosive dynamics she finds herself surrounded by. In leaning so heavily on flash, I aim to communicate the narrator's restraint, and her own self-silencing as she quietly observes the telling details of her family.

This focus of quiet observation was also largely inspired by Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*. Chbosky's protagonist Charlie witnesses a myriad of traumatic coming-of-age events in which his friends and family are at the center. Yet it seems that in empathetically observing these traumas, Charlie ultimately builds emotional endurance and a

level of wisdom well beyond his years, finally growing beyond observer to active, self-actualizing agent. I resonated deeply with this character arc and wanted to convey a similar coming-into-self with my narrator in this memoir.

While writing this memoir I strived to avoid portraying any family member from a vindictive or bitter place. While many of the sections in the memoir the mother and father behaving less-than-favorably, I was far more interested in investigating “how could people with so much love think that these behaviors were the only option?” rather than “isn’t it awful the choices that these people made?” It is my hope that the representation of these characters reads as not only realistic, but above all empathetic and understandable.

A major theme that I explored while writing this memoir was loss. While the loss of the grandfather is not the focal point of the memoir, the way that he represents a stable, parenting relationship to the narrator and her sister helped to literalize the slow loss that both girls experienced of their parents. This memoir is interested not only in what the ugly parts of loss look like, but also how loss is formed through rippling traumas (i.e., affair leads to divorce leads to abusive relationship, leads to parentless daughters).

A theme/question that I wanted to communicate in Part Three of this memoir was “how do you build the self in the wake of deep loss, and where do you find love from other people to fill that loss?” The narrator’s realization of her own humor, and the sister’s emergence into theatre and opera both felt like arcs that symbolized these daughters moving beyond the internal drama of their home, and out into the external drama of the creative arts – a drama that they are active consenting agents in.

I also wanted to build a space in Part Three for the players in this drama that have created support and reprieve for the narrator and her sister – the friends, the lovers, the communities found within theatre and school. I believe these players also help to build towards the externalization that happens in Part Three – that the narrator and sister find themselves through their ability to move outside of and beyond their family space, and by proxy, beyond the familial roles that they were assigned.

I see Part Four as largely a work-in-progress. While I think it achieves a good deal of what I'd like it to for the purposes of this thesis project, I see plenty room for further excavation and development. A large theme that I envision for Part Four is navigation. While there is literal navigation in "Ashland," I also want to explore how the narrator's parents have begun to move towards self-awareness, and how that self-awareness might inform a more complicated adult relationship with these two girls. While the current iteration of Part Four has a good deal of the mother's growth, I am also interested in portraying the ways in which the father has tried to become self-aware and repair and take ownership over the damage he's caused. I also believe that the characterization of Ginger in the memoir hasn't yet reached its full potential of complexity, and would like to create room for her character to have an empathetic understanding alongside her more unsavory traits.

Though writing *What We Can't Avoid* proved to be a painful, exhausting, and deeply personal experience, I am also beyond grateful for the ways my writing and own sense of emotional literacy has grown as a result. I have discovered a great love in the flash form, and I've come to appreciate the never-ending creative nonfiction journey of digging ever-deeper into that unreachable "why." I think more than anything else, this project has taught me about the

ways the structure and architecture of a project can do effective storytelling work, and how to not only create individual flash pieces that tell a story, but how to tell a story in the white space that exists in between each piece. I am very much looking forward to utilizing these formative and structural lessons as I undertake my next writing project.

PART ONE

Stains

Things my mother has used to remove stains: Shampoo, milk, dish soap, peanut butter, cheese whiz. Hairspray, toothpaste, bread, shaving cream. Soak until it relents. Wait.

Stains my mother has failed to remove: my sister's neon purple hair dye from all the bathroom towels. Ink bleeding into the rug from when I stepped on a pen. A splash of red wine on my father's white dress shirt at the Military ball. All followed by a feeble "sorry." Every time she hunched over the carpet, the tile, the wood, on her knees, scrubbing: "shit. shit. shit." Nobody tried to help. Her mouth cinched tight when she spotted a stain that refused to leave. Resentment creased into her forehead, her cheeks, in between her eyes, until permanent lines stained her face.

Stains I've tried to help my mother remove: a dot of blood on the bathroom rug after I got my first period. My father's thick boot prints when he leaves first for a year in Iraq, then for a year in Afghanistan, and finally for a woman named Ginger. My mother and I take turns, scrubbing our hands raw, until they are stained deep red. The kind that never leaves.

New Boyfriends

The fall of 2014 was when my mother and I started trying to make up for the dawning absence of men in our lives by getting boyfriends. Dad had already moved out of the house in a chaotic sweep of emotions that could only be looked at peripherally; and by the summer, my mother's father began to die.

We found out that my grandpa had stage 3 prostate cancer in August. I curled into my mother's weeping frame in her bed. The information felt as though it belonged to someone else. My grandparents lived a five-hour flight away on rural Wisconsin farmland. I could not see the cancer sticking itself to the inside of his body. This was Grandpa, Perfect Bobby, with his faded orange baseball cap and splotchy red face and wry grin. He drove his tractor and built birdhouses and tapped trees for maple syrup. He did not get sick. Our large Bernese mountain dog draped himself over our four feet. "We can call, we can visit," I said in between Mom's watery breaths.

In the last week of August, we talked to my grandparents every day. My mother and me in the kitchen on speaker phone, my sister Christine in Seattle via three-way-call. Grandma regularly emailed us medical updates on Perfect Bobby. *Bob had an appointment with his oncologist on Wednesday. His PSA dropped from 12 to 11. She was ecstatic.* When I started my freshman year of college in the fall, phone calls became once a week, and eventually whittled down to just me and my grandparents.

When they flew to Washington for Thanksgiving, each of us had brought someone for them to meet. My sister with her best friend from Seattle, me with my two friends from college, and my mother with her new boyfriend from Match.com.

My roommate, Emily, nibbled on Chex Mix and relentlessly teased me about how speechless I was when my grandparents asked about the boy I had just started seeing. I couldn't

tell them about the way he made me snort-laugh, or the way he kissed my face methodically (left cheek, right cheek, forehead, nose, lips, every time), so instead I bit my lip while Emily listed off characteristics like “really tall” and “blue eyes” and “loves puns” and “huge Broncos fan.” Beads of sweat crept down my neck.

My friend Navi, braiding and unbraiding her hair, came to my aid. “Cut her some slack, it’s her first relationship.”

Christine spent the evening tackling a 1000-piece puzzle, a family tradition, intermittently muttering a “damnit” or a triumphant “YAS.” After dinner she texted me from across the table, “Have you seen Mom and her boyfriend? They’ve just been cuddling on the couch all night...”

The football game was on. My mom hated football, but there she was, wrapped up in the arms of Mr. Match.com in front of the TV, while Christine’s friend Nic helped our grandparents with the dishes.

I texted back, “gross.” The man spoke a few unmemorable sentences to each of us, but he was mostly preoccupied with the game and with our mother.

“I mean, we barely talked to the guy.” The next morning Christine whisked the sugar around in her mug until coffee sloshed over the edge.

I had expected our grandmother, who always had a thoroughly-mulled opinion about everything, to find their exclusion distasteful, but she only sipped her black coffee. “When I think of how...unhappy she was after the divorce... For a while there, she was really really sad, and really *really* angry.” She ran a thumb over the rim of her mug. Her fingernails filed into perfect ovals. “I think it’s good for her to finally find some happiness.”

I kept nodding. I didn’t know much about Dan except that he was my mother’s second

boyfriend since the divorce (following Steve the photographer, a man the same age as my grandfather who broke up with my mom after he had a stroke and she offered to stay with him for a week to take care of him). When she found this one on Match.com, he was riding a motorcycle in his picture and my mom had thought he looked ridiculous. “*Definitely not my type,*” she’d said.

From the back of my grandma’s minivan driving past a Wisconsin cornfield, Christine nudged me. She tilted her head towards our mother in the adjacent backseat, who was staring intently at her phone and typing out a text message. Christine rolled her eyes and shook her head. I threw her a feeble half-frown. After finally growing out of the snotty, brace-faced thirteen/fourteen/fifteen-year-old who didn’t want to be there, who escaped to the sanctuary of her iPod and headphones on family trips, I was just glad that finally I wasn’t the one always on her phone.

Christine took the frown as approval to act. “Mom,” her sharp voice broke the easy rural silence.

She looked up, dazed.

“Could you not be on your phone right now?” The effort in her voice to be polite was audible. Vast white snowbanks blurred past the windows.

Mom looked confused, defensive. “Nobody’s talking.”

“I know,” she stretched the vowels the way she does when she’s lecturing her kindergarteners at day care. “But this is family time.”

Mom turned back to her phone, finished the text, and put her phone away before Christine could finish shooting me an exasperated look. Christine had a snotty

thirteen/fourteen/fifteen-year-old phase too, once, complete with the neon-hair-thick-eyeliner-facial-piercings expansion pack. She possessed a visible amount of satisfaction at being on the other end this time. The car filled with a thicker silence than before. Finally Grandma mentioned something about Aunt Leann's new job so as to justify the car ride as proper "family time."

On the farm, Grandpa let me and Christine drive the tractor – his "doo bopper" – around the fields. Our tire tracks left curvy mismatched patterns in the frosty December grass. He showed us his "man cave" (pronounced "may-uhn cayve," partly because the concept was hilarious to him, partly because he enjoyed mispronouncing words on purpose): a small shed where he liked to burn wood in a cast iron furnace, read thick history books, and now bike on his new elliptical, as recommended by the doctor. On a piece of scrap paper, Christine wrote "I love you, Grandpa! (2014)" and set it on his desk, where he would later frame it and keep out for the next three years. When we walked back to the farmhouse, his breathing was more labored, audible. His skin sagged and drooped off his increasingly visible bones.

I made a point of keeping my phone stashed away in my backpack for most of the trip. The only person I'd really be texting other than my best friend was Brandon. The first boy to ever like-like me, seeing his name pop up on my phone screen made my insides squirm in the good kind of way. I wanted to be a schoolgirl passing notes to her crush in class, sending texts with hearts and happy faces every three minutes. But I had a dying grandfather and regrettable years of passive indifference to make up for. The phone stayed in the front pocket of my backpack.

Our grandpa was an introverted guy – most days he would reach a socializing threshold and be contented with watching "the game," whatever it was that day, in his favorite recliner with a bottle of New Glarus brewed beer. When visiting, the routine was Grandma in the

matching recliner next to him; my sister and me on the brown corduroy couch (me with a YA book, Christine annotating her choral sheet music); Mom in the grey leather chair by the lamp with her whirring laptop, editing down the barrage family photos she had snapped that week. Today she had only her phone, for a few minutes, then quietly started to slip upstairs to the guest bedroom.

“Where are you going?” Christine asked pointedly.

Mom paused. “I’m gonna call Dan,” she said finally.

Christine made a face. “Okay.”

“What?” Sharp and accusatory. The kind of tone she’d use with teenage Christine instead of 20-year-old Christine.

Taking in a careful breath, Christine slowly said, “It’s just that I thought we were all spending time together, that’s all.”

Mom looked at the room, at her parents, then at me. “We’re not doing anything.” She pointed at the couch we were sitting on. “You’re not even watching the game, you’re doing your own things. Why is it so terrible to talk on the phone?”

“Spending time in the same room together is still spending time. Not running upstairs to talk to your boyfriend.”

My grandparents’ eyes were on the two of them. The chairs, the couch, seemed to root into the orange shag carpet that was swallowing the living room. I struggled to think of a way to diffuse the situation. “We just wanna spend time with you.”

Mom looked at me for a long time, as if to say, “you too?” before turning to go up the stairs. As Christine opened her mouth, Mom snapped, “I’m just going to tell him that I *apparently* can’t talk.”

She didn't come back downstairs for another forty-five minutes. The rest of the evening she dropped sulking hints that Mr. Match.com was mad at us for not supporting his girlfriend. "He gets lonely," she backtracked after seeing our faces. "It's the holidays and he doesn't have any family to be with." I mentally added "lonely" to the profile of the man on the motorcycle who drove us to the airport and bought us pancakes at IHOP.

The next morning, Grandma poured three cups of coffee while Mom showered. Perfect Bobby was still asleep. Christine launched into a tirade while Grandma slowly nodded.

"She's acting like a little kid! How is it that she's more immature than the actual teenager?"

I rotated my coffee mug in a circle on the linoleum tabletop. I spoke slowly. "Maybe she just doesn't realize that this is an important time to be here right now."

"Well, her dad is dying," Christine said. "She *should* know."

The shower water turned off. Grandma sipped her coffee. Christine bit her cheek. When our mom dressed and entered the room, silence. After the fact, we would all refer to that winter as the first warning signs of her relationship, of putting this man before her family. She would refer to it as the first time we ever gave her a reason to do so.

Her phone buzzed. The kitchen clock ticked.

Family Dinner (I)

My mother knows I don't like her boyfriend. I don't like the way he winks at me. I don't like the way he calls me "baby girl." Inside the cramped booth of the pub, his eyes are on me again. He has just finished his second pint. "I'm not the one who's controlling. If you want to know who's controlling, it's kids." The lines in his face grow thicker. "Kids are the ones who've got you wrapped around their little finger." He makes deliberate eye contact with my mother and holds up his pinky. My mother nods. "See," he leans in close to her. "Your kids are the ones who know exactly how to push your buttons, and they'll use that against you." The bulb over our booth casts a dull yellow light over everything. "Aren't I right, baby girl?" The peeling landscape painting on the wall hangs slightly off-center. A child at the next table is picking off a scab. "I think your mother's doing pretty great, don't you?" I do not mention that my mother has not spoken to my sister in seven months. I do not mention that I was kicked out of my mother's house two weeks ago, or how little she has said tonight, or the way his leathery hands edged towards my ass as he led me into the pub. "She's making real progress on selling the house, she's got a decent-running car. And this weight-loss thing we've been doing for her is working really well." I bite my cheek. Taste vinegar blood. "I mean, look at this." He reaches over and grabs her underneath the chin with his right hand. He shakes her head back and forth until her jowls wobble. "Look at how much of that is gone now."

Life Raft

The house needed to be sold. That was the ever-omnipresent fact hanging over us once the divorce was finalized. When their marriage ended, my mother weighed herself under the covers in a bed that was now twice as big. She came downstairs to eat, to get water, to feed the pets. But something in her whirled to life when the affair with Ginger exploded. A gear shifted and the slow, endless sinking was replaced by an unquenchable fury. She tore up the loose carpeting, ripped weeds out from the backyard, whipped a broom into dusty corners until packs of tiny hairy spiders fled the destruction of their homes.

When they divorced, Dad had the perfect life raft waiting for him to jump onto and escape. His girlfriend of over a year waiting for him, weightless without the early-marriage sacrifices that Army wives are expected to make. A house waiting for him, an extra space in Ginger's bed ready to be filled. His high-income job and high-paid divorce lawyer waiting to get him the best possible outcome when it came to settlements.

Eldest daughter building a new life in Seattle, youngest daughter building a raft to take her away to college, my mom was left with the pets and the graveyard of a four-person household. When Christine and I were kids, she saved everything: schoolwork, drawings, toys, piled high in mountains of boxes that conquered the garage. The first step was to sell the house and build a new home out of the remnants. But how could she dig through the trash of a life left behind to find anything salvageable? "Everything in this place reminds me of the past, and I just get mad and sad all over again," she tells me over the phone. "I'm drowning in broken things."

The Dog

My sister's modest five-person household in Seattle smells like weed (in the bathroom I google "is it bad for dogs to inhale marijuana smoke?"). Otto lies shakily in his dog bed by the door, his belly thick and bloated from the protruding tumor. Christine dutifully helps him walk out to the backyard every few minutes so that he can urinate — a small trickle of blood falls onto dead grass.

On his first night home, eight years ago, I had slept on the floor downstairs next to his crate, so that every time he cried — a soft, humorously high-pitched hooting sound — I could pull him in towards my stomach and rub his ears until he fell back asleep.

I curl my body around him now as he lies down and occasionally cries. Christine gently rubs his ears, and I finally decide it's time to bring up Mom.

"I've tried to reach out to her, Julia, she hasn't responded to my text and she won't answer my calls."

"I know, yeah. But maybe I should just call her anyway. I mean...it's Otto."

I see her bite the inside of her cheek. She nods. The phone rings twice before she picks up. My stomach still churns at the sound of her voice, last heard over a month ago, dark and bitter, when she promised that we would not speak or see each other again if I couldn't support her relationship with Dan.

"Um." Her voice is much quieter now. Weaker. "Thank you," she begins. Even though I know she's at work, not with him, she sounds scared. I tell her that she is welcome to come and see him anytime (I squeeze Christine's hand) to say goodbye. "I-I just," slow and shaky. "I kind of- already- I was ready- I made my peace when I was ready to give him away, so."

A kind of sinking, endless, settles itself into my stomach. I say “Okay” and try to sound understanding instead of sad. We say goodbye, I say “I love you,” and she hangs up.

#

We used to joke that Otto liked Mom the best because she gave him the most food, but it was obvious that she loved him more fiercely than any of us. Making sweet-potato puree and freezing it into dozens of hexagonal cubes for him to eat when his stomach was upset; darting around the backyard with a roll of toilet paper every morning to pick up his poop; taking him on walks through Watershed Park several times a week and letting him splash through the river so that he always came home smelling of salt and stale musk. She would take him everywhere — her job at the church, grocery shopping, the dentist. He followed her all over the house. When she watched TV on the couch, he would lumber his huge body up next to her, head slumped into her lap, and she would absent-mindedly rub his ears, for hours.

“We’re all alone here,” she told me when I came home for Thanksgiving. The two of them, mother and dog, moved slowly and silently in this big, empty house that she was left to deal with. In less than two years she had lost two daughters to college and one husband to a mistress and a divorce. “I can’t do *anything*. It feels like someone cut my arms off.”

Dating Dan introduced a considerable change. Whenever my mom wasn’t at work, she would be at Dan’s house. When I came home from school in the summer, in the rare instances that I saw her, she was in an energized cleaning rampage, ranting about how it was *high time to sell this old house*.

Dan’s nickname for Otto was “furball,” followed by a gruff scratch behind the ears. His nickname for me was “baby girl,” with what I imagine was supposed to be a charming wink. My mother’s nickname was simply “girl,” used mainly when “teasing” her about how she didn’t

know how to fix cars, didn't understand the language divorce attorneys used, or how she would pause to think for a moment before answering his questions. "Out with it, girl," (always with the amiable half smile, a ruffle of her hair).

In her absence, Otto did little except lie on the cool kitchen tile or sit in the grass outside. Even when I took him on walks, halfway around the neighborhood he would slump down onto the sidewalk and stare up at me with his large watery eyes. In the evenings he would sit in her library and stare out the big window, softly hooting until she came home.

We thought it would get better once the house was sold, but they never seemed to get to that part. Dan kept finding things to fix: paint stains on the woodwork, overgrown grass in the backyard, patches of peeled wallpaper. He made a point of reminding our mom that Christine and me contributed to a lot of that wear and tear, but where were we? This became an especially popular point when we tried to convince her that he was controlling ("Why are you taking a picture of your food?" / "Dan likes to know. He's helping me lose weight.").

Last summer I cried in the bathroom in between meetings at my job because my mom called and told me she was giving Otto away. "He's just...he's so sad." She was sniffing. I wondered how many times that week she had been crying over this. "I spend too much time at work to take care of him the way I should." I didn't mention that she only works four days a week from 10-3, or that she only comes home from Dan's two nights a week at best. She had contacted an old retired couple to come and take him. I begged her to please wait until at least the weekend so I could make the time to drive to Washington and see him.

That same night Christine called me with that determined fire in her voice that only she has. She asked me if I had talked to Mom, I said yes, and she said "yeah, there is no way in

hell that is happening.” She said Otto was a family dog, and Mom couldn’t make this decision without consulting all of us. She had talked with Mom and convinced her to let Otto stay with her in Seattle, that way if he’s ‘adopted’ he can at least stay inside the family.

The next day I got a call from my mom. I shouldn’t make the trip to say goodbye. The couple was coming to pick him up tomorrow morning, and there just wouldn’t be time in her schedule for me to visit him. “Please don’t fight me on this.” With a watery voice I told her “Okay.” I hung up.

I called Christine. “She’s giving him away tomorrow. I don’t know what to do.”

“That’s impossible, she said she’d give him a chance to live with me first.”

“She lied.”

Christine made plans to go on a self-proclaimed rescue mission to keep our mom from giving him away. Knees hugged to my chest, crouched at the corner of my bed, I listened to Christine speaking frantic and fast on the phone the next morning. Our dad was three-way-called in. Christine came to Mom’s house. It was expectedly empty (save for Otto). She called, sent a text, and left a note explaining that she didn’t want people to take Otto away and so he would be staying with her, just until the four of us came to a decision “as a family,” all to no reply.

She called when Christine was speeding down I-5 with a large dog in the backseat. She demanded that Christine bring him back right now. Christine refused. There was muttering on the other end. Dan. (Of course Dan. The man was furious when she made a decision without consulting him first. She wasn’t allowed to use her phone at his house.) Our mom threatened to call the cops if she didn’t bring the dog back. A few minutes later Christine was crying frantically while an officer on the phone threatened to press charges for theft if she didn’t return this woman’s dog. “He’s a family dog,” she argued. Then she said it wasn’t safe to talk on the

phone while driving and she hung up.

Our dad was prepared to get their divorce lawyers involved. “Otto isn’t mentioned in the division of property, but we can classify it as a civil dispute, they can’t arrest you.”

For days after I held my breath, waiting for everything to explode, but we never heard back from Mom. She never tried to take Otto back from Christine. He spent his last nine months at Christine’s house.

