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My impediment adulthood : quarterlife crisis and beyond

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

MY IMPENDING ADULthood:
QUARTERLIFE CRISIS AND BEYOND

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
CREATIVE WRITING
by
Corey Ginsberg

2009

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Corey Ginsberg, and entitled My Impending Adulthood: Quarterlife Crisis and Beyond, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Vernon Dickson

Les Standiford

Dan Wakefield, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 3, 2009

The thesis of Corey Ginsberg is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean George Walker
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2009

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my amazing family and friends. Thank you for allowing me to use your lives as fodder for my essays. Without your support and your willingness to put up with my mood swings, whining, and incessant rocking in the fetal position for the past five years, I would never have been able to complete this project.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
MY IMPENDING ADULthood:
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by

Corey Ginsberg

Florida International University, 2009

Miami, Florida

Professor Dan Wakefield, Major Professor

My Impending Adulthood: Quarterlife Crisis and Beyond is a collection of personal essays that chronicles the time before, during and shortly after the narrator's quarterlife crisis. The further removed from childhood she grows, the more the narrator clings to aspects of her youth she fears she'll lose when she resigns to enter the adult world—a place she believes is stifling and terrifying. Each essay in this collection serves as a lens through which the adult world is examined, admired, feared, avoided and misunderstood as the narrator works to accept that she must grow up, despite nearly three decades of persistent resistance. The essays illustrate ways in which innocence is incrementally lost, while at the same time celebrating ways in which portions of this innocence is preserved and appreciated. This collection aspires to give a voice to readers in their twenties whose struggles are often ignored by the literary world.

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SECTION ONE

“In the time of chimpanzees I was a monkey.”
~Beck

SWIMMING BECOMES YOU

“We’re doing flip turns,” Coach Matt said as he pointed toward the shallow end of the pool. “Why don’t you hop in and give it a try?”

You’d never swum a full length with your head in the water, let alone heard of a flip turn. But everyone was staring as you stood there, goggles in hand, navy suit three sizes too big hanging from the shoulders of your bony nine-year-old frame. Mom nodded from her seat in the grass, eyes saying, *go ahead*.

“It’s easy,” Coach Matt said when he sensed your hesitation. He smiled and winked at you from behind thick glasses. “Just swim toward the wall, and when you’re about two feet away from hitting your head, turn upside down, flip over and push off on your back.” The way he gestured with his body and arms made his belly jiggle and he looked like a fish in a hula hoop.

You pushed your long blonde hair behind your ears, put your goggles on and climbed into the pool. You took your place at the back of the line of swimmers and watched them each complete the drill. Every few seconds a new person headed down the lane, approached the wall and rolled upside down in a fast, clean motion. Then they pushed off on their back, extended their arms and kicked till they floated to the end of the line. The other kids made it look simple, with their bent elbows, side breathing and quick, on-target flips.

When it was your turn you tried to mimic their movements but your body wouldn’t bend that way. You thrashed and fought for every stroke. Each time your right arm came out of the water, your left shoulder dropped and you rolled too far onto the

side. Even though your legs were kicking hard, your hips still sank. By the time you made it to the wall you were nearly vertical in the water, pushing forward, grabbing to stay afloat.

Still, you tried to flip, to make your body roll into a compact ball and propel your feet over the top of your head. But it didn't work. You dipped down, tucked your chin and blew bubbles out your nose. When you finally inverted your body, there was no air left in your lungs and you began to choke. You surfaced and coughed as water spewed from both nostrils.

When your next turn came, you managed to flip over without inhaling water but went too far and ended up standing in the pool facing the wall. The turn after that, the same thing. And again. And again. Even though Coach Matt said it didn't matter, that you'd figure it out, you ran to the bathroom to be away from the other swimmers so they wouldn't see you cry. You could hear them laughing and splashing each other as you sat in the first stall staring at the green rubber floor.

The whole way home in the car you begged Mom not to make you go to practice the next day.

"I hate swimming. I don't even know how to do it right."

"Honey, give it another try," she said. "You're just starting. You won't even know if you like it till you give it a real chance."

"But I don't want to."

"Please, one more try?"

And it began.

That first summer it was short practices, no more than forty-five minutes, four times a week. On the days before swim meets the team played Sharks and Minnows and Coach Matt let everyone out early to go off the diving board. Those were the best practices, when you left the pool laughing and excited. That summer, even competitions weren't too bad. One length of the pool freestyle, no flip turn. Sure, most of the time you were slower than everyone else—the alternate in the outside lane whose points didn't even count, flailing just to stay afloat—but at least your slowness wasn't so obvious in a short race. At the end of the meet, no matter who won, everybody got cookies and orange drink and there was a pool party with a DJ.

But that winter swimming changed. Your best friend's mother encouraged you to sign up for an indoor team, the one her daughter was on that practiced at the local high school. She told you it would be fun, and you'd get a lot faster, just like Lisa had. Plus, it would be nice to carpool.

For the first two weeks the new team was great. Each night you played games or learned how to do starts on the block, and the little swimming you did wasn't too bad. Sometimes you got to use flippers or Styrofoam pull buoys that went between your legs to make them float during arms-only sets. Everything about indoor swimming was so new and fun you didn't realize this was just the honeymoon.

At the end of the free trial period, your parents sent in the non-refundable check for nearly a thousand dollars to pay for the winter and spring seasons. When you walked onto the deck that following Monday, most of the swimmers from your lane were gone. You stood in the corner and watched the fast kids stretch their shoulders and hamstrings and tried to mimic their arm circles.

Practice wasn't fun anymore. Workouts were every weekday for an hour-and-a-half with optional Saturday morning swims. Just like in the summer, you quickly learned you were the slowest one, only on the new team it was more obvious. Now you were with kids who trained year-round, whose parents never let them miss a practice—eight-year-olds who shaved their arms for competitions and could swim two lengths of the pool underwater without their chests heaving. Most of them knew the intricacies of butterfly, understood the scissor kick in breaststroke and could do pullouts that took them well beyond the halfway point in the pool. They were used to swimming four or five miles at a time. The fast kids could lift themselves out of the water at any spot on the wall using their arm muscles. You had to climb up the ladder, one rung at a time. After really hard practices you sometimes stopped halfway up the stairs on the way up the bleachers to catch your breath.

At your first meet that winter—B Championships—you were signed up to swim the fifty yard freestyle—two lengths of the pool. That whole day you camped in the auditorium on a huge blanket playing *Go Fish* with the other swimmers, nervously waiting for them to call your event. Your parents sat in the bleachers for four hours, sipping Pepsi and fanning themselves with the heat sheet, until you finally climbed onto the starting block.

The gun went off and everyone dove in together. By the time you took your first stroke the other swimmers were already five yards ahead. They pulled further and further away; some of them had already finished as you approached the halfway point. You tried not to breathe much since lifting your head made your whole stroke fall apart, but your lungs burned. Each time you snuck a breath to the left you saw Coach Jen signaling for

you to go faster, her long blonde hair waving with her arms. At the end of the race everyone in the bleachers applauded—the pity clap. You pulled yourself out of the pool, flopped onto the deck and saw you’d gone a 1:02, a time that would place you last in the slowest indoor meet in Pittsburgh.

During the car ride home, Dad kept glancing at you through the rearview mirror. At each stoplight he’d steal a quick look, then rub his fingers over his moustache and fidget with the knobs on the radio.

“How about we stop for pizza?” he asked when the car was a few miles from home.

Mom nodded as she wiped off the lenses of her glasses with her shirt sleeve. “I think that’s a great idea.”

Swimming continued through the winter and into the spring. There were minor improvements during that time, like learning to breathe to both sides and figuring out how to make the knees bend during the breaststroke kick. As the efficiency of each stroke improved, finishing a lap wasn’t so hard anymore, and you could complete sets without your arms twitching and your chest burning. Even though your breaststroke was still ugly and swimming butterfly was impossible, your backstroke was finally legal, which added some variety to workouts.

That season Coach Jen fudged your times—listing them ten, twenty seconds faster than they really were—just so you could go to bottom-tier competitions. You’d head out with your parents at six a.m., drive to some unremarkable swimming pool, warm up, and sit there for hours waiting for your forty-five second race. Sometimes you dropped a few

seconds and placed sixty-fifth out of eighty swimmers. Other days you disqualified for gliding into the wall on a backstroke turn or for wobbling on the starting block before the gun sounded. In the lobby on the way out of the meet, your teammates gathered around the results table, waiting to pick up their medals or trophies. You looked down as you walked past and pretended not to be jealous.

Still, though, there were other things besides swimming, like softball, basketball and soccer—or just going to a friend’s house after school to hang out. Some nights you traveled straight from the pool to the softball field or to basketball practice. Mom brought dinner with her—usually a heaping plate of food you shoveled in with your fingers, half done by the time the van pulled out of the parking lot. You rushed onto the court ten minutes late with wet hair and untied shoes, ready to spend the next hour chasing after the basketball.

Other nights you skipped swimming practice. Sometimes there was a fight, but you persisted, begged. Mom reminded you this sport was expensive, and that you’d made a commitment when you signed up to be there when the coach said you should. You screamed and told her the coach never said you had to go to *every* practice. She reminded you she’d spent hundreds of hours driving you to and from the pool with your little brother and sister in the back of the van because you had told her you wanted to get better. How did you expect to get better by skipping practice?

But usually you won and Mom finally said, “Do whatever you want,” in the voice that meant she was done arguing. On those afternoons there was a moment of triumph. You ran upstairs, threw on your tennis shoes and grabbed a stack of Nintendo games. As you headed down the street toward your friend’s house, though, the guilty, nagging voice

crept its way in. The whole afternoon, as you sat there playing Mario 3 or watching MTV, you wondered what everyone else was doing at practice, what you were missing. While your friend sat on the couch eating chips, you started to think maybe the reason you were such a bad swimmer was because you weren't as dedicated as everyone else. *Lazy. Slacker. No wonder they're all faster than you.*

One season melted into the next, and your times began to whittle down. Instead of going to "B" swim meets, you started qualifying for the next level, "BB," and then finally for "A" meets. The nights you missed practice became fewer and fewer, and pretty soon stopped happening. You quit tennis, then soccer, then basketball. Even softball, your favorite sport, took a back seat to swimming, and eventually you set your bat and glove in the attic closet.

Then it happened, three years in—your breakthrough meet—Dual League Championships. It was the first time you wore a swim cap and shaved down especially for a competition. When you touched the wall after the fifty freestyle, you saw you had gone a 28:54—a swim that was seven seconds under your previous best. You looked at the clock again to make sure it was really your time you were seeing. All those hard practices you'd made it through—everything that had been given up for swimming—it had all been worth it.

Beginning that afternoon the sport took on a new intensity. Every practice set became crucial; missing one would cost valuable seconds come competition time. If there was traffic on the parkway on the way to the pool, you panicked, swore, wondered how missing those hundreds of yards of warm-up would affect your entire season. You began

to leave earlier for practice. Some days you got there thirty, forty-five minutes before dry land circuit training and sat in the locker room until the door to the pool was unlocked.

One season your practice attendance average was a 105 percent since you managed to get in one extra Sunday workout nobody else attended. You swam through everything—bronchitis, respiratory infections, the stomach flu, strep throat, sprained ankles, cracked bones, a concussion. Missing a single lap would show weakness and would mean you didn't really want it as badly as you said you did—it would make you a hypocrite—and there was nothing worse than that.

The lucid swimming dreams began the summer before freshman year in high school. At first, when you woke up on the floor wrapped in your sheets swimming freestyle, you thought maybe something was wrong inside your head. *It's not normal to swim in your bedroom at three a.m.*, you thought when you turned on the light and saw the rug burns on your forearms and knees. Some nights you woke up and found yourself upside down on the bed, trying to push off the footboard, struggling through a flip turn. The part of you that knew it was the middle of the night would chime in and insist you stop. So you slowed down in the water and treaded for a minute while your body tried to wake up. But then Coach Melanie screamed at you from the other end of the pool. You pulled your head from the water and saw her standing by the bedroom door, her blonde bangs resting on her lined forehead. She gestured angrily with her arms, pointing at you and shouting *go faster!*

So you did.

You were fifteen the first winter of double practices. One day over Christmas break the carpool dropped you off at the bottom of your driveway after the morning workout. There was a half foot of snow on the ground and the cold burned your chapped skin as you made your way toward the house. But the climb was too much. Your thighs pulsed and cramped, so you sat down in a snow bank on the side of the driveway. The snow quickly soaked through your jeans, but it was okay. *I'll just take a little break*, you thought as your muscles relaxed. It felt peaceful to rest there, staring up at the sky, watching the white patches gently fall from the clouds.

Sometime later, your father stood over you in his huge blue jacket, staring down with a snow shovel in hand. "Why are you sleeping on the lawn?" he asked, smiling. "You must want to help me shovel."

The next day was Christmas Eve, and instead of doubling, there was one three-hour marathon practice that was nearly eight miles of swimming. Afterward, as you changed out of your suit and into your clothes, you started to hiccup. The whole ride home in the van the hiccups continued. The lack of oxygen your body had felt during that morning's practice wasn't something it was used to, and it was fighting back. They wouldn't go away no matter what you did. All afternoon, *up, up, up*. By dinnertime, you were nauseated and sore from the contracting motion and didn't want to eat. You fell asleep that night next to the Christmas tree, hungry, sick and still hiccupping.

Swimming took on its own life. There were ten practices each week plus lifting, stretching, dry land circuits, running, technique lessons and competitions. The chlorine and bromine transformed your hair to blonde straw and your skin was perpetually dry and

cracking from the chemicals. Beneath each arm were deep cuts from where the two practice suits rubbed against the skin. You walked like a swimmer; lurching, shuffling, calves and thighs constantly sore from squats, lunges, dead lifts and miles of kicking. When you sat down, your back curved and your shoulders hunched over your body under the constant pressure.

That season—your freshman year—you joined your high school team. Some days you went straight from morning practice to school, and then back to the high school pool as soon as eighth period ended. Usually you left in the middle of the afternoon workout to make it in time for the second half of the club team practice, which was fifty minutes away. At the end of that season, you got best times but missed qualifying for the state championships in both the two hundred freestyle and five hundred freestyles by a combined total of thirteen one hundredths of a second. When they called your name to stand on the podium to receive the fifth place medal, you sat in the end stall in the bathroom because you didn't deserve to be recognized, because you didn't want to have to pretend to smile as everyone took photos of the girls who had made the cut.

That night, as you walked toward the car in the cold Pittsburgh air with your hair frozen to your head, all you could think about was how this could never happen again. *I'll train harder*, you told yourself. *I'll do whatever it takes so next year I'll deserve the medal I earn. Next year I'll be the one at the top of the podium, smiling a real smile.* When you got home you didn't eat dinner or the chocolate cake you had been saving for after the meet. You waited till your parents went to bed, then headed down to the basement and dusted off the old weight bench. The rusted plates rattled against the metal bar as you did one set of reps after the other.

How many mornings did you sit in geometry sophomore year and tune out Mr. Sakrak's theorems and instead write your goal times on the margins of your notebook? How many places did you scribble the number 24:59—the Junior National cut in the fifty yard freestyle? Maybe if you could just imprint it deeply enough into some corner of your brain, it would register in your muscles and forge its own reality.

It never did. That year you made states, but instead of finaling at the meet like all your other teammates, you got thirteenth place in the fifty and one hundred freestyles. Only the top twelve came back at night. Eleven one hundredths of a second off getting another chance to swim, to redeem yourself. Even though you anchored the relay that got fourth and set a school record, you didn't get any best times. Your team won states that year, and you smiled when your friends swam good races, high-fived them as they headed toward the warm-down pool. You smiled while they cheered, smiled as they threw Coach Mike into the water at the end of the last session. When they went back to the hotel to celebrate, you made your parents drive you home.

At dinner that night, you refused to eat. You stared at your Dad, Mom, brother and sister while you sat against the back wall at The Olive Garden and wished they'd stop trying to make you talk about it. Maybe if they knew how much you wanted this, how all you thought about was swimming, they'd have understood how you felt.

The more focused you were on making a cut, the more superstitious you became. As your times got faster, you started to think maybe swimming wasn't as temperamental and fickle as you once believed. Maybe there was some overarching logic behind it, and all

you had to do to keep getting better would be to hone in on this formula and repeat it. That's when the accumulation of rituals and rules began.

Two months before the big meet the diet started: no fried foods, no refined sugars, no alcohol. Each meal had to be a perfect balance of protein, fat and carbohydrates. Water intake was increased, and gradually more vitamins and minerals were added; some nights you swallowed twenty-five different supplements. Even with homework and papers, sleep came first. Before bed, you picked up the stopwatch from the nightstand and visualized your best races. You felt yourself step up onto the block, take your mark, and swim perfect, beautiful freestyle. Nineteen strokes, then a breath. Flip turn. Eleven strokes then another breath. When your fingers jammed into the wall at the end of the race, you stopped the watch and checked the time. If it was more than five one hundredths of a second off your goal, you'd repeated the visualization until it was exact.

Then there was the pre-meet ritual. In the hotel room the day before a big competition, you hosted the shaving party. All your friends sprawled out on beige hotel towels in front of the TV wearing swimsuits. They brought the ice buckets from their rooms and filled them with warm water. You each lined up your shaving tools: razor, four new blades, shaving cream, Band-Aids and lotion. The entire afternoon was spent sitting in front of the television watching cheesy movies, shaving off the accumulation of leg hair the coach had insisted you grow for the past five months to slow your body down in the water. Each leg had to be shaved twice with slow, deliberate lines, then dried off and examined for missed spots around the knees and ankles. Next were the arms—careful around the wrist, elbows and knuckles. You took turns shaving each others' shoulders and backs. All the hair and dead skin had to be removed from each part of the body that

would come in contact with the water, and every nerve ending had to be exposed so you'd have a new, more aerodynamic shape.

The morning of the meet you woke up ten minutes early and put on the tiny water-resistant competition suit, situating the straps so they wouldn't dig too deeply into your shoulders. You stretched your arms, legs and back, then jumped on the bed to wake up the last stiff muscles. For breakfast you had two pieces of French toast, a banana with peanut butter and two glasses of water. In the bus on the way to the meet, loud, angry rap music poured from your headphones.

Then, there was the pre-race ritual. You wrote your event number, heat and lane assignment on your left hand. Fifteen minutes before your swim, you went up behind the starting blocks wearing a racing suit, cap, sweatshirt and sandals. You sat on the deck on your towel and stretched. Three heats before your race, you stood and listened to the starter send off the swimmers in front of you to get a feel for the consistency of the starting speed. With two heats remaining, the goggles went on. Tighten them. Tighter, till the room crossed and bent a bit. A minute before the race, you pushed the air bubbles from beneath your cap. Once the person before you climbed onto the block, you jumped up and down and swung your arms to get your heart rate up. You looked at the girl in the next lane. If she made eye contact, you wished her good luck, then turned away and convinced yourself you hated her. If nothing popped into your head to warrant this feeling, you made up a reason: *She's too tall, too thin, too happy*. When the starter called your heat, there was only time for one deep breath before you stepped up to wait for the gun.

After the race, if you got a best time, you stared at the clock and acted indifferent, as if it really wasn't that big a deal. As you walked toward the warm-down pool, you wiped your face off in the towel to hide your smile. If it had been a bad swim, you looked at the time, shook your head and walked directly to the warm-down area. Snippets of the race bubbled in your mind until your face turned red and you wanted to punch the wall. You stared down as you walked and tried to avoid making eye contact with anyone—especially your coach or teammates. If someone offered congratulations, you shook your head no and kept on walking. When you got to the other pool, you hopped in and looked at your feet for a moment, then went over every aspect of the race to pinpoint what went wrong. As you slowly swam to get your heart rate back down, the voice in your head screamed *You fuckup. You blew the race, all those months of work, those thousands of hours spent training. Step it up in the next event or the whole season will have been a waste.*

For thirteen years swimming was the constant. Even in bad seasons when you didn't register a single best time, it was that thing you did every day that helped to keep you sane. Swimming was there through the roughest transitions, like losing friends and switching high schools. No matter what else was going on in the background, it provided a framework, a point of reference, an identity. It even made the move from high school to college manageable. You chose a school based on where you could swim and found a coach who seemed to be in line with your philosophy as an athlete. For four years, you lived with, trained with, studied with and partied with an extended family of swimmers who understood you in a way most others could not.

Freshman year of college was your fastest season yet. Coach Dave, a balding man with a quick temper and graying beard, focused primarily on sprinting and less on yardage. Practices were shorter and more specialized, and the lifting routine targeted the specific muscles that would be crucial for middle-distance swimming. That season you got best times in nearly everything—from the two hundred freestyle to the two hundred Individual Medley to the one hundred breaststroke and one hundred butterfly.

Freshman and sophomore years, your relays set school records and were well under the qualifying time for NCAA championships, but because of the newly-adopted rule requiring swimmers to get a place number as well as a cut, you missed going by one or two spots. Even though you got best times in some events every season, your freestyle got progressively slower and you didn't know how to fix it. No matter how much you focused on technique, on timing, on head position and shoulder rotation, the stroke always fell apart during competition. By junior year you refused to sign up for the one hundred or two hundred freestyles at big meets, and opted instead for off events like backstroke and breaststroke with the hope of at least dropping time in those.

Some days getting up and working out before class after having spent most of the night studying made you resent swimming. There were weeklong stretches when you had a perpetual headache from trying to balance six classes, a part-time job and double workouts. At the beginning of junior year when you were swimming your poorest, you wanted to quit. After practice in the evening, you took long walks on the golf course and thought about how unhappy swimming made you. As you stared at the reflection of the streetlight in the frost-covered green, you knew you were only torturing yourself; no matter how bad it was, you'd never be able to quit swimming before your NCAA

eligibility was up senior year. Even though it made you miserable, you couldn't imagine what you'd do or who you'd be without it.

Before your final competition senior year, you had a goal meeting with Coach Dave. This was the standard, pre-championship procedure every February in which he met one-on-one with the members of the team to discuss their goals for the events they had signed up to swim.

Each year you came to the meeting with a mental list of your goal times calculated to the hundredth of a second. For every event you would tell him a number—a blanket cutoff that defined success. Achieving that time or better meant the season had been “good,” while anything slower meant the plane ride home would be dismal.

Coach Dave sat across from you in his cluttered office with pen in hand, waiting for you to begin. He knew from past experience you always came ready with a plan for all seven swims; he just had to sit there and jot down notes for his records. But this time you had something else in mind. This meet would mark the end of your swimming career. Once your eligibility was up in two weeks, there would be no more chances to compete. Maybe one or two other seniors on the team would continue on with swimming—join masters teams or paddle around a few times a week at the YMCA, but not you. Unless you were training double practices, lifting and focusing completely on the sport, you would never again achieve a best time. The only thing worse than no longer being a swimmer would be to spend the next sixty years getting progressively slower.

By this point your goals had changed and you were looking for more than just a time. You wanted the right sort of closure, the kind that wasn't possible by obsessing over a set of numbers. What you wanted more than anything was to go out having made peace with the sport. You told Coach Dave your only goal for the championship meet was to be able to get out of the water after each swim and be genuinely okay with how you performed—even if it wasn't a personal best time.

For a long moment he looked at you, not quite sure what to make of the talk. He seemed disappointed, like he couldn't figure out why you always had to be complicated, why you couldn't just give him a number like everyone else. Then he nodded, ran his index finger and thumb through his beard, and nodded again. He bent down and wrote some notes next to your name in his legal pad.

A week later you stood in a crowded hotel room in Atlanta in front of the twenty-two women on the swim team. It felt strange to give the pep talk—to be one of the captains whose time was nearly up rather than a scared freshman who hadn't yet competed in a college championship meet. In your speech you told the team you remembered thinking before you started college that there would only be four years left in your career as a swimmer, and you'd have to make the most of this time. In October of that past year, you realized there were only four months left. That moment as you talked to them, there were only four days remaining till it was over. How quickly it had gone.

You told them, "Swimming is what it is. This meet is not a justification for the season. It's not going to make or break your career as a swimmer or define you as a person. It's just swimming, and it can't define you unless you let it."

They all stared at you as you tripped on your words and tried not to get choked up; you were the quiet captain who hated to speak in front of a group. They also knew you were the one who never seemed to be satisfied with her swims, who usually got out of the pool and scowled at the clock, always shaking her head no. Yet here you were advising them about how to view the sport that had obviously owned you. Who were you really addressing?

The first day of competition you had mediocre races in the fifty freestyle and the two hundred freestyle relay in prelims as well as finals. Even though you placed in both events and your relay medaled, it was no consolation. The second day you finaled in the one hundred yard backstroke—four lengths of the pool. You were seeded seventh that morning with your best time, but knew you could go faster—and were excited to go into finals with this energy behind the swim.

That night, when the starter blew the whistle, you entered the water, placed your feet on the wall and gripped the bar. When he instructed your heat to *take your mark*, you felt your left foot slip down an inch or so. There wasn't time to adjust your starting position, and when the gun went off your left foot didn't catch, which caused your right foot to also slip. When everyone else shot off on their backs, you fell straight into the water with no momentum.

You turned your stroke over as fast as your shoulders would allow, pulling forward with shallow, jerky arm movements. At the first turn you saw you were a body length behind the rest of the swimmers. You were slipping water but it didn't matter; you had to catch up. You kicked harder and fought through the water but still finished in eighth place, over a second slower than you'd gone that morning.

When you climbed out of the pool, your body trembled. You sat down on the deck and looked away from your friends who had been cheering behind your lane and your family who had flown to Atlanta to see your last meet. While you sat there catching your breath, you tried to remember what you had said to the women's team two nights beforehand—that swimming should be fun and that at a certain point times don't really matter—but your brain was too heavy to process anything other than how it felt to slide off the wall and blow your last chance at that event.

The next day you swam a personal best in the two hundred backstroke at prelims, and went a half second faster in finals. Instead of feeling happy when you saw your time, you were already panicking for the next event—the four hundred freestyle relay. It would be the last swim of the meet. Of your career.

An hour later the pool deck exploded with cheers and shouts as the competitors made their way behind the blocks for the final race. Since you were the fourth swimmer, you knew it would come down to you if there was a close finish.

The first person took her mark, dove in, and raced the four lengths. Then the second. Your relay was slowly slipping behind the other teams. When the third person shot into the water, the force of the moment finally registered: this was it—your last swim. You dove in from behind and pushed forward, hoping to make up time. Your brain was sending your legs instructions—*kick harder, don't slow down into the wall*—but the rest of you didn't want to listen. It felt as though your body knew this was the end and had already quit. From fourth place to fifth and then finally to sixth, you slipped further and further behind.

When you looked at the other swimmers who were pulling ahead, there was a moment of realization; this would be the last chance you'd ever have to prove yourself in the pool, to get that amazing time you'd spent the past thirteen years working for. As the force of the thought hit you, you did something you'd never done during a race—you began to cry.

That night in the hotel you drank with the team and smiled for pictures you would later hang on the refrigerator. It was the annual post-championship party, and everyone was drunk, roaming from room-to-room, playing beer pong and listening to music.

When the last of your friends passed out sometime after three, you wandered the hallway, not sure what to do with yourself. Even though you were tired, you didn't want the night to end. You walked from floor to floor in search of anyone who might still be awake. But the hotel was silent. You returned to the stairwell and sat on the cool cement, rubbing your fingers over your prickly arms and listening to the hum of the flickering overhead light.

After more listless drifting, you ended up in the bathroom next to the lobby. There, in the leftmost stall, you sat on the cold granite floor and cradled your head in your hands. The tears came quickly. They poured down your cheeks, streamed off your chin and soaked your sweatshirt. Sitting there in that bright, empty bathroom, you replayed the last race again and again, trying to make yourself okay with it. But how could you be happy with such a poor swim—nearly two seconds off your best?

Nausea hit you all of a sudden. You crouched over the toilet and heaved, but nothing came out. *It's gonna be okay, it's gonna be okay*, you muttered, but the more you

heard the words the less you believed them. You tried to imagine what would come next. You thought back to the time before you were a swimmer, to being eight, nine years old. How did it feel? The harder you focused on remembering, the further your mind wandered and the more frustrated you became. It was as though there were no memories before swimming—nothing but a blur of vague feelings melting together into a white fog.

There were so many swimming moments, though, vivid snapshots hanging in front of the other memories, blocking everything else out. They spanned from the first time you swam the fifty freestyle up until the last race only hours beforehand. As you sat there with your head resting on the wall, you made yourself go through every good and bad swim you'd ever had. You needed to make sure they were imprinted in a place you'd always be able to access, even when the sun came up in a few hours and your last day as a swimmer finally ended.

* * *

The swimming nightmares persist. Some nights you're back in the high school natatorium where you spent so many hours training, the one with the yellowed ceiling and brown tile deck. In other dreams it's an unfamiliar pool with mist hanging over the surface. There's a cold, eerie feeling, as though someone's hiding behind the fog waiting for you. Suddenly you're in the water swimming, and there's no end to the pool. The more you paddle the longer it gets. Your body thrashes and cramps as you try to stay afloat. You can't figure out where you are or why you're swimming, but you know you can't stop. There's always the same feeling of dread, of never being fast enough, of knowing you're letting yourself down.

The alarm finally rips through the threads of the dreamscape. You jolt up in bed, twisted in the down comforter, still not quite sure what's real and what isn't. As your brain tries to process what's just happened and acclimate itself to the new day, you wonder, for a brief, groggy second, if you've overslept and are late for morning practice.

MISSING PIECES

Here are the things I know about my biological father: he's short, thin, has sandy orange hair and a neat-kept moustache. His name is Milo, and I've been told he has a quick, quirky sense of humor. He was a good student and a fast runner, and tended to obsess over little things. Once he graduated from Notre Dame, he became a successful stock broker. He lives in San Rafael, California, in a condominium on a hill with a white door I once parked outside of but never let myself enter.

This man put his wedding ring on the kitchen counter a week before I was born and told my mom he never meant to hurt her, but he'd been sleeping with his client for six months and "two parents are better than one." When the baby came, if she didn't put it up for adoption, he'd fight for custody.

I think I hate this man.

But I don't know if it's possible to hate someone I've never really met, a stranger who should mean nothing more to me than the sperm he used to impregnate my mother and the stories I've pieced together in an attempt to make him real.

A few months after the separation, Milo stopped paying child support. My mother dropped me at my grandparents' house each morning and rode the trolley to work. Her maternity leave was up. I recall being three years old, standing at their storm door in the morning, crying as she walked down the street toward the trolley stop. As I watched her grow smaller and smaller, then finally disappear over the hill at the end of the road, I wondered whether she would come home that night like she'd promised.

My mother doesn't hate this man; she claims she never has. She says that if he were to show up on our doorstep today, twenty-three years since she last saw him, she would invite him in and make him a drink. She tells me this, along with many other snippets, one night as I interview her about her first marriage. We sit on opposite sides of the living room—she on the couch wrapped in a plaid fleece blanket, and me on the loveseat taking notes on my laptop. I type quickly as she answers my questions so that I don't miss a word. Even though we've discussed Milo many times, I want to have all the information on my computer so I can access it whenever I want. Between questions, we sip from matching glasses of Grey Goose—three olives in each—and my mom's hazel eyes fix on the ice in her glass. It's a cold Pittsburgh night; the snow is falling in fat flakes outside the window, but the fire heats the room.

"It's been twenty-three—twenty-four years," she says as she lifts her feet onto the coffee table and adjusts the turtleneck beneath her sweatshirt. "It's so far in the past. When I talk about it, it's like I'm talking about a story, like it didn't happen to me."

I ask if time has helped her move past some of her anger toward Milo. "It's a lot easier to revisit a situation when the rest of your life has gone even better than you expected," she says. My mom refers to her life with Mike, the man who became my Daddy when she married him when I was four, adopted me when I was seven, and came to every one of my soccer matches, softball games and swim meets no matter how busy he was with work. She has two children with Mike—my sister and brother—and never worries he'll cheat on her or leave her with nothing.

"We all go through our own experiences in this life, for whatever reasons. And we do the best we can." She pauses to lift her glass to her lips, then brushes her chestnut

bangs away from her glasses. “Sometimes you hurt someone else. It may be intentional, it may not. If he walked in, I would invite him to dinner. But I can also tell you that if I were living in the ghetto in an efficiency apartment, I’d probably want to slit his fucking throat.”

My mom tells me there was a time when she wanted to hurt Milo like he’d hurt her, to make him suffer for abandoning her the week before I was born and then showing up in the delivery room wearing a “Proud New Father” shirt and a proud grin. She fixes her eyes on the black television screen as she tells me what it was like to be pregnant and terrified. And alone.

“I used to drive into town with you in a car seat in the back of the car. He was living downtown, and there was a spot where I had to drive where he could potentially cross the street,” she says as she stares at the vines on the red Oriental rug. “And I used to think that if he walked out in front of my car, I’d hit the gas. If I killed him, I’d go to jail with a smile on my face.”

If he walked in the door today, I don’t know if I could do the same as my mother—pretend as though it never happened and sit with Milo while we all have a drink. I’ve heard the story of him leaving so many times it’s become my story. And in my story, I get to decide whether or not I hate him. What I like best about the idea of hating Milo is that it’s my decision. It’s my power over him. I can’t change that he walked out of my life all those years ago or that he’s shown no sign of regret about his absence. I can’t change the man he was, the man he is. My only power is in my decision of whether or not he’s worth my hate.

“That’s the thing,” my mother says. “He never intended to hurt me or you. I honestly mean that. We didn’t even factor into his equation.” This isn’t the first time I’ve heard her say this, and with each year that distances her from their divorce, her anger fades a bit and is replaced with a sympathy I sometimes can’t help but feel. What happened in his life to take him to that point? If I were to sit down and hear his side, what secrets would he have to tell?

The story of Milo has become an ongoing research project. Each time he’s brought up a part of me takes notes. My mind is riddled with snippets of the tales I’ve been told—choppy pieces that don’t fit in anywhere besides a stream of consciousness. On nights when I can’t sleep they run through my head like a river. I think about how he told my mom his uncle was deaf, that deafness runs in his family. The possibility his child could be born abnormal was too much for him to handle. I remember my mom saying that a week after she had me, Milo came to our house with his friend, an off-duty policeman, and stole all our furniture while she was at work. When she got home that night, she knew something was wrong as she held me in her arms in the dark. When she turned on the lights, the living room was bare except for the grand piano. On it was a Post-it note: *Came by for a couple of things*. Or the afternoon he had visitation rights at the house and asked if he could take me for a walk. He carried me around the block to where his girlfriend was parked on his motorcycle, and they took off. We were gone for hours. My mom was hysterical; she searched the neighborhood and called the police but there was nothing they could do—it was his time.

I etch each detail into my brain and store it for when I know it will be needed, an indefinite date in the future when we'll meet face to face and I can call Milo out about all he's done. But each snippet I collect takes me further from the ending I crave. The few shreds I have don't amount to anything because they don't tell a complete story. In addition to the missing pieces, there are so many other important lost details that it's hard to construct an entire person. Little things, like what his voice sounds like or his favorite flavor of ice cream. Did he ever remarry? Could I have a half-sister I don't know about? When he meets people at cocktail parties, does he tell them he has a daughter? Do I exist in his world?

On my end, there are gaps in the Milo story, days and weeks when I don't think of his name. He ceases to exist, like a dream that fades into nothingness once the morning has taken over. Then I hear someone say "California," "stock broker," or "Notre Dame," and his world flickers back on.

Half of me is Milo—a biological truth despite my reluctance to accept it. Knowing him may help me to know myself better. What did he feel that Halloween night when he walked out on his nine-month pregnant wife and slept with another woman? Or years later when he stood on his front stoop screaming at the lawyer, refusing to read the adoption papers my parents sent? Have I ever been more to him than a piece of his own puzzle?

I've been told the Milo stories and have always been given honest answers to my questions. But it's not enough. Each question I ask leads to another and another and, before I can help it, I'm arranging the pieces I have to try and form a whole person.

I envision our meeting—a possibility I used to cling to but now realize is not in keeping with my way of solving the puzzle. I see us at a coffee shop, him sitting across the table from me drinking a tall mocha latté with steamed skim milk, playing with the cardboard warming ring and taking note of my face for the first time in twenty-four years. I think *I don't even like coffee*, and wish he'd have thought to ask me this before suggesting we meet at Starbucks. I see me sitting across from him, staring at his blue Polo shirt (or is it white?), looking over his shoulder and past his face, not liking the way his eyes study me. Or I picture us at his condominium, ten or so years from now; he's pouring me iced tea and I'm nervously eyeing the pictures on his mantle of a life I've never known. I study each of these faces—pieces of his puzzle—and wonder what it would be like if I were the person staring back through the glass. I swallow the tea awkwardly, preferring Sweet N' Low to Equal, but not wanting to tell him this.

I've worked our meeting out in my head hundreds of times—what I would wear, the appropriate tone for my voice, the jewelry I'd carefully choose that morning. Each decision is a revelation, a confession to him of a life he'd chosen to miss out on. How much would I reveal? How would he read me? Which pieces of my puzzle would I make available, knowing each one he's offered up to this point has told me so little?

Usually, I see myself playing it cool, giving single-word answers to his questions, leaving him feeling empty and disappointed after I leave. This thought comforts me. I want him to hurt, to know he blew it big time, that I'll never open up to him and he only has himself to thank. I want to see the gears in his head turning and watch him try to understand the person I've become because of him, despite him. And I want Milo to hate himself for missing out on the years it took to get me to this point.

Other times I can't help but see myself telling him everything, opening up like the pages of flimsy newspaper caught in the crosswinds of a storm. I start off quietly nodding, my voice bending and cracking as it breaks through the dust of years. Then it's his warm smile that catches me off guard after a glass of Chardonnay and leaves my cheeks rosy. I see myself in his deep brown eyes, hear myself each time he laughs, in the inflection of his jokes. I'm a pinwheel in a hurricane, spinning out of control, telling him things—confessions I can't believe I'm offering. I let slip my fears, my recurring dreams, my collection of unknowns. Instead of regret, I feel intense relief. He seems to genuinely care, to eagerly await my next story.

Usually before the latter thought progression is too far along, my brain shuts it down. I see myself telling Milo about my family, my life, my philosophical identity, and everything I report opens doors neither of us is prepared to walk through. How could I ever talk to him without judging his abandonment? He's the man who left me—who left us—and I haven't forgotten. I'll never forget.

I keep my "Milo" items in a secret folder in my bedroom—a plain green, two-pocket portfolio just like my others. It's sandwiched between a binder full of literature papers from college and old copies of *Rolling Stone*. I want it to blend in with the rest of my bookshelf, to fit nicely into place as though it belongs there. Nobody knows about this folder or its contents. Inside are eight items: three letters Milo wrote to me, an envelope one of them came in with a return address, a letter he sent to my parents, and the three letters I wrote in response to his inquiries. This folder, as well as the wedding album, are

my most valuable pieces of the Milo puzzle. These items represent the only tangible, real pieces I've ever held.

My mother gave me the wedding album several years ago. She found the leather-bound square in the attic, wedged beneath our winter jackets in a box nobody has touched in over a decade. "There's no point in me keeping it," she said as she shrugged her shoulders and handed me the tiny yellowed book. "What would I do with it?"

In the wedding photos my mom is beautiful; she wore a plain white dress and her Joan Baez hairdo was pulled loosely off her face. Each time I take the album out and study its pages I'm struck by how happy and assured she looks. I flip through the book and wonder what she thinks, years later, when she studies its pages. Does she wish she could go back and warn this younger self that something was off, or does she realize that without this piece to her own puzzle, hundreds of others would disappear and those that remained would never quite fit?

I take the folder and album out periodically to reexamine them, searching for scraps I may have overlooked. On these nights I'm never certain what I'm looking for. Sometimes I settle for a facial expression or the angle at which Milo's head falls in a certain picture as the exact thing I require. Other nights I leaf through the photographs and take note of the shape of his cheekbones or the way my Grandma and Pap smiled when he kissed my mom.

I look at the pieces in chronological order, beginning with their wedding album and progressing to the letters Milo wrote to me nearly two decades later. His first letter was addressed on Father's Day, 1999, and arrived on a hot June morning, an hour before I was about to head to my summer job as a lifeguard at our local pool. The letter said

nothing about him or why it had taken seventeen years to contact me other than “I had a strong sense that the time was not right.” At the end of the typed note, he requested we meet in person to fill in the missing sections of our relative life stories.

When Milo’s letter came I devoured his words. It had finally arrived—the piece I had waited so long to hold in my hands—the piece that proved I was real in his world. I wanted more than anything to meet him—to respond immediately and tell him *yes, I want the same thing. You’re the lost piece I’ve been waiting to place.* But before I’d had a chance to read it again, I told my mom who the letter was from, and she tore it from my hands. She read the letter quickly the first time, then her eyes crawled over the Courier font again and again, always stopping at the “Go gently” before his signature. My mom’s features twisted into an expression I’d never seen her wear, the kind of face a person has when they recall a forgotten nightmare. Her eyes said everything: *He’s back again, to take my daughter from me, to tear apart my family. After all these years, he’s come to take it all.*

There is a tonal shift from the first letter I sent to Milo in high school to the final communication I had with him four years later. As I skim over each letter in the progression, I try to decide which one is “me”.

In the first there is a scared, angry seventeen-year-old who’s hungry for the scraps he delivers. The lines she writes are earnest but reluctant—clear, though never too forceful. She words things carefully, spending hours on each draft to find the right language, the right tone. Her prose is choppy and mechanical, and tries not to come across as too “real” or desperate but secretly professes both. Each black mark on the page

tries to mask her intentions and protect her from the thing she's afraid to admit she desperately wants—to find a way to meet Milo without threatening her family.

“I do believe that our connecting with each other might help us to understand ourselves better. My mother told me we have many things in common. . . While we may eventually develop a friendship, nothing can match my closeness with my dad, brother, sister and mother.”

She confesses this much, but sending the letter makes her uneasy. Each day she runs to the mailbox to check for his answer. A week, no reply. Two weeks, still nothing. Then, two months later, his response. Without offering a single detail about his life, he claims that “Spirit” told him the time was right to contact her. If his life has taught him one thing, Milo says, it's that he should never question “Spirit.”

The girl in the letter hates him all over again—for making her wait, for spouting his stupid philosophy, for saying everything wrong. She considers tearing up his letter and telling him where he can shove “Spirit.” But she can't let herself because it would mean giving up the chance she'd been imagining for so long to finally meet him. The next day another letter comes, and the day after that, another. This man sounds crazy—absolutely self-absorbed—but she can't bring herself to tell him no. So she says nothing. She waits several months, then sends a generic response saying she still wants to meet, but she's not interested in exchanging photo collages and narrative essays detailing her life from age two on—how about lunch instead?

Two years pass with no response. She receives the final letter her sophomore year in college, the day before spring break, at a time when mail from Milo is the last thing she expects.

“At 4:00 a.m. today, I celebrated exactly fifty years of life on planet earth! My main goal for today was to attend to some of the important matters of my life—ones that I’ve ‘let go’ for much too long. Re-connecting with you is one of these matters.”

He says he’ll be in Pittsburgh to visit his parents in two months and would like to meet her. *The piece he let go—the piece he ignored.* His words make her shake inside, make her want to light his letters on fire and punch a hole through the flimsy wall in her dorm room. She sees through his gimmicks, his clever tricks and mind games. What she sees she doesn’t like. The inner layer of the onion—the centermost ring that holds the “why” she’s spent so long searching for—doesn’t exist. It never will.