Eight years ago, our family of four drove to a dog breeder in rural eastern Washington. Our dad, eccentric over the new addition to our “family unit,” had spared no expense. We weren’t going to get just any old dog from the pound — only the best for his family. In this case the best meant giving an exorbitant amount of money to a breeder of Bernese Mountain Dogs, who, before the litter was born, made each family take an extensive personality quiz so that she could match each family to the perfect puppy. “She’s gonna give us the fat one, isn’t she,” my sister said dryly from the backseat.

She gave us the fat one. Plump and small, with stubby brown legs, oversized white paws, and little patches of brown fur arched over his giant eyes so that he appeared constantly quizzical. She plopped him down in front of the four of us — a black-white-brown puffball the size of a football.

As part of his puppy training, he was supposed to lick peanut butter off our fingers, and we were supposed to squeeze his nose every time he bit us. Only he didn’t bite once — he went cross-eyed with concentration, gingerly scooping up the peanut butter with his tongue and huge slobbery lips. “Soft puppy lips” my mom would coo every time she let him eat food out of her hand (after nearly every meal, something which the three of us — especially Christine —

continuously chastised her about). “He likes it,” she insisted, as his now football-sized head disappeared into a large bowl of spaghetti remains.

When my parents got divorced, it was obvious who would get to keep him. “He’s always been her dog, really,” my dad had said.

When he’s finally put down, I’m not there. I don’t want to be. I don’t want to see it happen. Christine tells me that he wasn’t scared when the nurse approached him with the needle. Didn’t even bother raising his head. He was so tired. Brown eyes wet and red. His soft hoots replaced by heavy beleaguered breaths.

In my room, on my nightstand, there’s a small Bernese mountain dog pin with angel wings and a little halo. The last time I saw my mom, two weeks ago at my cousin’s wedding (talking like estranged friends running into each other at the super market), she gave the pin to me. “Someone just left it on my doorstep with an unsigned ‘sympathies’ card. After everyone found out what happened, I mean. I don’t think it’s someone close or anything. They addressed it to ‘Mike and Beth Oshiki,’ isn’t that weird?” She’s not teary or weepy. Her face is hard-lined. Tight. Her gaze is locked on something beyond my face, somewhere intangible. She holds the pin out to me. “Anyway, do you want it?”

Epidural

The first time she had a child, my mother wanted it to be a natural birth. Christine came out screaming with a full head of thick black hair, ripping seams and leaving my mother with the notion that anyone who thinks *that* experience is somehow more beautiful than the pain is full of shit.

When the second one came, she and her husband rushed to the hospital, my mother panting in labor. The nurses assured her that it wasn't time yet, at least another few days, and that she ought to go back home and get some rest. In the car on the way home, she had another contraction and forced my father to drive them back. When the doctor finally realized that she had been right, she said through gritted teeth, "give me the drugs."

She wasn't prepared, however, for the visceral image of receiving an injection through the spine. Terrified of the threat of paralysis, of the sensation of needle pushing through vertebrae, she pressed her forehead to her husband's, eyes squeezed shut. He cupped his hands over hers, running a thumb over her knuckles. While they administered the epidural, he described the baby that was on her way. "Julia will have big beautiful eyes, and tiny soft hands, and the most beautiful laugh..." She felt his hands, his safe, doctor hands, wipe the sweat from her face, and it was over. She gave birth numb, relieved.

When they took the baby away to make sure she was okay, my mom was inconsolable. Despite my father and the nurses repeating that they were just cleaning me up, that I would be back soon, she couldn't stop crying. When they finally brought me back to her, swaddled in crisp white cloth, she soaked my tiny blonde hairs in tears. I didn't cry, only small delicate grunts. My mother heaved herself forward and back, rocking me, softly murmuring "I know, I know." I looked so upset, so *angry*. Of course, she thought, after squeezing through all that. Your poor

little distressed skull.

The Breakup

The tile on my kitchen floor used to be white. Over time, spills, and stains, each little hexagon is now browned at the edges. The once pristine eggshell has faded to a gray, almost yellow. Spoiled milk. Thick lines of grout and dirt frame the tiles, forming a spider web over them.

The last conversation my mom and I had in 2016 was in the car in December, after dinner with Dan. I didn't talk back, I didn't make faces or say anything to provoke him. I smiled and nodded politely when he said that I'd better get a boyfriend so that I don't get screwed over by my car mechanic. And when he said that my mom was lucky to have him around because she didn't know squat about the real estate market or how to keep the house. And when he made comments about how thank god that *somebody* was there to help her out.

The tires hummed against the road as streetlight after streetlight bathed my mother and me in yellow and back into darkness. I was waiting for a good time to bring it up while she was away from Dan, but we were almost to the house I was staying at, so either I had missed my chance or there would never be a good time to bring it up. Except for right now. "Have you talked to Christine at all? Since June?"

Lips pursed. "Um. No."

I nodded, slowly. "Okay." The brakes groaned at the stop sign. *I think it might be a good idea for you to give her a call. I know that she's tried to call you several times. I know that you miss her, too. I don't have a solution.*

The car halted to a stop, jerking us both forward and back. She turned to face me and stared. "It was really shitty, what your sister did." She hit the accelerator. "Really. Shitty."

I nodded. “Yeah. It was.” *It’s just that you were about to give Otto away. She panicked. I’m not saying she handled it in the right way, but none of us knew what to do. You lied to us and we thought we’d never see him again.*

“Yes.” Short, with a hard “s.” At the next stoplight, she pulled a folder out from the glove box and handed it to me, eyes set on the road. Jaw locked. “This is the contract that your father and I signed when we bought Otto. Legally. Binding.” I turned the page. A few sentences were highlighted in yellow. “One of the stipulations says that if your dad and I don’t want the dog anymore, we have to give it to a family that has been approved by the breeder. It’s a \$6000 fine if any part of the contract is broken. And I know you think that Otto is a family dog, but Christine didn’t sign the contract, so legally she shouldn’t have him.”

Was she going to sue Christine? Dad? I bit my lip. “I know it’s not exactly my place, but I really think you should talk to Christine about this.”

Her gaze shot back towards me. “Do you not understand what happened?” Her voice was slow and loud. “*She* came in and took Otto. *Without* my permission. She just *took him*. She came into my *home*.”

“She tried to call y—”

“She violated my privacy! I had to get the locks changed after that.”

I stayed quiet. Then, under my breath, “I knew this would happen.”

A slow inhale. Knuckles white on the steering wheel. “I don’t know why you make this so. Fucking. Hard.”

“I—” I snapped my mouth shut to stop myself. *I’m not the one making this hard. Why do you let him police everything you do? What happened?* Deep breath. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry that we never helped out more. I’m really sorry that it’s like this.”

The silence remained thick when we entered the neighborhood. The brakes creaked again. I looked at my mom. “I don’t want to leave like this.” Back to school for another semester, I wouldn’t see her until spring break. I lightly put a hand on her shoulder. “I love you.”

She stared forward. Then, “you too.”

“Okay.” I got out of the car and waited until I was inside before I let the hot tears betray me. The headlights grew smaller and dimmer, and the street was black again.

Two weeks later, my mom calls.

I answer, “Hello?”

“Hi.” Brusque and determined.

“Is everything okay?”

“Well. Um. No. We need to talk.”

My stomach starts dropping like an elevator. “Okay. What’s going on?”

I hear her take a deep breath. “The way you girls have treated Dan is really unfair and really shitty. When your dad divorced me, *no one* was there to help, alright? No one. Do you have any idea how insanely helpful Dan has been? God, and just from the very beginning you have been unsupportive. No. You don’t get to be unsupportive of someone who has been so helpful to me when no one else was there. I know you say he’s controlling, but I don’t think you understand how much he’s done. I wouldn’t have been able to keep the house without him helping me with the legal stuff. Your dad’s lawyer is really squirrely and nasty, Dan really saved me from getting screwed over on a lot of stuff. And he’s been here to help fix the house up. I don’t feel pain anymore. I’ve lost so much weight. That’s all Dan. And for you to *still* be so rude to him and so unaccepting after all that, that’s just –no.”

“I don’t—” My brain works to piece her words together. “I don’t think I’ve been rude to Dan. I haven’t shown him any disrespect or anything.”

“He knows. He can tell.”

I take a deep breath. Choose my words carefully. “I understand that Dan has been extremely helpful, and because Christine and I are away in college, he’s been able to help with things that we can’t help you with. I get that. I don’t think that Dan is a horrible person. But also, I hope you realize that *you* are also part of the reason that you’re doing so well. It’s not all him. And what worries me is that I think he’s making you believe that it’s all him.”

“I wouldn’t be able to do any of this without him. I wasn’t getting the support I needed before. And you not supporting this relationship? That’s really disrespectful. That is so disrespectful to everything that he has done.”

“I just...” *He’s been so shitty to you! How many times has he sent you home in tears?* Exhale. “I don’t like that you’re not allowed to use your phone at his place, or the way he’s isolated you from your family.” *You haven’t visited your dying father in the last two years because “Dan doesn’t want to be left alone.”*

“He’s not the only one forcing me to pick sides, you know. Do you know how stressful it is trying to split my time between him and you?”

“I...” *I hate him. I hate him and I hate that you think you need him.* Choose carefully. “I’m sorry. I know that puts you in a really tough spot. And I don’t want you to feel like you have to choose. But you have to understand that being around Dan makes me really uncomfortable. And I feel so awful about myself after talking to him. And I want to be supportive, but there’s only so much time around him that I can take.”

She’s quiet for a long time. I can see her standing in her home. Feet planted. Left arm

gripped over the right. “Okay...” I imagine Dan, with his tool belt and leathery hands, moving around her house, replacing the broken radiator, tearing out peeled wallpaper. “But you and Christine are somehow magically fine around Ginger now? She had an *affair*. What she did was way worse than anything Dan has done. And that is not fair.”

This is a point I expect her to make. “I understand. But Ginger put in a lot of effort in order for us to like her. And it was not an easy process, it took a really long time. When my car wasn’t working, she took time out of her day to help me take it to her mechanic, no questions asked. She kept her distance when she knew that Christine and I needed distance, and she didn’t try to force anything too quickly. And also we thought we were going to lose our dad. Ginger was something we had to get used to if we wanted to keep him in our lives. And he’s paying for our school. That puts us in a really hard position.” I pace around my bedroom, toes sinking into the carpet, and wander into the kitchen. My fist tugs at the roots of my hair. “But from day one, ever since that trip to Wisconsin, Dan has been unsupportive of you spending time with family. And he controls a lot of your decisions and he makes you cry a lot and it’s great that he’s been helpful but he’s made Christine and me into the bad guy and we’re not the bad guy and I hate that he makes it seem like we are just because we’re not there helping because we’re in school.” I can hear myself getting faster and my eyes are watering, so I stop there.

Silence. “It is not. Fair.” I hear her take another breath. Some indiscernible noise in the background. I can hear Dan’s voice. For a minute I think she’s speaking louder, to make sure that he can hear what she’s telling me. “And if you can’t be supportive of this relationship, and you keep putting me in this spot where I have to choose, I’m gonna choose the relationship that’s good for me.”

I open my mouth. No sound comes out. Then, quietly, “Mom...” Another breath.

Shaky. “I’m not trying to make you choose, but you just have to understand that it’s really hard for me to be around him. I just—I can only take so much.”

“Okay. But you are still putting me in that position. I can’t be forced to choose like this. I just— I’m gonna choose him. I have to. He does so. Much for me. I really need him. And if that makes things between us too difficult, then maybe we need to not have a relationship. Until that’s no longer the case. No texting or calling or visiting.”

My ribcage heaves. I try to contain the sobbing. *Quit being so dramatic.* My cheeks are hot and wet. “I know this puts you in a tough situation. And I hate that you feel like you have to choose.” I struggle to keep my voice level, lower it to keep from sounding high-pitched and pathetic. *But why can’t you choose me?* “But I can’t change how uncomfortable he makes me. I wish I could, but I just can’t.” When I take another breath, I can’t keep it from hiccupping. I take a few more until it slows down again. “But this is not my fault.” For the first time, my voice is strong. “I know you don’t believe that, I know you think I’m making you do this, but I need to take care of myself. And that is not my fault.”

“Right. And I’m choosing to take care of myself too.” Her voice is softer now. More kind. More sad. “This is just what I have to do right now.”

The wall breaks down, and so do I. I try to find something to say in between childish sobs, but I can’t think of anything except “okay.”

“Okay.” I can hear her resolve. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The phone clicks. I sink to the floor. Kitchen tile cool against burning skin. The refrigerator hums in a rhythm with my crumpled breathing. A spider web of tile cradles my ball of a body, eyelashes kiss the grout. Tiny puddles pool into their soft grooves. Caked dirt floats to

the top, ebbs toward my cheek. I can see the infinitesimal flecks of soil and dead skin cells. The blow of my breath disperses them, abandoned debris, drifting further and further apart.

Pseudo-Mother

I want to collapse into my mother's arms, a pair of warm large hands to rub my back and speak in cool, soothing tones. Instead, I imagine myself five, maybe ten years from now. A grown-up. Older, graceful, she has it all figured out. She sits on my bed and rubs my back. "Shh," she says. "Everything will be okay. You are doing so much. You are going to do so much. Everything will be okay." I imagine myself sobbing into her chest as she rocks me back and forth, a pseudo-mother. A substitute for the woman who does not want me.

Before the Divorce

She used to go shopping at thrift shops. “The Cheap Store,” as I called it when I was little, because she explained it to me as a place where people give away the stuff they don’t want anymore, and you can buy it for a cheaper price. I remembered it as the place where I got the cool toys that weren’t on any of the commercials because they’d stopped selling them. During most of my childhood my mom impulsively bought things she knew she didn’t need or wouldn’t use. Little trinkets – tiny ceramic houses, blue metal frogs with plastic emeralds for eyes, teapots with watercolor paintings of cats on them. “You never know what you might find. You have to do some looking, but eventually you find something really *awesome*.”

She listened to the BeeGees. She would bop around and sing along when cleaning the house, turn her stereo up so loud that you could hear from every room.

She would send long letters to her parents. She did this a lot in her mid-twenties when Dad was away at med school, trying to find ways to occupy the time that she didn’t want to spend missing him. Once he became a doctor, she continued the tradition, and filled her letters with stories about me and my sister. “Julia said the funniest thing today. She said, ‘Mommy, did you know that we are manimals?’ Yes, *manimals*.” Some of the letters are still stuck up on my grandparent’s refrigerator, parents proudly displaying their child’s work.

She got caught up in TV dramas. *The Tudors* was one of her favorites. The two of us huddled under the covers of her bed when I was in middle school, snickering about how you have to pronounce it with an English accent, “tyew-dahs,” otherwise it sounds like a piggish term for breasts, i.e. “hey, nice *tooders* lady!”

She read *Lord of the Rings* over and over, had passages underlined and annotated. Joined chat groups and took online classes analyzing all of Tolkien’s works. Listened to podcasts and

lectures in the car, or while she cleaned, or while she made coffee in the morning. (Later, when I went away to college, she would ask me so many questions about my English classes over the phone. “Tell me more about your King Arthur class. What are you reading? Let me know when you get to Chaucer!”).

She took photos. So many photos. Before we got a dog, her digital camera was the one thing that would never leave her side. She spent her late thirties and early forties snapping hundreds of the same shot, because “you never know which little detail is gonna make one picture better than the other,” and at the end of the day put a movie on in the background and go through each photo, deleting the duplicates, narrowing it down to the best ones, and editing the *very* best ones from that bunch. Several years in a row our extended family received CDs and USB drives full of photos that summarized a year for the Oshikis.

She made scrapbooks of our life as a family – mostly photos of me and Christine. Each page would be devoted to a specific category: “Day at the Beach” “First Day of School” “School Performances” “Julia’s Fashion Show” “New Pets” “Trip to D.C.” Each photo had a carefully cut out border of nice thick cardstock, with a mini blurb giving the context. “Julia and Christine loved going to the beach and splashing in the waves (Top right). Barbie and her friends enjoyed getting some sun, too! (Bottom left)”

She crafted a lot. Sculpey clay was her favorite. There was a large blue plastic bin in our laundry room that had mountains and mountains of packaged clay, two books of clay craft ideas, little tools like shaping knives and small rolling pins, and a box full of her completed projects – ornaments, earrings, necklaces, pins, and brooches. She especially loved to make mini food. Tiny sushi rolls with tiny chopsticks, tiny pastel pink cupcakes, tiny roast turkey, tiny cinnamon buns, tiny peppermint candies, all the same color and texture as the real thing.

She went in and out of baking phases. First, in her early thirties, it was bread. When Christine and I came home from elementary school, the house always smelled like fresh baked bread. She told us that was part of the reason she loved making it so much, it made the house smell so comforting and warm. Most of the time she would just give the bread away to friends or neighbors or the church, she made too much for the four of us to eat before it went stale. Then it was hummus, to go with the bread, and the house smelled like garlic and there was the on and off whirring of the food processor pureeing the ingredients. After hummus was biscotti. Some filled with walnuts, some filled with berries, some lemon-flavored, some dipped in chocolate. They were a popular Christmas/birthday/just-because gift for about a year or so. In her forties it was jam, stacks and stacks of glass jars sitting on the counter, cartons of straw/blue/blackberries or peaches or plums in the fridge, always a giant pot of viscous red/orange/purple liquid boiling on the stove, and the multicolored, oval-shaped stickers decorating the jar lids in her cramped careful handwriting. Even after giving most of it away or sending it to relatives, we didn't run out of jam for years, always sitting in the white plastic basket on the second shelf of the fridge.

After the divorce, when she was in an anger-fueled drive to rebuild her life, I asked her why she stopped baking and crafting and reading. Why abandon what had made her so happy?

Before the marriage, she was a communications major in college. Snickering in her dorm, she and her friends co-authored a satirical romance novel – busts heaving out of corsets, angst-filled stares in the rain, the works. They fed the pieces of beer-stained notebook paper up to the window above theirs on a paperclipped fishing line as a joke. To their surprise, new pages soon coasted back down the fishing line – the strangers had continued their story, and the two

dorms spent the rest of the night trading chapters, alternating echoes of raucous laughter pouring from each window. She and her friends never found the identity of the ghost-writers from upstairs, but she spent the remainder of college covertly peering at random strangers, *was it you?*

When she was twenty, studied abroad for a year in England. Her classes were in Kenilworth, so every morning on her walk from the dorms she would take the long way and meander through the crumbling caramel-colored ruins of Kenilworth Castle. She loved living in rural England because it reminded her of her dad's farm in Wisconsin. Her favorite place (aside from the British Library – what could compete with the *original draft* of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?) was a small pasture a few miles out. She was perfectly happy to spend the day laying in the long wisps of grass near a snoozing cow or a grazing sheep, *Anne of Green Gables* in tow.

After the wedding, she followed her husband's job to El Paso, Texas. Always hot, always dusty, never green. Two clueless twenty-somethings, they shared a cookie-cutter neighborhood with other military couples. The wives of these army officers spent their time organizing socials, trading recipes, and holding support groups for when their husbands were away in combat. She went to grad school for literature and wrote a creative nonfiction essay about the vast loneliness that ate at her while her husband was deployed in Saudi Arabia. How he wouldn't embrace her before he left because he was in front of his superiors; how the army wives seemed aimless and grasping in their support; how she took comfort in the presence of her sturdy Rottweiler, Schatze; how she wasn't sure, between wife and dog, whether there would be enough room for her husband's body in their queen-sized bed when he returned.

She joined a book club hosted by some of the army wives, where they usually read something recommended by Oprah. On the side, she started reading self-help books on

depression. She searched for ways to fill the voids of time while her husband was away or at work. Stuck in a town she despised, far from her parents, from her real friends from college. Eventually she tried out some of the recipes recommended by one of the neighboring wives. Homemade bread.

After the divorce, she gutted the house of its memories to make room for new ones. When I asked her why she stopped baking and crafting and reading, she said those were luxuries that she couldn't afford anymore. Ceramic clanked together as she tossed the bread pans, the glass jars, the clay tools into a plastic bin to donate to the thrift store.

De-pristining

In January of 2019, I took some vacation time and drove back to Washington State to my mom for a few days. I stayed in my old bedroom, now stripped of its rainbow splatter-paint walls and coated a pristine white, completely empty except for a queen-sized bed, a lamp, and 2 dollhouses hiding in the closet. We were driving home from the movies. We had just seen *Incredibles 2*, and Mom was grinning behind the wheel as I emphatically analyzed the writing and characters and themes from the movie. She said that she liked that one woman, the one who eventually became the villain, with the messy pixie-cut hair and drooping eyes loosely holding a whiskey on the rocks. Mom's phone started playing a lilting, classical melody, and Dan's name flashed onto the screen. They were currently "off-again," and Dan had already decided that he wanted her back, after kicking her out of his house the week prior. "He's not worth your time," I told her. "Why let him ruin your day?"

When we got home, I locked the front door behind us (a habit I knew my mom had taken on since *The Otto Thing*). Mom stood at the kitchen island anxiously staring at her phone. Dan had now called three times, to no answer. I held her hand and tried to think of funny things I could say to distract her. Instead, I said "today's been really nice."

Then someone knocked on the door. "Beth?" Dan. Mom's eyes widened and she stared at me. I mouthed "don't answer it." At the beginning of my visit, my mom laid out the fight that went down (he got mad because she messed up his oatmeal), and announced her determination to let this be it – she wasn't going to go back to him. He was still knocking as we stood at the kitchen island. He had to go away eventually, right?

"Come on, Beth, open the door."

We heard the knob turn, followed by the dull thud of wood hitting the deadbolt. Then the

click of a key turning. And Dan was in the house.

He'd shaved his salt-and-pepper stubble since I had last seen him, but he had the same leathery hands, the same brown work boots that now clunked their way slowly into the kitchen.