What upsets her even more is knowing the only reason she lets herself be hurt by this man is because she *does* know him—too well. She sees him when she looks in the mirror every day. She notices him sometimes when she laughs too loudly at jokes or when she can’t let herself back down from an argument. She sees him analyzing, judging, and dissecting every situation, something she’s done her entire life. And she hates that each time she hears herself speak, half of what she says comes from him.

By the time she replies to Milo’s final letter, the tone has changed. After years without a response—a second abandonment—there’s a rough edge to each sentence she refuses to water down. On the page is still the scared, angry teenager, but she doesn’t want to hear his pretty, vague tales of a life he excluded her from. She hates that she cares so much, that she’s still letting this stranger upset her. The game has gone too far.

In her response the girl on the page is tired of him weaving in and out of her life for long enough to stroke his ego before disappearing again. After weeks spent struggling to write back, she sits in front of her computer one night and lets herself go. She writes as

fast as her fingers can tap the keys and doesn't stop to proofread or to make sure she's spelled words correctly. Ten minutes later, she cracks her knuckles and reads what's on the screen.

“... I'm not going to play your game anymore. I'm not your unfinished business. . . You think you are so clever but you are not going to win this one. . . I know that my desires, well being, health, and overall happiness have never factored into the equation at all. Without getting into the events that went on twenty odd years ago, I would just like to point out that I have never even so much as been considered in your world—except as a means to your own happiness. You fucking bastard. What a sad man you must be.”

It's well after midnight but she knows she has to send the letter or it may never make it further than her computer screen. She prints it, puts it in an envelope and lets the tears stream down her cheeks as she walks to the mailbox down the street.

I'm still that seventeen-year-old from the first letter. I still want what she wants, but now I know I can never have it. I'm also the twenty-year-old in the last letter as well as the baby he deserted. I'm each of these people and so many more.

I still don't know whether or not I hate Milo. Maybe I'll never know. Maybe it doesn't matter. Instead of being his unfinished business, I've decided to let him be mine.

I now understand that my puzzle will never be complete. This chunk has always been missing and probably always will be; it was lost before I'd opened the box to begin sorting through the rest of the pieces. There will be no last words, no formal closure, no chance to have him clarify all I still have questions about. But I'm starting to think that's okay. I know Milo as well as anyone can know the key player in a book or the

protagonist in a movie. And while my puzzle will always have some pieces missing, if I study it hard enough, I can finally see patterns and shapes coming into focus.

Many years ago, my Dad received a 1,000-piece three-dimensional Eiffel Tower puzzle for his birthday. After Lizzie and I joked about what an odd gift it was, my family went to work piecing it together, one corner at a time. It was nights like these I enjoyed most—evenings that seemed to happen by chance, sitting with my brother, sister and parents, gathered around the rectangular kitchen table after dinner.

I don't recall investing much time into the Eiffel Tower puzzle; my dad, however, worked on it for days until it was several feet tall and became the showpiece of our dining room. Although I've forgotten most of the details about its construction, I still remember studying the final product and noticing one corner leg was missing its base piece. How would the tower support itself?

It's strange that this detail has stayed with me for so long. The tower was strong and sturdy, and its weight evenly rested on many base pieces that were firmly pressed into place before the rest could take shape. Even with the thousandth piece missing, the Eiffel Tower was as complete as it could be.

WHITE LIE

“Instead of counting by eights, let’s spend the rest of class talking about a field trip we’ll be going on next week—on the last day of school,” Mrs. Pershun said to my second grade class. The words came out of her mouth slowly as she moved the Counting Chart back to its corner on the side of the chalkboard. She put a lid on the marker that smelled like blueberries she’d been using to show us patterns of numbers, and placed it back into the box that went on the blue bookshelf next to her desk.

Even though it was Friday and the little hand was almost on the three, the room was quiet—the kind of quiet it only was when we were in trouble or were supposed to be reading to ourselves. The strips of sun that were on the floor by Peter’s desk in the morning had moved almost the whole way to Steven’s desk, and that meant the bell was about to ring and it would be time to line up for our buses.

None of us moved. We looked at Mrs. Pershun, who wiped sweat off of the side of her face with a white handkerchief she carried in the pocket of her shiny brown pants. She always told my class that we were young, and sweating was easier for young people. When you got to be as old as her, she said, sweating was hard. I wondered if that was why she was going to be retiring, from all the hard sweat.

“Who would like to know where we’ll be going?” Mrs. Pershun asked, leaning back on Jenny’s desk like she sometimes did when her feet hurt and her ankles got swollen. She said that she was allowed to sit on the desk because she was old, but that we had perfectly good chairs that were perfectly good for sitting on.

We all raised our hands at the same time. My class had only gone on one field trip the entire year—to the Aviary to look at birds—and it was the kind of boring that made my feet tired and my head hurt. The stupid birds flew in circles and squeaked like they hated each other. That was all they did. Everyone in my grade stood by the cages and watched them for a really long time, and then we got back onto the bus. The only good part about the field trip was that we got to eat at McDonald’s on the way home, and I ordered chicken nuggets and French fries and ice cream.

“We will be going to Florida—to Disney World, to be exact—and it will be your job to plan everything about this trip,” Mrs. Pershun said.

At first I thought my ears were wrong. Did she really say “Disney World?” Was she serious? I wanted to scream that Disney World was my favorite place on the whole planet, and that she better not be kidding.

“The real Disney World?” Jimi asked from his seat in the front row. He didn’t raise his hand.

“Yes, the real Disney World. We will be there for one week, which is six nights and seven days.”

“But how are we gonna get there?” Timmy shouted. He ran his hand over top of his spiky hair and down the little ponytail on his neck.

“That’s the fun part.” There was a smile on Mrs. Pershun’s lips but her face was trying to pretend it wasn’t there. She couldn’t fool me, though; I could tell she was excited. Her fingers tapped on the wood and one of her black shoes with the big soles and Velcro straps went back and forth in the air. “How many of you have ever driven a golf cart?”

The whole classroom was suddenly full of shouts and waving arms. It sounded like we all had a story about steering a golf cart while our dads or grandpas were golfing.

“I’ve even driven a real car,” Shawna said. “My daddy let me drive his convertible.” I didn’t believe Shawna because she liked to lie when it was time to talk about somebody who wasn’t her. My mom told me that was because she needed attention since her parents didn’t give her any.

Mrs. Pershun stood in front of the room with her pointer finger over her lips. That meant she wouldn’t talk until we were quiet. All the girls in my class said *shhhhh* really loudly so the boys would stop asking stupid questions and we could hear more about our trip.

“Now listen carefully,” Mrs. Pershun said. “It will be your job to plan ev-ery-thing for this journey. This is a *lot* of responsibility. You must each select a partner—”

Desks opened and slammed shut, and people shouted and pointed to their friends on the other side of the room. I turned and stared at Tommy, who shook his head yes as soon as our faces saw each other. Tommy wore thick glasses and button-up shirts, and the tips of his feet went out to the sides when he walked, just like a duck. He wasn’t very good at saying words with “t” in them, like “this” and “those.” We were best friends, and he even let me help him make up a dance routine for “Walk Like an Egyptian” when he was in the talent show.

“So you are *really* gonna let us drive golf carts all the way to Florida?” Jimi asked. His voice sounded like my mom’s did when she wanted to know if I had *really* cleaned my room. “I don’t have a license!”

“That’s not a problem,” Mrs. Pershun said. “You and your partner must stay on the sidewalk while you’re driving. You don’t need a license to drive on the sidewalk, do you?”

Mrs. Pershun had thought of everything. And she was right; I was allowed to ride my bike on any sidewalk in my neighborhood, even though I wasn’t allowed to go in the road.

“But what about money?” Josh asked. “My parents said Disney World is expensive.”

“I just spoke with Principal McClymonds. Since you were such a good class this year, he said he will give each group a blank check to cover the costs of the trip.”

“For real?” Josh bounced in his seat. “That’s awesome!”

Some other people asked questions, like they didn’t really believe her, but I knew she was telling the truth. Adults didn’t lie, especially teachers. I wasn’t really sure what a blank check was, but I knew the principal had lots of money. He wore a gray suit with lighter gray stripes, and drove a red Corvette. If anyone could give us a blank check, it was him.

Mrs. Pershun smiled bigger, the kind of smile that made her cheeks scrunch into her eyes. “But understand that this is a lot of work. You and your partner must account for every cost. That means on Monday you will need to come in with a list of all the expenses you will have. Then you must add them together and tell me the amount you wish the check to be made out for. Remember to include food, gas, hotels and tickets to Disney World and Epcot.”

My chest felt busy, like there was a Jack-in-the-box inside, one crank away from popping up.

“On the final day of school, you will have to bring all the items you will need for the trip. But there’s a catch—they must all fit inside your backpack.”

Half of me was listening to Mrs. Pershun, and half was thinking about all the stuff I would need to pack. I had so many toys, and I knew my small pink backpack could only hold a few. Did I want two or three big ones or lots of smaller things to play with? What about candy? Would there be room for Fruit Rollups and Snickers bars, or would my mom make me bring a change of clothes instead? Maybe I’d wear all the clothes on top of each other so I’d have room for my train whistle, all four Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and both walkie-talkies.

“Are there any questions?” Mrs. Pershun asked.

I had about a thousand questions, and I made sure my hand was really high in the air. I waved my fingers and rocked in my seat so she’d call on me, but Jimi shouted out again. “Are you sure you’re not being kidding?”

I watched Mrs. Pershun’s face. The bags of skin that hung from her cheeks like water balloons jiggled a little, then settled down.

“I certainly am not being kidding,” she told Jimi. “Next Friday, as you all know, is my last day teaching. I will be retired after that, and I wanted to do something nice for my favorite class. Did I ever tell you that you’re my favorite class?” We all nodded because she’d told us that lots of times.

I ran home from the bus stop so fast my lungs felt like they were full of fire. I was glad I had on my new summer tennis shoes because they helped me to be a quick runner, even when they were untied and the tongue was stuck on the side of my foot. As soon as I got in the front door, I threw my backpack down. My mom walked into the kitchen holding my baby brother in one arm and my little sister in the other. Max had yellow baby food all over his chin and he smelled like bananas, and Lizzie's curls hung in her eyes. She said "Tee" when she saw me, because that's how she said "Corey."

"Where's our phonebook?" I asked as I tore through the papers and books piled on the shelves.

"Who are you calling?"

"Tommy. It's for our vacation to Disney World."

"What?"

I didn't really feel like talking because I had so much to do, but I thought I should let my mom know what was going on so she wouldn't pester me with a thousand million questions later. I told her all about Mrs. Pershun and the trip, but I talked in my out-of-breath voice because there was a lot to say. Even though there were two babies hanging from her, my mom seemed happy because she kept nodding and she didn't even interrupt—not once. I felt a little bad that she couldn't come with me on the trip, but it was kids only. When she played Bridge with the neighbors, it was adults only. And besides, she was a grownup and could do whatever she wanted. She had her own car, and even if it sounded like she was dragging cans behind her when it went up hills, it was big and fast. Plus she had a black credit card she kept in her purse; all she had to do was put it in the machine, type in a secret number, and money came out in a neat stack. If she really

wanted to go to Disney World, she could leave whenever she felt like it and didn't have to wait for a blank check.

"So you're doing your homework all ready? It's only Friday!" My mom giggled as she handed me the phonebook from a high-up shelf. "We'll need to make sure we get you some sunscreen before this big journey."

All I did for the next six days was think about Florida. At night when I was supposed to be sleeping, I stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling and planned which rides we'd go on first. Tommy and I agreed Space Mountain was on the top of the list. We'd have to go on it at least ten times. Then we'd ride Thunder Mountain and The Mad Tea Party. We even figured out what souvenirs we'd buy for our families: I'd get Minnie and Mickey Mouse ears for my brother and sister, shirts and matching caps for my parents, and a Donald Duck keychain for my grandma, because he was her favorite.

That week Tommy called Information and got the number for lots of hotels and motels. His mom said we should research to see which ones were the safest and least expensive, but Tommy and I didn't care about that kind of stuff. We wanted a hotel that had a swimming pool and an arcade—the kind that gave you free popcorn at night and donuts for breakfast. We wanted a place with bouncy beds and HBO and R-rated movies like *Friday the Thirteenth*, one with a glass elevator and an ice machine on every floor. Tommy called tons of hotels and made a list that took up two pages in his big yellow tablet. He wanted to call more—to be sure we had the best one—but his mom said it was too expensive to keep making long distance calls. So we decided the Marriot in Orlando was good enough.

We added the price of the hotel for six nights to the cost of gas, forty-two Happy Meals and fourteen banana splits. The number kept getting bigger and bigger. My dad told us to remember to include tolls, too, so we put them on the list. We thought of everything, even who should drive first. I told Tommy I should because I was two weeks older, but he said he was taller so it was better if he did. I said it didn't matter how tall you were, stupid. He told me not to call him names. I said he could drive the whole time we were in Florida if I could have the first turn. After lots more yelling, Tommy said okay, but that he got to pick the radio station.

Each day the group of toys laid out on my dresser changed. At first there were two Pound Puppies, a Super Soaker gun and six slap bracelets. Then I got rid of the gun and threw in some candy necklaces, a bottle of sunscreen and my pink Kodak camera with a new roll of film. When I tried to fit them all into my backpack, it bulged like a camel hump on my back. Just when I thought it couldn't get any bigger, my mom made me put a toothbrush into the front pocket. Like I was gonna use it.

On Friday morning I had to comb my hair two times, since my bangs wouldn't stay down. They kept pointing to the sides, like arrows that couldn't make up their mind which way to go. When nothing else worked, my mom took a spritz bottle and sprayed water onto my forehead so the hair would stick down like a Band-Aid.

"I'm gonna miss the bus!" I told her. "Lemme go!" Half my body was on the chair, but my hands were reaching for my backpack. When I finally pulled myself free, I skipped to the kitchen door, over the cat, and onto the porch. Lizzie waved her grubby

hands in her highchair. Just when I was about to run down the driveway, my mom called to me. Her body was hanging out the door.

“Come give me a goodbye kiss,” she said. Even though I usually didn’t give her a kiss in the morning, I ran back up the path and hugged her. She handed me a powdered sugar donut. I gave her a pretend kiss on the cheek—the kind where you touch your lips to the person but don’t make a kissing sound—and took the donut.

“Have a good trip. And call me from the first rest stop!”

Everyone in my class was talking in their outside voices, the kind we were only supposed to use in gym and during recess. I could hear them as I walked down the hall, past the rows of red lockers and the black and white checkered floor, past the kindergarteners putting their backpacks in their cubbies and the sixth graders who were too cool to go to their homerooms and were sitting Indian-style in the hallways. When I walked into the classroom, everyone was sitting on their desks. Mrs. Pershun wasn’t there yet, and I was glad because she’d have been the kind of angry she got when lots went wrong and she couldn’t decide what to yell about first.

In the corner of the classroom by the Counting Chart, desks were pushed together in groups like bunches of grapes. The popular girls argued about whose list was for the most money, and the boys had dumped out all their baseball cards into a pile and were fighting over whose was the best. Rachel, Stephanie and Brandon were the only ones who didn’t seem excited; they sat with their heads resting in their hands on the top of their desks like this was just an ordinary day. They weren’t allowed to eat cupcakes for birthdays or to sing Christmas Carols in school. My mom said it was because they were

Jova Witnesses or something like that. Maybe Jova Witnesses weren't allowed to go to Disney World, either.

Tommy sat apart from the rest of the class at his desk in the middle of the room. Even though almost everyone was wearing T-shirts and shorts, Tommy had on a button-up shirt with neon orange flowers and vines printed on it. I was pretty sure it would look perfect once we got to Florida, since that's how people there probably dressed. He was staring at the yellow notepad that had our list on it. Tommy held the paper up close to his face—so close it almost touched his glasses—and his lips moved.

I put my backpack next to my desk but didn't open it because I knew that if I got it opened, I'd never be able to shut it. Tommy saw me sitting there and came over with the paper in his hands. It had been his job to add the costs together, and he had the final amount circled at the bottom of the page in a big cloud.

"Look at how much money ours is for!" he said, pointing to the number, which was more than one thousand dollars. My cheeks got hot thinking about all that cash. We would have to hide it well; my mom always made me put money in lots of different places when I went out so if I lost some, there would still be more dollars left, hidden in my socks or in the case with my toothbrush. I wondered how we would get the cash—if it would be ten dollar bills or hundred dollar bills. Either way it made me nervous. I hoped Mrs. Pershun would give us all ones so I wouldn't feel bad if I lost some.

Everyone in the classroom suddenly got quiet. I looked up from my desk and saw Mrs. Pershun's face peeking into the door. She sometimes played that game and spied on us to see if we were being bad when she wasn't watching. Shawna and Jenny got off the

top of their desks and slid into their seats, and the boys in the front of the room shoved their baseball cards into a big pile and threw them into a desk.

“Well the big day is finally here,” Mrs. Pershun said as she put her black purse into the bottom drawer of her desk. She had on a Mickey Mouse shirt, white pants with a crease down the middle and big sunglasses with gold on the sides. She turned her head while she talked so she could look at everyone over top the lenses. “Can you please pass your homework assignments to the front so that I can look at them?”

It sounded like a paper storm as everyone handed their homework to the person in front of them. I watched Tommy pass ours up.

Mrs. Pershun gathered the papers from the first row and hit the pile off her desk until they lined up at the edges into a neat stack. I liked the way she did that, always making them come together into a perfect bunch. Instead of putting them in her desk drawer like she always did, she licked her finger and started to go through the pages. She looked at each paper quickly, and her eyes went back and forth like a ping pong ball. Every few minutes she laughed a little and made a loud sighing sound like she was letting out a chest full of air.

“You all did very well with this assignment,” Mrs. Pershun said when she reached the end of the pile. “Very well indeed.” She folded her hands so her fingers looked like a pack of sausages, then stared at us with the same look my mom had when I caught her sneaking cigarettes in the back yard at night with Mrs. Beswick, the lady who lived down the street.

“Now, can anyone tell me what they learned from this assignment?”

I was confused. What I had learned? Sometimes Mrs. Pershun asked hard questions and she had to say them a different way for us to understand. Maybe this was one of those questions. A few chairs squeaked in the classroom, but other than that, we were the bad kind of quiet that means we don't understand.

"Does nobody know the answer to this question?"

"Math?" someone said in a little voice without raising their hand.

"Good, that's correct. You learned to add up large numbers without the help of the Counting Chart. What else?"

The classroom was silent.

"Well, for one thing, you learned how much planning goes into a trip like this. Now you'll have a new appreciation for your parents! Someday, if you ever *really* get to go to Florida, you will know how expensive it is and how much effort it takes to coordinate a vacation."

There was something about the way Mrs. Pershun said "really" that made me feel hot, cold and sick—all at the same time. The inside of me felt like ketchup and mustard look when I mix them on my plate—the dirty color they turn right after the yellow and red have been swirled too much. Even though the classroom was silent, the sound changed into the kind of quiet that means something's wrong.

Mrs. Pershun looked happy, sitting there on the edge of the desk smiling. She reminded me of my friend Steven's python right after it ate a mouse—like it was so strong it didn't even care about what it had just done. The classroom was full of whimpers and grunts, and Shirley looked like she was going to cry. Tommy stared up at the ceiling, then at the floor beneath his desk. His eyes went all over the place.

Finally, Jimi spoke up. “So you were lying then? We’re not really going to Disney World.”

“Well, Jimi, it wasn’t quite a lie. No, I would call it a “little fib” or a “white lie.”

“What’s the difference?” he asked. His voice didn’t sound like it really wanted to know the answer.

“A white lie is told to help someone learn something, whereas a *real* lie is done to hurt them.”

“But how does lying about getting to go on vacation help us?”

Mrs. Pershun leaned back on the desk and looked at the ceiling. Maybe she didn’t notice how angry we were. Or maybe she didn’t care. I tried to burn a hole through her with my eyes, like holding a magnifying glass over a leaf on a sunny day, while I said every bad word I could think of in my head—even the really bad ones.

“It was meant as a learning exercise,” she said. “To teach you something.”

I was all-over confused. Why was it okay for Mrs. Pershun to lie to us, but if I ever told a fib—even a small one—I’d be grounded and have to go to detention? I never even realized a teacher could lie. Sure, I knew some adults did, but those were the bad ones in jails, the ones on TV shows late at night that I wasn’t allowed to watch. Not teachers. Teachers were supposed to be honest all the time; it was part of their job. If Mrs. Pershun had lied about Disney World, how could I trust anything she’d said all year? What if cursive writing wasn’t a real thing? What if it was a language she made up and forced us to practice until our fingers hurt? And the Counting Chart on the front wall—the one she scribbled all over every day as we counted to one hundred by multiples of five, ten and twenty—what if math was really something else?

“One day you’ll thank me for this,” Mrs. Pershun finally said. Her words meant that she knew everything because she was old and wise, but we had no idea how things worked in the real world because we were stupid seven-years-olds.

All morning I sat there with my hands on my lap, trying to tune out everything Mrs. Pershun said. It took forever for the little hand to reach the twelve.

Instead of buying pizza for lunch that day, I used my money to get ice cream and fruit punch. I wasn’t even that hungry, but ate the Choco Taco and Scooter Crunch so fast I got a headache between my eyes and above my ears. As soon as I threw away the wrappers, I ran outside onto the field for recess. I played kickball with the boys and imagined the red rubber ball was Mrs. Pershun’s ugly fat head. Each time my foot smacked it, her face jumped past the infield and fell down near the fence at the edge of the lot.

In the hours after recess, my class was supposed to study Spelling, Math and Social Studies. Since it was the last day of school, Mrs. Pershun said we could sit on our desks and talk to each other, or spread out in the room and play board games until the final bell rang. She had the tired face on, and that meant she didn’t want to be in charge of talking.

I sat on the floor in the corner with Jimi. We played *Chutes n’ Ladders*, and I kept getting the big chute right at the end, which meant I had to go all the way back down to the bottom of the board. Stupid game. Just when I got a big ladder, Mrs. Pershun asked us to all come to the front of the room.

Maybe because she felt bad about her white lie, or maybe because it was the last day she'd ever have to teach, Mrs. Pershun said we could each choose a special item from her bag of treats. We all moved around the small blue picnic table in the back of the room and watched her dump everything out from her sack. There was a pile of chocolate bars, potato chip bags, cans of Pepsi, and even the Counting Chart.

"Who would want the Counting Chart when they could have candy?" Jenny asked in an *eww gross* voice. She grabbed the last Snickers bar and walked back to her game of *Old Maid*.

The chocolate looked good, and there were even Twix bars—my favorite. But I had an idea that was better than chocolate. I waited till everyone else took the candy and potato chips from the table, then moved near the Counting Chart.

I hated math, and I hated the Counting Chart ten times more than I hated math. All year Mrs. Pershun had forced us to slowly count with her as her fat finger made a path from one number to the next. And there it was, sitting right in front of me, like it was begging me to take it. I knew then it had to be mine—not because I wanted to own it, but because I wanted to hold it in my hands and make Mrs. Pershun watch me tear it up.

As my classmates walked away with their candy, I waited by the side of the table to see if anyone else had the same idea as me. But it seemed like most of them had already forgotten that Mrs. Pershun was a liar and a horrible person. They were happy to have chocolate, even if it was in place of the trip to Florida. Only one other person stood at the table—Jimi. He looked at me, then down at the Counting Chart, and then back at me. I could tell from the way his blue eyes jumped around that we were thinking the

same thing. Without saying a word, Jimi and I reached down and each grabbed a corner of the chart. We walked with it toward the front of the classroom.

“What’re you going to do with that?” Jenny asked as we zigged-zagged between desks and over backpacks. Neither of us said a word.

When we reached a spot several feet in front of Mrs. Pershun’s desk, Jimi and I stopped. I whispered to him, “Let’s tear it up.” He nodded like it was the only thing to do.

The smooth white cardboard felt cold in my hands. The chart was three feet long and almost two feet wide, and weighed more than it looked like it would. Its shiny surface was covered with lines and squiggles in every color. When my classmates saw us standing there, they stopped playing their games and walked toward the front of the room.

As the afternoon sun painted the spot on the floor by us white, Jimi and I stood in front of Mrs. Pershun and ripped the Counting Chart in half down the center. We each took a half and tore it, over and over again, until all that was left was a few pieces of cardboard on the checkered floor and a tiny corner in each of our hands.

By the time we finished, everyone in the class was standing up and cheering, the way they did when we played soccer in gym class and someone scored a goal. We were the two quiet kids who never got in any trouble, and they looked surprised that we were the ones being bad. But Mrs. Pershun didn’t think it was as funny as they did. She stared daggers at us—the kind of look you feel all over your skin. Her body galloped toward us so fast I almost cried out. When she got to the front of the room, Mrs. Pershun’s face scrunched into a red ball like a fat tomato. She was the kind of mad my mom was when she came home and saw me playing tennis in the living room—the kind of mad that starts

in the brain and jumps to the mouth before the face is ready for it. Her body stood over us like an elephant, and she snatched the pieces of cardboard from our hands.

“This was extremely disrespectful,” she yelled, pointing at the two of us with the larger white piece. “You are ungrateful children,” she added, then sighed. She let the pieces of cardboard fall to the ground and put her hands on her hips.

Normally, when a grownup yelled at me, a prickly ball formed in my throat and I had to use all my energy to keep it from reaching my tear factory. My face would get the kind of hot it got when I was sunburnt, and I’d wish I was invisible forever. But not this time. As Mrs. Pershun stood there yelling at us, all I could think about was her elbow fat and the way it hung below the sleeves on her shirt and gathered at the bone like a folded ball of dough. I didn’t hear the rest of what she said; every time she moved her arms and pointed at us, the jiggly fat bounced back and forth like it was clapping for itself. I tried not to smile as I thought about how Mrs. Pershun probably didn’t understand the difference between “being disrespectful” and “teaching her something.”

GETTING INK DONE

I sat in the red faux-leather chair with my jeans unzipped, my underwear rolled down and my right hip revealed. My body was rigid and rivers of sweat gathered between my fingers as my nails dug into the armrests. Outside, people were walking up the Pittsburgh street, heading home after a lunch date or late Saturday breakfast at Pamela's Diner. They stared at me through the grimy front window of the tattoo parlor; it was like being in a zoo or the main attraction at a wayside freak show.

There was a low hum, like the one I heard each morning when my dad plugged in his Braun razor and did away with yesterday's stubble. It was a busy, electric buzz, how I imagined a thousand bees caught in a tin can would sound, with an urgency that made my skin crawl. The unwieldy machine looked like a tool from a Sci-Fi movie that aliens would use to insert implants into an abductee's brain.

As it made contact with my body, I watched the artist's tattooed fingers move the needle in tiny circles—a puppet dancing a ballet. The first few seconds weren't too bad; my skin was cold from the rubbing alcohol and the anticipation of pain was a lot worse than the initial puncturing. I cocked my neck to the side so I could watch every stroke of black and purple that was being jacked into my flesh. When the first dot appeared on my hip, I knew there was no going back.

I had made the spur-of-the-moment decision the previous week, as I watched an MTV special on groupies. On the show, a girl slightly older than me had an unnatural obsession with Kid Rock, the washed out, smarmy musician who marketed his "career" on the *bad-*

ass I have tattoos and long hair and do drugs and am in a fringe rebel rock band image. She had decided that, in order to profess her eternal, undying love for this musician, she would have his name tattooed across her back in flowing cursive letters.

I cringed as I stared at the television, repulsed yet unable to turn away from the screen. Watching this stranger commit so quickly to getting a tattoo made me squirm. Didn't she want to mull it over to make sure she was making the right decision? I wondered what had happened in this girl's life to cause her to have this obsession and go so far to express herself. Was there anything I felt so passionately about that I would brand it onto my flesh in a permanent statement?

For as long as I can remember, I've been enamored by tattoos and the people who wear them. It's as if they have a story to tell, a confession to offer on their most valuable medium. In a way these people are like writers—compelled to create, to share, to evoke a reaction from those who see their work. But it's one thing to put your words into print, to tell a story to a select group of people willing to read it; it's another to walk around with your message plastered onto your flesh. There's something grossly fascinating to me about this permanent display of art on the body.

Even though tattoos had always interested me, I'd never seriously considered getting one. I'm not a "tattoo person," if such a breed exists. To me, tattoos have always signified the impulsive—the wild, uninhibited Id, the portion of yourself you let loose at bars and frat parties, then wake up in the morning and stuff in the way back of your sock drawer. I'm the least impulsive person I know. Every decision in my life is calculated and analyzed to an exhausting degree; meals are planned a week early, semester-long projects

are begun the day they're assigned and daily lists are made that include such items as "make to-do list," (which can immediately be crossed out). Balance of any sort has been absent from my life, and everything inevitably falls into one extreme camp or the other. Body art, while interesting, was on the side I'd never considered.

Something happened that day as I watched the MTV special. The little voice that always screamed at me to think it through *just once more*, to look at every outcome before making a rash decision, had gone quiet for a few minutes and was replaced with an impulsive flash. In that moment, I decided that I, too, would get a tattoo, and ran from the family room before I could change my mind.

That evening I told my mom about the plan. Even though I'd just turned eighteen and didn't need parental consent, I was curious how she would react. My dad was out of town on a business trip, and it seemed smart to run it by her before telling him. I waited till my brother and sister were parked in front of the TV in the other room, then made my case.

"So, I think I'm gonna get a tattoo this weekend," I said casually, between mouthfuls of spaghetti, as if getting a tattoo was no different than buying a new CD or choosing a different hairstyle. After my words registered, she looked up from her plate to study my face. A smile curled at the corner of her lips.

"Okay," she said quickly, sarcastically. "To match your nose ring?" The previous week, I'd come home from the mall with a magnetic nose ring and had worn it all afternoon with the hope of freaking her out or eliciting some sort of traditional parental response. After six hours, the hoop started to hurt my nose flesh and I was impatient. I

walked up to her, looked right into her eyes, and said, “So, what do you think?” as I flared my nostrils.

She reached her hand toward my face and pulled the hoop off my nose. I tried to scream and pretend she was tearing through tender cartilage, but it was too late. “I like it,” she said after she handed it back to me.

As we sat across from one another at the dinner table that night, I wanted my mom to take me seriously and to understand that deciding to get a tattoo was a huge decision. This wasn’t another joke. I wanted her to acknowledge this was important to me and should be important to her, too. “No,” I said, a little louder than I intended. “A real one.”

“Ah.” The smile was still plastered to her face. She didn’t even ask where I wanted it or what the design was.

“Why is that so hard to believe?”

“I know you too well. You wouldn’t do that,” she said as she spooned more sauce onto her plate. To her, and to most everyone else, I was the prude. I was the one who thought I was badass when I painted yellow polka dots on my sandals or mowed the lawn in horizontal instead of vertical lines. Maybe she was right: I was boring and predictable. I’d never been drunk, had only gone on a handful of dates, always carried around two pens in case one broke, and was compulsively early for school, meetings, appointments, and everything else.

“Fine. I don’t care if you believe me.” The more she doubted me the more set I became on the idea. I shoved my fork into the bowl of pasta and shoveled a pile onto my plate. I chewed so hard my teeth hurt.

My mom's face changed, and she set down her fork. "You're serious?"

I nodded and pierced a chunk of tomato.

My mom knew forbidding me to get the tattoo would only make me want it more, and nothing she could say at this point would change my mind. She searched my face for a long moment, then looked down at the table. "Make sure you go someplace clean," she said as she carried her plate to the sink.

The pain began to pick up. I watched as drops of blood ran down my leg and dripped onto the white towel I was sitting on. How could the artist see what he was doing? Every few seconds he pulled the machine away from my quivering frame to study his work. He used a thick wad of gauze to blot the blood from the outline of the Yin Yang, a design I'd sketched several days beforehand. It hadn't occurred to me I would bleed during this process; it always looked so clean and easy when I'd seen it done on TV. I had never actually watched someone get ink done, though, and my knowledge about it came from motorcycle movies and Discovery Channel specials on aboriginal tribes.

After he had once again cleared his work area, the artist lowered the vibrating machine and its cluster of thin needles to my raw skin. I tried hard not to flinch or quiver, and controlled my breathing each time it touched down. One wrong move and I'd have a permanent mistake. The tips hit my leg hundreds of times each minute to place the pigment. It felt like getting dozens of paper cuts, one on top of another, and I tried not to think about it.

My eyes crawled across the walls in the shop and fixed on several tattered photos and magazine spreads. To the side of the front door hung pictures of people with various

body parts exposed, each displaying a large tattoo. In one, a man stood with his back to the camera, his arms stretched out perpendicularly at his sides. Spanning his back, shoulders and triceps was a huge gray eagle with complete wingspan and hundreds of individually-detailed feathers—a tattoo which had no doubt taken dozens of hours to create. To my right was a series of cut-outs from a magazine, haphazardly taped to the wall and hanging crookedly. They depicted men in an African tribe with large holes in their ears and black markings decorating their faces.

I studied their serious expressions, their firm stares, and thought how different their body art was from the man with the eagle on his back. But they each served their purpose. People have been tattooing themselves and others for more than ten thousand years, and this trend has continued to today, where one in seven adults is tattooed. It occurred to me as I sat studying these images that we all shared something; we each were compelled to use our skin to tell our stories.

When I was eight years old, I was mesmerized by the Black Widow painted on my uncle's right shoulder. At the pool in the summer, I saw him apply thick layers of sunscreen to his trophy every hour so the ink wouldn't fade. People looked at his tattoo—studied it and then stared back at his face—as if the two would merge to tell the entire tale neither alone could provide. Sometimes they seemed appalled but curious—gawkers whose distaste for his apparent lifestyle choice sparked an interest their expressions couldn't hide. After he walked past, they turned from him, their eyes having lingered a moment too long. I saw those people briefly pause before they went back to sunbathing

or reading their tabloid magazines. Their “why” stares have stuck with me, and when I piece together my memories of his tattoo, I can’t help but wonder the same thing.

When I asked, my uncle shrugged and said in an apathetic voice, “I like spiders,” or “I’ve always wanted a tattoo.” These answers were never good enough for me. I liked mashed potatoes, The Beatles and the number 24, but never felt the need to commit them to my skin. “Like” was such a nondescript, nothing word that implied the tattoo was a decision similar to ordering an egg roll with dinner or buying a pair of gray tennis shoes. I wanted to hear a deep confession, some profound insight into all that had happened in his life to culminate in this defining moment.

A decade later, I sat in a dimly-lit tattoo parlor with the same plate of questions in front of me. What answers did I have? I looked to my left, to the seat next to me where my twelve-year-old sister patiently waited. That morning I had asked Lizzie to come along, maybe because I knew she never judged me, that she always accepted me and looked up to me with esteem I have yet to earn. I had hoped that having her there would be comforting and reassuring, and would tell me she understood what I was doing, even if I wasn’t completely sure. Maybe, too, I’d brought her out of a feeling of guilt, because for those long winter months, she had faded from my focus as I spent night after night in front of the computer, working on college applications and homework between double swimming practices.

As the pain picked up and the buzzing sound cut through my thoughts, I looked to Lizzie for a flicker of understanding. This made little sense, given her morbid fear of blood and needles. Her eyes darted around the room, purposefully avoiding the red stream running down my hip, and she played with her ponytail. Her frame quaked and

trembled on the edge of her seat. She tucked her tiny hands beneath her thighs and her body rocked nervously. Sensing my stare, Lizzie turned toward me and our brown eyes met for a second. Seeing her pale face made my muscles tense and constrict. I recognized that *why* stare, the same one I'd given my uncle a decade earlier. In her eyes I could see every feeling that should have been running through my head. The realization that they weren't was the scariest part. Why was I sitting there, getting this done? Was the tattoo really that important to me? Was it so important that it felt completely natural to get it, or had my impulsive moment been a mistake?

Forty minutes later, when the artist had finished applying the remaining violet touches to the Yin Yang, I stretched my leg and my knee cracked from stiffness. When I stood, he placed a bandage over top of the design, then adhesive tape, then another layer of gauze. As he briefed me on the proper healing and maintenance procedures, I studied myself in the full-length mirror. Even though I couldn't see the tattoo, I felt different knowing it was there. It was an excited, nervous feeling, like the one on the first day of elementary school each fall as I walked in fresh from summer vacation with new shoes, a new outfit, and a shiny new Trapper Keeper. I was starting over.

That first week I studied the tattoo obsessively, waiting for the scab to heal and the crusty dark parts to flake off and reveal the underlying gem. Hidden beneath several stubborn layers of skin was the Chinese symbol for the dualistic nature of reality. In Taoism, the Universe is divided into two opposite, equal forces—male and female. The Yin, or the black portion, stands for disillusionment and the return to the source of creation. The white Yang counterforce is pure creativity, which balances out the

darkness. Neither half is good or bad, but each represents a different side of the same overarching truth. The cyclical image reflects a constant interaction, a give and take, a delicate balance between two extremes that come together to form a whole.

Balance—it's what was at stake. This was a concept I had struggled with my entire life. In middle school, when I began studying Eastern philosophies, this idea cemented itself in my mind as the image of a Yin Yang. At night, instead of going out with friends or watching TV, I read Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and discovered a name for what I lacked. In class I doodled Yin Yangs on the margins of my papers, delicately shading them instead of taking notes. This continued through high school, and when I meditated at night, it was to search for a way to be balanced, to make the person I was more like the one I saw in my head.

Getting ink done was my first attempt at internalizing this balance. The tattoo represented a collision of the spontaneous and planned, the preparation and payoff. Even though it had been an impulsive decision, the impetus behind it had been brewing for years. My hope was that each time I'd look at my hip, it would be a reminder of the importance of balance in my life, of how I often teetered between obsessiveness and groundedness. This marking would provide a nudge to step outside the situation, to put things into perspective and see the larger whole that embodies both ends of the spectrum.

Balance wasn't the only thing at stake. Just as my car is littered with bumper stickers, my backpack with patches, and my bedroom walls with posters, vodka ads and framed quotes, I wanted to be my own walking billboard. Even though the ink barely penetrated two millimeters of my flesh, the tattoo went deeper; it was the physical

evidence of my need for voice. There, an inch below my hip bone, was a new, loud part of me. And it was there to stay.

At swim meets in high school, when I stood on the block before a race, the Yin Yang was visible beneath the cut of my racing suit. Parents in the bleachers always turned and said to my mom, “I can’t believe you let your daughter get one of *those*.” These were the parents who let their children walk out the door in the morning to middle school wearing cut-off mini-skirts and pink T-shirts that said “Porn Star” in silver sequins, the ones whose kids got suspended for cheating on A.P. history exams and getting drunk on Robitussin during study hall. My mother always shrugged and said, “It’s her body. She can do whatever she wants with it.”

I knew my mom liked the design. Although we rarely discussed it, she said it helped her to recognize me at swim meets, where everyone looked the same in their matching suits and caps. It made me stand out. Even my father, who is the most straight-laced person I know—who won’t take Ny-Quil because it may make him “trip out” and who has read every page of every instruction manual we’ve owned—never put down my tattoo or judged me for wanting it. I waited to show him the mark for a week after I’d had it done, until the night of his fortieth birthday party. After he’d had a couple of drinks, I told him it was time for his “special” birthday surprise. I handed him a folded piece of paper with a poem on it that said: “Happy birthday to you; Corey got a tattoo; at Inka Dinka Doo; it’s a present for you.” After a long discussion during which I finally convinced him that it was real, and that, no, he couldn’t pick it off with his finger or wipe

it off my leg with a damp paper towel, he paraded me around—drink in one hand, me in the other—to show his friends my new addition.

My parents were the minority. My high school expelled students who got tattoos. Had I competed for the Pennsylvania high school swimming association, I would have been forbidden to walk on deck with my marking visible. At competitions, I would have had to cover it with Band-Aids, and if they came off during the race, my entire team would have been disqualified. Each day at school, people wore trench coats, chains, wife beaters. Some of my classmates had mohawks, tongue piercings and Playboy bunny hoodies, all of which could be worn to sporting events. How were these expressions of self any different than mine?

Maybe the difference wasn't the type of expression but its permanence. The school could rejoice in knowing this teenage rebellion was a phase, that eventually the black makeup and anarchy patches would come off, the tongue piercing would close and the purple hair would grow out. The student would eventually become a well-adjusted, normal adult who would look back at their sophomore yearbook photo and get a good laugh. I, on the other hand, would never be able to outgrow my tattoo; my statement would live as long as I did.

There were others who saw my tattoo as a display of art. These people sometimes stopped me at the beach in the summer to tell me they loved the design, or to ask questions about what it meant and why I'd selected it. Usually they were people who had a tattoo or were looking to get one. As our respective worlds met beneath the August sun, we would connect for a brief moment as our stories merged.

A week after I got the Yin Yang, the final layers of dead skin peeled off and the tattoo began to peek through. As I stared at this two-inch medallion, I noticed for the first time it wasn't perfect. The purple had turned out a duller shade than the periwinkle I had requested, and the black half of the design had bled slightly onto the purple circle in its center. While I would have previously let these tiny mistakes define the tattoo for me, I was shocked they didn't really matter. As I poked and prodded the design, I realized it wasn't the color, shape or size of the marking, but the image and the decision it represented that held its importance. Knowing it was slightly imperfect made it more real.

People sometimes ask if I regret the decision. A simple yes or no is never enough. I've found that people who regret their tattoos generally grow tired of the image. When they look at their bodies, they see a marking whose importance was fleeting—a memory whose story has long since been told and forgotten. My reaction is the opposite; I still love the Yin Yang and what it represents. Each time I look at the tattoo, I'm forced to consider a message which is still as relevant today as it was a decade ago.

Although I never regretted getting the tattoo, I've had a different sort of disappointment. I often worry I don't live up to the design and what it stands for. On bad days I get angry looking at it, and instead of feeling grounded and reassured, my upset mounts when I measure who I am against the self I want to be—the “me” of the tattoo. On these days the Yin Yang reminds me of everything I'm not, of the balance I still lack.

Other days, however, the design gives me confidence. It signifies the side of me that rarely shines through. Seeing it affirms this impulsive, vocal self is still somewhere

in there, holding on for dear life. I know it's just a matter of time before she will jump out and stake her claim.

In the weeks after getting the tattoo, I sat on the edge of my bed in the morning before school and examined it. I pushed and pulled the skin on my leg, stretching it out and then bunching it together as I took in the contours of the design. The cold February air chilled the bedroom, and I shivered as my bare skin met the day. Sometimes I stared at the tattoo for several minutes, forgetting I was late for school or that any day I'd hear back from colleges and know the next step in my path.

Even now, sometimes when I'm in the shower, I look down at my hip and notice the Yin Yang. It no longer startles me to see it staring back with its imperfect round eye. The marking seems natural, like the scars covering my left hand from rollerblading that at one time looked strange and foreign but have since become a permanent feature of my skin. Just as these scars have their own story to tell, the tattoo remains my offering, my prompt for the unwritten tale of everything that hides beneath these two millimeters of flesh.

In the shower I take note of it for a moment. I trace over my smooth wet skin, gently pushing the soap suds off the black and purple design and onto the pale leg flesh. Despite how carefully my fingers graze the surface, I can no longer feel the difference between that skin and the skin which surrounds it.

THE SIGN

“Sam,” I whispered as I pulled the headphones from her blonde-streaked curls. “Let’s make signs.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. Something funny. So people will laugh.”