"Why didn't you pick up your phone?"

Mom stared at him for a long time. Her eyes were wide and watery, and I couldn't tell whether she was more afraid or angry. "Why did you do that?"

"What?"

"Why did you unlock the door and walk in. You knew I didn't want to see you."

"You weren't answering your phone. I just want to talk." He turned to me and lifted his eyebrows expectantly. "Can you please let us talk?" He looked back at Mom. "I understand," gesturing a hand towards me "this is an important girl time visit, and I know how great that is. But let's just talk about this."

I wanted to make sound, anything, come out, but my throat constricted, so instead I held my breath and watched.

Mom was still looking at him with her wide eyes. "That was really not okay. That was not okay, what you just did."

I stood there while Dan tried to convince her to just get a drink with him, "let's just sit down and talk." I stood there while Mom battled between speechlessness and trying to hold her own without giving Dan what he wanted. Finally, he tried to appeal to me.

He looked at me, as if to say, "come on," and I felt my stomach churn and shrivel. He said, "You know that I'm only trying to take care of her right?"

I chose my words carefully. I nodded. "I know, I know you care about her a lot, that's so clear in how much you've helped her the last few years." I took a breath to keep my voice from

shaking. “But I have also seen my mother come home in tears, multiple times. And I’ve seen her get small. And she deserves to have friends, and I don’t like that she seems so afraid.” Mom nodded.

Most of the rest only comes to me in broad strokes. I remember thinking to myself, “he used to be an attorney, don’t give him anything to fight you on.” I remember holding myself back from telling him what a destructive force he had been on our family’s lives, all the damage he’d done, and instead trying to give reasons for why my mom deserved to be happy. I remember Mom holding back tears and struggling to find words to Dan’s rhetorical questions and his pressing her to admit that she needed him. I remember Dan kept trying to get me to leave, and I remember saying, “if Mom wants me to leave then I will, but I want to be here for her if she doesn’t,” and I remember Mom looking at me and nodding. I remember feeling my skin rust over as I watched Dan slowly manipulate my mother, laying out everything that he’d done for her over the years, and did he deserve to be treated this way? Wasn’t her life so much better now? Remember when she almost lost the house in the divorce? And where were they standing right now? I remember my mom only being able to produce a tiny, “yes. Yes. Yes.”

The last time Dan asked me to leave, Mom looked at me and quietly said, “can you please go upstairs?” In my old bedroom, I sat on the floor and clutched the carpet between my fingernails and tried to breathe in between panicked sobs. After the fact, I remember my mom telling me she was impressed with how calm I was. I remember feeling like the world was floating away from me, like I was watching a car crash in slow motion, watching her go back to him, and eventually knock on my bedroom door to tell me that she was going to sleep at Dan’s tonight.

Sick

For the last six or seven years of her marriage, my mother was convinced that she had Lupus, or at least something in the same vein as Lupus. She knew that she had muscle aches all over her body and that there were too many mornings when she couldn't get out of bed for it to be nothing. The doctors my dad worked with were reluctant to label it as Lupus, suggested hypochondria, but ultimately landed on something along the lines of fibromyalgia, a chronic muscle pain disorder. Dad was convinced that taking the right medicine could solve just about anything. So through middle school and high school, I would spend the mornings sitting on my parents' bed chatting with my mom while she took out a large cardboard box filled with dozens of bottles of pills and load her multicolored day-of-the-week pill containers with the proper combination of medication to make the pain go away.

My sister and I were unfamiliar with how to support our mother's daily discomfort, offering clumsy sympathy rubs on her arm or her back. We tried to be as soothing as she had been when we were kids. Soft touch, push back the hair, kiss the forehead. But even with all her soft grunts of pain or scrunched up wincing with movement, a certain level of disbelief was maintained by the doctors, my father included. He grew impatient with how long it took her to get out of the car, to climb the stairs. How she couldn't get through a conversation without mentioning her discomfort. She was taking the pills, the doctors had done everything they could, so why all the fuss? Eventually my sister and I grew impatient too, and began to follow suit with our father's mindset. "I don't know if it sounds mean, but do you think maybe she just needs to have a healthier lifestyle?" Christine asked once. But we ate all the same food that she did, and we weren't experiencing anywhere near the amount of pain that she had. But the doctors said that she was overweight. She would start a lot of sentences with "if I weren't so *fat*," only half-

joking.

She didn't start to lose weight until Dan came into the picture. Dan was all about projects: win the house in the divorce settlement. Get the house spruced up and sold. Understand the real estate market. Learn how to fix a car and haggle with the mechanic. Lose the weight.

When I came back after studying abroad in December of 2016, about a year after she started seeing Dan, the pounds had melted away. She was wearing those tight jeans that she always wished she could wear. She excitedly demonstrated that she could tighten her belt to the *third loop*, when before she never even wore belts. She sent Dan a photo of her salad from the Chinese restaurant because he liked to know what she ate so he could hold her accountable for it.

"I don't feel pain anymore," she said after looking at me for a long time, after I tried and failed not to suck in my cheeks at the mention of Dan and his extensive knowledge. "All those body aches and the exhaustion that I used to feel *all the freakin' time*? They're gone. And I don't need all those pain meds anymore. Just vitamins."

Six months later, in the summer of 2017, Mom almost missed my sister's college graduation voice recital, because of a bladder infection that a week later we found out was kidney stones. Christine wasn't sure if she even wanted her there, not having spoken to her in over a year. Dan insisted that it was important for her to be there and drove her up himself. Christine had a panic attack in the bathroom before her performance. Afterwards, she wordlessly walked up to Mom and hugged her for several minutes, finally breaking the silence with "I love you."

Two months after that, in the fall of 2017, while helping Dan take his son back home across the country, driving all night without stopping, my mom had a grand mal seizure. And then a second seizure a week and a half after that. Once she was out of the hospital and unable to

drive for the next six months, Dan came to the rescue and drove her wherever she needed to go within his reason – her job at the church, Costco, the hospital for doctor’s appointments.

She still received treatment from the doctors at my dad’s old military base (one of the benefits she was entitled to after the divorce). Because the doctors had waited for things to go from bad to worse before doing anything about her kidney situation, she was distrustful and terrified for the kidney stone removal surgery. It was supposed to be a simple procedure – just a couple hours.

It did not go as planned. Something went wrong. A two hour surgery turned into ten hours. Mom was in the recovery wing of the hospital. She would be there for the next couple of days. There was a tube attached to her kidney, coming out of her back, that fed into a small plastic bag hanging at her waist. The doctors taught Dan how to change it and dress the wound where the tube was so that it wouldn’t get infected. Change every four hours.

On the phone, her voice was small and pained. The two of us were a broken record of “I love you so much.” I wanted to take time off school and work to drive and see her, but she and Dan insisted that I stay put, the roads were too icy.

A couple days later, on her first night out of the hospital, she sent me walls of texts.

Hello, oh artsy and most psychologically genius daughter. I think I will take you up on your suggestion to write as a relief/release comfort therapy exercise. I will spill out bile and putridness to purge it from my soul. In the last few days I have thought of you and laughed – and then swore about how much laughing hurt my belly. I laughed remembering you when you were in kindergarten and you had your tonsils and adenoids out.

You were sitting on Dad’s lap and you already had the surgery shower cap on your head,

and they made you drink this pre anesthesia drug to get you really chill and floppy. You drank it, then you cried and yelled in outrage, “That tasted like....MELTED SQUASH!!!”

You had such a pissed off and horrified look on your face that we all kind of thought, “God that is adorable as hell – poor baby.”

ANYWAY!! Now I keep thinking of you and saying to myself, “That tasted like...MELTED SQUASH!!!”

Dan and I are home from the hospital and they are so fucking stingy with the pain medications that I want to do violence and scream in self-pitying outrage at the same time. And Dan is so tired from taking care of me and nobody could have been more dedicated to it. I definitely don’t want to make him the target of my ire.

When it hurts to breath I want to cry. I feel so scared because we can’t avoid breathing, and there’s no way to get out of it. Tonight we were watching Blade Runner and Dan fell asleep right away. It was such a MEAN movie. So violent and people being shitty to other people – I couldn’t take it and just started to cry. Now I just got more drugs and shut off the fucking horror dystopia movie and am now listening to Stephen Fry read the complete Sherlock Holmes on Audible. Whew.

One more grey text bubble shot up:

MELTED SQUASH!!!!!!!!!!

Immediately I called my mom and we talked for hours, each curled in balls in different

beds, Salem and Olympia. She could only speak in a whisper – Dan had been taking care of her all day and was finally asleep, she couldn't get out of bed but didn't want to wake him up.

Despite all the times he had convinced her that Christine and I didn't belong in her life, despite all of the times that he had sent her home in tears, all of the times he made offhanded jokes about how airheaded and clueless our mother was, he was there. He was there when we had family in Wisconsin and Oregon and Seattle that couldn't fly there, couldn't drive on the increasingly icy roads. He stayed in the hospital for the ten-hour surgery, slept in one of the plastic waiting room chairs, caressed her face and held her hand during all the painful parts.

“The way he touches me, when they're sticking these giant needles of morphine into me,” her voice is quiet and delicate. “He'll rub my hair and my face, just like I'm a dog. Like really soft and gentle. He's so loving and sweet and affectionate.”

When I had come to Olympia to visit her a couple days before the surgery, Dan bought us lunch and then left us alone on our gray living room sofa for the rest of the evening, no questions asked. It had been his idea for us to catch up at Mom's house, even though she essentially lived at his place. He thought I would be more comfortable on my own turf, in the house I grew up in. He came back to say goodbye to me before I left, dropping little phrases like “hold onto this. This is so important. The relationship between you girls is so great.” Was it forced? Absolutely. But it was becoming easier to believe that he wanted us to be okay. The man had to spend nearly every minute of every day taking care of her; helping her walk, driving her around, helping her to the toilet and in and out of the shower, up and down the stairs of his home. It no longer felt like bile to thank him gratuitously over the phone, to tell him that we didn't know what we'd do without him, and that it really meant a lot, because it was true – the praise was earned and warranted.

Three days after the surgery, I got a call from Christine.

“Dan kicked Mom out.”

The two of them had set a specific time for when Dan was supposed to help Mom into the shower. Mom fell asleep. When she woke up, she checked messages on her phone for a few minutes. Dan, waiting in the bathroom, stomped into his bedroom, tearing into her about how apparently he was the last person to be considered, never mind that he was bending over backwards to help her all of the time. And how exactly was she supposed to get better if she kept asking him for more pain medication? And why in the hell was she lying on her ass all day? How is that going to help her get better?

They had nixed the heavy-duty drugs because they made her hallucinate, but Dan had forbidden her from taking even Tylenol, because she was supposed to tough it out and let her body heal on its own, without a dependence on any medicine. Instead, she was supposed to get regular exercise (despite that she was told to rest and take the next two weeks off work) and do daily chores like cooking dinner for Dan and his son.

Mom told him that she knew her body and she didn't want to put it through too much, especially just after surgery. She yelled. Dan yelled. He told her to get out. She told him that he couldn't just be bluffing this time. If he was saying it, he better mean it, because she would take him seriously this time. He told her to get out. Eventually she did. He stood and watched while she hobbled up and down his stairs to gather all of the things that she kept at his house, watched as she struggled to carry the bags to her car, and watched her drive away, even though she still wasn't legally supposed to be driving.

She was in her house alone. No one was there to change the bag attached to her

kidney, to help her go to the bathroom or the shower. She knew that within six hours Dan would call, apologizing and spilling honey out his mouth for her, begging her to please come back home. She told Christine that she was so horrified by what he'd done, that this was the time that she really wouldn't go back. "I mean, that is just sick. Someone who would do something like that, that is really cruel." Christine drove that morning to come and take care of her. Together, they contacted neighbors, friends, coworkers from her church, enlisting the help of anyone in the community who was able to come over in shifts and help her however needed. "I never want to feel that unsafe and powerless again."

Christine was there to change her bag and help her shower. On the weekend I came to take out her trash, wash her clothes, buy her groceries for the week, and cook a few re-heatable meals for her. She slept at every opportunity because she said it was the only time that the physical and emotional pain weren't unbearable. In shifts Christine and I put on her soothing audiobook of *The Wind in the Willows* and cradled her shrinking frame until she fell asleep for a few hours. She mostly talked about her time in the hospital, how uncomfortable it was ("I just want this neon sign above my head, screaming, 'POOR FUCKING ME!!'"). Sometimes she talked about Dan. She was afraid to stop being angry and horrified because she didn't want to forget and go back to him like she had done every time before. "It's just that when it was good, it was *so good*. I mean he really went above and beyond. He did *everything* for me." My sister and I both prayed to ourselves, half-expecting Dan to reappear when we turned our backs, *please*. *Please let this be the one that sticks.*

I called Mom every day after that. Mostly so she wouldn't be so alone in that big empty house that we'd left behind. I tried to remind her that she was smart and hilarious ("God, I wish we could have gone to college together.") and more than capable of getting through this. I also

told her that this fucking sucks and that she had always, always deserved better. Not just with Dan. Sometimes, understandably, she would tell me that the energy it took to keep up a conversation was more than she could handle, and she would rather just put on a movie. “God, that sounds horrible,” and she began laughing. I laughed with her, until I realized that she was sobbing hysterically. “No no, Mom, it’s okay, it’s totally okay, I’m sorry.” I struggled to find words that would calm her breathing, that would make the pain stop, knowing that there was nothing to say except “I love you.” I listed off everyone I could think of: “I love you. Christine loves you. Grandma loves you. Grandpa loves you. Aunt Leanne loves you. Cousin Michael and David love you. Uncle John loves you. Our cats Lily and Sweetpea and Luna love you.” I tried to inhale and exhale evenly to relax her heaving breaths. I waited.

The One That Sticks

A few weeks after consoling her over the phone, I pull into my mom's driveway. *Hey there, Baby Girl.* He is fixing the garage door so that it coasts up and down at the push of a button. He asks me to help him hold the chain as he tightens it. *Now*, a gear shifts and clicks. *Why don't you ladies go inside and make some coffee?*

Mushroom Fields

For most of my childhood, and even through most of high school, whenever I got sick, my mom would take care of me. She let me lie on the gray faux-leather sofa in the living room (the same one that, over the years, eventually started splitting at the seams, and we had to use cameo duct tape to cover up the yellow foam peeking through), and draped the navy fleece blanket over my body, tucked it into the crease of the couch. She'd bring me Sprite in a tall glass, with clinky ice cubes and a neon ribbed-but-not-bendy straw, along with two Tylenol and a Mucinex. I'd watch daytime TV, or more often old episodes of *Little Bear* that my mom had recorded on Tivo and burned to DVDs, and from the kitchen I could hear the soothing low rumble of the dishwasher, the clink of kitchen utensils, the distant hum of the dryer. To this day, whenever I'm at a real Low Point, I find episodes of *Little Bear* online, and somehow the soft orchestral music, the watercolor backgrounds, the simple plots of "Little Bear plays in his grandparents' attic" bring my heart rate back down, make me feel sleepy and small in the good way. There's this one scene, where Little Bear's best friend Emily moves away, and after they say goodbye, Mother Bear makes Little Bear hot chocolate, and we see her rock Little Bear in a rocking chair while he cries and sniffles and lifts the teal mug of hot chocolate to his face, while a sad, lilting piano theme plays quietly.

That scene always makes me cry – in the cathartic way – and it always makes me think of my Mom. It makes me think of childhood mornings crawling into the Big Bed and snuggling into her squishy softness. When I was about five or six, I told my mom, "Mommy, your skin is so soft, just like a mushroom." When I was a couple years older, she told me she thought that was so hilarious, and so awesome because it was true, the tops of mushrooms *are* soft, but no one would ever think of them like that. That story is part of her library that she pulls out when

she tells me I've always had a writer's brain. And so from that point on, "mushroom-soft skin" became one of our usual sayings. To this day, I'll start a text to my mom with "Good morning, Mushroom Lady!"

My mom's arms were my favorite place to cry. Even into late high school, well beyond the time when it stops being cool to willingly hug your parents, whenever I saw my mom doing the dishes, or underlining *The Chronicles of Narnia* with a thin ruler and mechanical pencil, I'd come up behind her and hug into that soothing, endorphin-inducing Mom-ness. Sometimes the hugs were also my way of saying "sorry I never do any chores around the house and you end up doing them all" without my actually having to admit it.

I think it was the summer before I went to London for a semester, the summer of 2016, that I stopped feeling like Mom's hugs would make everything better. This was a month or two after the Otto Thing, but about six months before she said we couldn't have a relationship if I didn't support her being with Dan. This was when Mom was in and out of her getting-the-house-fixed-up-to-sell phase, concurrent with her oh-my-god-this-house-has-so-much-damage-I-can't-believe-I-have-to-fix-this-all-by-myself phase. I was a soon-to-be college sophomore who was used to ignoring dishes in the sink and dirty countertops, and Mom, 8 months into her relationship with Dan, had gotten into the habit of saying, "I really regret how nice I was when you girls were little," which really just meant she wished she and Dad had actually made us do chores and enforced the habit. Every time the words came out, she would try to soften it by saying, "it's just that I see how Dan is with his boys, and he's on the other side, like *really* tough, but they do what he wants without being asked." It was during this summer that Mom was cleaning out the garage – a task she'd been dreading for months – and took me up on my offer to come down and help her with "house stuff," an offer that I made per my grandma's suggestion,

as a way to curb the subtle resentment that she feared was building in my mother.

When I made the 2.5-hour drive from Salem to Olympia, I was expecting the weekend to be me and Mom sitting in the living room, nostalgic media from childhood (*Little Bear!* *Muppets Magic!*) playing in the background as we sorted through my old toys, schoolwork, miscellaneous junk, the boxes and boxes piled high in the garage of detritus built up and collectively hoarded over time. Sometimes Christine or I would want to hold onto something, like the plastic tubs full of Barbies and accessories that I played with, embarrassingly, into early high school, but oftentimes it was Mom who couldn't bear to throw things out. Little dollhouse toys that she thought were way too *awesome*, or stuffed animals that reminded her of the years when we were infants. I was ready for nostalgically rooting through things, and making the calls for what to get rid of, the stuff that Mom wasn't sure was still important to me. Sometime before this summer, Christine had apparently already gone through and picked out the possessions she wanted to keep, so it was the just the Julia Stuff that remained. I was to sort my old toys and clothes and books into piles of: stuff that I wanted to take with me, and stuff that I was okay with getting donated.

After I pulled into the driveway, I discovered the front door was locked. Unusual for Mom — since her gray van was parked out front, I knew she was home. I rang the doorbell, and after we hugged and chatted about the drive, she started apologizing, that she actually had to get to work, and I would have to start without her, but she'd be back home in a few hours. Mom led me to the garage, where boxes still sat stacked, some close to the ceiling, and she faltered.

“So, um,” the space between her brows wrinkled from behind her wire-rimmed glasses. Then her voice got low, like she was sharing a secret. “After the whole dog-napping thing with Otto, I’ve been really scared about the house being safe.”

I nodded. Strange, considering her own daughter was the one to enter the house, but I could imagine my mother's fear and loss of control upon realizing that what Christine had done.

Mom nodded back, her eyes were sharp, as if saying *I know, right?* “Yeah.” She said, and sucked in a breath. “So, I had the locks to the house changed, and I’m gonna keep the key with me, you can come get me at work if you need it. But I—I would just feel safer if we kept the door to the house locked.”

It slowly dawned on me that she wanted me to stay in the garage, locked out of the house, and sort through the boxes while she was at work. “O-okay. So...I’m not allowed in the house?” How could I protest? After her privacy had been violated, when she looked so scared now, so ashamed but determined.

“I’ll be right down the street at the church. I’ll let you in if you need anything.” She pushed a button and the garage door groaned and cranked open. She promised to be back by around three or four, said some more emphatic thank you’s, and drove off to her job at the church down the street.

Slowly I sunk down to sit on the purple lid of one of the plastic tubs. My breathing shifted to shocked staccato bursts. I texted my college friends, trying to process what had just happened.

“What the fuck.” One of them texted back. “Dude, fuck that. I say just sort that shit and get outta there asap.”

And so I played music on my phone, put my Barbies in bins to donate, and set aside my favorite ones – Rapunzel, and a 90’s Ariel whose tail you could pull off like a skirt to reveal her human legs – to take back with me to Salem. I methodically went through the mountains of stuff that I’d owned back when I lived here, trying to decide what to keep based on what I’d be able to

fit in my tiny Volkswagen Beetle. I didn't start *really* crying until it hit me that I'd have to go across the street and use my neighbor's bathroom to pee. I could have gone to the church to get the key from Mom, but the Wakefields lived so close, and since Emily Wakefield and I have been friends since the fourth grade, the Wakefields have become a second family for me. Barb, Emily's mom, was at work and texted me the garage code. I pet their two cairn terriers, who wiggled their butts in excitement and licked my face, before using the bathroom and walking back to Mom's garage.

I ended up saying goodbye to a few things that to this day I still regret giving up just a little – the Anna from *Frozen* cosplay that I'd made with my high school friend to match her Elsa dress, a stuffed Toothless from the movie *How to Train Your Dragon* that gurgled when you squeezed it. But ultimately I found a way fit all the priceless stuff in the back of my car – annotated scripts from my favorite musicals that I'd been part of, the paper-and-clay *Spring Awakening* diorama my friend Meghan had made for me, rainbow-Sharpied yearbooks from 7th and 10th and 12th grade. Mom pulled back into the driveway just as I was putting the last of the “to donate” clothes in one of the garbage bags she'd left out for me.

“Wow. Wait, you did *all* of it?” The plan was for me to stay for a couple of days to get through all of my possessions. There were still the two boxes of schoolwork and artwork, meticulously and lovingly saved from over the years, but Mom wanted to wait and go through those with her scanner so that she could have digital copies of most of it. Mom was impressed, said thank-you over and over.

And I probably could have stayed. I probably could have split a bottle of white wine with her and we could have watched all the old nostalgic movies. Maybe I could have even brought it up, after a glass or two, how awful it felt to be locked out of my childhood home that I had

thought was still mine. Maybe we could have had a really honest conversation, and maybe we would have understood each other after. But the stubborn part of me that wanted to remain bitter and horrorstruck, she was done. “I think I just wanna go home,” I said. I put my overnight bag back in my car, waved off Mom’s offers of “are you *sure* you don’t want to keep any of this stuff? What about this?” assured her that I’d be fine to drive home, it was still early evening. We hugged goodbye, and I cried and cried and felt sorry for myself on the drive back to Salem, back to the sparse dorms that I was staying in for my summer job as an RA. I sat on the twin bed that crinkled with plastic, and stared at the corkboard walls, stared at the boxes of childhood mementos that now sat in the corner, and tried to wrap my brain around this being “home” now.

Dragon Land

Whenever we went to Busch Gardens amusement park as a family, the divide was an obvious one. Christine would go with Dad, because they both liked the rollercoasters. They wanted rip-your-throat-open screaming, fast-fast-fast, upside down. Mom and me, too mild for high-speed rides, were perfectly happy to camp out in Dragon Land. Even after I became too big to ride the kiddie coasters that populated the place, my mom and I enjoyed simply walking around and appreciating the scenery. The larger than life mint-colored dragon eggs that you could crawl inside of, the orange and purple statues of friendly dragons with large smiling eyes, the towering yellow treehouse with a thatched roof and the scaly body of a dragon weaving in and out the windows, the hanging glass bubble baubles that glowed white when the sun went down. Amidst all the screaming, stomach drops, and adrenaline of the rollercoasters, Dragon Land was our sanctuary. While Dad and Christine debated which on-ride flash photo was better – the one with Christine’s hair sticking straight up or the one where Dad looks like he just ate a lemon – Mom and I would ride the gondolas to Dragon Land and sit on what we had deemed the perfect bench. Right under the speaker so we could hear the mystical Celtic folk music, perfect view of the treehouse, a good distance from all the shrieking toddlers.

The first time I got lost at Busch Gardens, I was six years old. I had become absorbed in the floral carvings on this big wooden pillar we passed by, running my finger through the intricate notches. When I looked up, everyone was gone. Panic rose from stomach, through my chest, into my throat. I walked around, aimless, feeling my eyes grow wetter. I saw the thatched rooftop of the treehouse peeking over the skyline and walked towards it until I found the dragon eggs. I looked for Mom, but I had started crying and was terrified of being approached by concerned strangers, and so I crawled inside one of the eggs and made myself into a ball. Several

minutes later, Mom's face peered in at me and she pulled me up into her arms. I was sobbing. She called Dad because they had split up to look for me, and we sat down on a bench and waited for Dad and Christine to come to us. In an effort to console me, Mom rubbed my back and listed off every detail around us that she loved. The lilting music, the cotton candy smell, the dragon eyes, the way the colors faded from orange to purple to blue.

After that, any time I got lost, I immediately headed to Dragon Land and waited by the big hollowed eggs. And she found me. Every time.

PART TWO

Yours and Mine

When my sister and I were kids, she was all about “yours” and “mine.” Barbies, umbrellas, sandwiches, movies, even the family cats (“Sweetpea is *your* cat because we got her near your birthday, and so Lily is *my* cat”). I was always slightly skeptical of Christine’s decided assignments – *my* Barbies never had matching shoes, *my* umbrella didn’t have Ariel on it, *my* cat was always tired and swatted at me when I tried to pet her – but when it came to our parents, we were in mutual agreement. Mom was mine, and Dad was hers. Mom and I liked the same movies, we were both a little too quiet and a little too gentle. We understood each other. Christine and Dad both liked to do flips when we went to the pool, they were both competitive and liked to make poop jokes. They both felt emotions intensely. Even as teenagers, it would be me following Mom around the kitchen in the mornings talking about the books we’d been reading, and Christine and Dad spending the evenings sitting on the living room couch with chips and queso watching *South Park*.

Even with all the “yours” and “mine,” eventually there was one thing my sister and I shared. We both lost our best friends when our parents got divorced. Me and Mom: a slow ripping, a breaking at the seams until we were far, far away from each other. Christine and Dad: loud, and all at once.

Things My Sister Discovered at Our Dad's New Apartment

- Dishes from our house.
- The potato peeler and the colander that Mom had been looking for.
- The entire collection of M*A*S*H that used to reside snugly in the DVD cabinet of our living room.
- Christine's senior portrait. Pink cardigan, white winning smile, arms wrapped around our family dog.
- My senior portrait. Maroon jacket, awkward smile, hair flipped out at the edges. Trying to look happy after a hormone-fueled fight with Mom about whether or not I should wash my hair.
- The Father's Day card Christine and I made for him ages ago. Messy crayon and careful handwriting. "I love you, Daddy!"
- On the nightstand: a 1-year anniversary card from Ginger.
- The divorce had only been discussed two months ago.
- In the top left dresser drawer: silky purple panties, black lace lingerie.
- In the drawer of the bedside table: a book of Kamasutra. A receipt proving it was purchased before the divorce was finalized.

Things My Sister Stole From Our Dad's New Apartment

- Her queen-sized mattress, for her college house in Seattle. A reconnaissance mission in which she and my mother heaved its giant form down three flights of stairs.
- Before we knew about Ginger, our dad had asked us what we would like to have in our bedrooms at his apartment. He made sure to rent one with three bedrooms, two just for us, so we could stay with him whenever we wanted. Walking through Target we picked out lamps, desks, posters, mirrors, bedsheets.
- She took the lamp, too. And the posters.
- 2 baby photos of us and our father – one where we're surrounded by pigeons in Paris. I, three years old, am sitting in his lap, curling away from the frantic flapping. Christine, five, is chasing after the miserable birds, a blur of a red raincoat chasing blurs of grey.
- The second photo is of Christine, a newborn baby, asleep on our father's chest. Back before he had the Lasik eye surgery, when he wore those giant round glasses from the eighties that made him look dorky and innocent.
- The purple bag of Hawaiian-onion potato chips that were her and our dad's favorite, from the kitchen cupboard.
- The book receipt – proof that he's been lying for a year.
- Not the lingerie. Just pictures on her phone. Pictures of the book, too. She would later show me, in my bedroom, door shut. "Don't tell Mom. I'm still trying to figure out how to tell her."

Traitor

Dirty dishes piled in the sink always make me anxious. My dad never washed them when he lived here; my sister would shove it all into the dishwasher without thinking, and the dishes would come out with bits of dried salsa and chicken skin caked over everything; usually my mom would just give up and do it herself. It had been almost two weeks, and the dishes were starting to smell. My nose wrinkled as soapy hands ran over globs of old food that wasn't mine. I scrubbed something charred off a pan and kept telling myself that it would be worth it when all of this dirt was gone.

I heard the front door open and close from the hallway behind me. My stomach clenched at the unmistakable clunk of army boots on tile. I didn't understand why my father hadn't knocked, and simply walked in as though this house was still his home. I started to panic — my mom and my sister were upstairs and I didn't know what they'd think of his being there.

“Otto! Hi buddy!” Our huge Bernese mountain dog came galloping towards him, matted black fur bouncing wildly, and wedged his head in between my dad's legs just like he used to.

Their reunion gave me some time to think about what I was going to do, how I was going to react. He mimicked our dog's high-pitched whining and rubbed his belly. My sister still refused to speak to our father, and my mom hadn't left her room all day, still curled in a ball under her covers. I turned my toweled fist around the inside of a glass before putting it away.

“Hi.” His voice didn't sound how I had expected it to sound. It wasn't the booming, enthusiastic voice that used to greet me with a “good morning, Miss Jubilee!” It was quiet and watery. He sounded small.

I took a quick breath before turning to face him with a polite smile. “Hi. I've been

meaning to talk to you.” I didn’t understand how the words were exiting my mouth so smoothly, as if I had everything under control.

His features were frozen in hesitation. He’d already experienced my sister’s anger and my mother’s tears, what should he be expecting from me? He let out a shaky “okay.” I smiled tightly and gestured to the dusty blue futon a few feet away. He sat down. He looked as polished as ever — clean shaven and short black hair cut close to his head. I placed myself on the leathery gray couch across from him. Warm gray sunlight filtered in from the skylights overhead. A lawnmower pattered serenely from next door. I folded my hands with a distant professionalism and paused to decide what I wanted to say to him.

“So. Um,” I took another slow breath. “I was... really hurt by what you did. I think you must know that.” He nodded eagerly. “And you understand why we’re all feeling the way we do right now.”

“I understand.” His voice was dark and raspy. Pity surged through my stomach. I kept my gaze locked on my tightly folded hands.

“And...” I tried to keep my breath from sounding shaky. “I think we’re just going to need some time...”

“Whatever you guys need me to do, I’ll do it.”

“So I think it would be best,” I continued, blinking hard to keep my eyes from stinging. “If I didn’t see you for a while.” I couldn’t keep my voice from wavering at the end and I hated it.

“Okay.” He said weakly. “For how long?”

“I don’t know. I just need time to work through this.”

And then I saw my dad’s face. The shame that creased in his forehead, the way he

avoided looking straight at me, the tightness in his jaw. His eyes were red and watery. His chin was wobbling slightly.

“You know I’ll always love you, Dad. Right?” I don’t know why the words fell out. But now fresh tears were spilling onto his cheeks and he simply nodded.

All of the muscles in my face were tensed as I tried to keep myself composed. I quickly got to my feet, feeling sick. I needed to get him out before anybody else saw him. He stood too, and I wrung my hands uncomfortably for a moment, before finally crumpling to hug him.

“I don’t hate you.” I whispered into his shirt. “You’re still my dad.”

I was familiar with the feeling of crying as my father held me. But I had no idea what to do as I held him through his own sobbing.

I pulled away and started walking him to the door.

“What are you doing here?”

My sister was frozen on the staircase. Her normally theatrical presence had gone rigid — eyes wide, mouth set in a hard line. Her voice was cold and harsh. Everything was silent for a long, uneasy moment.

My father’s demeanor shifted from curled and small to authoritative and defensive.

“Christine,” he said firmly. “I was just talking to your sister, and—”

Immediately she started shouting. “No, you don’t get to walk in here like you still live here, get out, *get out!*”

Otto walked lazily to my dad’s side and plopped himself down at his feet. My dad ruffled the scruffy fur behind his ears and my sister propelled herself down the stairs.

“Don’t touch him!” She shrieked. My muscles froze and I darted up the stairs just

before my dad started yelling back.

As I reached the top of the stairs, my mother emerged from her room, looking dazed and concerned. “What’s going on?” Her eyes were still permanently red and puffy, and there was a pool of watery mascara beneath them.

For a moment I considered lying to minimize the damage, before finally getting out a helpless “Dad— Mike is here.” I walked past her and managed to slip into my room before the worst of it came.

Most of the shouting was muffled from my bedroom, but occasionally my sister’s voice would ring out.

“You had *an affair*. You *cheated* on her.”

Her voice broke in a pained way that I had never heard before. I sat on the floor of my room with my knees hugged to my chest. My face felt hot and flushed and I couldn’t keep the anxiety from flooding inside of me.

“And you’re still choosing that bitch over your own fucking family!” I could tell that she was crying by this point. I saw why she believed it, but I couldn’t convince myself that he didn’t love us. Not after seeing him so vulnerable. She continued to call Ginger all of these awful things, and all I could think about was that she was still my friend’s mom. She took me and Sam out for ice cream after school. She went shopping with us. I’ve slept over at their house and baked brownies with them. How could I despise her the way my sister did?

I took out my phone and sent Ginger a text. *Hi, I know things are shaky right now, and I’m sure you know how I must be feeling about all of this. But I want you to know that I don’t think you’re a horrible person. I don’t hate you, I just hope everything will be okay eventually.*

I don't know why I did it. I felt my family slowly coming apart, and all I could think was, *who else is going to do anything to try and fix it?*

Then I heard my mom's voice from downstairs. Weak, hurting, and straining to be firm. I thought of the way all of this was crippling her. The distant, glazed look that hadn't left her eyes in days.

My phone buzzed. Ginger had texted back. *Thank you. I needed to hear that.*

I felt queasy. I couldn't wipe the image of my mother's broken face from my brain. I could still hear my sister half-screaming, half-sobbing, threatening to call one of his supervisors and have him fired for breaking one of the army's honor codes. I couldn't stop thinking *traitor* to myself. *You're a traitor.* I felt the bile and shame rising in my stomach and I ran to the bathroom to throw up.

About an hour later, I watched him leave the house from my window. His car grew smaller and smaller as he drove away. When I came back downstairs, the air was still loaded with tension. Christine was hunched over on the couch, squeezing a pillow tight against her chest. My mother stood in the hallway. A frantic, wild expression was etched over her features. I tried to think of a way to say "it will be okay" without it sounding like a lie. She opened and closed her mouth several times before finally moving wordlessly back up the steps to her bedroom.

Unspeakable

My parents decided to get a divorce around their 25th wedding anniversary. They kept it a secret that I half-knew until a couple weeks before Dad moved out and got his own apartment. If the movies and tv shows had it right, being a child of divorce is supposed to be this dramatic, formative moment, but it didn't feel that way. It just felt numb.

Four years before that, in seventh grade, I was standing outside homeroom with my friend Britta and she asked me if I was okay. I didn't know how to admit something like this, nothing felt right. I mumbled the information, almost inaudible, shameful. "What?" When I repeated myself, my voice was high and cracked and felt way too loud. "My dad cheated on my mom with my doctor." Then I started crying and Britta had to take me to the nurse's office to calm down. After the fact, I was embarrassed that I had been too dramatic. The affair hadn't actually happened recently, it was from way back when I was in kindergarten and Christine was in second grade. I had only just found out about it last night. I'd come to the kitchen for Nutella toast, and accidentally stumbled into a tension-fueled stare down between my sister and my dad. "Aren't you going to tell her?" Christine spat, never taking her eyes off our father.

I had never seen him look like this. Ashamed, but simultaneously defiant, shoulders back, palms braced against the kitchen counter. He took a deep, sharp breath through the nose, and turned to face me. *Julia, do you remember back when we lived in Virginia, your pediatrician, Liz?* It had happened while Christine and I were in Canada with Mom, on a trip with our grandparents. It was only that one time, it never happened again. Mom already knew, he told her a few months after it happened. Christine demanded to know why he let Liz continue to be our pediatrician even after the fact. Eyes round and wide, mouth cinched tight, braced against the counter mirroring Dad, Christine oozed with fury and disgust and disbelief. She wanted to know

more information, every detail to make it real. I left the Nutella on the counter and went back up to my room.

I kept waiting to cry, to feel something, any kind of volatile reaction. Nothing came until the next morning in front of homeroom with Britta, and even then the tears felt unwarranted. It was so long ago, it had never happened again, our mom had known about it for years and they were still married. The infidelity had come and passed, as if I had missed my window of being allowed to feel anything about it.

Christine punished my dad for a few weeks after that. Eventually, though, they fell back into their routine of *South Park* and queso on the couch. But I don't think he was ever her hero again. I didn't know what he was to me to begin with, so I couldn't decide whether I had lost anything after I knew.

By the time we found out about the second affair, he had already moved out and moved on.

Spoiled Gifts

As a kid, I got very defensive when my mom told me that my sister and I were spoiled. I pictured bratty kids throwing tantrums in the toy aisle when they didn't get what they wanted, Angelica Pickles from *Rugrats*, Veruca Salt from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Those were mean kids, and I was not a mean kid. Weren't both my parents always telling me how polite I was? I was the Shy Kid, not the spoiled one. She tried to explain that being spoiled didn't mean I was a bad person, it just meant that I was used to getting what I wanted.

It took me several years to acknowledge that my mom was right. When I wanted the Barbie Grand Hotel for Christmas, it was under the tree. I would dogear pages of the American Girl Doll toy catalog and ask my parents for the accessory sets, waiting for them to arrive in the mail.

When I was in the seventh grade, I was obsessed with the movie *The Little Mermaid*. My sister was getting involved in musical theatre, and I soon discovered that there was a Broadway version of my favorite Disney movie. I remember sitting on my parents' bed, gushing about it to my dad while he worked at his desk. He swiveled around and smiled at me. "Well, Christmas is coming up, do you want to go to New York?"

Our first night in New York, we ate chicken kabobs from a street vendor and Dad got food poisoning and locked himself in the hotel bathroom. After that, though, it was something out of an idyllic Hallmark movie. It was just the two of us in New York in December. We took a horse-drawn carriage ride through Central Park, and our driver pointed out where David Schwimmer's house was. We had soup and hot chocolate in a café at Rockefeller Center. We saw *The Little Mermaid* on Broadway, waited by the stage door afterwards, and managed to snag

autographs from both of Ursula's eels. What I remember the most, though, was ice skating. Not necessarily the skating itself, but I remember looking up and seeing what seemed like thousands of sparkling snowflake-shaped Christmas lights coating the skyscrapers, and telling myself that I was experiencing whimsy defined. I grabbed my dad's gloved hand and together we stared up into the falling snow.

I wish that I could look back on that trip without feeling the echo of queasiness. An unsettled guilt. I felt like I hadn't deserved the trip, or maybe that the trip didn't deserve to happen.

He was making up for something. Whether or not that was true, I was convinced that the trip was meant to repair something. Somewhere between childhood and seventh grade, a divide had grown between us. Maybe it was the months or sometimes years that he was gone on special forces missions. Maybe it was what we had eventually termed, "the Liz thing." Over the years something changed in him, or me, or in both of us. In the time he'd spent providing for our family and compartmentalizing combat trauma, I had grown up, outgrown the daddy-daughter bear hugs and princess carries, and the idolization of my father as prince had faded away. I told myself this was normal, that feeling awkward around your dad as a preteen was normal. But then it didn't go away.

Our family had a clear understanding of the trade-off that came with having an army doctor as a Dad. He was at work from 6am until 9pm most days, but Christine and I each got our own bedrooms. He spent a year away in Kansas for a training program, but I got the Barbie Grand Hotel for Christmas. Our garage was full of boxes of toys and on school mornings I would wake up to the sound of army boots walking out the door.

Whenever my dad got home before bedtime, I would jump into his arms and hug him. I loved the way his hands smelled when he came home from work – clean, like the hospital soap. By seventh grade, I stopped jumping into his arms when he came home, and hugged him with that guilty queasy feeling, my mind darting to the mountains of toys in the garage, the new clothes I didn't need hanging in my closet.

In New York, I pretended not to notice Dad's desperate glances to make sure I was having a good time. I didn't act annoyed when he accidentally slipped into a coddling baby voice, forgetting that I was thirteen. I held his hand and did our three squeezes (I-love-you) from when I was six. I asked him if he would buy me merch from the show after we saw *The Little Mermaid*. I pretended to go back in time so that the thousands of dollars my dad spent on this trip would be worth it to both of us. I was simultaneously taking advantage of my father while being bought off by him. I would continue to get what I wanted, and he would continue to let himself believe that we had a good relationship.

2014 Theatrics

For several months after you moved out, once we all knew, I was the only one among my mother, my sister, and me who was willing to visit you at your apartment. You let me pick out whatever I wanted at Target to put in my room, excited at the idea of me staying for multiple nights at a time. (I don't think I ever ended up staying overnight more than a couple of times, and one of them a sleepover with my friend, not really to spend time with you). I was excited because I got to have a hanging wicker chair in my room, a luxury that I'd been fantasizing about for the last few months.

I tried different mental tricks to make it feel meaningful, or at least to quell that queasy feeling in my stomach that never really went away when I was around you now. I thought about the divorced kids in movies and tv shows, the term "shared custody," how split time was a normal thing that divorced kids did, that it could be a character trait, something to make me and my life interesting at least somewhat unique. I could casually say things like "oh shoot, I must have left that at my dad's place." And you got so happy when I visited, even when I couldn't think of anything to say.

I wanted to make you happy, and you performed accordingly whenever I came to visit, or when we would go out for lunch. High-pitched, excited voice, excessive affection to compensate for the unspoken distance. We were actors working without a script, unsure what our roles were now. A sugar-coated Band-Aid of what we thought father-daughter was supposed to look like.

The day you moved out, back when we still thought it was just a divorce, you went into Mom's office. She was sitting numb in her desk chair, and you knelt down, put your head in her lap, and cried. After 25 years, maybe the separation was too much for you. Maybe you were

overcome with guilt, wanted to apologize without really apologizing. And she comforted you. Cradled your head and smoothed your hair until you felt okay enough to leave. And you retreated back to Ginger, while Mom sat in the newly half-empty wreckage.

Thanksgiving 2012

Dad couldn't make it for Thanksgiving dinner. He was on call at the hospital most of the day. Mom, Christine, and I made small gift bags with letters for all the combat soldiers who couldn't be with their families for the holidays. We ate turkey with our neighbors, and I went to bed at 10. A year later Christine told me that after I had gone to sleep, around 2 or 3 in the morning, Dad had called Christine, slurring drunk, and asked her to drive him home. She said okay, where are you? And he said Ginger's house. In the silent dark of Ginger's driveway, Christine turned to him. Did you sleep with her? Oh my god, of course not. He was adamant. Do you have any idea how much I love your mother? I would never do that to you guys. No.