I reached across the back seat of the Chrysler and dug my tanned arm into my backpack. My body was stiff from the seven hours spent sitting, watching the scenery change from palm trees in South Carolina to evergreens in Virginia, to bare, ugly towns of West Virginia. We still had four more hours of car time ahead of us till we returned to Pittsburgh, and the batteries on my Discman were dead. There was no way I’d be able to sit in silence, thinking about what I’d tried all summer to ignore—that I’d be leaving for college the next morning.

My mom and sister were in the green minivan a mile behind us, trailing my dad, driving fifteen miles an hour below the speed limit. We’d taken both cars to the beach that summer so we could fit the five of us, plus my best friend Sam, luggage and rafts. Even though my dad had to pull over every twenty miles to let her catch up, I was glad my mom wasn’t with us. She’d spent most of the summer pestering me about why I hadn’t done any shopping for college, why I hadn’t packed anything, and why I hadn’t told her my roommate kept calling to order matching sheets and comforters. The car ride home would be the last chance I’d have to be freed from her nagging and to not think about college.

Sam watched as I ripped a sheet of loose leaf paper out of my notebook. I fished out a bright pink highlighter and wrote in huge bubble letters the first thing that popped into my head: “HELP I’M BEING KIDNAPPED.” Satisfied with the absurdity of the sign, I colored in the words and added an exclamation point.

Sam wasn’t sure how to respond. We’d been friends for seven years, and she was practically part of our family. She was used to my impulsive ideas, like the time I put on rollerblades, tied myself to the back of the car and told my fourteen-year-old friend to take me for a spin. Or the previous summer at the beach when I insisted we make outfits out of aluminum foil and palm fronds to scare my senile, sleeping grandmother at one a.m. But she was the guest on our family vacation and had to behave accordingly. Sam gave me a quick, questioning glance, looked at my father in the driver’s seat, then started to laugh. I could feel my dad’s eyes studying us through the rearview mirror.

My brother Max turned and stared at us. He got to sit in the front seat the entire drive because he was over six feet tall, even though he was only in fourth grade. He’d inherited the front seat when he was seven, the year he grew taller than me. Max tried to make out what was on the paper, but I blocked his view with my shoulders. As I displayed the sign out the back right window, I felt more like a naughty child sneaking candy than someone who would be leaving for college the next morning.

Some decisions seem like a good idea at the time. They slip off the tongue, onto the paper and are splayed on the back passenger window without a second thought. For nearly an hour we weaved in and out of traffic and transferred the sign between us as we passed and were passed. Sam and I had perfected our routine; when we went around a car, I grabbed the paper, held it to the window and stared at the driver in the next lane.

After several moments they felt my eyes and looked over. Most of them pointed and laughed at the silly girls in the red car with their silly sign. When we were passed, I handed the paper to Sam and she did the same. Each time we got a response out of the driver we added the number to our tally, which was well over a hundred in the first hour alone.

“What’s on that sign you keep holding up?” my dad asked after the fifth truck driver honked and waved. His graying hair poked through the headrest. Over the course of the past year, it seemed as though half of it had fallen out. He liked to remind me this was a side-effect of having two daughters, and that he was lucky to have any hair left.

Max turned around again to investigate. “It says they’re being kidnapped,” he reported with a nervous half-smile. I kicked the back of his seat and whispered *asshole* loud enough for only him to hear.

I studied my dad’s face from my vantage point and waited for the first sign of anger or upset. I thought about the panic attacks he’d had that week at the beach, the stress he was under at work preparing for an upcoming deposition and the upset he was still feeling over my grandma’s death that spring. My mother called it his midlife crisis and told us the red sport car and Tom Cruise *Mission Impossible* Oakleys were his way of coping. For months his mood had oscillated between mild depression and bouts of seemingly random, unprovoked panic. Even on vacation, when he was supposed to be relaxing, I could see the tension hanging behind each smile, waiting for a trigger.

“How long have you been holding that up?” my dad asked.

“Like fifteen minutes.”

“Well maybe that’s enough, then,” he said as two girls in a blue Honda Civic pointed and waved.

“Just a few more, Daddy. I promise.”

“Corey—” His tone was scolding but tolerant, the voice adults use when they know they should be parental but really don’t feel it’s worth the effort.

The game continued, now with a new level of passion. Every few minutes my dad cast a disapproving glance in our direction, which only made it more fun for Sam and me. As we waved at passersby and handed the sign to one another, I forgot I’d be sitting in a dorm room in eighteen hours, away from my family and from my few friends. I had a reprise from the fear that college meant starting over, a break from the stabbing dread that it would be just like high school, that I’d never make friends. I’d spent the entire summer worrying I’d fail out, convincing myself the only reason I’d gotten into a good college was because the swim coach had pulled some strings. I would be the dumbest freshman, clueless and asocial, sitting in front of her computer on Friday nights, too afraid to venture beyond her dorm. As I held the sign, I forgot how certain I was I’d never be able to handle the transition.

We were about to cross the border into Pennsylvania, and still had over seventy miles to kill. Something would have to be added to the mix to keep the game entertaining. It was then The Perfect Idea Part II came to me: dramatic facial expressions to accompany the sign.

Some ideas should come equipped with a red flag—a flare that fires from the brain’s synapses and ignites a bright flashing “NO” behind the eye sockets. Ideas like this

should immediately be aborted and discarded, buried in an unmarked grave and never again mentioned.

A green Dodge Caravan pulled into the lane to pass us. I handed Sam the sign and she held it up to her window. I scooted toward her side of the car and watched the woman in the passenger seat turn to read the bubble letters. As she squinted at the back window, her lips held a tight grimace, one I imagined she'd worn like a girdle for at least thirty years. Her sensible curls and large glasses bounced as the road turned bumpy, but her eyes remained locked on us. She looked at the sign, then at Sam and me, and then back at the sign.

"Don't laugh," I whispered, barely moving my lips. I made sure my eyes met hers, and forced them not to blink. Judging by our reflection in the window, we looked sad enough to win an Oscar.

This lady didn't seem like the type who enjoyed playing games. After a couple of seconds she turned her head away and faced the driver, most likely her husband. This wasn't good enough for me; every person that had passed us up to this point had laughed, and she wasn't going to blow our perfect streak. I told myself this lady was the sort of woman I never wanted to become—an adult who said "gosh" and "heck," who supported Tipper Gore's explicit lyrics ban on CDs, whose idea of a crazy Friday night was to read *Reader's Digest*, sip herbal tea and cut coupons for toothpaste, Wheat Thins and Hummel figurines from the center of the paper. I wasn't about to let her win.

The van pulled ahead of us. On the back right side, several inches above the bumper, was a metal Jesus fish decal. My father seemed upset at the idea that a middle-aged god-fearing-soccer mom-van driver and her identical husband were going to pass

him; he sped up, pulled behind them, and waited until the van moved into the slow lane to fly past. This was my opportunity. I grabbed the sign from Sam and plastered it to my window. I stared at the driver, who wore thick-rimmed Buddy Holly glasses just like his wife's. He stole nervous glances at me every few seconds. I shook the sign slightly and with sad, desperate eyes enunciated *PLEASE HELP ME*, pausing between each word to heighten the effect. Before I could gage her response, our car pulled ahead of the van and sped away.

I didn't hear the sound of sirens until the two cop cars were nearly a hundred yards behind us. The warped blare was easy to mistake with the jazz music playing on NPR my dad had made us listen to in the two hours since he'd forced us put away the sign. By the time I glanced through the back window and saw the flashing lights speeding toward us, we were a mile from our house. Nobody else seemed to hear the sirens; my father drove along, three miles over the speed limit, and my brother and Sam both stared ahead like they were watching an infomercial on late-night television.

"Shit, Sam," I mumbled, nudging her with my elbow and gesturing out the back window. She turned toward the trunk and stared. It took her a long moment to register what was happening, then her eyes expanded. Without saying a word, she and I both reached for the sign and shoved it into the pouch behind the driver's seat, as if hiding the paper would fix everything.

My father finally noticed the cop cars. I watched his eyes dart from the road to the rearview mirror like a tennis ball caught in match point. He checked his speed and seemed taken aback when he saw it was within range.

“They must be after that asshole in the Porsche who passed us a few miles back. Did you see that guy? He was going eighty.” My dad’s breaths rustled the hairs in his moustache.

I tried not to look at Sam, and could tell she was trying not to look at me. Max turned around and studied us through the metal bars on the headrest like we were criminals and he was guilty by association. Max didn’t like getting in trouble; he was the kind of eleven-year-old who wouldn’t play a board game if it said “For ages ten and under” on the box, who believed in leprechauns, who panicked if we had brunch on Sunday because he’d missed a meal. I could practically hear his brain struggling to decide whether he’d go to jail as an accessory to our crime.

My dad slowed down so the cops could pass, but they made no move to go around us. He dropped his speed down to thirty, then twenty five, and watched through the rearview mirror. They too slowed down. Finally, after the police cars boxed him in, he pulled off the road and into the parking lot of an apartment building several blocks from our house. The three of us gawked at him like he was an active grenade.

The car was still. A pattern of red lights pulsed on the ceiling. The only sound was my dad’s breathing, the heavy ins and outs. Even though I could see through the rearview mirror that there were two cop cars and a State Trooper parked behind us, I didn’t want to make any movement or to turn and directly acknowledge their presence.

There was a tap on the driver’s side door. A tall, young looking police officer with short black hair motioned for my dad to roll down the window. By habit, my dad began to open his door to get out of the car, but the officer slammed it shut. “Stay in your

car, sir, and put your hands where I can see them!” he screamed as he took a step back. He moved his fingers down to his hip and rested them on the leather case around his gun.

“What is this?” my dad asked in a sharp tone. He rolled the window down and put his hands on the steering wheel.

The officer was silent. He glared at my father like he was the kind of man who had just filled a pillowcase with a dozen kittens and a brick, and thrown it in the Ohio River. He peered into the car at the three of us, voiceless statues. The officer jotted down some notes on a tiny pad and gestured with his pen toward the back seat. “These *your* children?”

“What’s this about?” my father repeated, this time louder. His full cheeks were splotchy and red. “I’m a lawyer, and I know my rights!”

Good move, Daddy. Everyone loves a lawyer.

Instead of answering, the cop studied his face for a good five seconds, then repeated himself.

“These two are,” my dad said, gesturing to Max and me. “The other one is my daughter’s friend.”

“Is this true?” He stuck his head into the car and extended it toward the back seat. We all nodded like bobble-head dolls.

The officer turned toward my brother. “What’s your name?”

“Max.”

“What’s your middle name?”

“Max.”

“Son?” The officer cocked his head to the side and stuck it further into the car. There didn’t seem to be a tactful way to tell him my brother never went by his first name, Jonathan, and that we called him by his middle name instead.

As my dad tried to explain, the officer fixed his eyes on the curb and shook his head.

“Can I see your license, *Max*?”

“He doesn’t have one,” said my dad. “He’s too young.”

“When were you born, *Max*?”

I looked at the back of my brother’s head and could see sweat gathering on the edge of his white Hanes T-shirt, below his spiky hair I had dyed orange at the beach. He was prone to excessive sweating. “1999,” he blurted out.

The officer rested his elbows on the open car window and shook his head. “So then Max, you’re *one* year old?”

My brother fidgeted with his hands. He traced them along the beige leather paneling on the side of the car, then shoved them into the pockets of his cargo shorts. I wanted to tell him that if he fucked up again, they’d throw him in jail with all the other perverts, deviants and convicted felons, but it didn’t feel like I was in any position to be assigning blame.

“He got mixed up,” my dad said. “He was born in 1989, right Max?”

My brother nodded and looked at his feet. The officer mumbled and wrote more notes, then turned toward Sam and me. He asked for our names, our dates of birth and our relation to the man in the front seat. Then he took our licenses and carefully studied them in the late afternoon sun.

Before he could continue, my father once again chimed in. “Sir, can you *please* tell me what this is all about?” He gestured to the flashing lights and the flock of black and white cars behind us, as if the officer hadn’t noticed the whole “police scene.” I wondered how it was possible my dad hadn’t yet figured it out.

“Yes, sir, I *can* tell you what *this* is all about. You’re being held for kidnapping.”

The word “kidnapping” hung in the car for a second, the same way dropping the F bomb at church or in front of a room full of kindergarteners would stick. From the back seat I watched my father’s facial features transform, like a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde flip-book. His brow furrowed. The lines on his wide forehead became clearly defined and the vein on this right temple jutted and pulsed. His jaw clenched and a ball traveled down his throat. He lifted his hands, then put them down, then lifted them again to the steering wheel. The silence in the car was far scarier than if he had started to scream.

With Sam’s and my licenses in hand, the policeman told my father to remain seated until he returned—he had to check on some things. We watched him head toward the officers parked behind us.

As we waited, I wanted to point out that this was probably one of those things we’d all be able to laugh about one day, sometime long in the future when this whole “kidnapping” thing had blown over and we were removed enough from the incident to appreciate its humor. With enough time, this whole fiasco would make a good story.

In an attempt to not make eye contact with anyone, I looked out the window and noticed flashing lights across the street. A cop car had pulled into the church parking lot, next to the green minivan with the Jesus fish on the back. The matching husband and

wife stared at us from inside their van, the lenses of their glasses reflecting the sun. I shrunk down in my seat.

My dad reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He dialed our home number. My mother and sister had passed us over ten minutes beforehand; they had stared at the cop spectacle as they went around us. Thinking my dad was finally getting his proper punishment for speeding, my mom stuck out her tongue and pointed at us as she and Lizzie drove the remaining blocks toward our house.

“Hi,” he said into the receiver. “Yeah, I know. . . Well, I did get pulled over. . . No, I was going the speed limit. . . No. . . don’t lecture me. . . No. . . Just let me finish. . . I’m being held. . . for kidnapping. . . The kids. . . *Our* kids.”

My dad looked offended. I knew he wanted my mom to give him sympathy, to acknowledge how unfair this was—especially on the tail end of such a wonderful vacation he had paid for. He wanted permission to yell at me for being irresponsible, stubborn and childish. Once he’d finished speaking, there was a brief pause—a defining moment—and then laughter poured out the other end of the line. My mom’s shrill voice escaped through the holes of the cell phone and tore through the silence.

All eyes were on my dad. How would he react to being laughed at on top of being arrested? Could things get worse? I watched his mouth in anticipation of the screams and litany of profanity that seemed inevitable. But by some undeserved stroke of luck, a smile crept onto the edges of his lips, right below the line of his moustache. Even though I could tell he was trying to suppress it, the absurdity of the past twenty minutes had won and he began to laugh.

The car seemed to expand as we collectively exhaled. He hung up the phone and handed it back to Sam. “You’d better tell your parents what’s going on, in case the cops call them.”

Sam dialed her number and let it ring. No answer. When she got the machine, she left a message. *“Hi Mom and Dad, it’s Sam. I just wanted to let you know that if you get a call from the police, to tell them I am your daughter and that I’m with the Ginsbergs. Okay, thanks. Bye.”*

The officer once again appeared at the door. This time he gestured toward me. “Can you step out of the car, please?”

I looked down at my “Cocks” T-shirt, the one I’d purchased from the bookstore at the University of South Carolina while on vacation, and the matching “Cocks” baseball cap I had on to shield the sun. It didn’t seem as funny as it had two days ago to be wearing my subversive outfit that advertised the college I almost attended. The hot afternoon air stuck to me as I walked away from the car. The officer moved slowly, and I followed him down the slope of the hill, away from the flashing lights and the Chrysler. When we were a good distance from everyone, he put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes.

“Don’t be afraid to tell me the truth. I need to know—is this man really your father?”

There was a brief moment when I thought of extending the joke even further, of saying *no, officer, he’s just some crazy man who told us he had beer in the trunk and snatched us from a rest stop in North Carolina*. I looked back at the other cops sitting in their respective cars, studying me from behind dark sunglasses. Across the street, the

couple from the van was standing on the pavement, talking to a short, heavy-set officer. They were gesturing toward me. I felt like an ass.

“Yes, he’s my dad.” My voice barely carried past my lips.

The officer flipped his little notebook shut, put it into his back pocket and shifted his weight onto his heels. His features darkened and his angry face returned. It felt as though I had given him the wrong answer. He sighed and cleared his throat.

“What were you thinking?”

Ten hours after the kidnapping I was alone in my bedroom. It was well after midnight and the house was silent except for the buzz of the centralized air conditioner. I sat lotus on my stained white carpet, looking at the row of empty suitcases that were supposed to be filled with matching towel sets, sheets, clothes and cooking supplies. I tried to focus my attention on packing or on bracing myself for college, a roommate, new friends, and starting over. Instead I began to laugh.

At first it was just a chuckle I could muffle with the sleeve of my sweatshirt, but then it spread and my entire body shook in a fit of desperate, uncontrollable laughter. For hours I sat there laughing, until my abs hurt and my cheeks felt like wet clay. Shortly before daybreak, when I couldn’t laugh any longer, I rested my head on the side of the biggest suitcase and closed my eyes.

FOREVER YOUNG

Several days after my college graduation I was at the grocery store with a full cart. It was late—well past my parents’ bedtime—and the parking lot was virtually deserted. The week had been draining, and I felt empty and exhausted. My friends had all moved away—to jobs, graduate school, or to backpack around Europe until they “found themselves.” And I was back at home for the summer, dreading the start of the master’s program in professional writing. Late night parties, barhopping, and games of beer pong had been replaced with family movie night and after dinner trips to the supermarket.

On top of that, something else felt wrong. I stopped for a moment on the smooth asphalt and wondered if I’d left my headlights on or had forgotten my wallet at the cash register. But it was a different sort of uneasiness, like the feeling on the day after Christmas when all the presents have been opened, the guests have gone home, and there’s nothing to look forward to except all the snow that still has to be shoveled. I felt as though a little piece of me had died, a piece I hadn’t realized was there until that moment.

For as long as I could remember, I had always made it a point after grocery shopping to push the cart through the lot until its wheels were about to spin out of control. Then, I’d jump up on the back and ride it like a scooter. Inches before it made contact with the car, I’d hop off and yank it back with all my might. It had become a tradition. Mom would panic, sometimes even scream, envisioning the impact and dent. I always timed it perfectly, though. It was one of the many routines I didn’t think I’d ever outgrow.

That night at the supermarket I tried to put my foot on the base of the cart as I had always done—to run with it and then jump on—but my feet clung to the ground like magnets. No matter how hard I willed myself to climb up and go for a ride, I wasn't able to step onto the metal bar. It was as though dozens of invisible arms were reaching out and keeping me grounded, forcing me to walk like a mature, civilized person.

As I shuffled my feet toward my VW Beetle, I experienced a rare shred of awareness that nearly overwhelmed me; every unspoken fear that had been on my mind since I graduated became real. A horrible thought crept into my brain and settled there, a realization the previous weeks and years had been building toward: my childhood was over and there was nothing I could do about it.

I often think about this night at the grocery store. I'm twenty-two-years-old—isn't it time to accept I'm not a kid anymore? It's just not that easy. I'm not ready to be inducted into formal adult society. I don't feel "mature." Even though I'm no longer able to ride the shopping cart, this alone can't make me an adult. What, then, am I? I feel like a misfit without a niche; I'm too old to have snowball fights and too young to throw Tupperware parties.

Maybe I resist adulthood because most of the grownups I know seem incapable of really having fun. They're so controlled by deadlines, schedules and routines that their inner child has long since suffocated and they don't have time to care. The capacity for fun dies if it's not nurtured, and riding the grocery cart may be the first of a series of parts of me that has begun to sour with maturity. What a terrifying thought. I don't want to

grow cynical, to end up a salty senior citizens who wears polyester slacks and drinks malt liquor for breakfast while she watches stories and plays solitaire on a tray table.

I've always identified more with children than adults, and can't figure out what's wrong with that. A little voice inside my head yawns at the opera and while watching professional golf. This child within gags when I swallow a piece of seafood and tells me to spit the gristle from my meat into the napkin on my lap when nobody's looking, even if I'm at a fancy restaurant. Then she tells me to fish the olives from my martini and put them on my middle fingers. It's this inner child who still gets a chill when the sound of *The Entertainer* rolls through my neighborhood and makes me run outside barefoot with a dollar clenched in my fist to chase after the ice cream truck. She makes me punch whoever's standing next to me when a Volkswagen Beetle drives by and stick my finger into the backs of the chocolates at Christmas in search of the coveted caramel-filled pieces. It was she who made me hold my breath through a two-mile-long tunnel last weekend, ignoring the black dots that clouded my vision. Even though I was going ninety-five miles-an-hour in the final stretch, I made it the entire way without cheating, and it was great. I don't want to forget the feeling as I pulled out of the tunnel—that numb, tingly wave that screamed *you win!* and made me want to do a happy dance in the car seat.

What's so bad about blowing bubbles in my root beer when I think nobody's looking or watching cartoons on Saturday mornings? I still wish I had a hovercraft like the one in *Back to the Future* and spend an obscene amount of time planning what I would do if I won the contest and got to ride around in the Oscar Meyer Weiner-Mobile

for a day. When I see a new neighborhood, I can't help but judge it based on how good it would be for trick-or-treating, hide-and-seek and sled riding. I wonder: is this bad?

It is in a world of professionals who look down on juvenile behavior when you reach a certain age. It's true: as an adult, it's no longer fashionable or socially acceptable to race your sister down the hall to press the buttons on the elevator or to throw up at parties from minute-long keg stands and rounds of blowjob shots. By this point you're years past the age where you should be jumping on beds (except for the ones in hotels because it doesn't matter if you break the springs in those). You're expected to be able to point to Czechoslovakia on the map, to enjoy listening to NPR and to have an informed opinion about America's dependence on foreign oil. Like it or not, it's what adults do.

But I'm not that.