Stepsisters

For five years, my sister and I spent our summers in middle school and high school doing musical theatre. I became close friends with this girl in the program, Sam. Cool and confident, Ariel-colored hair and a boisterous laugh, spending time with her made me feel bigger than I was. She lived about a fifteen minute walk away from my house, so in the summertime, when all the musicals were in full swing, I would sleepover at her place all the time. We practiced the dance numbers over and over again and sang along to the soundtracks of the shows we were in. The small house decorated with trendy teal furniture and Parisian posters was the perfect size for herself, her mom, and their three cats. Sam's bedroom was wallpapered with posters of *A Chorus Line*, *Rent*, and even all the obscure shows that only drama kids would know. We had a tradition of baking treats for the cast of our shows during the run of tech week, to boost morale: for *Aida*, chocolate chip cookies; *Les Miserables*, brownies; *Little Shop of Horrors*, Rice Krispy treats. Sam would dance around the kitchen belting out "On My Own" into the cookie-dough-loaded wooden spoon, while I emphatically bopped my head from side to side and dumped in the extra chocolate chunks.

Sam's mom was a democratic lobbyist working at the state capitol. She had sharp, bony features, stylish green glasses, and short hair clipped just below her ears. Not to mention an energetic, get-it-done bulldozer attitude to match her daughter's. She loved to cook and spend time in the kitchen after work: whenever she wasn't chopping garlic and listening to NPR, she would join us in the baking, even turn up the volume on the blasting show tunes. She and Sam would rock the duet in "You're the One That I Want" with elaborate improvised choreography. She would pick up me and Sam after rehearsals in her bright yellow Mustang convertible – top down, of course – and take us shopping downtown, just because. She had just the right fashion

advice, this is flattering, this isn't, and somehow we would always make a spontaneous Starbucks run on the way back. Ginger was the epitome of "cool mom."

When she wasn't working at the capitol, Ginger also handled politics of the theatre program, as head council member. The summer after my senior year of high school was the same summer that the program was at risk of getting shut down. Lots of parents, my dad included, stepped up and joined the council to make tough decisions to save the program. The same summer I found out my parents were getting a divorce. My friends asked if I was okay, I said I was: "I mean, they were unhappy. Hopefully now they can both be happy." Halfway through the summer's musical season, Sam and I noticed my dad and her mom talking all the time. He started coming with us on downtown shopping trips. Hands slipping my hair into a French braid because I didn't know how, Sam said "wouldn't it be cool if our parents, like, got together? Then we'd be stepsisters!" We enthused over the concept of sharing everything like sisters do, and finally I said, "But it probably wouldn't happen for a while. I mean, my dad *just* got divorced. It wouldn't be fair to my mom if he started dating right away."

Family Dinner II

Christine comes to Ginger's house for the first time after the affair. A few months after, when the dust has settled. A mutual attempt to make amends, to feel in the dark for a sense of normalcy. When I can't come with, she brings her friend Nic as backup. Mike and Ginger have several glasses of wine because they are Mike and Ginger, and Christine matches them because she doesn't know how to be around them. The wine turns everything into red liquid laughter, and eventually Christine tries to bury the ugly hatchet. She touches Ginger's hand and says she's ready to forgive and move on, she just needs an apology. For the lying. She's gotten one from Dad, she just needs to hear it from Ginger. The nerve is touched, and burgundy bubbles burst. Ginger and Christine match each other in rising anger until Ginger spits, "you think *I'm* a homewrecker? You're the slut who can't even hold a boyfriend for more than a few months!" Christine is shouting back, but mostly she is crying. Nic grips her hand and keeps offering to drive her home. Mike sits back in his chair, drunk and droopy-eyed. Hands clasped over his stomach. Silent. Both women expect a defense, but all that he can eventually muster is "ladies...ladies..."

Morning Gifts

When he still lived with us, every holiday morning – birthdays, Valentine’s, Easter – our dad would leave surprise gifts for my sister and me on the kitchen table. He’d be gone for work, but we would come down the stairs and find a box of frosted donuts, cards with our names on them, and a balloon tied to the back of a kitchen chair.

Years later, my mom told me that one Valentine’s Day, back when Christine was a toddler and I was a baby, she didn’t do anything special in the morning for Dad. “I *did* have something planned, I was going to make him a nice dinner when he came home from work.” But that morning, he had left her flowers and a card, and gone off to work with nothing from her. Apparently he was so upset, that when he came home from work he was prepared to tell her that he was leaving her. “All because it hadn’t been in the *morning*.”

Even after he moved out, without fail, my dad still sends something to me and my sister every year on those same holidays. Big vases of flowers on Valentine’s, care packages on birthdays, boxes of chocolate on Easter. Always with the card. Even now, I can’t pass by a grocery store donut case without thinking of him.

Daddy-Daughter Dance

The golden age of our relationship was when I was a little girl and you were Doctor Dad. When you came home from work and I would shout “Daddy!” and run and jump into your arms. Your Army uniform was stiff, and your patch-sewn badges poke-y, but it was a warm and safe cradle. Your chin would be scratchy on my cheeks because your stubble grew in faster than you could shave. The tiny black hairs looked green, budding underneath your skin.

When I was too sleepy to walk upstairs to go to bed, and I raised my chubby arms and murmured “princess carry?” You would scoop me up and carry me upstairs, just like the prince carried Snow White away at the end of the movie. The special song you made up for me, “you’re the best / Ju-li-a / e-ver!” I beamed and put my hands over my cheeks, grinning. “You are too!” I would say. You cocked your head to the side. “The best *Julia*?” I squealed with laughter. “Nooo! The best *Daddy*!” That was the routine. And I would do it back to you: “You’re the best / Da-ad-dy / e-ver!” and the back-and-forth would repeat.

You helped with homework, brows knit in concentration with me or Christine looking helplessly up at you. You were the Prince in your daughters' Disney movie re-enactments, the butler when we pretended to be posh rich British ladies, the student in the play-classroom that always respectfully raised his hand and said “Excuse me, Miss Teacher Christine?”

When Christine and I shared a bedroom, you would tuck us in and made up bedtime stories for us. The two princesses, Crystal and Jewel. It wasn’t easy for them to be princesses and manage their kingdom, but whenever trouble arose, they always found a way out of it – a diplomatic compromise with the giant, outsmarting the evil witch’s tricks, magically freeing cursed princes left and right. Happily Ever Afters and Clean Endings.

And even after we both grew out of it, you and I never stopped playing pretend.

Family Dinner III

In the Winter of 2017, Mike and Ginger are in Oregon and want to visit me, see my college senior apartment, and cook me dinners that I can freeze for when I want comfort food. When I'm out of class, I let Ginger into the apartment so that she can get a head start on cooking, and I'm touched that Dad wants to spend some one-on-one time with me. We go to Target and wander through the Christmas décor section, because we both love to get excited about the aesthetic of colored lights and trees and reindeer and snowmen. Anytime I gush over an item, he puts it in the cart. Only I don't want this to be New York, I want to clear myself of obligated emotional debt. I try to explain, "the gifts are really nice, but sometimes it feels like you're trying to make up for something, and I don't know how to feel about that." He puts another snowflake pillow in the cart and smiles warmly. "I'm doing this because *I* want to, Sweetheart, I'm not expecting anything in return. It just makes me feel close to you." I smile uncomfortably and tell him I appreciate it a lot, and that I appreciate *him* a lot. And every time I use the polar bear blanket, I will think about how long it's been since I called him, shove down the reluctant inexplicable knots in my stomach, and pick up the phone.

They're making dinner together in my apartment. Passing through my college town in the winter of 2017, a visit was called for, and with it came offers of making me dinners that I could freeze for easy leftovers. They decided on cheeseburger soup, orange ginger chicken, and enchiladas. They are sautéing things on the stove and scooping food into freezer containers. They are drinking wine, one bottle already emptied. Mike and Ginger talk in baby voices to each other, and kiss in between cooking tasks. They make jokes that aren't funny, Ginger says something snarky, and Dad smirks and smacks her ass as she laughs raucously. Ginger is playing Frank

Sinatra on her iPhone, and eventually the two of them start swing-dancing in my kitchen.

And I can picture so easily what they are thinking, spinning each other around and giggling. They are outside of their bodies, standing beside me, watching a movie of what two teenagers in love must look like. Isn't it adorable? Aren't they so lovestruck and romantically aspirational? Maybe, if they act out enough of the tropes, if they can convince every onlooker that they are madly in love, maybe they can convince themselves, too. Maybe then they can say that all the damage was worth it. Romeo and Juliet.

I feel the tightening in my chest, the dizzy sense of overwhelm, the push of lungs trying to expand, and slip into my bedroom. Press my head deep into the pressure of the mattress until breathing feels normal again. When I come back into the kitchen, it's apparent that I've caused a scene by leaving. Ginger is talking fast but not saying anything, Dad sends a not-so-covert text, *I hope the swing dancing didn't make you uncomfortable.....*

With Family Dinner comes more wine, and Ginger has decided to become philosophical and impart wisdom to me. Her favorite topic when she gets like this is my mother. How much she pities her, how Beth is *so strong* and has *so much potential*, *she just needs to get out of that horrible relationship*. Even if I agree, Ginger, who has never once taken responsibility for her actions, saying anything about my Mom crosses a line. I'm silenced by the glaring truth that no one will admit, the affair that's "in the past" that we don't talk about anymore.

In the middle of her wine-soaked diatribe, Ginger shifts gears, and begins talking about the value of moving on. *You know*, she slurs, *you get to a point where you keep holding onto things, it's not healthy. And I really worry about you, girlie, you've got to learn how to let things go*. Maybe it's the English major in me, or maybe it's years of versing myself in my parents' passive-aggressive language, but in between the lines the message I read is clear: "the

affair was in the past. Now let it go. Don't think about the residual damage, don't think about whether your father and I are good people, just let it go."

Two-and-half-glasses of wine into the evening myself, the sour courage picks up enough for me to say warily, "I feel like you're referring to something specific here."

To this, Ginger challenges me. "What do *you* think I'm saying?" We go back and forth, in a guarded dance, and Ginger says "Go ahead, say it."

I'm an animal backed into a corner, but it's also 2017, five years since the affair, and Ginger has yet to accept accountability. I give a half laugh, shrug, and drop my arms. "You had an affair. You lied about it for a year and a half."

Ginger blinks and quickly shakes her head. "No I didn't." Hummingbird voice.

My eyebrows knit. "Y-you got together while my parents were still married."

Dad is solemnly silent as he stacks our dinner plates and carries them to the sink.

"No we didn't," she retorts.

I speak slowly. "It was in the fall of 2012. They didn't decide to get divorced until 2014." She has a look of self-determined certainty that curdles the inside of my chest.

"We did not get together until *after the divorce*. What makes you think it was before?"

Dad is sulking as he washes the dishes, hardens his face.

"Christine and Mom were there..." I say. How can she think she'll get away with making this up?

"Well, if you want to trust what *they* think."

"I do trust them. Completely." I say it before she can even finish the sentence.

"Well then I don't know what to tell you, they're going to have their own story about what happened." She's speaking fast again. Eyes wide.

For an incredulous moment, I'm left red-cheeked and speechless. I run a hand through my hair. "I mean, okay, I guess?" I look at Dad, then realize Ginger is looking at him too. He is staring intensely at the cabinets. I wonder if he thinks the genre of his movie has shifted to melodrama, he the tragic protagonist, forced to pick sides. I sigh. "I'm going to bed."

"Oh, let's not end the night like this, don't be like that." Ginger snaps.

Dad has decided that now is the time to de-escalate. He says a lot of nothing, like a true diplomat, but in the middle of it, he spits, "because this was *fucking uncomfortable*." My fingertips are electric and I want to say "wow, Mike, I'm so sorry for you, this must be so hard for *you*." I can't stand to be in front of his self-pity, the Tragic Ingénue of his own story, but leaving will escalate the tension (providing Mike and Ginger the perfect opportunity to look out a rainy window and savor the production). So instead I force the sticky boiling in my stomach to congeal, and make amends. Hug them both goodnight, get them blankets and pillows to sleep on the living room couch (there are two couches, but they prefer to share one). Once I'm on the other side of my bedroom door, I finally exhale. *What the fuck*. I look at my hands and realize I haven't stopped shaking since dinner.

The next morning, Dad goes out and gets Starbucks for the three of us and it's time to say goodbyes. The I-love-you's are only half-empty, because we all still want it to be true, want it to work. And really, when it's Mike and Ginger, can I even be surprised? Surely I wasn't expecting a drama-free visit? I'm weightless once they leave, but later walk out of my college class halfway through to sob in the bathroom.

When I'm back at the apartment, I try to admire the string lights that my roommate and I had been so excited to put up when we moved in a few months ago. I look at the pastel refrigerator magnets, the framed art from Target. I can see the ghost of Ginger standing bug-eyed

in the kitchen, of Dad with the dishes, pretending to be the one caught in the middle.

Home Video I

My dad is sandwiched between one-year-old me and three-year-old Christine on the living room couch. He's wearing his huge metal-rimmed glasses and a gray Army training tee shirt. He pulls the puffy pastel pink blanket over the three of us. "Now we're all cozy," he announces. "Yeah," Christine says, and her pitch goes up and down. She can't take her eyes off him. He opens the book on his lap. After each page, he asks us questions. "Do you see the duck? Good job Christine! He's right there. See, Julia?" Every time he asks a question, Christine eagerly pipes up and provides the answer. When he asks the next question, he leans over to my sister and says "this one's for Julia," because I'm either too quiet or too slow to answer before Christine. Mom laughs from behind the video camera. "What sound does a bee make?" I stare intently at the page, my face is scrunched in stoic concentration. Finally I smile and say "buzzzzz." Dad exclaims "Yes! Good job Julia," and plants several kisses on the top of my head, squeezing his arm tighter around me. With one cheek smushed against my head, his eyes go up to the camera, and he smiles quietly at Mom.

It's only on the second watch through that I see the desperation in how he clings to us. And I wonder if he has ever found a love that leaves him fully satisfied.

Father Figures

It's early October of 2019 when I see my Aunt Leanne, Mom's older sister, is calling my cell, and a wet panic fills my chest as I slip out of class to take the call. It's exactly what I fear, and within three hours I'm on a plane to Wisconsin to say goodbye to my grandpa.

* * *

When I go to Alabama for a few days in the Summer of 2017 to visit Dad and Mistress-Turned-Second-Wife Ginger, Dad picks me up from the airport. On the drive, I talk to him about how undergrad's going, tell him about my creative writing classes and how fun they are. He tells me about his job, how it's putting a lot of pressure and stress on him, but his neighbors are nice and Ginger is slowly adjusting to the move, building a small network of democrats in a sea of southern red.

The house in Alabama is huge, a dot in a neighborhood of houses that look exactly like it, with other families also working on the nearby base. "Hola!" He says jovially when he opens the door. Since when has he ever said that? Ginger is in the kitchen, and the way he swaggers inside after delivering his new catch phrase makes the whole thing feel like an episode of a sitcom.

* * *

I'm in New Glarus for the whole week, and only leave my grandpa's side when he needs to sleep, which is more often than not at this point. My grandma is the sturdy rock that sorts his

pills, takes notes at the doctor's appointments, arranges the hospice services, takes the constant onslaught of concerned phone calls from loved ones. I sleep on the couch and get up every two hours to give Grandpa another dose of oxycodone. There is an emptied five-gallon plastic ice cream bucket that he pees into a few times a night because he can't walk to the bathroom. I hold the bucket and rub his back. Small and bony. My grandma is exhausted, and with my mom and sister here to say their goodbyes as well, I try to be as helpful and collected as possible, but there is a lot of scrambling and fumbling and not knowing what to do.

* * *

Dad and Ginger's kitchen is filled with fancy cooking gadgets. Dad didn't have time for cooking when he was with Mom, and mostly preferred going out to eat, with the occasional exception of grilling burgers when we had people over. While the two of them cook, they excitedly walk me through their routine – the metal fish Ginger uses to get the garlic smell off her hands, the rosemary and mint that they grow themselves, the tiny green tool that Dad uses to peel the leaves off the herbs.

Dad shows me the wine diffuser they recently bought, something about a special filtration system. He produces a bottle from the chiller and pops it open with a flourish. He attaches the diffuser to the top and pours me a glass, grinning proudly. I smile back and sip the wine. It's apparently a very expensive kind of wine from France, but it's too bitter for me, nevertheless I pretend to enjoy it.

* * *

When my grandpa is awake and can tolerate his pain enough to be social, we sit with him at the kitchen table, read the paper to him. When he's in a good mood, he'll hum like he used to, sing to himself, "dee dee dee deeee, doo doo doot." Perfect Bobby. Charming even on his deathbed. I'll ask him to tell me again about the time he first saw Grandma – how she tilted her head and had a funny way of walking because one leg was shorter than the other, but *she had that gorgeous red hair, and it stayed that red most of her life my gosh was she pretty*. How he wasted his quarter on the pinball machine because he couldn't stop looking at her, until his friend jabbed his side and joked, "you like what you see?"

When he's in his recliner, I sit on the floor beside him and rub my hands over the tops of his feet. For years, this has been the routine in the evenings, whenever I came to visit. Grandpa and Grandma side by side in their matching recliners, the TV flipping between the football game and Turner Classic Movies, and me on the floor rubbing Grandpa's feet. He looks down at me now with a loving fondness, smiles, and lets his eyes fall closed. "That feels so nice." His voice is so weak, and I can't imagine the pain he's in.

* * *

Dad wants to add more cheese to the dish, but Ginger reminds him that he's on a diet. He looks at Ginger with a look of impish surprise – mouth tiny, eyes bashful and wide, then sprinkles in some parmesan. "Just a little bit," he uses his Eric Cartman voice, high-pitched and mischievous, then pours himself another glass of wine.

* * *

Grandpa— known by me and my sister as “Grandpa Farm” when we were little, because of the pig farm that he and Grandma live on – was the most honest man you’d ever meet. He’d tell you what he thought with a slight nod of the head and a “well...” He wasn’t afraid to address his own shortcomings or biases, admit them with a knowingly bashful grin. He addressed his grandchildren with words like “cutie” and “booger” and “fart” (always pronounced “faht,” because he enjoyed applying accents to random words, and it never failed to make at least one person in the room laugh).

* * *

While I wipe down the counter, Dad and Ginger are bickering as they load the dishwasher, trying to make everything fit. I can tell Ginger is stressed because she’s talking fast as she explains why that ladle can’t go on the top rack. Dad’s muscles visibly tense, his jaw clenches and he says “okay, fine. Whatever you say, Sweetheart.” They make short snaps at each other, and I wonder if it’s worth getting this worked up over a dishwasher, but just as quickly as it started, they finish loading, say “yay!” in high, happy voices, and kiss.

* * *

That week in October, the week of the goodbye, my grandpa had a procession of family and friends filing in and out of their house every day to see the man they loved so dearly.

Friendships of over sixty years, neighbors that he'd given his tree-tapped maple syrup to, the boys he'd employed from his pig farming days, cousins, great aunts, siblings. A surprising number of younger adults knelt by his bed, touched his face or gripped his hand. "You've been such a role model for me." "I wouldn't be where I am now if you hadn't believed in me." "Even as a kid, you talked to me like what I had to say really mattered."

* * *

Ginger asks how my mom is doing, if she's still with that awful boyfriend. I avoid the question and let her go on about how cool and "badass" she used to think my mother was, back in the Olympia days. My dad's half-empty glass of wine is tilted in his limp hands and his glassy eyes grow heavy.

* * *

The day that I need to leave to go back to Colorado, Grandpa never lets go of my hand. All of the cousins are here, so my Grandma corrals the grandchildren and daughters out onto the porch, along with Perfect Bobby, and she prompts us to go around and share some of our favorite Grandpa memories together. "Do you remember that time in Florida, on the beach? Do you remember the lobster joke? Do you remember the DuLuth underwear story?"

It's only a few more hours until my flight leaves, and Grandpa has exhausted his energy on the porch. As I'm packing my suitcase, my mom comes in and says that Grandpa wants me to lay beside him while he naps. I curl my frame around his, and he grips my arm to his chest. Too

soon it's time to go. As we hold each other I quietly tell him that he's a wonderful man, that I'm glad he's my grandpa, that he's taught me what it means to be a truly good person. He sobs into my shoulder, repeating "I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to do this." Finally, he does what I can't, and with his back shaking, says "please go."

I sit in the car as my cousin drives us away from the farm. Feel the irreparable ripping through my quaking chest.

The next day I sit in a Starbucks in Colorado grading papers. A few minutes after using my Dad's Starbucks app to buy a coffee, I know that he must have gotten a notification on his phone, because he texts me, "Hey Miss Julia, I'm glad you made it back to Fort Collins safely! I hope that the unscheduled trip to Wisconsin didn't put you too far behind... You must be up to your armpits in alligators trying to get caught up! Not sure what your schedule is like, but would love to talk when you get the chance. Can't wait to see you in a few weeks!" The espresso machine hisses and I quietly weep over my student papers.

My Father's Walk

Mike Oshiki is a sensitive man with a delicate ego but he walks as though he could part the room like the red sea. Shoulders pressed back, hips forward, and a slight sway in the chest. He wants to signify that he is a man who deserves to be here, who deserves attention.

My father walks like a colonel who has been in the army for decades. He walks like a man used to the way the stiff camo uniform hangs and stitches itself into his skin. He walks like a man who has stitched soldiers up on the battlefield, who has seen countless people die, who can't get the severed foot of the little girl out of his head – and has been congratulated for it. He walks the way an army doctor walks across the field during a change of command ceremony to receive laurels and make the speech. He walks like someone who is used to hearing that he is essential, that he is important. Like someone whose daughters will only ever hear from colleagues, “your father is so unbelievably good at his job. I don't know what we'd do without him.” He walks like a man who would describe his dedication to the army as using his “God-given talents,” who is willing to sacrifice, time and time again, for the transaction of being important and indispensable.

When he's feeling a little more fun, my dad will allow his hips a slight sway when he walks. I find it embarrassing to watch, but I wouldn't know if that's because I'm his daughter and I'm legally required to be at least a little embarrassed, or if it's because I can see that he so desperately wants people to believe that he is fun. For example, when he suggests making margarita's, his eyes go impishly wide, and his mouth pinches down into a tiny circle, and his eyebrows shoot up, as though he's suggesting something silly and scandalous. The trick is, if he

doesn't get a reaction to this animated moment, if he doesn't receive enchanted bubbling laughter, there is an immediate change in my father. He grows quiet, and the broad shoulders crumble inwards like a burning piece of paper. His face falls and grows serious, and his mouth shifts from the silly circle to a flat crimped line, and suddenly his own self-flagellation is the thickest thing in the room, because his performance failed.

Rock Star

“The love you have for your kid,” my mother tells me after learning of my pseudo-estrangement from Dad, “it’s like...*more* than love. It’s like you’re obsessed, like put-up-a-poster-of-a-rock-star-in-your-bedroom-and-scream-about-it obsessed.”

We’re driving past grey piles of snow on a Wisconsin dirt road near my grandma’s house to get more beer. Grandpa’s funeral is in two days, and all of us have been joking about how we’ll need more beer to get through it. I laugh at Mom’s simile, and in response she imitates the teen-rock-obsession: “like, ‘ahhh!’” she whisper-screams, eyes squeezed shut.

“I know that he loves me,” I tell her. “And that’s huge, because I know not everyone can say that so confidently.” I slow down as we get to the hill that leads onto the main road. “But isn’t it okay for me to want more? I just...I want our relationship to be easier. Like it is with you.”

She asks for examples of how it’s not easy, and I tell her that, for one thing, he tries *way* too hard to be funny. “Like he’ll mess up words on purpose for no reason.”

Mom quirks up her lip and says after a moment, “I do that. That’s something we used to do together all the time.”

I sigh. “Well when you do it, it’s because it’s clear *you* think it’s funny and awesome. When he does it, it feels like it’s for somebody.”

“Like he’s pretending?”

“Sort of.”

Mom looks thoughtful, and I can practically feel her rethinking her past relationship with my father. *How much of it was all a lie?* A common question that she repeated over and over in the first six months or so after finding out about Ginger. I know part of her wants to throw the

whole thing out, to paint over their 25 years together as a lie, an act of manipulation. But I know she also wants to give herself more credit, that there *was* someone in my father who made her laugh, who made her feel safe. And I think it might be worse for her to consider that truth, to acknowledge all that really was lost in the losing of her marriage.

Fire and Forget

In 2018, the summer after I graduated college, I visit my dad and Ginger in Washington D.C. They had just moved there earlier that year for dad's work, as he continues to climb the medical army career ladder (said by my grandma, my mom, and supposedly once my dad himself: "he won't stop until he's working at the pentagon"). Before that, they were living in a small town in Alabama, clinging for dear life to the semi-liberal pocket of their neighborhood – D.C. was a welcome change (despite the tiny apartment, so much smaller than their Alabama house, Ginger commented several times).

For most of my college years, summers and Decembers have been designated "family visiting times," the breaks being the only time when I was free enough to travel to Wisconsin to visit the grandparents, Washington to visit Christine and Mom, and Alabama-now-D.C. to visit Dad and Ginger. Because my graduation earlier that spring had gone off with surprisingly little drama (given the cringingly accurate trope of trying to manage the divorced parents in the same room), and because I had missed my dad's change of command ceremony (a celebration of his promotion that moved him to D.C.) earlier that summer to move into my Portland apartment with Caden, I was generous with my "Dad visiting time" this summer. 10 full days with Mike and Ginger. I even brought a travel journal, complete with a little antique box filled with washi tape and my polaroid camera, to document the visit.

Already the plane ticket was taped in, and in a pastel blue pen I make a bullet point list of our first day's activities: sleeping in to recover from jet lag, walking around the neighborhood (Mike and Ginger's comments that the view from the back of the building isn't as nice; "this neighborhood's in the middle of some gentrification. Which isn't awesome for the people living here, but it's great for us!") Ginger letting out an awkward cackle as we collect Dad's car keys

from the apartment lobby's front desk). After a walk and a couple happy hour drinks, it starts pouring, and instead of braving the weather to walk back home, Dad calls us an Uber. The guy pulls up, and once we're in, Dad and Ginger pull out their phones. Between the gentrified neighborhoods, the expensive happy hour cocktails, and the convenience of getting a car to get five blocks home, I start to feel uncomfortably nauseous and squirmy, so I make conversation with the Uber driver. It's been a busy day for him, but he's grateful for the work because his son's birthday is on Tuesday and he wants to afford doing something special; his son is turning three. Dad follows suit and joins the conversation; I cringe at how his pitch lowers and he drawls his vowels, and I can see him putting on the casual "I'm just like you, bro," act, and yet it is so clear that the man driving us to our fancy apartment down the street is nothing like my father. It wouldn't be nearly as excruciating if he hadn't acted so smug about how well he thought he was doing.

Being with Mike and Ginger like this reminds me of how they see money. It reminds of me of all the toys and gifts my dad threw at me as a kid to make up for being gone all the time. It reminds me of how much money my dad threw at his divorce lawyer and how terrified and lifeless it left my mom after the settlement was over. I see a transactional man. I see a man who has every fancy and unnecessary kitchen gadget imaginable but who doesn't have very many close friends. I see my father. I think about whether my dad has anyone to talk to about his marriage, any friends he feels truly able to confide in, and the thought of that absence just makes me sad.

Being confronted with all of this always leaves me quiet and uncomfortable, unsure of what to say or how to act; how to make up for all the entitlement that my father the colonel puts

out into the world; how to make myself smaller when my father, prideful and broad-shouldered and so painfully insecure, takes up so much space.

Ginger, on the other hand, seems to thrive in this environment. Her loud head-thrown-back bursts of laughter at her own jokes that makes the back of my neck clench. She is a master of small-talk, of jokes that are just funny enough for you to politely laugh along. For how often she says, “we don’t need more stuff” (“stuff” a gruff “u” sound, like a Boston accent, even though she’s lived in Washington state her whole life), she and my father seem to *love* stuff. And it’s perhaps hypocritical, because they love to give things as much as they love to have things, and it’s beyond obvious that I’ve benefitted from this trait they share. Were I to tell Ginger this, I think she might say that she has had such a difficult life up until this point, she deserves to spoil herself for once.

I can picture so clearly the narrative that Ginger must paint of herself in her head: married too early and too rashly, left with a daughter, a divorce, and a deadbeat co-parent; dedicating her career to politics and being a democratic lobbyist; realizing the brutal sexism within that field and learning to grow vicious claws just to stay afloat; she somehow becomes the powerhouse mom, the woman-who-does-it-all, who takes no bullshit and empowers other women with how she refuses to be nice; and finally, after all of that, she meets the love of her life, her soulmate. I think the narrative they’ve co-crafted is that they are two broken people who have finally found love in each other. The fact that this narrative completely ignores the people they’ve stepped on in order to get there is what makes my brain boil when I imagine how they see themselves.

On the third day of my visit, we take the train to New York to visit Ginger’s daughter Sam for a few days. I use washi to tape in my train ticket, and in orange pen I make the

following list:

- D.C. NYC (our Uber driver plays basketball competitively)
- Got to hang out with Sam for a bit
- Weird dinner with Sam's friend's parents. Everyone got way too drunk and I didn't know what to do
- Talked with Elsie (Sam's friend's mom) about Toni Morrison
- Drunk-voicemailed Caden

Over the next couple of days, we see New York. We go to a food market, we see the musical Sam is performing in, and I have breakfast with my old friend from high school. It isn't until day five of the trip that Ginger finally explodes.

We got to see *Head Over Heels* on Broadway, a jukebox musical of songs by The Go-Go's. After the fact, I can't stop gushing about how funny it was and how they were so good at subverting gender norms but making it seem completely normal. We manage to snag some seats on the subway, but when I notice a pregnant woman standing I offer her my seat. Ginger makes a joke about how she gets "old people privileges," and my dad has to squeeze her thigh to make her feel less uncomfortable.

Eventually the subway stops and stalls for several minutes. Nobody is sure what's happening, but then the doors open and people start uncertainly filing out. In the jumble of the crowd, we lose dad and he's on the other side of the doors. We're trying to decide whether to give up and walk back to our Airbnb or if we should wait it out, and the doors start to close. Ginger shoves her hands in between the doors to stop them, I cry out, "no!" and she pulls her hands away after they pinch her fingers. "Well, it's not like they have a sign saying not to do that," Ginger semi-laughs. Her pitch is heightened and vaguely unhinged. I awkwardly press my

lips together and silently point to the bright yellow sign on the doors that says not to put your hands in them.

Ginger abruptly starts shouting. “Well I guess we can’t all be as fucking perfect as you, now can we?!” She then lets out a humph, and slumps into one of the subway seats, arms crossed. We’re either the only ones in the subway car or there are so few others around us that I remember it as empty. After an awkward pause, I quietly say, “do you want to talk about it?” and she holds up a hand. “Don’t. Just, don’t.” I start to talk again, and she interrupts. “No, I’m not in the mood for little miss perfect, pretending that you’re so much better than me and so level headed.”

So we stay silent for another couple minutes. I bite the inside of my cheek, and finally the doors open and Dad is back inside the car. An announcement comes on that this subway is no longer in use, and Dad asks if we should try and find a different subway, or walk the remaining mile and a half back to the apartment.

“Well why don’t we just ask Julia since she’s so smart and she knows everything.”
Ginger snaps from her seat.

After a long pause, Dad meekly says, “come on.”

“No! No, you’re *always* defending her! You don’t see that she’s putting on a fake little innocent act, but I am *so sick of her judging* and condescending.”

“I really don’t think she’s doing that on purpose,” he says.

“Oh please, she knows *exactly* what she’s doing. She hates me!” She looks at me. “You *hate* me.”

“I don’t hate you,” I say, and I can see angry tears brimming behind her glasses.

We opt to walk back, and during the walk, Ginger and I air out the building tension. She

lists all of the things I've done that have passive-aggressively communicated judgement: making conversation with our two Uber drivers, being quiet at dinner and thanking the wait staff, giving up my subway seat. I don't know how to tell that these are just things that people should do. I also don't know how to tell her that she probably feels so judged because six months ago she flat-out denied there ever being an affair between her and my father. Instead, I admit to her that I feel inexplicably uncomfortable sometimes and I try to cope with it by doing nice things for people, but that it doesn't reflect me thinking that she ought to be doing those things, too. Dad is silent for the whole walk, and my head bitterly replays him six months ago, during the last confrontation with Ginger; him sullenly and silently clearing dishes away, finally saying "this was *fucking* uncomfortable," as if the emotional trauma of being torn between daughter and mistress-turned-wife affected him alone. Ginger explains that by nature I'm just so much more polite than her, that she's learned to just say what she wants and have a thick skin.

During the whole walk I do my best to be rational and empathetically understanding, to be the mediator and conflict-resolver, but I keep getting blaring echoes of Ginger's outburst. I want to complain about how immature she was acting. I want to tell someone that I can't believe this woman is married to my father.

When we get to the Airbnb, Ginger declares the need for alone time in her and Dad's room. Dad solemnly joins her, and I quietly burst into sobs. I text my friends about what happened, and their responses are expectedly supportive.

"What the FUCK!!! What the fuck."

"Oh my god. Oh my GOD."

I tell them that above all else, I really just want to leave, and I can't believe that I have *five more days* of this trip.

“Dude, get the fuck outta there. That’s horrible.”

“And if they’re upset that you want to leave, tell them that YOU’RE upset that Ginger is acting like a fucking middle-schooler!”

My dad emerges from the room and asks if I want to go with him to pick up some pizza.

As we walk the early-evening summer streets of New York, I tell Dad that I want to get a new plane ticket home for the next day or so, but that all the ticket options are too expensive for me to afford, and would he mind helping me pay for it? He’s adamant that he really wants me to stay the last five days, and that he’s so sorry about what happened. I can’t remember if I cried there on the stoop of our Airbnb when he said that, but I remember weakly and childishly murmuring “I just want to go *home*.”

Dad tries to do damage control by explaining that Ginger is “fire and forget,” an excuse he’s used for her behavior before, and tells me her tragic backstory of being a woman in a sexist patriarchal political sphere, that she’s had to learn to stand up for herself and has lost some tenderness as a result, but that she definitely loves me and Christine a lot.

“It’s just...” I take a breath. “I’m sure that Ginger does love us, but ‘fire and forget’ is just, not an acceptable excuse anymore.” And even though it happened years ago now, I say, “Like I’m sorry, but you can’t just call my sister a slut who can’t hold a boyfriend for three months and then act like it never happened.” Dad pauses. Maybe he forgot how horrifying it is that Ginger said that, too.

The thing is, Ginger acting unacceptably towards my sister is not a new thing. But my dad has either avoided intervention or has stood up for Ginger because he could rely on the excuse that both women were at fault. My sister full of kaleidoscopic emotions, betrayed by her once-best-friend dad, of course she and Ginger have found themselves locked in screaming

matches before. But forever burned into my brain is the story Christine told me of when she first had dinner with Mike and Ginger post-affair reveal. The glasses of wine, the immortalized quote from Ginger after being prompted to apologize for lying to us.

By this point, we're walking in circles around the pizza place, and Dad says we should probably head back, or Ginger will wonder what's taking so long. But he at least tells me that I'm right, that what she said to Christine was unacceptable, that how she acted that afternoon was unacceptable. I think he realizes that he can no longer blame Ginger's behavior as a result of someone else's instigation. When Christine and Ginger butt heads, he can always lean on "you were *both* in the wrong." But this time, I wasn't in the wrong. Because I'm almost as dramatic as my father, when we get back to the Airbnb, I take out my travel notebook. I find an over-exposed polaroid, a black square, and in red sharpie I write on it, "NO ONE IS SAFE FROM GINGER'S WRATH."

True to her nature, by the next morning, Ginger has forgotten that a blowout ever happened. That is, until we're on the train back to D.C. A man unconsciously cuts in front of Ginger as we board the train and try to find seats. Dad settles into a seat, but the ones around him fill up before Ginger can get to one. She confronts the man who cut her, who incidentally is trying to sit in the empty seat next to my dad. "You mean you won't let me sit next to my husband? What is wrong with you?" The anxiety of a scene in the making spreads through my chest, so I tell Ginger she can have my seat, and she glares at me. "Okay, I do not need help from *you* right now, missy." I sit back down.

Eventually Ginger and Dad find two empty seats together a ways further down the train. Dad texts me, "sorry about Ginger....." And even though they're several rows behind me, when I peek around I can see them in the middle of a heated discussion, and finally Ginger loudly snaps,

“just STOP” and gets up and leaves. I see Dad’s lips press into a thin line as he stares forward.

I text him back, and tell him that I’ve decided to stay the rest of the trip, but that I want us to have some one-on-one time.

A couple days later, we go out to lunch, just Dad and me, and he has a plan to take us on a driving tour through where he grew up. I twirl the fettuccini around my fork at our table right by the bayfront. Finally, I say it. “Um, so. I think our relationship for the past five years has been kind of shitty. And I think we’ve been trying to make it not-shitty, but we’ve also been kind of faking it. And I think the only way we can make it better is if we actually talk about it.”

I can see the muscles in my dad’s neck tense, but he says “okay,” in an amicable and willing tone. So we talk about it.

I tell him that I felt like I had to be okay with the affair way too soon, because Mom and Christine were so (rightfully) mad at him. I told him that I never got the chance to be upset about it, and I just skipped ahead to pretending that we had a good relationship. He admits that he’s sensed I’ve been faking being okay for a long time, and that if he’s being honest, he’s been faking it, too.

We get in his Buick and he drives us to his childhood neighborhood. On and off talking about our relationship (my discomfort with Ginger, how his and Mom’s marriage was already dead for so long, how his mental health was at his lowest point when he did what he did), he tells me stories about growing up with his older and younger brothers, the walks home from school, the funny things Uncle Tim used to say. He talks about how much he loved his dad as we drive past where my grandpa used to work. In my head, I craft my own narrative for who my dad’s dad was. I’ve been told that when my grandpa was a freshman in college, he and his siblings were

put in internment camps after Pearl Harbor. I've been told that he later volunteered for the U.S. military, and was tasked with translating Japanese intelligence messages that had been intercepted. I've been told that he eventually ended up working as the Congressional Chief of Staff in D.C., when he was raising my dad. And I imagine a man who had to erase all otherness in order to be accepted in his career. I think of a man who had to divorce himself from his own identity, to betray his heritage in order to be redeemed beyond his internment. I remember my grandma's stories about meeting dad's parents after he married their daughter. About how Kaz Oshiki would host lots of parties for political mingling, which would involve lots of charm and lots of alcohol. I think about how startled my grandma was at the way Kaz talked to his wife. And I think about how deeply my father idolizes his dad.

When we pass the hospital where I was born, I ask my dad, "is that where our pediatrician Liz worked?"

I see his knuckles whiten over the steering wheel. It's obvious he doesn't want to talk about it, but I push forward anyway. I ask him the questions about Liz that I've been afraid to ask. How long were they sleeping together for? Is it true that it happened while Mom took me and Christine on that family trip to Canada? How long was it until you told Mom what happened?

His jaw is clenched, but he answers each question as best he can. I remember him saying something defensive, but I don't remember what. I remember wanting to tell him that *he* was the one who made these choices, that all I'm asking him to do is accept responsibility for the damage he's caused. But instead I ask more about Liz and Ginger. Part of me just wants to know, but a bigger part of me wants to see him acknowledge it. I haven't been able to remove the sour taste in my mouth at the way he and Ginger play at being the happy couple; the blissful denial of the

people they've hurt and lied to. Dad tells me that he wants to do couples' counselling with Ginger. He tells me that he thinks he rushed into another marriage. Secretly, I pray that they get divorced.

When it's all said and done, and we're driving back to the apartment, I make a joke about how this is like clearing out all our chakras and unloading all the baggage that's been clogging us up. I ask him how he feels about all of this, and he closes his eyes, takes an intense breath, and says "I've cleared out the chakras." I want it to be as endearing as he wants it to be, but I still can't get over the feeling of forcing a bond that isn't there just yet. I tell him that I want us to have more time one-on-one, at least once for each visit.

He asks me to text for him while he drives, and I try not to look at the passive aggressive conversation they were having earlier about when we would be getting home. But when we get back to the apartment, fire-and-forget Ginger is all smiles and honey.

Home Video II

Five-year-old Christine is acting out the story of Little Red Riding Hood, over and over again. The audience consists of Mom behind the camera, Grandma and Grandpa Farm, our great aunt and uncle, and Dad. Christine is wearing a red hooded cape that Mom sewed for her, and her American Girl Doll is wearing a miniature one to match. The supporting cast includes Dad as the wolf, Grandma as the grandma, and Grandpa as the woodsman. When Little Red is walking through the woods, Dad fully commits to the role. He gets on all fours and lunges out towards Little Red. Christine recoils, hugging her doll to her chest and giggling. Dad makes his voice gravelly and menacing, and he snarls his lines when he asks where she's going. It's a slightly hilarious image because he's wearing his wiry glasses that take up half his face, and a cottony striped shirt with a white collar buttoned all the way up. After talking to Red, he walks over to Grandma, gives a roar, and covers his mother-in-law with a blanket. Christine enters, and goes through the "what big eyes you have!" routine. She forgets some of her lines, and pauses. Dad bares his teeth to give her a hint, and Christine lights up. "OH! What big TEETH you have!" Dad throws off the blanket, spreads his arms out and growls, "the better to EAT you with, my dear!" Christine shrieks and runs over to Grandpa. She takes his hand and pulls him towards the wolf. The woodsman pulls out an imaginary axe. "I'll save you Little Red!" Dad cries, "Noooo!" and Grandma pulls the blanket off her head, and Christine flies into her arms. "Oh, it was so dark and squishy in there! Thank you, Woodsman."

The wolf peeks at the reunion, before resuming his "dead" position – sprawled out on the floor, tongue sticking out.

"Oh no!" Christine rushes back over to the wolf. "What's wrong, Mr. Wolf?" Dad pops

his head back up. “I’m dead. The woodsman cut my stomach open with his axe.”

The five-year-old slaps her hands to her cheeks. “Oh no! We have to fix him!” She runs out of frame and comes back with a toy doctor’s kit. She puts the stethoscope to his heart. “What do we do?” The wolf says, “a gastral bypass with anesthetics,” and the camera shakes a little when Mom laughs.

Christine puts a plastic band-aid bracelet on Dad, and in his wolf-voice he grumbles, “that’ll work too.” He sits up, and Christine cheers and kisses him on the cheek. “Oh, thank you, Little—uh, Doctor Red. Oof. I’m never going to eat that much ever again.”

But Christine is back to resetting the scene – she throws the blanket over grandma’s lap, runs back to her mark, and yells “I’ll see you soon, Grandma!” And as she walks through the woods, she gestures for the wolf to come out. And once again, Dad is growling on all fours, asking Little Red where she’s going.

PART THREE

Girlhood

She's a cool girl. She's a shy girl. She's a pretty girl. She's a smart girl. Are you gonna be a good girl? Polite girls don't interrupt. Nice girls don't do that. Oh, you're a bad girl, aren't you? Boys don't like girls that wear clothes like that. Boys don't like loud girls. Boys don't like girls that scratch their armpits in public. When you have a little girl, what will you tell her when she wants to buy lingerie? That show isn't for little girls. I've never met a girl that can shotgun beer before. You're not like other girls. Wow, you're a real girly-girl, huh? You know, most girls don't wear as much makeup as you do. You punch like a girl. You throw like a girl. You go, girl! Girl power! Oh, it's girls night, I'll leave you ladies to it. Have you ever been with another girl? She's just a girl. Wow, you're really tall for a girl. You eat a lot, for a girl. Girls can't lift as much as boys. Girls shouldn't drink as much as guys. Do you see that girl over there? I know exactly what girls like. Wow, girls like you should be illegal. Girls like you don't know what you do to guys. You're a nice young girl, what are you doing here? Step off, man, that's my girl. Girl fight, that's hot. Every girl was obsessed with *Twilight* at one point. Every girl had a crush on Zac Efron in 2008. You're a smart girl, you figure it out. Oh, quit being such a girl.