Maybe it's more complicated. Maybe the boomerang children who feel lost, who skirt the threshold between childhood and adulthood but can't commit to either extreme, can start a new breed of grownups. We'll be the kind of adults who enjoy playing Truth or Dare and seeing how many grapes we can fit in our mouths (forty-two—I'm not even kidding). We'll be the ones who blow bubbles with our chewing gum so gynomous a sticky pink mess gets matted into our hair. And when we're at soda machines, we'll be the ones mixing all the drinks together in one glass—just because we can.

There are certain things I'm not going to outgrow—not because I can't, but because I'm not ready to give up my better half. I don't want there to be a time when the kid I was dies. I am this child. To deny her an occasional voice would be to stifle the skip in my step, the snort in my laugh.

Maybe the real test of what makes a successful adult shouldn't be how many memos you can write in one day or whether you pay your bills on time. Nor should it be if you can pretend to like dressing up, or if you manage to not laugh while explaining to the paramedics how you glued your hands together with rubber cement. Instead, the real test should be if you can still laugh at yourself, even when the adult inside scoffs and scowls.

It's inevitable that some aspects of who I am will be replaced with pieces of who I will become, but they're all made from the same Me Stuff. Sometimes my adult voice may creep in and demand a moment of seriousness. I guess she too needs the opportunity to breathe. Maybe she'll even have some witty tidbit to offer once in a while about the economy or sustainable organic farming. But I'll never let her take control for too long. She frowns far too much and has a funny mothball smell I can't seem to get rid of, no matter how many bubble baths I take.

So even when my twenty-two-year-old shell calmly walks my cart through the parking lot instead of riding it to my car, that little flash in the corner of my brown eyes is saying that inside, my hair's blowing in the breeze, and I'm still full of hell.

DENTAL WORK

I'm doing okay until I hear the sharp electric buzz of the drill—the high-pitched revving sound it makes as it cuts through enamel—and the accompanying cry. My hands tremble and I nearly drop the dated copy of *House and Garden* I've been leafing through. The little blonde boy sitting next to me in the waiting room stops swinging his legs. He looks up from his Game Boy toward his mother with huge eyes.

“Don't worry,” she coos as she squeezes his knee with her thumb and index finger. “You're a big boy. You're not afraid of the dentist.”

I have the sudden desire to call my mom, to make her drive thirty-five minutes to come sit with me in this sterile waiting room. Maybe she could hold my hand and assure me I'm a big girl and can handle getting a filling. I would call her if I thought she'd be any comfort. I imagine us sitting side-by-side in cheaply upholstered chairs, the shoulders of our adult bodies nearly touching. I picture her flipping through an old copy of *People*, checking her wristwatch every three minutes and sighing as she thinks about all the things she should be doing at home. When I turn to her for support and clasp my sweaty fingers around her hand, she brushes me off and tells me to get a grip. She reminds me I'm twenty-four years old, chicken shit, and maybe it's time to grow up and set an example for the other children.

So I go it alone.

On some level it occurs to me getting a filling is a routine procedure, that thousands of people have dental work done every day and find the entire process

unremarkable, standard. I used to be one of those people who viewed trips to the dentist as nothing more than a minor annoyance. That was before they found the cavity.

As I sit waiting to get the filling, it's not the pain I'm worried about, it's the idea that any minute I'll be called into the back room, where the dentist will drill into my head with the machine that looks like the Jaws of Life. I've seen enough horror movies to construct an absurd, though sufficiently terrifying mental montage; my mind ignites with images of blood splattered on the white walls, of metal trays containing chunks of tender head flesh, of crimson teeth with huge, twisted roots stacked on a porcelain plate. I imagine the dentist staring at me from behind his magnifying glasses, pupils dilated, his crazed, hungry eyes lusting to saw off my tongue and store it with the others he's collected to satisfy his secret tongue fetish.

I try to shut off my imagination as I go through my wallet, re-arranging credit cards, receipts and old movie stubs. Just as I'm about to count the pennies in my change compartment, the receptionist calls my name. I jump and spill the contents of my purse; coins roll all over the blue carpet and I pick them up one at a time as she stands with her hands on her hips watching.

I sit in the plastic-covered chair while the hygienist lays out a row of shiny, sharp tools: miniature hooks, curved blades and drill bits. As she shoves her doughy fingers into latex gloves, I try to focus on anything other than this countertop arsenal. I force my mind away, let it wander back to the last time I saw this woman. It was a month ago at my annual checkup and teeth cleaning. I recall her smiling as she poked at my gums and pulled on my tongue, her heavily permed mullet bobbing from effort. Once she crammed

tubes, chemicals and fifty thousand dollars worth of machinery into my mouth, she decided to engage me in a round of small talk.

“So, where do you go to school?”

I gagged out a jumble of letters and sounds as she repositioned my tongue on the opposite side of my mouth, and tried not to choke on the well of spit that trickled down my throat.

“Oh, How great! What do you study?” She scraped plaque off of the backs of my front teeth and deposited it onto the paper bib on my chest.

“Wriing.”

“Well isn’t that nice. Do you want to be a writer when you graduate?”

Although I was impressed with this woman’s ability to decipher my muddled half-words, now didn’t seem like the time to indulge her with my fear about pursuing a path of writing, to explain to her how I had spent the past five years whittling away life skills as I tested various other vocations, how writing seemed to be all I had left by default. A nod was much easier.

But she wasn’t looking for a simple conversation with one-word answers. She wanted to get to the meat of things, to engage in a round of soul-searching.

“My goodness! I see you’re reading Deepak Chopra,” she said, gesturing with a silver hook toward the corner of the room where my purse and a copy of *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* rested. “I love that book!”

Her face lit up like a pinball machine and she bantered for five minutes about how that book changed her life, how Chopra’s philosophy is so revolutionary, how he really

knows how to reach out to people. She rattled on about the eternal soul, the universal life force that is present behind every thought, object and person we encounter.

Any other day, and under any other circumstances, I would have been up for a chat about metaphysics. But not with the looming doom of dental work choking out my inner Zen. Of all the books I could have chosen, I had to pick that one. Why hadn't I selected something a little less complex, a book that could be discussed with a few grunts and shoulder shrugs? Our conversation was heading down a slippery slope of complexity that reminded me of my undergraduate philosophy classes, and I feared where it could end up: *What do you think of his epistemic analysis of the soul's inherent impetus to create the physical body as its corporeal manifestation?* I choked as I tried not to swallow the paste that coated my teeth.

But the hygienist was suddenly distracted from our discussion. "Looks like we may have a cavity here," she said as she pushed on my top right molar. "I'd better get the dentist to confirm."

While she was gone I panicked. Over the course of a thirty-second window, I oscillated between rational, self-assuring banter and catatonic despair. First, I told myself that having a cavity wouldn't be too bad; it's an easy enough problem to fix. Then I realized getting a filling would require drilling into my head and burning out the rotten part of the tooth. I cursed the thousands of gummi bears I'd convinced myself had nutritional value and consumed by the bagful, the gallons of ice cream and frosted cereal I had mixed together and sandwiched between Reeces cups. I thought back to the bowls of dirt dessert I brought to parties, the dish my friends referred to as "sugar salad" because of the crushed Oreos layered between a mix of powdered sugar, whipped cream,

vanilla pudding and butter. I made a pact with myself that if I could just squeak away this one time without a cavity, I'd immediately adopt a healthy, holistic diet that would substitute organic apples for Krispy Kremes.

But no. The dentist rushed in and shoved the metal pointy thing into my molar. There was no hello, no small talk, none of the usual *how's-your-day-wow-it-sure-is-beautiful-out-not-a-cloud-in-the-sky-see-any-good-movies* chatter we normally exchanged. After digging around a bit, he nodded, walked over to the X-ray and said, "Yep, yep, yep, that's a cavity all right. Looks like you'll need to come back to get that taken care of."

Here I am, sitting in the same stiff chair, staring at the same dental hygienist. Today, however, she doesn't want to chat, which is a shame because I really need a diversion. As soon as she's done lining up the tools, she darts out the door to fetch the dentist.

It's freezing in the office but I can't stop sweating. My blouse is soaked and it's stuck to my back like cellophane on a piece of raw chicken. A moment later, the dentist rushes in. His deeply tanned skin contrasts his white scrubs and face mask, and makes my Pittsburgh pallor seem five shades pastier. He has a small drill in his hand, and his jerky movements cause the muscles in my back to knot.

"Hi, Hi, Hi," he says as he leafs through my charts. "I see we're doing a filling today?"

He comes over and opens my mouth, pokes around inside for a bit, then tugs on the tooth with the cavity. "Yep, that's the one." He scribbles notes on a paper and places it in my file. Before I have a chance to prepare myself for what's happening, the dentist is

standing over me holding the Mother of all Needles in his right hand. He lifts it up to show me, as though this display of weaponry will elicit a visceral response. What does he want me to say? *Oh, wow, isn't that a big fucking needle?* Can't he see that I'm trembling, that the nails on my right hand are digging into the flesh on my left wrist?

I close my eyes, then immediately open them, close them, then jerk them open. I finally decide the only thing worse than seeing him stick my gums is imagining it and leaving my brain to fill in the missing gaps. My eyes nearly cross as they watch the tip of the needle approach my mouth. The first shot of Novocain pinches a bit, but the next two melt into a numb, tingly wave. The dentist sets down the needle, then immediately jabs my gums with some sort of metal prodding device.

“Can you feel that?”

I shake my head no as I run my tongue over the inside of my mouth. It's a strange sensation to trace the contours of flesh and teeth I know are there, but to experience them as foreign masses in the same mouth.

Just as I'm about to take a deep breath and celebrate my bravery, the scene speeds up. Without warning, the dentist grabs the drill and lowers it toward my mouth. When he turns it on I hear *reeeeeeeeeeee*—the sound a swarm of killer bees would make if caught in a helium tank. The tremble I managed to repress till now manifests into full-blown shakes. Coming to the dentist was obviously a bad idea. What the hell was I thinking?

Even though I'd made it this far, maybe turning back isn't such a bad option. There must be worse things than going through life with an untreated cavity. The office is on the second floor, and I'm pretty sure there's a small section of grass right outside the window. A jump isn't out of the picture. Or maybe I could duck down really

low and crawl out through the same door I'd entered. There would probably be enough time to get into my car and a good block or so away before they'd even realize I'd gone missing. If that didn't work, I could pretend to faint or tell the Mouth Team I had to go to the bathroom, then lock myself in the stall for six hours until they'd all left for the night.

The dentist finally notices I'm shaking; he sees the small dots of blood that have formed on my left wrist as my right hand digs into the flesh.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

What the hell do you think, Captain Obvious? I want to shout in his face. *Did my caged animal eyes give it away?* But I'm too embarrassed to say anything. It takes all my energy to try and make my body stop shaking. The harder I work to force the quivering to go away, the worse it gets; it's like trying to hold back a sneeze.

The dentist straightens his back and moves the drill away from my face. "We haven't started yet," he notes, as if this hasn't occurred to me. He looks sideways and gives the hygienist who's standing to his left the *we're gonna talk about this one after she leaves* look.

I wish I could explain to him that I don't normally act like this, that I'm generally able to function in society despite my current state. I want to be frank with him and let him know I'm as shocked at my own behavior as he must be. Maybe we could even share a good laugh about this whole filling fiasco if he'd just put down the goddamn drill.

"Do you want me to begin?"

I nod, even though I'd rather sew my head to the carpet than sit through the next fifteen minutes. The drill is on again and lets off its heinous sound. I inhale, hold it, and

wait for touchdown. A moment later there's pressure on the roof of my mouth and I hear the buzzing rise two octaves as the diamond-bit drill boars into my virgin molar.

If someone had asked me before this procedure what the worst part would be, I would have told them the sound of the drill ravaging my tooth. I would have been wrong. As he cuts through my top right molar, the smell of burnt enamel combines with the chemical odor wafting through the office. An invisible stink cloud settles around my head and makes my stomach turn. Now I'm really shaking, and it's not just a quiver—it's convulsions that roll from my head down to my bare toes sticking out from my flip flops. The dentist jerks the drill out of my mouth and pulls his entire body away from me.

"I can't go on until you stop shaking." His tone is kind but impatient, as though he wants to be sympathetic but his busy schedule won't permit him to indulge in this act of humanity. For a long minute he and the hygienist stare down at me like I'm a puppy that's just had an accident on the new carpet. Even with the drill off, the smell still lingers. I gag several times and have to really work to keep down the wall of vomit. I look away and try to focus inward, to think of those seven spiritual laws of success. How the hell have I managed to forget them all?

Getting up and leaving is no longer an option. We're at the point of no return; I've got a half-drilled hole in my numb mouth, and the filling has yet to be inserted. I flirt briefly with the idea of filling it with caulking, white plaster, even a tiny pebble and some Elmer's Glue, but doubt that a makeshift filling would withstand an electric toothbrush, let alone the test of a Rice Krispy treat or s'more. I need a distraction—now—so I do the only thing I know will take my mind away from the room and the procedure; I conjugate verbs in French.

When I signed up for French in seventh grade, I had lofty goals; I pictured myself sitting in a café in Paris, speaking eloquent, quick French to locals, offering them witty, thoughtful tidbits about The Louvre and croissants. It didn't quite work out that way. After six months spent trying to cultivate a nasal quality that would allow me to properly enunciate my ever-growing vocabulary list, I gave up and refused to speak with a French accent because I sounded like an old man with a deviated septum. For the next six years I failed every aspect of my French classes that involved recitation.

Conjugating French verbs, however, has proven to be much more useful than speaking French. This mechanical, monotonous act is the only thing that always forces my mind away from the moment. I use it at random times—when passing the two-minute mark in breath holding contests, when walking alone on a dark street at night, when trying not to cry during sad movies. While the dentist waits, I go through every verb my mind can still recall: *être, avoir, voir*. Each one I mentally recite takes the focus a bit further from the smell. After a few rounds the shaking begins to subside and my body prepares itself for the next wave of drilling. This time, instead of focusing on the ruckus in my mouth, I'm back in the eighth grade—*je suis, tu es, il est*. . .

“Well now, that wasn't so bad, was it?” the dentist says a little while later as he throws his latex gloves into a shiny metal garbage can. I glare at him and wonder how he's managed to forget the past twenty minutes. He must have a liberal definition of success, one that's loose enough to embody failure and its accompanying humiliation. Or maybe he understands that victory is relative; for some it means getting back to the office on time for a one p.m. conference call after getting a double root canal; for me it means

making it out of the chair, out of his office, and away for one more year without pissing my pants.

By the time I get home, I'm starving. My eyes scour the refrigerator for something that looks remotely satisfying. I see a bag of carrots in the bottom drawer, the bunch of celery I always buy and then let fester for three months until it decomposes, liquefies and swims in its own juices. I see apples, a block of tofu and an unopened pint of fat-free yogurt. I shut the door and head to the cabinet.

I glance past the rows of canned peas, past the saltines and spaghetti sauce. Just as I'm about to settle for some lentil soup, I spot a bag of Oreos in the back corner. I try to forget I've seen the cookies—to ignore the blue, unopened bag and refocus on the other items on the shelf. But it's too late. It beckons me to come closer. *I know you've had a tough day*, the bag says. *I'll make it all better.*

There's a moment of guilt—a brief flash when I remember my promise to be done with sugar, to be good to my mouth, my teeth and my body. But then I think back to the afternoon, to the fiasco I've been through—to what I've endured. I shudder as I run my tongue over my still-numb gums and over the jagged top of the filling. *Fuck the dentist*, I think as I snatch the cookies. Next to the Oreos there's a tub of cream cheese icing. It seems anemic to eat only cookies for lunch, so I grab it, too. *And fuck the sugar-free diet.* As I make my first of a dozen icing and Oreo sandwiches, I know, without a doubt, that I've earned my dessert.

ORIENTATION

I lay in a fetal position on the floor of my fourteen-by-ten-foot rented bedroom next to a mostly deflated queen-sized air mattress, panting and dizzy. After ten minutes of hyperventilating into this rubber receptacle, I decided beds are overrated and that I'd manage without one for a few more days. I had long since given up on assembling the desk; it sat, half-constructed, in the corner of the room closest to the window.

It was the first day of graduate school orientation, and I was already burnt out. I had spent the entire morning and afternoon unpacking my belongings from a series of boxes and Hefty trash bags, throwing shoes and towels, pots and pans in various corners of the whitewashed square cell, pausing every few armloads to feel sorry for myself.

After four years spent earning my B.A. in creative writing and philosophy, I was back at Carnegie Mellon for a master's in professional writing—a degree I was getting not because I wanted it, but because I had no idea what else to do. The previous spring I had been rejected from all the MFA programs I had applied to in creative writing and had, by default, accepted that I would have to either get a job or another degree in the time until I could re-apply. More school seemed like the lesser of the two evils.

Part of my upset was the degree itself and the thought of what I'd be spending the next two years doing. I was about to begin a course of study that would enable me to write instruction manuals for toaster ovens, to map out intricate grammar trees and to debate the definition of "rhetoric" for hours, just for the hell of it. Sure, it would be marketable, even a step up on the totem pole of pointless degrees I was collecting, but it would be boring and tedious and had the potential to suck out all my creative energy.

That summer, my friends from college who had graduated with me eagerly left Pittsburgh. They had moved on, to California, New York, even Alaska, and I was back in the same city I'd always lived in, sharing a house a quarter mile from campus with scary new roommates. As I carried bag after bag from my car to my bedroom, my housemates watched from their spot on the couch and whispered to one another. They were Ph.D. students in computer engineering who spoke only Chinese and binary, and spent their days sleeping and their nights playing Dance Dance Revolution in the living room. They ate dried mushrooms for breakfast and had twelve-syllable, unpronounceable Asian names I made no attempt to learn. I was absolutely terrified.

That afternoon, once I peeled myself from the carpet and ran a comb through my matted hair, I ventured to campus for my first taste of graduate life—an orientation meeting and dinner with the members of my program. I sat in the corner with a small plate of carrot sticks and watched as the new students mingled and introduced themselves to professors. Almost everyone was well over thirty, and I was completely naïve about life beyond college. I'd never had a professional internship much less a decade-long career in marketing or public relations. I still watched cartoons, misused pronouns and held my breath while driving past graveyards and through tunnels.

What am I doing here? I wondered as I fidgeted with my napkin, tearing at the edges and trying to look busy. The longer I stayed, the more trapped I felt. There was still time to leave, to get my deposit back and apply for jobs downtown. I could creep toward the stairs and out the back door of the building without anyone even noticing. On the way home, I could call my parents and tell them I'd changed my mind after all. I'd say I had quit before I'd even started, that not only was I too scared to give it a chance, but now I

had no job and no idea what I was going to do with myself for the next seventy years. Maybe I'd tell them I planned to leave Pittsburgh, that I would go far away and start over. California would be nice. Or Amsterdam. They would probably be too shocked to be disappointed.

I could have done this, except I had already signed my apartment lease. Except I was broke and dependent on my parents for rent, car payments, health insurance and nearly everything else. Except I was too scared and stubborn to admit getting this degree was the wrong decision, a horrible mistake.

As I walked to my house I could see the freshmen gathering at tables and on benches throughout campus. They roamed casually, eating pizza and playing Frisbee. This was their first week of college and they were basking in the new network of potential friends they'd inherited. They had an opportunity I'd never again have. There would be no forced social icebreakers in the real world, no forged friendships with people down the hall, no more all-night drinking parties with loud music and greasy food. Like it or not, college was over and it was time to move on.

Later that evening, in between reruns of "Everyday Italian" on The Food Network and trips to my computer to compulsively check my email, my cell phone rang. On the other line were my friends from college—one year behind me—who were about to start their senior year. They screamed into the phone over the blare of music.

"Corey—come drink with us. Right now!"

"I don't know, I have orientation in the morning."

"Whatever. We're taking shots of vodka out of coconut shells."

“Well—”

“Get your ass over here. And you better have your drinking face on.” The line went dead.

Before I walked out the door, I set my alarm for 7:30, *just in case*. I didn’t plan on drinking much, but there was nothing wrong with playing it safe. Arriving late to the computer software orientation in the morning didn’t seem like the best way to impress my new professors. I stopped in the kitchen and grabbed a box of unrefrigerated pink wine, a half-eaten bag of Cheez-Its and wasabi mustard dipping sauce.

Moderation has never made sense to me. Why eat two Oreos when there are three rows full of cookies? Why run for only twenty minutes if I’ve got time for a half-marathon? And why sip light beer when everyone else is already slurring their words? As I downed my first shot and felt the smooth burn of vodka coat my throat, I was suddenly committed to going all the way, to letting the stream of cheap booze carry me past the intermediary, introspective phase, right to Happy Town.

We sat on the hardwood floor in my friend’s living room and did shots of flavored vodka, drank mugs brimming with pink wine. We played “Up the River, Down the River” with a deck of cards that was missing most of the spades and hearts. We chased each drink with crackers doused in hot mustard. Once the alcohol was gone and we were sufficiently housed, we boarded the bus to a bar downtown.

As I stared at my reflection in the massive tinted window, I realized I was smiling. It had been well over an hour since I’d thought about being a grad student or remembered I was done with college. *Why stop now?* I thought as I climbed out of the bus and crossed the street.

The music inside the bar was loud and a thick wall of smoke hung at eye level like smog. A football game played on the overhead television and drunk, bearded men in flannel shirts and down vests periodically swore and shouted as they nursed their beers. We found a row of empty stools sandwiched between groups of people at the bar and ordered our first round of Bloody Marys.

Two hours later we were all sloppy drunk. The room took on the sharp quality it often does after a bout of heavy drinking; the bright lights pulsed and the music that blared from the jukebox in the front of the bar warped and bent. I was talking quickly, passionately, to a group of guys with ROTC haircuts and firm, angular jaws while my friends sang karaoke to Bon Jovi. When the final call for drinks was announced, I retrieved our group and we boarded the last bus of the night. We weren't ready to go to bed, though. I followed my friends as they staggered off the bus two stops before my house and tagged along as they crossed the deserted Pittsburgh street.

The next thing I knew I was standing inside the dirtiest frat house on campus in the middle of a huge pledge party. There were over a hundred freshmen assembled in large groups, grinding to *The Thong Song* and chugging beers so it would be easier to fit in with a room full of drunken strangers. *What was I doing there?* Even as an undergrad I had refused to set foot in the frats unless I was so drunk I couldn't smell the urine on the carpets or feel the crusted semen on the couches. I spent many nights freshman year hidden in my closet, avoiding friends who came to my door trying to get my roommate Heather and me to go to the frats with them. I hated dancing and waiting in line twenty minutes to use a bathroom so vile I had to hover a foot over the toilet to prevent whatever diseases it housed from touching my body. But here I was, almost twenty-three years old,

with close to a gallon of assorted liquors and heinous foods in my stomach, playing beer pong with a bunch of freshmen. It didn't even seem weird. I sunk shot after shot and announced in my outside voice how funny it was that that the drunker I got, the better my pong game was.

My college career had prepared me well for the night; I won five games in a row before stumbling onto the front porch and rolling into a ball on a broken couch next to a half-naked frat guy dry-humping his girlfriend. My mouth was parched and I could hear liquid sloshing in my stomach when I moved. Under the dim overhead light, I sat as still as I could manage and tried to ignore the couch sex happening to my left. When the gyrations became too much to bear, I pulled myself off the sofa and staggered away.

I wandered behind the frat house into a parking lot and decided to rest for a spell in an empty parking space. Although my memory from this point on is hazy, I remember lying next to the back tire on a red truck, oblivious that I was wearing a mini-skirt and had to be up for orientation in four hours. My left hand clenched the curb in an attempt to keep from falling off the spinning world, and my right hand traced the treads on the tire as though it was a piece of expensive silk. The music that was playing inside the house faded into background noise, then went off completely.

After what seemed like hours and may well have been, I managed to pull myself onto the sidewalk and anchor my frame to the smooth cement. I cradled my head in my hands and tried to focus on a "No Parking" sign on the back of the building to keep from getting sick. This worked for several minutes, but then my body began to shake. Before I could position myself for the impending release, there was a gurgling sound followed by

a wave of relief. I looked down at my new canvas sandals and saw them swimming in a puddle of neon red vomit, my painted silver toenails poking out from the warm pile.

The blare of the alarm clock cut through my skull like the tip of a rusty knitting needle. I shot up and hit my head on the bottommost shelf in my closet and cursed as I fell back to the floor. I crawled into my bedroom on all fours and peeled an empty trash bag from my cheek. With one eye shut, I was able to make the room stop spinning enough to see it was morning and I had somehow managed to get back to my apartment the previous night, unlock the door, and find a pile of dirty towels in the closet in which to nest.

As the cold water rinsed chunks of tomato from my hair and chin, I held onto the tiled wall for support and worked to piece together the previous night. I reeked of stomach acid and liquor, and no amount of scrubbing made me feel clean. Judging from the bruises and scratches that adorned my legs like a vague road map, I had apparently fallen several times, perhaps even into a thorny bush or a trashcan. The montage of the night played back like a poorly-directed abstract movie with no plot or purpose. I recalled bits of conversations, brief flashes of me pole dancing with a football player, eating mint brownies in somebody's kitchen, sitting at a bar talking about how much I hated our president to a bunch of unsympathetic frat boys wearing Bush/Cheney tees who were downing a line of whiskey shots.

I made a mental list of everything I could remember drinking, which included half a box of bottom-shelf pink Franzia, three vanilla vodka shots that I had insisted tasted "just like birthday cake," three Bloody Marys and countless glasses of warm Natural Ice I had chugged each time the other team sunk a beer pong shot. As the beverage list rattled

off inside my head, I dry heaved and clutched the soap dish to keep from keeling over. The thought of spending the entire morning at a computer lab learning the basics of Adobe InDesign was as repulsive to me as the idea of starting off the day with a generous swig of Stoli.

I wished more than anything that I could return to my makeshift bed in the closet and never come out. If the previous night had been an indicator about how I would handle graduate school, then I clearly wasn't up for the challenge. Maybe there was still time to choose a different path than the one that I was on. I could go back to sleep and think all day, then start looking for jobs first thing in the morning. I could pretend graduate school orientation had never happened, regroup and start again. Even though I felt trapped, there were other options.

As I buttoned my blouse and wiped lint off of my skirt, I tried to formulate a game plan. If I quit I'd have to have some sort of backup in place. Maybe waitressing or bartending. No, I hated being forced into social situations with strangers. What about working for a nonprofit? I'd applied to twenty of those over the summer and didn't get a single interview. How about being an ice cream scooper at Coldstone Creamery? Too embarrassing to have to sing for tips. It was clear I had no marketable skills, nothing to offer the world other than a piece of paper listing a degree in writing and one in philosophy. How dim my prospects were. And I'd be just as clueless and confused if I dropped out, especially if I quit graduate school before it had even started. No grownup would give in that easily.

I shuffled toward campus with a binder in one hand and a bottle of blue Gatorade in the other. It was a hot August morning and I was sweating vodka from every pore. I walked forward mechanically and tried to focus on a tree on the other side of the campus quad to keep from getting dizzy. All I thought about was *left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot* until I was standing outside the Humanities building, gripping the brass door handle in my sweaty palm.

I paused outside the stone structure with its dull copper paneling. If I opened the door, there would be no going back. In the glass I could see my tired reflection staring out, tempting me to turn around and go home. *Do it, she said. For once in your life, don't chicken out.* My hand fell to my side and I swallowed. *If you walk through this door it will be the biggest mistake you'll ever make.*

A group of girls in black skirts approached the Humanities building. They laughed at a private joke as they walked around me to open the door. As it slowly shut behind them, I stepped forward, grabbed the glass panel and inched my way in. I hated myself as I heard close behind me.

I sat in the back of the computer lab and tried to tune out the first hour-long lecture that chronicled, in painful detail, the many ways to prevent carpal tunnel syndrome. As waves of nausea ravaged my already shaky body, I mapped out an exit strategy, knowing from past hangover experiences it may well come to that. I watched my classmates as they sat on the edges of their seats devouring every word the speaker offered. They transcribed stretching techniques and asked insightful, annoying questions that made the lecture drag on twenty minutes past its humane ending point.

I stared blankly at the screensaver on the computer in front of me. A small red ball bounced from one side of the monitor to the other. It was trapped in that little box, floating listlessly. The woman sitting next to me was onto her third page of lecture notes. She paused periodically to shake some feeling back into her fingers and then went at it again, breaking long enough to adjust her glasses and nod in agreement when the speaker made a compelling point. I looked down at my paper and saw a series of squiggly lines and shaded-in circles scribbled beneath the date and heading—the kind of musings a child would leave on the back of a Denny’s placemat with a red crayon while waiting for an ice cream sundae with rainbow sprinkles.

I understood then that I was a different breed than the other grad students; I represented the intermediary—the subway stop between arrested youth and impending adulthood. Maybe they had once been like me, maybe not. Somewhere along the way their lives had taken a turn and they had veered onto a different road than the one I was traipsing down. We were all along for the same ride, but I was sure we were going to very different places once we got off the train.

After nearly three hours spent mopping the sweat from my forehead and choking down the wall of bile that threatened to explode at any second, we were told to head to the student center to have our photos taken for our ID cards. Although I wasn’t feeling “Kodak Moment” worthy, I was too tired to fabricate an excuse.

The twenty graduate students traveled across campus in a pack. I watched from behind as they exchanged excited conversations and discussed that morning’s lesson. They opened binders and showed each other notes they had taken and charts they’d made. I stared at the fingernails on my left hand, which I had painted blue with a Sharpee

marker during the second hour of the lecture. I hid my hand in my pocket, looked down and tried not to make eye contact with anyone.

As we rounded a bend toward the student center, I ran directly into a blonde girl I vaguely recognized from my writing class the previous spring. She wore a fitted pink T-shirt with a sorority logo on it, and immediately smiled when she saw me.

“How are *you* doing today?” she said with an inflection that implied she had been a part of whatever I had done the previous night. I searched my brain for where I had seen her, and realized that she had been my beer pong partner for hours.

Several of the students in my program who were walking ahead of me turned and watched our exchange. I felt my cheeks redden and could already hear the rumors playing out in my head: *That blonde girl—she’s the resident alcoholic, the asocial one who goes to frat parties because she can’t leave college behind, because she refuses to grow up.*

I hung back from the group and recounted what I could remember of the night before. With the help of my pong partner, I was able to fill in some of the missing pieces.

“I’m so sorry if I said anything offensive,” I offered. Given how many chunks of the night were gone from my memory bank, this was a real possibility.

“Oh my god, don’t apologize! You were great last night! I’ve never won so many times at pong!” she exclaimed. “You should come back on Saturday and be my partner again.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I tried to think of a response that wouldn’t sound too stupid, but all I came up with was a smile. Even though I had no intention of taking her up on the offer, it felt good to know it stood.

“Well, I’m going to get some lunch now. You wanna come?” she asked, pointing in the direction of the food vendors. The smell of lo mien and egg rolls wafted toward us in greasy waves.

I thought for a moment about joining her, even though the idea of food made my insides wither. Then, though, I remembered I wasn’t through with orientation.

“I actually have to go catch up with the other grad students,” I said as I gestured toward the group that was entering the building several hundred feet away. She shrugged and nodded, and we exchanged goodbyes. I watched for a brief moment as she walked away, then turned slowly and headed in the opposite direction.

SECTION TWO

“ ‘Can you see anything in the dark, with your sunglasses on?’ she asked.
‘The big show is inside my head,’ I said.”

~Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*

MY QUARTERLIFE CRISIS

I can't decide what the worst part about my job is. Maybe it's cleaning the caked, orange urine stains from the inside of the Fabi's toilet bowl rim. Maybe it's being hungover from drinking cheap vodka out of a *You're #1* mug alone in my apartment last night while I ignored term papers and surfed the internet. Maybe it's having to smile at Nancy when she peeks her head into her son Teo's bedroom to remind me to clean the windowsill behind the dresser—the one I can't get to unless I move the dresser. Or maybe it's having to cart her four children to debate club, baseball practice and swim meets while the floors dry and the linens go through the spin cycle.

Nancy comes into the bathroom while I'm standing in the shower, scrubbing the grout between the tiles with Clorox spray and a soapy rag. I see her orange hair out of the corner of my eye, a helmet of curls that never seems to lose its shape. She has a way of doing that, of always poking her head in to check on me but pretending like she has some piece of gossip or breaking news from CNN.com she needs to share that second. At first I thought it was because she wanted to make sure I wasn't stealing anything, but after more than two years working in the Fabi house, I realize she's lonely and a little manic. Some days it seems like part of what she's paying me for is to be her sounding board—the one trapped in her slice of suburbia for six hours each Friday who has no choice but to nod and smile. This I do, no matter what bit of absurd or irrelevant information spews from her mouth.

Nancy has taken it upon herself to suggest internships for me for over the summer. She tells me creative writing is a waste of time, says to try journalism or

magazine writing. I nod. She instructs me to be a librarian when I graduate, to date her nephew, a *hot Jewish boy*. I smile. She tells me I'm pale, that I don't eat enough, that I should sleep more so I can get rid of those horrible bags beneath my eyes. I just stare at her. She corrects my grammar when I say the sink still "needs cleaned," tells me she's helping me for my own good.

I'm tired of people helping me for my own good, just like I'm tired of graduate school and staying in the computer lab till two in the morning working on design projects and fake grant proposals for class. Some days I'm so tired I crawl into bed with my shoes on when I get home from campus after my afternoon classes. I lay on my air mattress with the slow leak and stare at my lava lamp till the sun has set and the room melts into a purple jumble.

"I'm gonna run some errands," Nancy says. "Would you mind keeping an eye on Teo?" Before I can answer, Nancy notices the rag in my hand and shakes her head no, like I'm the dumbest maid she's ever seen and my stupidity is nearly insufferable. She reaches into the bathroom closet and pulls out a scrub brush. "Use this, it works better," she says, handing it to me.

I wait until I hear the car door shut, then watch through the small window as the van backs out of the driveway. When I'm sure she's gone, I walk into the hall and angle my head down the steps to hear what Teo is doing. The TV in the family room is blaring *Star Wars*, his favorite movie. Teo and I have watched the *Star Wars* trilogy so many times I can recite nearly every one of Harrison Ford's B-rate, overacted declarations. When I'm not cleaning, Teo and I usually play light sabers. He always gets to be Mace

Windu, because he has The Force. And I have to be Darth Vader—the culmination of everything evil in the Empire—because I suck.

I have pretty much resigned to the idea of sucking. What I can't figure out, though, is how it's come to this, how I let things get so out of hand that I spend my few minutes of free time each night reading posts on the Quarterlife Crisis web page. Until last week, I had never heard of a Quarterlife Crisis or had known there's a web page and body of literature that chronicle it. I learned of it accidentally, while reading the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. The front page featured an article, "Why Wait for a Midlife Crisis when you can have one at 25?" The piece describes the range of upsets and insecurities people my age experience once college has spewed us into the Real World. The article details how Quarterlifers such as myself feel unsure of who we are or what we want and how to get it. The article features a link to a Quarterlife Crisis web page with ten thousand registered users.

My eyes rested on an italicized section of the article—a quote from the musical "Avenue Q":

*"I wish I could go back to college.
In college you know who you are.
You sit in the quad, and think, 'Oh my God!'
I am totally gonna go far!"*

When I was in college I never pictured myself standing in the Fabi's living room once I'd graduated, emptying garbage cans and polishing door knobs. I was destined to do really important things, to make a dent in society with my insights and offbeat opinions. I wasn't supposed to be sitting alone on Friday night, Googling new labels for my mental state. I wasn't supposed to be this unhappy.

Teo and I are alone in the house. Nancy's husband is at work, and her three older kids are in school. I lie in the hallway on my back, stare at the white textured plaster on the ceiling and listen to the *Star Wars* theme music playing downstairs. It feels good to take a break from scrubbing, to relax my back muscles and stretch my cramped legs. I try to think about anything other than what's been on my mind lately, but I can't help it. The plan races through my head again, as though I'll really go through with it. I see myself quitting the master's program in professional writing—the one I'm in because I got rejected from every school I'd applied to in creative writing and thought would be better than getting a “real” job. I picture myself emptying my meager bank account and driving to the west coast with a full car. I imagine bunking with friends along the way until I reach California, where I will live by the ocean. In the morning, instead of my hair freezing in the cold Pittsburgh air, I smell the salt from the Pacific and feel the sun blanketing my shoulders.

As my first semester in graduate school gets progressively worse, this fantasy nearly consumes me. Some nights I load the car with provisions: I take with me photo albums, granola bars, my laptop and pillow. And I drive. There's a part of me that thinks I'm really gonna do it each time, that I'll make the break. A few nights I get all the way to the Turnpike before heading back to my apartment. Other nights I drive down the street and around the block to the gas station, where I get a cup of French vanilla cappuccino. I scald my tongue on the hot liquid, swear, and dump the contents of the nearly-full glass down the bathroom sink when I get back home. I lock myself in my bedroom and pretend I can't hear my crusty housemate having sex with her hippie boyfriend in the room next to mine. *Thump, thump, thump.*

There are parts of the story I don't like to consider—the real parts—that remind me it's impossible. As I run my hands over the wooden floor I've just finished waxing, I try to ignore the obvious holes in my plan, such as what I would tell my parents if I dropped out of school, how I would support myself, or what I would do about the lease I signed that requires me to pay rent for the next nine months. When I think about these pieces of the story, my throat feels thick, like I'm choking on thorns. I stand, swallow and walk down the stairs.

Teo runs up to me and hugs me around my legs. He's at that age when he's not afraid to be affectionate, when he likes to sing along to the theme song to *Dora the Explorer* and secretly play with his sister Maria's American Girl doll.

"Are you behaving?" I ask as I lift him into the air. Teo has light blonde hair and is underweight for a four year-old, frail. He has phenylketonuria, a genetic disease that makes it impossible for his body to process naturally-occurring proteins. He has to be on a strict diet. For breakfast he eats dry cereal. For lunch it's usually a jelly sandwich and his "special juice," which is a thick white powder mixed with water that probably tastes worse than it smells. On Halloween last year, Nancy made the mistake of letting him eat a piece of caramel containing ingredients not listed on the wrapper. They spent the entire night in the hospital.

One of the worst parts of the disease is that it attacks Teo's joints. The damage to his body has weakened his bones, and has resulted in Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis. Some days Teo can't go to preschool or go out to play. He sits on the couch in a little ball. I bring him Cheerios and we make paper airplanes.

“Yes, I’m being hayve,” he says as he jumps around the room. I can tell from the way he’s moving that today is a good day, that his knees don’t hurt and that he probably slept through the night.

“Let’s put on your real clothes,” I tell him. He’s wearing Mickey Mouse pajamas and a *Star Wars* belt with a holster on each hip for light sabers.

“But dis is my real clothes.”

“Don’t be a silly goose. Those are your pajamas.”

“First put me in the oven!” Teo screams. This is our special game. When Teo doesn’t want to eat, I invent ways to make him finish his meal. Sometimes I give him an ultimatum: if he eats the other half of his sandwich, I’ll let him be President of the Galaxy or I’ll bake him in the oven. Without fail, he claps his hands and scarfs it down in three bites. When he’s done with his juice, I sling him over my shoulder, open the oven door, and ask him what temperature he’d like to be cooked on.

“Hot!” he giggles. “Turn it up all da way.”

I pretend to jack up the dial, then pull him off my shoulder and lower him toward the open oven. After I put his head inside for a few seconds, he yells that he’s done, that he’s extra crispy. I take out a dish from the cabinet and say how hungry I am because I didn’t have lunch. I pretend to put Teo on the plate and sprinkle salt over him, and tell him I’m going to gobble him up.

But today I’m not in the mood to play Bake Me in the Oven. I want Teo to put his clothes on, and then I want to sit him back in front of the TV while I finish cleaning the upstairs. My head is throbbing all over, like there’s a thunderstorm trapped in my skull, and I know this day will drag. I plan on driving straight from Fabi’s house to the

computer lab on campus, where I will stay until well after midnight finishing a Document Design project that's due on Monday. When I'm too hungry to concentrate, I'll walk up to the vending machine in the main hallway of the Humanities building and get a bag of pretzels, which I will convince myself I haven't earned because I didn't make it to the gym. I'll stare at the huge screen on the IMac while the janitor vacuums around me and will pretend to be so focused on my work that the rest of the world is a frivolity I've chosen to ignore.

“Not today, Teo. But I'll play light sabers if you put on your jeans all by yourself.”

Teo whines for a minute, then seems okay with the compromise. He runs up the stairs and I hear his dresser drawers creak open. While he's gone, I take the Pledge and begin dusting the tables and mantles in the downstairs. I go quickly over the wooden surfaces, making sure to move the framed photos and to dust behind the knickknacks on every shelf. When she's not stalking the Internet or playing Dr. Phil, Nancy transforms into the Dust Nazi and checks corners.

Things weren't supposed to turn out like this. I wasn't supposed to be in Nancy's house, shampooing her carpets, washing her windows and picking dried mustard stains and sticky spots off her kitchen counters with my fingernails. I wasn't supposed to be in Pittsburgh, copying grammar trees from a dry erase board and memorizing the tenants of the Plain English movement. The past months, it seems, have been a huge mistake.

Half a year ago I was in college, going to parties and bars almost every night. All I had to do was walk out my front door and across the cement median and I was at another house full of drunk, fun people. As I dust the glass shelves in the dining room, I

try to remember the last time I've done something social. I move the rag harder and faster. No parties, no dates, no late-night phone calls with friends. I take the floor mat outside and beat it against a tree. Five, ten, twenty whacks.

By the time Teo is dressed, I'm vacuuming beneath the cushions on the living room couch. I don't hear him run up behind me, and I scream when his light saber jabs into my back.

"Gotcha!" he shrieks, then runs and hides behind the arm of the sofa. I take the red light saber that's sitting on the floor and try to fend off his attacks. We duel for a few minutes, and Teo makes swishing sounds from the back of his throat, like he's slicing through air. I pretend he's got me, that I'm down, dead, my head chopped off. I lay in a heap on the clean floor, my arms bent awkwardly at my sides, and gurgle a bit. He laughs and cheers.

But there's still half a house to clean, and I can't stay late to finish. I stand up and tell Teo it's time for me to get back to work.

"How about you watch the rest of your movie now so I can finish the downstairs?" I say. He pretends not to hear me and continues to poke my stomach and my sides with his weapon.

"I mean it, I have to finish." I use my adult voice so he'll know I'm being serious. When I pick up the vacuum, Teo throws his light saber onto the floor and crosses his arms. I retrieve it and put it into the toy chest, along with the other toys I've collected from the floor. He crawls onto the couch and makes the pouty face, which I pretend to ignore as I migrate into the next room.

The house isn't too dirty this week, and I'm able to breeze through most of the downstairs. I move into the kitchen, where I wipe down the front of the refrigerator and the cabinets, then scour the stove. Just as I'm about to fill a bucket with Pine Sol to scrub the linoleum floor, Teo peeks around the bend.

"There you are!" I say in my pretend happy voice. "How's your movie?"

"I don't wanna watch dat stupid movie," he says.

"But you love *Star Wars*!"

Teo's blue eyes well. "I *just* wanna pway a game wis you," he moans. His voice is tinged with disappointment, and he's making the *I can't believe you let me down* face. I can't say no to that face.

"How 'bout this: you go to the basement and pick out a game, and I'll be down in five minutes when I'm finished mopping?"

When I get to the bottom of the stairs, Teo is jumping up and down by the closet, swatting his hands at the highest shelf. He grunts and points to a white box. I take it down and study its dusty cardboard lid.

"I don't know, Teo, *Memory* is a big person game."

"No, I pway dis game lots," he says, grabbing it from me. Judging from the look of the box, nobody plays *Memory* ever.