A *huge* part of humor is all about the dramatics and self-aware hyperbole. For example, my hair is greasy and therefore everything is terrible. Or, if I'm not immediately perfect at something then I think, *ugh, why bother* and drop it.

“!!!!!!!” Katy texts me one morning. “Oh god oh GOD” the next text reads. My phone buzzes again. “Greg is decidedly NOT chill abt the breakup.” Next she sends me a screenshot and I'm gasping at some sentences and screaming in horror at others, my hand clasped over my mouth and eyes wide. Greg's spiteful text is an unintentional satirical masterpiece.

When Katy calls my video chat I answer cackling before we erupt into a chorus of screaming “Oh my *god!* Ohmygod.”

“Does this man know?” I ask. “That this was *two months*. What Hallmark movie is he in?!”

“I think my favorite part is ‘why why why.’”

“Oh I absolutely love ‘you should come with a warning label’ though.”

“‘I am the healthiest I have ever been’ sir you hang things with neon yellow duct tape and bought your first lamp last week.”

“Yes, but he did it *for you*.”

“Ah, right! Too bad I'm a demonic bitch.”

“A demonic bitch who's scared of commitment, though.”

“Do you think I should make t-shirts?”

“Absolutely.”

It should be noted that, because Katy combusts at the first sign of conflict, her actual response to Greg was much kinder, with empathetic phrases like, “I’m sorry you don’t see it this way, but I truly do think we are simply incompatible, and it hurts me that you think this is about something else entirely.”

It should also be noted that Katy later printed and framed Greg’s text. It now sits in her bathroom, atop the toilet tank, so that when men stand up to pee they are confronted with some light reading and a proper Warning Label.

Sick Day 1

My sister and I had a recurring habit of faking sick to stay home from school. It usually didn't take much to pull it off; we both knew how to look pitiful, how to say, in small froggy voices, "Mom...I don't feel good." Obviously our sick days almost never overlapped, but whenever one of us was "sick" it was always the same: Sprite in a glass with ice and a straw, a plate of saltines, all placed carefully on the coffee table in front of the couch. Mom would set it there, wrap one of us up in a blanket, and we'd stare into the distance trying to look miserable while listening to Mom call the school in a hushed, concerned voice from the kitchen. Christine and I never talked about why we did it, but I think our reasons were more or less the same: staying at home under a blanket with daytime TV or *Little Bear* episodes was way better than facing whatever it was at school that we didn't want to face. Sometimes it was a test I needed extra time to study for. Oftentimes it was because I hadn't completed my homework and couldn't bear to turn it in late. I didn't know much about Christine's school life, but I knew that people could be shitty, and that was enough of an explanation for me. Either way, being home was always the better alternative. Mom would generally leave us alone, checking in every couple of hours in a soft, soothing voice, offering Tylenol or more Sprite or if we had the stomach to try and eat something.

Ultimately, though, it was never that hard to fake sick. The shame of what I was doing, who I was lying to, what I was avoiding – all of that compounded and twisted in my stomach so that looking miserable and small on our living room couch was as easy as breathing.

Bracelets

When Christine was in eighth grade, she dyed her hair purple and pierced her cartilage and wore lacy thongs and lots of eyeliner and neon beaded bracelets that went all the way up her forearms. I thought she was coolest person I knew. I was a little bit scared of her – she wasn't afraid to yell at Mom whenever she wanted, and she was the fastest at texting on her purple flip phone – but mostly I remember how most middle school afternoons, she and her friend Kenzie (same amount of eyeliner and bracelets, only Kenzie's hair was electric teal, not purple) came over to our house and together they ate lots of pizza rolls and harmonized to “Africa” by Toto and watched *Friends* on DVD over and over. When Mom and Dad weren't home, sometimes they would smoke cigarettes and weed in the backyard.

I remember how, the same year Christine was in eighth grade, I was in sixth grade, and how one night after youth group (our parents made each of us go all the way until seventh grade) my mom called me and told me that everything was ok now, but that Christine had started cutting again, and all the razors in the house were now hidden somewhere. I remember sprinting home (the church was only two blocks from our house), telling myself not to be so dramatic, did I really need to run? And I remember seeing the bloody tissues in the trash can and the pile of beaded bracelets in a tornado of yellow and bright blue and hot pink and lime green on the floor of our parents' bathroom.

I remember finding the big gallon plastic bag of razors hidden in the bathroom, and I remember a few weeks later, Christine called me into the bathroom when Mom and Dad weren't home and asked me to help her walk back to her room. She was holding a single metal razor blade, not a shaver like Mom hid, and a heavy stream of blood trickled down her thigh. “Don't

tell Mom and Dad,” and how her eyes were wet and ashamed and scared behind her swoopy purple bangs. I did help her into her room, and I didn’t tell Mom or Dad. Christine kept saying that she was okay, but after that I got stomach aches whenever Christine took showers longer than twenty minutes. I remember asking her if she wanted to die, and she said, “no, I just want to hurt.”

On Humor 2

Yes, and is the key to any good collaborative bit. There is something inherently stupid and ridiculous in any random thing that is given to you – once one of you decides it's funny, you both decide to commit to the bit. My boyfriend says that this was the most Wonderfully Annoying thing about me during his first month of knowing me. "You just *kept* coming up with counter-quips to things I would say. I'd have to struggle to keep up. It was like a contest of who could come up with the next funny response. That's when I realized, *oh shit, she's funnier than me.*"

Admirers

In the summer of 2008, the summer before she started high school, Christine's friend Maddie convinced her to do a musical for the first time: *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. It was through this summer program that the downtown community theatre did. Every summer kids ages 8-18 could sign up for up to three of the five musicals they would put on that year. Both Christine and Maddie got to be guards for the Pharaoh in the second act of *Joseph*.

Trying to talk to Christine after the show was like trying to take a picture with a celebrity. All the families and friends of the kids in the show waited outside the stage doors. When people with actual parts walked out, lots of people applauded, and then the performer was swarmed with admirers telling them what a great job they did. I was so intimidated by the leads, but when Christine came out – this time her thick eye makeup done to make it show up onstage – she walked right up to the leads from the show and started making jokes with them. I went to see the show with my parents two more times after that. Even though Christine didn't have a speaking part or a solo, it was so fun to see her walk out the doors at the end, still in her stage makeup and sweat pants, grinning and holding the flowers we sent her during intermission.

I didn't actually realize that I was Funny until college. Before that, I had readily accepted my role as The Shy Girl. After all, The Shy Girl was usually the protagonist of the teen movie, right? I would be quiet at school, and only dare to be funny in secret: online with my internet friends, at sugar-high 5-person birthday parties with silly photoshoots, or under the covers of the blanket fort with my best friend where we combined five different kinds of cereal and then complained the rest of the night how bad our stomachs hurt. Funny wasn't pretty. Funny wasn't perfect. And all the way up until college, pretty and perfect were all I wanted to be. It wasn't until my future dorm-mate and I started talking online before school started, and then when I finally arrived on campus that I realized my overdramatic, snort-laughing internet persona was much less exhausting to put on than The Shy Girl.

3 Things To Buy To Be More Fuckable: Boots

You've seen enough pictures in magazines and on social media of young women in corduroy skirts, white peasant blouses, and black thigh-high boots, that you throw caution to the wind and go ahead and decide to buy your own pair of black thigh-high boots.

Once the boots arrive, put them on with your red skirt, and prance around your room. Admire yourself in the mirror. Smile thinking about making men's jaws drop to the floor when they see you. But nothing too risqué. Just a light tease.

On your walk to the grocery store, boots and red skirt and all, internally recoil every time a pair of eyes falls on your body. Hold your breath as you walk by the group of men laughing and playing loud music. *At least, if they catcall me, I can make some funny Instagram post about how stupid it is to catcall someone wearing a mask*, you think. When you see the old woman walking her dog, you feel ashamed and suddenly wonder if you're showing too much skin.

Sick Day 2

I found out sometime in late college that my mom knew we were faking sick. She was washing the dishes and I was sitting on the kitchen island, watching her. She said that she never wanted to be one of those parents that forces their kid to go to school and doesn't believe them. She told me about how she first caught on when Christine was in first grade. Christine would vomit, and Mom would call the school saying she had a stomach bug. "Looking back, I'm thinking she was probably stressed, like that was why she was throwing up. Those girls at her elementary school were so *mean*." She told me that eventually she brought Christine in to our pediatrician's office on the army base to see what was going on. "And Liz" – *Liz! As in our-dad's-first-affair-Liz!* – "said something really passive aggressive. She asked Christine if she liked being sick, and Christine said yes, because it meant she could stay home with me. And then Liz looked back at me and said, 'well I think we have our answer.'"

I picked my jaw up off the floor and asked Mom if that happened before or after the affair. "I'm pretty sure it was before," she said. "At least, it was before I *knew*. Your dad said that it only happened the one time when the three of us were on vacation, but how am I supposed to believe that with his track record?"

Exposed Wrists

Christine stopped smoking cigarettes after switching her college major to vocal performance. She never did stop smoking weed - even now she'll discreetly offer me CBD mints at family gatherings. And she stopped wearing the bright neon bracelets, and the scars on her wrists healed and whited over. And she did musicals with our local kid's theatre program every summer until she graduated high school, and during the school year she did the program's children's choir, and even became a regular in her high school drama department. The embrace of singing as loud as she wanted turned her features softer. She now leaves her arms bare, unexposed. I feel the tiny white smiles up her arms pressing into me every time she folds me into her embrace.

Sick Day 3

Christine and I always knew our sick days had limits – once it got to any longer than 2 days of missed school, Mom would start to talk about taking us into the doctor and we would miraculously feel “up to” going to school anyway. There were plenty of times where either I or Christine stretched this rule and stayed home a bit longer. And Mom would usually make good on her promise to take us into the doctor’s office. Unsurprisingly, they never found much to be majorly wrong with us, but neither of us ever got called out for it, either. It usually ended with putting on a brave face and announcing your willingness to go back school. The only time I went to the extreme with this was my senior year of high school. I couldn’t put my finger on exactly what it was, but the thought of going to class, talking to people, carrying my body through the day completely exhausted me. The fact that I wasn’t willing to face it all exhausted me even more. I stayed home for 3 weeks, sleeping most of the day and watching *The Simpsons* on my laptop, hating myself for staying home, knowing that going back meant having to acknowledge that I’d been avoiding nothing except for my own lack of motivation. My mom would go to work at her front desk job at the church; she’d leave before I left for school, and so I’d sleep in, or put it off, then take an extra hour or two to get ready, then maybe make it to school for fifth and sixth period, then go home and erase the voicemail from the school before my mom got home from work. This went on for another 3 weeks, of doing pseudo half-days. I lied and told everyone that I had mono. Talking to my teachers about getting caught up didn’t even take any convincing – I used to think it was the work of the patriarchy when adults and classmates alike noticed my lack of makeup and said “oof, you look terrible, no wonder you’ve missed so much school,” but thinking back to that miserable, barely-18-year-old who didn’t know how much she hated

herself, I think I really must have looked as terrible as I felt.

3 Things To Buy to Be More Fuckable: Lingerie

The first time you buy lingerie, it's expensive and comes from Victoria's Secret and you justify it by saying it's for your boyfriend's birthday. You wear it under your clothes on his birthday and it all goes over pretty successfully.

Once you graduate from the simple black-babydoll-dress-and-thong set, you're ready to move on to corset territory. This one is more expensive, but the model looks *so sexy* that you can't imagine wearing this and not feeling desirable, so you buy it anyway.

When your boyfriend goes to take a shower, you sprint to your room to change out of your sweats and into the corset, fiddling with the garter clips and thigh-high tights. Look yourself over in the mirror, admire your own fuckability, and then display yourself on your boyfriend's bed and wait.

While you wait, try not to notice the uncomfortable poking of the boning, or how the edge of the thong sinks a little too deep into the edge of your inner thigh. Try not to think about how this shower is taking a long time, and how you feel pretty silly just lying there waiting, but somehow hanging out in corset lingerie and going on your phone is even more embarrassing, so you just stare at the wall until you hear the water turn off.

When your boyfriend comes into his room, he'll take one look at you and laugh at the unexpectedness of it all. You'll turn red, and immediately and quickly say "never mind, never mind," several times over. He'll have to talk you into believing that you actually are sexy, are fuckable. Once he halfway convinces you, the actual sex will be only okay.

From that point on, any time you wear lingerie it feels forced, and it feels like you're risking some pretense of authenticity. You'll become increasingly aware that women are

supposed to be simultaneously effortless and performative in their fuckability.

On Humor 4

The truth is, I believe I'm funny in Real Life, but in my writing I can't escape from being a Sad Girl. Sometimes, I'm scared that I only know how to write about trauma. Sometimes, I worry that I don't know how to write happiness that people would want to read. I don't know how to write about my parents being desperately lonely people and seven-year-old me shoving rubber Polly Pocket pants up my nose in the same breath. I wonder if it's because the girl who thought she was Shy and Quiet was also the girl who faked sick for 6 weeks her senior year because she couldn't get out of bed, and didn't know until years later that all along she was depressed because her family was falling apart. I wonder if it has anything to do with the role I play for my family: The Therapist, The Understanding One, The Empathetic One, The Patient One. I wonder if me moving away to a tiny liberal arts school in Oregon, miles away from my family, has anything to do with me realizing that I could be funny.

Successor

I signed up for the same theatre program as Christine two years after she started, prompted by a friend of mine who was in the program too. By the time I got there, Christine was the one who got actual roles in the shows, while I was almost always in the ensemble – and I never minded, because it was always fun and I always got to perform with other people. But sometimes I wondered if people actually noticed me, or thought I was talented. Or whether I was simply an extra put there to make a scene more crowded. I don't think I actually started getting confident during shows until Christine left for college in 2012. And then, when the older kids like Christine graduated the theatre program: suddenly *we* were the older kids. And instead of Christine leading us into one of the spare rooms during free time in rehearsals to practice the songs, it was *me and my friends* thumbing through the sheet music and drilling the harmonies with kids younger than us.

Brandon Grievances

That awful night in January 2017, the night that my mom broke up with me, I remember texting my two best friends, Emily and Katy, who replied “WHAT” and “oh my god” and immediately came over and picked me up from my pile of tears on the kitchen floor. They let me tell them the whole horrible story, had their cries of outrage, and maintained that I didn’t need her, that I’d already been doing great on my own for a while now. That maybe this was actually for the best, because now I was free of Mom’s expectations for me to help with the house, free of her resentment that I didn’t do enough for her growing up, free of Dan in his awful entirety.

Emily and Katy knew when I was ready to stop dwelling on what had happened, and soon Katy changed the subject to how Brandon - my ex-boyfriend Brandon, who still had a lingering friendship with Katy - was being clingy and annoying. Emily was the perfect comedic counterpart to Katy’s venting story, and soon she was grabbing a pen and paper and we all collaborated on a list titled, “Brandon Grievances.” I brought that list up to Katy a few years after the fact, and she replied, “oh, that really didn’t have anything to do with Brandon. We were just trying to make you feel better.” Even now, regardless that I have no ill will against my first college boyfriend, the phrase “Brandon Grievances” still hugs its wonderful way around my heart.

3 Things To Buy to Be More Fuckable: A temporary tattoo of a pirate

In the summer of 2016, your coworker will think you wearing this cartoony temporary tattoo from the arcade makes you quirky and funny. He won't be wrong, but you'll be able to picture the image of you he begins constructing in his head.

That summer, you and your coworker will stumble drunk through suburbia trying to find the party, and in a moment of exhaustion, you'll flop yourself down in the bike lane in the road, limbs sprawled out, and he'll follow suit. *So easy*, you think to yourself. So easy to pretend to be the manic pixie dream girl who does shit like this.

He'll see you in a bikini while you and your best friend flirt with the lifeguard, and after, you and your friend talk about how hilariously desperately obvious your coworker is. You both agree that men are exhausting as you get ready to go swing dancing, but still, you think, it's nice to feel desirable.

You'll finally cave on the last night of the summer, over a bottle of way-too-sweet plum wine. You just as much say, "alright, fine," and it doesn't last more than thirty seconds. He says you can try again, but you just say that's alright, and let him hold you for no more than thirty seconds before you retreat back to your dorm.

You'll feel gross, and you'll think it was a waste of time, and as you put on your PJ's, looking at a naked body that doesn't feel like yours, the cellophane backing from the pirate tattoo will stick to your foot, and you'll remember that the person he fucked wasn't even you to begin with.

Crescendo

Christine fell in love with opera after spending countless hours perfecting her singing in voice lessons, and even majored in vocal performance in college. And now she teaches music to preschoolers in Seattle, and recently co-founded her own nonprofit, the Lowbrow Opera Collective. She and her friends are trying to make opera more accessible to young people by performing operas about the millennial experience (my favorite song is “Trying To Move This Fucking Couch”). The other day when we were video chatting, she showed me the rehearsal space she made in her garage. The cement floor is covered by gaudy thrift-store carpets, and her piano keyboard is covered in sheet music, which also litters the stool and floor. On the wall are posters from various musicals, including the opera she helped put on. I kept telling her how proud I was in a thick voice, because all I could think of was that it looked exactly like the spare theatre rooms we used to practice music in back in high school. And how proud 2008 Christine would be of 2021 Christine.

Sick Day 5

At the end of my first semester of grad school, I had way too much to drink at a Christmas party. I was grateful that I'd made plans to get a ride from a friend who lived down the road and who wasn't much of a drinker. Embarrassed and reluctant to seem like a messy-and-out-of-control drunk person, I tried to act relaxed and reserved, and prayed that he wouldn't ask if I was gonna be okay. Luckily he didn't, so I must have acted collected enough not to warrant his usual concern for others. Once I got inside my apartment, I could feel the spinning churn my stomach around. I stumbled to my kitchen cabinet and got a mixing bowl, placed it on the floor beside my bed. Then I filled a glass with water, drank most of it, filled it up again and set it near my bed someplace where it was least likely to get knocked over. I don't know how long I tried to go to sleep for before leaning over the side of my bed and puking into the mixing bowl, but once it happened I knew exactly what to do next. I opened the window for some fresh air, tore open a packet of Saltines and forced myself to eat 2 of them, then laid back down and combed my fingers through my hair, humming to myself until I fell back asleep. I felt horrible the next day, but there was something oddly comforting about taking a Tylenol and washing the vomit out of my mixing bowl. The certainty that I knew so well how to take care of myself wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

Letter of Recommendation

To whom it may concern,

I'm writing to recommend my sister to your opera program/therapy session/family reunion.

I believe Christine would be a great fit for your program because she has proven herself to be a person of unimaginable endurance. Her qualities that once terrified me when we were kids – her older sister need to always be right and always be The Boss, her ferocity in demanding our Mom buy her lacy neon thongs from Target when she was in the sixth grade – are the very ones which now render me awestruck. In her graceful adulthood, Christine has managed to use her childhood bossiness to direct a modernized opera performance, become a kindergarten music teacher, and co-found her own nonprofit opera company. (For reference, see: Lowbrow Opera Collective.) The fire my sister can produce that once had me slinking to my bedroom now makes four-year-old's laugh and captures the interest of opera-hating millennials.

In our family's 2013-2014 production of *The Divorce*, Christine took on multiple roles – The Detective, discovering the gaudy evidence of the affair; The Confronter, unafraid to present the evidence to Father, the accused; The Whistleblower, holding the house phone and frantically looking up who to call to reveal the infidelities of The Accused and jeopardize his army career. It should be noted that Christine's performances here also speak to her unwavering loyalty. The older sister I used to fight with over American Girl Dolls now holds my hand tighter than she ever used to. We're accustomed to the feeling of one another's shaking shoulders when holding a crying sister. Christine has also proven flexibility in undertaking roles – for several years now she and I take turns parenting one another, parenting our parents.

When it comes to partnerships, I believe you will find a well worthy candidate in Christine. Despite her resume's history of self-esteem-tanking sexual partners (see: "fuckboys") and gaslighting part-time boyfriends, Christine has demonstrated that she is not only willing to put up with negative personality traits, but will patiently stay up late talking through conflicts. The "blow ups" etched into the slammed doors of our childhood home have evolved into deep breaths, the occasional condescending tone, but mostly a remarkable patience and an unending willingness to roll up her sleeves and say "alright, let's talk about it."

In conclusion, my sister has put up with more than one can conceivably survive. She has maintained a meaningful friendship with our father, and continues to love me unconditionally, despite my tendency towards condescension and judgement.

For further reference, I encourage you to contact:

1) our mother, who excitedly texts everyone in the extended family when Christine is part of an opera performance.

2) her partner of two years, her longest relationship yet, who spent last Christmas at our house gazing adoringly at her.

Sincerely,

Julia Oshiki

Younger Sister

Wax Graveyard

Under my bed, I keep a box of candle corpses. The way a candle melts, there's always an inch or so of wax left at the bottom of the jar once the wick burns through. I used to put my burned out candle jars into recycling when I was done with them, but I read somewhere that that lingering leftover wax makes the candle nonrecyclable. Supposedly, you're supposed to put boiling water in the candle corpse, making the leftover wax float to the top, and once it's cooled, you can pick out the wax and throw it away, recycling the glass container. I've tried this a couple of times, and it never works – there's always a bit of the white film that sticks all over my fingers and refuses to budge, no matter how many hot water batches I do. So now I have the box under my bed. I tell myself that, eventually, I'll get around to actually digging out the remaining wax, maybe even use the leftover jars for something, but I never do. Sometimes, though, I'll lean over the edge of my bed, pull out the box, and smell each candle remains, one by one, then slide the box back under.

Sick Day 5

You were visiting me for the first time after we decided to do long distance. You were leaving tomorrow, and I woke up with the sore throat and saggy sinuses that can only mean one thing. You started your new job that week, and were still stuck in flurry of apartment hunting, with several viewings lined up – I was the one to make the call that you shouldn't kiss me, you couldn't afford to get sick. You reluctantly agreed while you held me naked in cherished early morning hours. I hadn't expected last night's sleepy goodnight kiss to be our last for the next six weeks. Even if I didn't want to get you sick, I was still disappointed. With a sigh that pretended to be discreet, I asked if you wanted scrambled eggs for breakfast. You took my face in your hands, smiled sunshine into me, and fully planted your lips onto mine. "It's worth it." My face bloomed into a helpless smile and I buried it into your shoulder blade and started to cry.

Disney World

In 2013 – the summer before my senior year of high school, a few months after my parents decided to get divorced – my dad took me, Christine, and my high school best friend, McKayla, to Disney World. Despite the mysterious blowout between Christine and Dad, I still look back on it as one of my favorite trips. McKayla and I were *obsessed* with everything Disney in high school. We approached every aspect of our time there with reverence, as if we were on holy land. Part of me was afraid that conflict would arise – Christine and I are both ones to get stressed out when travelling, and the navigating of schedules while McKayla and I would hit one side of the parks while Christine and Dad did the other seemed to make an tense argument inevitable. I thought we had finally arrived at the inevitable when McKayla and I were supposed to meet up at a specific spot with Christine and Dad. We were already running a little late, but then just as we neared the meeting point, an electric light parade blocked the road. McKayla and I grinned at each other, shrugged, and watched the parade pass by with delight. I think my phone must have died, because for some reason we couldn't communicate why we were late to Christine and Dad. And when we finally did catch up with them, Christine was livid in that silent, terrifying way. It's almost worse than when she blows up and yells at you. (Almost.) Once we got back to the hotel and I prodded her to talk about it, she only said that she wasn't mad at me or McKayla – she was mad at Dad. When I asked what he did, her mouth thinned and she said she'd tell me later. She didn't want to ruin the trip.

The second blowout of the trip happened outside the scuba building. While McKayla and I soaked up the Disney parks, Christine and Dad opted to use some of the time to go scuba diving. On our way to the airport towards the end of the trip, they had to stop by the building to

pick up the underwater photos of Christine trying to pet the fish. Dad went inside to get the pictures while the three of us waited in the car. McKayla and I sat in the backseat and watched Christine pick up Dad's phone that he had left, and stare at the screen for a long time. She started breathing harder, quickly muttered, "be right back," and speed-walked into the building after him.

McKayla and I sat in the car for a long time. A suspiciously long time. I texted both Christine and Dad asking if everything was okay, but neither of them responded. I was glad to have McKayla there, because we just used the extra time to watch another Disney movie on her iPod. When they finally got back in the car, both of them were silent and infuriated. McKayla and I tried to lighten the mood by talking about how fun it was to ride the yeti rollercoaster the other day, but only Dad responded with forced enthusiasm. Christine glowered out the passenger window, arms folded. At the airport, I tried to ask her what was wrong, but Christine still insisted that she could tell me and McKayla were having a blast, and didn't want to ruin the trip. She promised to tell me when we got home. Tentatively, I asked, "is it about Ginger?" Rumors had been going around about them flirting a lot during the parent meetings at our theatre program. I didn't think it was a big deal, since Mom and Dad already planned on divorcing several months ago. Sure, it wasn't official and finalized yet, but if they were already split up, wasn't he allowed to be interested? Christine nodded in answer to my question. During the flight I raced through what about Dad and Ginger could possibly have made Christine so upset.

It wasn't the affair. Or rather, it wasn't that she discovered how *long* the affair had been going on for. Christine wouldn't find out about that for another few months. Instead, it was that she caught Dad sending romantic texts to Ginger all throughout our trip. She caught the first

“I miss you (heart)” text peaking over his shoulder the night we were late to meet up with them. Then when she looked through his phone, she found all sorts of nauseating texts about how she wished she was there with him, how much he wished for that too, etc. I was disgusted, but I could tell it *meant* something to Christine. How it felt like the body of our parents’ marriage wasn’t even cold yet – how could he possibly already be in so deep with someone else? How this trip was supposed to be *their* time to reconnect in the wake of this fracture, and yet here he was wishing that his “new” girlfriend was there. I stared at my suitcase open on my bedroom floor as Christine told me, and squeezed her into a hug while we sat on my bed.

The evidence leaves a sour taste in my mouth after we all learned the truth. But even now, when I look at the pictures of me and McKayla posing with Buzz Lightyear at Disney World, it only fills me with light. I know that having McKayla, my friend-soulmate there was what made it unforgettable. But Christine’s sacrifice, her bearing the weight of our father’s infidelity on her own in order to preserve my innocent joy, that will always make her my prince.

PART FOUR

Ashland

The first time I went to Ashland, Oregon was with Caden and his parents in the summer of 2018. Apparently Ashland is an annual trip for Caden's family; his mom the high school English teacher loves it for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and his dad loves the quiet nature and outdoor aesthetics of the town.

Leading up to the trip, I battled between seeing it as a milestone (a trip with the parents! Wow! Things are getting serious!) and trying to approach it as casually as Caden was (he'd brought his friends along on Ashland trips in the past, this wasn't that different, plus he didn't even invite you back home for his birthday and family barbecue last month, don't make this a bigger deal than it needs to be). We'd only been dating for a little over six months, and had just moved into an apartment together after graduating college earlier that summer; I was aching for signs that this was going well, that we were doing it right. And if rom-coms and romance movies had taught me anything, it's that the encounter with the parents is the tell-all sign of whether or not you truly *belong*.

We drove the five hours from Portland to Ashland in the middle of July, in Caden's blue dusty Honda Civic with an air conditioner that only worked about 50-60 percent of the time. When I took my turn driving, he asked me to stop tailgating the car ahead of us and I pouted for the rest of my turn, driving slower than necessary out of self-conscious pettiness. I held his hand while he drove and stared out at dusty Oregon landscapes, wanting to see our first real road trip

together as a symbol of our successful relationship, embarrassed that I was even looking for signs at all.

I'd only had one meeting-the-parents experience before Caden – a painfully cringey chat with Brandon's dad outside of my college dorm building, me apologizing over and over waiting for my roommate to bring my keys down because I'd accidentally locked us out. I'd already met Karen and Brian once before earlier that year, and I already knew they were easy to be around. They laughed at my jokes and asked me thoughtful questions and looked at their son like he was their whole world. And somehow in Ashland I was still petrified over what they might think of me, couldn't shake stilted smiles and constant overthinking.

Karen and I gushed over comparing our favorite Shakespeare plays and performances. Brian held a contented smile the whole time we were there, occasionally gripping Caden's shoulder affectionately, or pulling him into a hug. At the record store, he asked me what kind of music I liked and my brain frantically sought out an answer that was honest-but-not-too-weird, even though I'm sure Caden's dad wouldn't have cared either way. Every Christmas, Caden's gift to his dad is a CD playlist of rock and heavy metal that he thinks Brian would like ("He's just completely off the grid; this way even if he's not on the internet, he can at least still hear what some of the newer stuff up his alley sounds like").

We walked through the downtown area, pointing out the buildings we thought were pretty, making guesses on the price listings on the houses for sale, peeking into shop windows. Brian and Karen held hands sweetly while we walked, Caden and me holding hands behind them. Despite my self-sabotaging anxieties, I couldn't get over how easy it all felt, how easily this family seemed to fit together. Something that astounded me when I first started dating Caden

was how effortless it was to be with him. Being with Karen and Brian, it was clear that all the things I loved most about Caden – his clear communication, his unflinching support, his sense of humor, his easygoing demeanor – they were all things he’d learned from his parents. And I kept thinking of all the things I’ve spent years trying to unlearn from mine.

I texted my mom loads of pictures during the trip. Ashland seemed to ooze with tiny trinkets and aesthetics that resonated perfectly with who my mom was: watercolor woodland creatures painted onto plates and kitchenware, funny Shakespeare quotes on refrigerator magnets, ceramic frogs dressed like Hamlet and Mercutio and Juliet, dozens and dozens of little fairy figurines. Mom replied with “OOOOO!” and paragraph-long text stories of her favorite memories abroad in England. After putting a dried leaf gift inside a small fairy door outside of a toy shop, I decided that I would bring her here someday.

Almost one year and another Ashland trip with Caden’s family later, I told Mom that for Mother’s Day, I wanted to get us a hotel in Ashland and take her to see *Much Ado About Nothing*. Mom drove to my and Caden’s Portland apartment in June of 2019 where we drove to Ashland together in her big minivan that still smelled like Otto. We talked about her church job (“the new pastor is really...there was a word Mary used to describe him... Oh, crunchy! He’s very ‘granola,’ and it’s kind of weird”), and my upcoming move to Colorado. We talked about Christine (“like I remember when we would go shopping together, like at Target, she would push and *push* to get like, *really* lacy lingerie thongs. And she was, you know, only twelve or thirteen! I *hated* pushing back, but I remember having to negotiate with her to get something only a *little* sexy, which was already bad”) and I went on a rant about how fucked up it is that girls are taught to be valued as a sexual commodity from the moment they become aware of sexuality at all.

I remember getting annoyed and losing my patience with Mom, but I don't remember what it was even about. I just kept thinking, *once we get to Ashland, it'll be fine.*

I don't really know what I was expecting the trip to be – I guess I wanted to copy+paste my time with Caden's parents but have it apply to me and my mom. Even though I still avoided asking about Dan so that we wouldn't fight, I felt like my mom and I were in a much better spot than we were two years ago. I'd showed her the essays I'd written about her during my undergrad thesis; after reading it she told me that she regrets ever letting Dan influence her parenting, while still trying to offer a clumsy defense of her motives and his. I'd visited her multiple times, and we'd sit on the couch watching movies and drinking wine, or putting on old home videos from when Christine and I were babies. So long as we stayed rooted in the past, things were great.

I wanted to believe that Mom and I were kindred spirits with the same kind of whimsy and silliness; the kind that had us talking in airy British accents, or pointing out to each other all the awesome tiny details of things that no one else noticed, like the little door knocker on the dollhouse cottage. I wanted Ashland to be three days of reveling in that sameness between us, the bridge between that rift that had ruptured in the wake of the divorce and Dan.

It's not that the trip was bad – my mom loved all the little bits and bobs that I had hoped she would, and we're well-versed in how to make each other laugh – it's just that there was enough prickliness for both of us to notice. We kept getting lost, I didn't remember my way around as well as I'd hoped I would, and I got irritable when Mom tried to help. She didn't have the same endurance for walking around all day that Caden's parents did, so we had to take lots of breaks back at the hotel. I wanted to try eating at local restaurants, but we couldn't easily settle on a place, Mom was on a budget, and more often than not we settled on tiny snack breaks at the

Starbucks across the street. I couldn't put my finger on what it was that made me so easily frustrated; as we wandered around, or tried to get to a specific place, her brows would knit together, and she'd get this dazed look in her eyes, and something about that look made me repeatedly huff and steamroll ahead in the direction that Google Maps directed me towards. On the second day there, she got fed up with my attitude. "I'm not stupid," she said. And then the embarrassment of being so impatient and rude to my own mother, to this woman who I'd worked so hard at finding my way back to, over something as stupid as directions felt so shameful. She was already being constantly belittled in her relationship – how could I add on to that with my own condescension? I could only distantly nod and say, "I know. I know."

It didn't end up looking like the two Ashland trips I'd taken with Caden and his parents, but with my mom getting frequent headaches and achy feet, the smoothest solution was the two of us camping out in our hotel room bingeing the entirety of *Good Omens* on the TV, each of us in our parallel hotel beds. Caden texted me later that second night, *how's it going?* I could feel myself shrinking into the bed as I texted back that we just ended up watching TV for most of the afternoon and evening.

On the third day we were set to drive back to Portland by mid-afternoon. We walked through the park, the quiet bubbly creek and miniature rock quarry, and I tried to make sense of the strange cocktail of emotions – the desperate desire to make the most of our time together, to recognize the rare and special fragility of our relationship, disappointment that a decent chunk of the visit hadn't gone the way I'd hoped, the impending wave of relief once I was finally back home at the apartment with Caden, the internal exhale of not having to tiptoe anymore, and guilt at that eagerness for relief. We walked past town square. My mom must have caught my distant

overthinking gaze, or my clenched jaw, because she started to tear up. “What’s wrong?” Her voice was small and quiet when she finally said, “I really think you must hate me.”

I pulled her to a bench beside the library and tried to ignore the happy bustling tourists around us. Tears rolled silently down her cheeks. I waited for her to say more. When she didn’t, I asked, “why do you think I hate you?”

She took in a shaky breath. “I can see how frustrated you’ve been with me this entire trip. And it’s not just this. Every time we spend time together, I see how annoyed you get with me. I just don’t know what to do.”

I started to deny, started to provide excuses (“there’s just been a lot of hiccups, and I really didn’t expect to get so lost around here, I forgot there were so many hills, I’ve been stressed, it’s not you, though”) but her disbelieving silence and her stoic stare forward was enough for me to try and re-gather my words.

“I guess I just...we have a history me supporting you. And I don’t want you to think that I’m sick of it, because I’d never abandon you when you need me,” the unspoken admission of *I don’t want Dan to ever be your only support network*. “but...it does get exhausting sometimes, I guess. It’s exhausting.” There just wasn’t a way to tell her without being cruel. To tell her that I wanted her to be Karen and Brian, guiding me through town, asking me about my life and being My Mom. How do you confront those kinds of issues with someone whose self-confidence is already at a low-point?

She was still crying, but it had dulled to a gentle snuffle. I rubbed her back and told her how much I loved her, but I could still feel a quiet rage gurgling inside of me. “What happened?” she asked. “It used to be so good. We used to be so close, and it’s like now you can’t even stand me.”

Finally, I said matter-of-factly, “well, we were close before because you’d never cut me out of your life before. Things are different now because we have a traumatizing history. Ever since the divorce,” my hand still on her back, “none of it has been the same, and I don’t think we *can* ever go back.”

Her face hardened. “I still think I did what I had to do. Maybe I went about it the wrong way, but you’re right, we couldn’t stay with the way things were. I’d been stepped on for *so long*, something had to change. It had to.” I thought back to when I’d visited Mom back in March earlier that year. How she mentioned, jaw tight, the vitriolic disgust her mother, my grandma, had for her after hearing about my mom severing ties with me and Christine. I remember wanting to scream *well! Do you not understand how fucked up it was?! What you did?* On the library bench beside her, my hands clasped together on my lap, tension filling me with helium, I wondered if maybe it *was* an insurmountable rift between us.

After the enraged silence within me subsided, I said, “yeah, it did need to change. And regardless of how harmful those changes were, we’re here now. So...I guess we can only go forward?” It came out of my mouth awkward and cliched, and it reminded me of how my sister and dad always approached family drama with a cinematic practice that could have only been informed by a movie script.

Mom’s lip quivered. I reached over and squeezed her hand. “But I’m glad we’re here now. I’m glad I got to spend time with you here.” She smiled like she only one-third believed me, but eventually she said “ze wee feeeh-ries,” a reference to the whimsy-inspired accents we’d adopted in the fairy trinket shop. I laughed a little too forced, but we silently decided to pave over a conflict that neither of us yet had the solution for.

Afterwards, I don’t think either of us knew how we should remember that trip. The warm

glow of realizing over dinner that neither of us actually knew what *Much Ado Nothing* was about, and frantically googling it before the play? The cozy indulgence yet quiet disappointment of watching *Good Omens* in the hotel room? The one of many confrontations of *The Rift* that left both of us sad and exhausted? In truth, there weren't that many narratives for the kind of relationship we had. Mothers and daughters are usually either best friends, or one of them is dead, or they've had a falling out and don't speak at all. There aren't enough stories about the sticky, difficult friction of trying to rebuild something fractured.

Unexpected Silver Linings of 2020 (1)

I hadn't expected the pandemic to be what would finally free my mother from her 6-year-long abusive relationship. She and Dan have been on-again-off-again so frequently that when she called me in June saying that she had left Dan's place and was back to living at her Olympia house because "I just can't imagine being *stuck* with that person, like *not* being able to leave," I secretly assumed in between hour-long phone calls that, like before, he would eventually come back to her house and ask her out to dinner, pretending that they'd never broken up. What I didn't expect was for my mom to hold so steadfastly to not taking him back this time. Up until the summer of 2020, the longest she and Dan had remained broken up was a little over two weeks. But then the months kept passing, and then it was fall and she still hadn't spoken to Dan. I don't know what did it, but something pulled her to call a domestic abuse hotline and talk to someone. "And she's not like our old family counselor Carol, she'll kind of, *bully* me into taking steps to keep myself safe." In June of 2020, my mom started playing the radio turned up all the way by the front window. She left the lights on all the time. She taped paper over the glass on the front door and shut the blinds. She kept her car parked in the garage instead of out in the driveway so that Dan would never whether or not she was home, so he wouldn't keep showing up. The woman on the domestic abuse hotline gave her a to-do list of steps to take to make sure that Dan wouldn't force himself into her life anymore. She filed paperwork that set her up to serve Dan with a restraining order if he continued to contact her. She sent Dan a letter explaining why she no longer wanted contact with him so that the communication was documented. She got the locks changed and didn't answer when he knocked and knocked at the door. It wasn't until she told me later that September about all the post-abusive-relationship Facebook groups she'd

joined that I finally believed this man was out of our lives for good.

Your Father's Daughter

On the phone with my therapist in 2020, I tell her that I often don't know how to read the motives behind my dad's actions. *Multiple people – my grandma, my mom, our family friend – have said that they think he's a narcissist. And I just can't help but feel like, every time we interact, he's always trying to get something out of it.* And I'm so tired. I'm tired of trying to understand this man, I'm tired of things not being easy. I just want to be able to talk with him without clenching my jaw, without constantly psychoanalyzing him. *Whether he's a narcissist or not really doesn't have to be your responsibility to carry,* my therapist says. *You can just be your father's daughter.*

Your Mother's Daughter

Before my mom comes to visit in the summer of 2021, I painstakingly embroider a tiny hobbit hole for her as a belated Mother's Day gift. She fawns over the lemon-print dress I sewed - the same fabric that we bought together in the Sewing Weekend of 2018 - and when we get to my house, she notices every small detail and smiles in her whimsical way, the same way she grins at Jim Henson puppets or fairy rings. She notices my fluttering sheer curtains and hanging flower wreaths and the framed art prints. Before my grandma and aunt finish their drive up to Colorado to join us, I cart out my scrapbooks and show them off to my mom. I feel like a little kid showing off her school drawings, but my mom genuinely loves every bit of it. Even after my grandma and aunt show up, I feel an invisible pull towards my mom. Idle passing affection, my head resting on her shoulder, her bubbling laughter at my jokes. The whole five days of their visit, my mom shows an interest in the things she knows I love. She brings up songs from my favorite show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, she's enthusiastic about listening to more of my boyfriend's comedy podcast, even when my grandma and aunt subtly imply it's not their thing. It's an overwhelming love - she pulls out her camera to take a photo of the heart-shaped sugar cubes I keep in the tea cupboard - and I realize it's one that's always been a bond between us.

After the visit, my grandma sends me a thank-you note. *Seeing the many ways that you have made your environment so inviting was a real treat. It was affirmation that as Beth's daughter you have built upon many of the models that she offered - sewing, organizing your space, those special touches from your calendar to heart-shaped sugar cubes.* Her note reminds me of the most tender compliment that I can think of to give my mother. Whenever I am curled into her side, a baby bird with my mother's wing over me, I softly tell her, "I'm *so glad* I'm

related to you. All my favorite parts of me are parts of you.”

Unexpected Silver Linings of 2020 (2)

“I’ve just been really itching to *write* more,” Mom tells me in December. She’s been engrossing herself in online study groups that analyze C.S. Lewis and Tolkien. For her birthday, I send her some of the books I read from my medieval literature class and she is over the moon with the exposure to academia. Instead of asking my mom tiptoed questions of “so where are you staying these days?” and “how have things been?” she texts me semi-daily, sends me pictures of old family photos (“I’ve been really getting into studying ancestry again. Did I tell you that one of our distant relatives was an accidental bigamist? It’s like something out of an old war drama!”) and childhood toys that she grew up with, and renaissance-style artwork of Alice in Wonderland or *The Wind in the Willows*. It’s sometimes overwhelming, but the genuine newfound happiness that leaks out of my phone screen more than makes up for it.

Unexpected Silver Linings of 2020 (3)

In her domestic abuse support group, my mom befriended a woman who's writing a book about how she learned to stop tolerating her own mistreatment. My mom, the once-an-editor (who once orchestrated a photoshoot that involved her peering wickedly over her glasses and dramatically scowling, pen in hand, at a sheet of paper, "a misplaced COMMA!") was asked to help her friend edit the book. On the phone, she tells me how strange it is that this woman left so many obvious misspellings and grammatical mistakes in her draft. "Like, I would be *embarrassed* to make other people correct this kind of stuff, is that normal for writers to just not worry about small stuff like this?" She was so scared that her friend would think that she was being too nitpicky, but then when the book was finally published, my mom made the first-page dedication. And I couldn't stop thinking about how this mushroom-soft lady, who once was kicked out of Dan's house post-surgery with a plastic bag connected to her kidneys, this woman now had a book on fighting against abuse dedicated in her name.

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