Teo tips the game upside down and shakes it. The cards fall all over the carpet like fat, shiny snowflakes. I lay them out in six straight lines, each with six face-down pictures. Teo sits Indian-style across from me on the oatmeal-colored carpet I haven't yet vacuumed. He claps his hands like this is the most exciting moment in his four years

spent on the planet. All I can think about is how long this game is going to take, how he'll never find a match and how I'll be stuck here till dinnertime, cleaning the baseboards and folding laundry. The game will have to be a quick one, I decide, as I watch Teo fumble to flip over the first two cards.

Teo selects at random, with no strategy or indication that he knows he should be looking for pairs. Every few minutes I check my wristwatch. Originally, I had intended to let Teo win, to get a few matches and then back off and grant him a victory, but since neither of us has gotten a single pair and we've been playing for fifteen minutes, I know I have to end this game as quickly as possible. I'm going to have to beat this kid.

I flip over a rabbit, then go to the bottom left corner where I remember seeing the other one. But I flip a hat. After Teo takes his turn, I try again. This time a rabbit and a wristwatch. The game is starting to get to me. A rabbit and a box, a rabbit and a toad.

Then it happens: Teo gets a match. I sit gawking at him, wanting to feel good that he found a pair all by himself. I force a smile and try not to resent his stroke of good fortune. *He got lucky*, I tell myself. *That's all*.

But no. He makes a second and a third, and I'm nervous.

By his sixth match pearls of sweat gather on my temples. We've been playing this stupid game for almost half an hour and I have yet to find a single pair.

It's one thing to let a small child beat you at cards—to be an adult, to step back and say, *This sick kid, he can have this*. That's is what "big people" do—grownups who are comfortable with themselves and their ability to excel at remedial card games. I'm not one of those people. Even though I'm trying my damndest, a kid young enough to be my child is beating me. The harder I focus, the worse I do. I try to rationalize the situation—

to assure myself I'm getting my master's degree and can handle a round of *Memory*. But the pep talk only makes me feel more desperate. What would my classmates and professors think if they saw me losing?

After flipping two more unmatched pairs, I adopt my opponent's strategy—randomly drawing cards. This, too, proves useless. What he doesn't realize is that this is no longer a game; it's war. Teo faces me, smiling. He flops around on the twill carpet and makes spit bubbles between turns. This pisses me off more. There's a flash—a moment when I hate him. Why couldn't he have chosen *Chutes n' Ladders* or *Candyland* or even *Uno*? He's up to nine pairs and I've only managed to get two. The prickly ball rises up my throat and no matter how hard I swallowed it won't go down. *This is absurd*, I tell myself. *It's only cards. He's only in pre-school*. Wasn't the game supposed to be getting easier now that so many matches were out of play?

"I hassa go potty," Teo says. He jumps up, holds his crotch and twists his legs as he bounces toward the bathroom.

As I'm sitting there alone, staring at the crooked half-rows of cards, the force of the previous months hits me. *Why do I suck at everything?* My eyes burn and I tremble a little. *Can't I just do one thing right in my goddamn life?* Losing this game will be too much to bear. I need this. It's one thing to be rejected from grad school, to be turned down for jobs, to be a lonely, pathetic person; but losing to a child at his own card game seems worse—the culmination of every failure and deficiency possible in a human being.

My shaky hand extends from my body and I peek under the card closest to me. I tilt my head down, as though Teo is watching, as though Nancy can see me and my parents can see me and my classmates are staring in horror—as though lifting only the

corner of the card isn't really cheating. Then I turn over the one above it, and the one on the top left corner. By the time I hear the toilet flush, I've peeked under nearly every card on the floor.

When Teo returns, I worry my guilty face will let on what I've done. I try to focus on the cards and keep the images straight in my head without blushing or fidgeting. But when my turn comes I've already forgotten where the second flower is. *It was near the bottom right corner, but which card was it?* I flip over one with the image of a drum. When Teo goes, he gets both baseball gloves, then both hearts, then the two dogs. After he cleans up five pairs, I get a shot. I match the elephants but can't find the other book. Where the hell is the other book?

All that's left on the floor are four cards. Teo pairs the smiley faces, then squeals with delight because he knows the two remaining cards are his—he's won.

I turn up the radio in my car so loud the side panels shake and the bass is muffled. I don't like the song, but it drowns the quiet I can't stand to face. The computer lab I'm driving toward will be silent. My bedroom will be silent. There will be so much silence that I can't bear to have a quiet car ride. I want the outside sound to match the noise in my head, which is screaming and angry and ugly.

In my pocket is a check for seventy-two dollars. Dirty money. My brain turns on again, reels faster and faster. *How pathetic you are, cheating a sick kid out of a win. But no—you weren't even good enough to cheat. You failed at cheating at cards, just like you failed at getting into MFA programs, just like you failed your grammar test last week and*

will fail the one next week and will fail to be a writer and will fail to function in the adult world.

Well, here you are, my brain shouts. This is rock bottom. It can't get much worse than this. I spend the rest of the ride trying to decide whether I deserve to be pitied or punched in the face. Maybe both.

A little before midnight I'm sitting on the swively chair in front of my computer, eating a huge bowl of pasta and drinking a huge glass of vodka. The start to my weekend. I call up the Quarterlife Crisis web page from my bookmarked list and stare at the new postings on the message board. I take long sips of liquor and feel the burn as it travels down my throat.

Under the thread "Your Quarterlifecrisis," one member writes: "I feel like my life is an open book right now." Another says: "My problem is that I don't really know what I want to be, even if when I think I have some idea in mind, I have no way to get there."

These are my people. I imagine us sitting together in the back room of a smoky bar, taking turns buying rounds of beer and shots of tequila, sharing stories about how it feels to be suspended in space, orbiting around the things we want but have no clue how to get. We keep going in circles, like planets circling the sun—but can't seem to move any closer.

Maybe it's the warm buzz of vodka, but reading the posts makes me feel less alone. I stack my plate on top of my glass in the corner of the bedroom, turn off the computer and crawl onto the inflatable bed near the back wall. The air slowly seeps out through the hole on the side of the mattress and makes a *shhhhhhhh* sound, which nearly

covers the thumping noises coming from my housemate and her boyfriend in the next room. I hardly even hear her moaning, *harder, harder, harder*.

THE WOMAN IN THE BLUE COAT

She shuffled into the restaurant on one of the coldest days in February, after the lunch crowd had dissipated and the dining room was empty. Her oily gray hair hung in chunks around her face and a knit hat plastered her bangs to her forehead. She wore polyester pants that didn't quite reach her white shoes and a blue cotton coat.

It was my third week working as a hostess at an overpriced, pretentious restaurant in Pittsburgh's theatre district. I despised the job and resented earning eight dollars an hour now that I had my master's degree. When I graduated in December, I'd applied to over thirty jobs and this had been the best offer.

As the woman in the blue coat approached the host stand, I walked up to the revolving door to greet her. A wall of frigid air poured into the restaurant and made my eyes burn. When I bent over to ask if she'd like to be seated, the smell of urine and mildew crept from her body like a wave.

"Coffee?" she said, exploring my face to see if I understood. Her dull blue eyes were vacant, as if searching for the rest of the sentence.

"A cup of coffee?" I asked.

"How much is coffee?"

I told her I wasn't sure, but I'd send her over to Mike the bartender who would take good care of her. I knew better than to ask if she wanted a table; I'd been instructed to never seat a patron who didn't plan on ordering a meal.

She slowly trekked toward the bar, shoulders hunched over her gaunt frame. Mike, a short, handsome boy with icy eyes and toned arms, studied her for a moment

from his spot behind the counter, making no move to come closer or to take her order. He busied himself with drying glasses and wiping down the bar, casting her a sideways glance every few minutes. The woman in the blue coat seemed accustomed to being ignored; she fixed her gaze upward and stared at the basketball game playing on the television mounted near the ceiling.

Five minutes later, Mike approached her. He stood against the wall as he took her order, so far back I wondered how he could hear her soft voice. His eyes stared to the side, fixed on the shelves of half-empty alcohol bottles. After a quick nod, Mike disappeared into the kitchen. He returned a moment later with a white mug and ceramic cream holder, which he set down on the bar. When the woman took her eyes off the television and glanced toward Mike, he was already ten feet away, re-cleaning every surface and object, pacing like a caged animal.

The afternoon turned into evening, and people began to trickle in for an early dinner. A little before happy hour, customers arrived at the bar and sat around the woman in the blue coat. They ordered martinis and cosmopolitans to unwind from a busy day at the office. Every so often the woman looked down from the television and stole a glance to her right and left sides, taking note of the commotion. She watched the people in business suits order appetizers and joke with the bartender. As Mike talked to a man wearing a red tie and a woman in a pin-stripe pants suit, he leaned over the bar and rested his elbows on the smooth surface, his face inches from theirs. The woman in the blue coat followed Mike's movements with detached interest, as if watching a stranger complete a jigsaw puzzle.

As the restaurant began to fill, I was back at the host stand less and less. Mark, the other host, and I took turns seating patrons and flipping tables. I went about my tasks, consumed with thoughts of when I would get to clock out, what I was going to have for dinner and how much money I would make that shift. I was keeping a mental list of all I had earned so I'd know how much I had saved for grad school, if I got into the writing programs I was waiting to hear back from. Even though I was counting down the minutes till the end of my shift, the thought of walking to the bus stop at midnight with the below-zero wind chill made me want to stand by the brick oven in the kitchen all night.

Each time I checked back at the front of the restaurant to seat another couple, I looked over at the woman, still sitting alone, nursing the same porcelain coffee mug I had yet to see Mike refill. I knew she must be hungry; it was dinnertime and the smells of lobster bisque and rack of lamb wafted through the restaurant. I wanted to sneak her a hazelnut scone or a piece of dark chocolate truffle cake the pastry chef had spent the afternoon preparing—a decadent treat I imagined she wouldn't be able to get for herself. But the restaurant had a strict policy against free food, and kept a chart of every item sold. As much as I hated my job, I couldn't afford to lose it.

When I returned to the host stand after seating a large dinner party, I saw Tammy, the manager, approach the woman in the blue coat. Tammy bent down over her stool and angled her head so she was close enough for the woman to hear. After a moment, Tammy nodded and backed away from the bar. The woman stood and turned around, seemingly confused.

Mark followed my stare. "They're kicking her out."

My face burned. "But she wasn't hurting anyone. The bar's not even crowded."

“I know,” he said. “But the managers don’t want her here. I guess she’s not good for our image.”

Tammy walked over to the serving stand and pretended to fold napkins as she watched the woman hobble through the crowded corridor and make her way to the front of the restaurant. A fake grin was plastered on Tammy’s face—the kind she had after she fired someone for coming in late or gave a server a warning for eating bread they hadn’t paid for. When the woman in the blue coat approached the host stand, she stared at me for a long second. I could tell she recognized me from earlier that afternoon. She looked as if she wanted to say something but the words had suddenly left her. Several times she started to speak but stopped before uttering a sound. The woman eventually shook her head no and pulled her hat over the top rim of her glasses.

“Did you get to warm up?” I asked, placing my hand on her shoulder. Her jacket was damp.

“Yes, I got warm inside here.” She glanced out the front door, into the snowy black night, and then looked down at her bare ankles and white canvas shoes.

“Do you have a far walk home?”

“Third Avenue,” she muttered, pointing out the door. She paused and her eyes came into focus. “But my apartment’s not so nice. It’s cold, and I don’t have any water.”

I wanted to say something to the woman in the blue coat—to offer her an apology on behalf of myself and the restaurant—for its employees and managers and every sentiment that was hidden behind our flashy copper paneling and bright orange walls. There were so many things that should have been said; I could feel them hanging in the space between us—overripe fruit just out of reach. I thought about the dozens of baskets

of bread that were sitting on a tray in the back of the kitchen covered in cloth napkins, waiting to be delivered to tables. Was there time to run back and fill a doggie bag with enough to get her through dinner and maybe even breakfast? Or what about all the uneaten meals guests had sent back—the plates of barbeque chicken pizza and salmon filets that “just tasted off” and were stacked, waiting to be thrown into the huge trashcan near the dishwashing line? Could I pack her a box without being seen?

I felt Tammy looking at me from across the restaurant, her eyes questioning why I hadn’t yet seated the party of eight who hovered by the host stand, waiting impatiently for a table with a “good view” that wasn’t too close to a bathroom. At that moment, I wanted more than anything to confront Tammy—to draw her out from her convenient hiding spot. I wanted to make a scene in front of the entire dining room, to spotlight what was happening so everyone could see what our restaurant was really about. Then, I wanted to tear my timecard up and throw the pieces in her face before I walked out the door.

A scene in John Updike’s story “A & P” popped into my head—the one where Sammy, the checkout clerk, quits his job to protest the manager’s rudeness to three girls who are shopping in bathing suits. Even though the girls leave without noticing Sammy’s gesture, the piece always made me feel as though his actions cosmically balanced out some of the hurt the manager had caused.

As the woman pushed her hands into the pockets of her coat, I stood frozen, watching her. My hands were wedged into my pockets, too, and in my right hand I could feel the thin roll of cash I carried around for bus fare and emergencies. Instead of taking out one of the tens—money I would later spend on an expensive glass of beer at a local

bar to celebrate getting into grad school—and handing it to the woman, all I could think to do was offer her the same mechanical response I told every guest as they left the restaurant: “Thanks for coming. Have a good night.”

Our eyes met for a brief moment before she smiled and turned her back on my blushing face. I watched her walk toward the revolving door, past the women in fur coats standing in groups, sipping chardonnay from tall wine glasses. She shifted her weight from side to side as she crossed the street in front of the symphony hall, past the row of limousines and bright flashing advertisements. Not once did she look up. The last thing I saw as the woman turned onto a side street was the tail end of her blue coat as it disappeared into the darkness.

TIME

After my freshman year in college I had my palm read by a woman with long blonde hair and bony elbows. She took my right hand in hers and lifted it up and down, as though it was a dumbbell at the gym.

“Ninety-six,” she told me at the end of my thirty-minute session. “That’s how old you’ll live to be.”

Maybe I’ve remembered this number for the past seven years because it’s a good age to claim as the end—an even number, close to one hundred. Probably long enough to grow sufficiently tired of myself. 2077—so far in the future it’s almost a scene from a sci-fi movie.

Now that I’ve past the quarter point, I’ve begun to realize how much of my time is invested in routines and habits—many of which are nothing but empty filler. What if, when I die, I’m given a breakout of every minute of my life in neat categories based on how much time I’ve spent doing the things that make up each minute of my day? How horrifying would it be to see every second accounted for on some master list? It got me thinking.

Sleep would definitely be at the top of the list, if I allow eight hours a night for ninety-six years. That would come out to about thirty-two years where I’m not even venturing beyond my bed.

I figure I spend an hour each day eating, and probably another half hour preparing the food and cleaning up after myself. If that’s added to that the additional time spent planning dinner, writing grocery lists, food shopping or obsessing over which flavor of

Coldstone I'll get, it comes out to more than two hours a day—a little over one twelfth of my life.

More than three weeks will be spent flossing—a minute a day. Seven days putting on socks, six taking them off. 146 hours cracking my neck. An entire week fishing in jars for olives to put in my martini.

How much of my existence is spent in traffic, waiting in line at the post office, watching commercials for products I don't want or need? What's wasted screening through junk mail, shopping for lip gloss and toilet bowl cleaner, scanning the nutritional information on the back of bags of Doritos and donuts I won't even let myself buy?

What about sneezing? I bet I sneeze ten times a day, and probably double that during allergy season. Let's count the build-up stupid face I make before I sneeze as part of the action, and say it takes five seconds total. That's fifty seconds a day, every day. Now add to the list and it's twenty full days of sneezing.

Then there's the gym. If I factor in all the years I spent doing double workouts for swimming—four hours a day in the pool plus stretching, technique lessons, dry land training and lifting—and combine it with my now daily one hundred minutes of exercise, it comes out to roughly seven years I'll spend standing in one spot running, swimming back and forth in the same urine-filled pool, or watching myself in a cracked mirror doing bicep curls and squats.

Washing my hair, another seventy-three days, and add all the time spent dying it, that's seven more weeks.

Then there's the *I'm-laying-in-a-fetal-position-avoiding-doing-work-procrastination-pose* that occupies, on good days, twenty minutes, or a total of approximately 1.3 years.

With all the time wasted on stupid things, it's sad to think about how much is left for the good stuff. Laughing till I want to puke—all told, ten hours. Going to concerts—twelve days. Getting up to watch the sun rise, five hours. Eating at IHOP—just four days. I will spend sixty times more of my life checking my email than all of these pursuits combined, nearly double painting my toenails, and three times this much swearing as cars cut me off on the highway.

I'd like to believe there is no eternal punishment for wasted time, for misspent minutes that add up to hours and snowball into weeks, months and years. I tell myself this as I sit on my back typing on my laptop, a consumption that eats hour after hour of every day. I think about how much time I've blown making to-do lists, calculating pointless statistics and adding up strings of numbers that amount, ultimately, to nothing. It makes me want to spend less time thinking about how much time I waste with my finger in my ear, and start appreciating how much time I spend with it out.

SUSPENDED MOMENTS

The second floor of the nursing home where Jack now lives is loud and busy. Patients at various stages of physical and mental decline wander and are pushed down the corridors. Some are put into wheelchairs and lined up in the hallway like mismatched furniture waiting to be placed in storage. Others are steered to the rec room and left at a plastic picnic table in front of a flat-screen television on which the hockey game is blaring. In one corner of the room, an old computer monitor rests next to a pile of wires, disconnected from the outlet. Along the back wall are a dozen books that look like they were purchased from a yard sale: a Learn to Speak French instruction manual, a guide to North American birds and a picture book about trains.

Even though it's a nice nursing home as far as nursing homes go, being here makes me uneasy. Everything about this place feels wrong. It smells like wet wipes and Lysol, though nothing looks clean. The hallways are filled with reprints of ocean scenes and forests, painted in color schemes too bright for the beige walls and beige baseboards and white and beige checkered tile. There are too many stray sounds echoing off the second floor hall: a telephone ringing constantly at the nurse's station, an assortment of beeps and buzzes, a cart with a broken wheel rolling down the corridor and the muffled drone of televisions playing the evening news.

Jack had been my swim coach for nearly ten years. I took lessons with him every Sunday since I was fifteen. Sometimes we spent the entire session focused only on the right arm as it entered the water on freestyle. I swam lap after lap, "quiet as a mouse," and he watched the angle of entry from his plastic chair at the edge of the pool—the same

spot he'd been sitting in seven days a week for the past six decades. If my hand position on a single stroke was an inch off, he'd say "Do it again," and I'd repeat the drill slower.

Jack got sick while I was still in college, several days before my final swim meet. Through he never mentioned his ailments, I later learned from his wife and nurses that he'd had quadruple bypass heart surgery, was diabetic and had probably also suffered a stroke. Each time I asked him how he was doing, his response was the same: "I'm fighting back," he'd say, as he made a firm fist and punched the air.

After my Sunday lessons, once I dried off, changed and came back on deck, Jack stood and pointed to his chair. He gestured for me to sit down, then went into his office and pulled out a tiny stool for himself. On those early afternoons, I set my swim bag on the damp tile and forgot about the unfinished lab reports waiting on my dorm room desk, the twitching muscles in my shoulders, and the horrible swims I'd had at the duel meet the previous night. Jack's blue eyes ignited behind gray-rimmed glasses, and for the next hour, he told me stories.

He started off slowly, pausing to stare at the calm cobalt surface of the lap pool as he situated himself in memory. After a break long enough to transport himself back six decades, Jack told me about meeting his wife at a synchronized swimming competition in 1940, how even behind the black makeup and elastic nose plug, he knew Fran was the one he wanted to take dancing that night. So what if he was her swim coach.

Jack told me about traveling to Australia, Japan and New Zealand to watch his top swimmers compete. He described the way his hands shook as he flew thousands of feet above the Atlantic when he headed to Tel Aviv to coach the 1950 Women's team at the Maccabiah Games. He tapped his bent fingers against his heart to show the rush he felt

standing on deck at the Olympics, knowing he was the one competitors looked to when they got out of the water.

Jack paused and smiled, then told me not to be deceived—he wasn't always such a responsible guy. "You better not do what I did," he cautioned. The sun poured in the side windows and danced on the pool's surface like yellow watercolor fireworks as I waited for him to continue. "One day I decided to hitchhike across the country, then spent six months sleeping on a beach in Florida. When I had my fill of the ocean, I worked on a boat headed for New York to make enough money to get back to Pittsburgh." Once he made it home, Jack met with the admissions counselor at a local college and offered to paint the entire stadium, alone, in order to make the thirty dollars required to enroll in the first semester of classes.

Jack's story faded and there was a moment of collection during which we both stretched our arms and re-adjusted our bodies in our seats. Jack fastened and re-fasten his black Velcro shoes. As the conversation progressed from swimming to school and then to his time as a soldier in Guam during World War II, his voice took on a deliberate quality, like each word was heavier than the last. Jack never unlocked his eyes from their hold with mine as he described the earth exploding around him when he crawled to safety beneath a pile of rubble. "I was just a kid," he said. "We all were." Jack pulled his thick gray hair behind his ears, rubbed his thumbnail over his chin stubble, and shook his head. I knew our conversation was over till next Sunday.

I sit on a wooden chair in Jack's room, nearly two hours into my visit. Despite the commotion in the hall, a silence has settled around us, and I can't undo it no matter how

many times I try. I tell Jack about school in Miami, about my dog and the blue hooded sweatshirt I bought for him. I show him a picture on my cell phone of the dog wearing the shirt. I tell him about the new swim coach on my little brother's team, about the gym at my apartment building where I work out. Each new topic cuts through a few minutes of awkwardness. Jack smiles and I smile, and then it's silent again.

What I want is for Jack to tell me a story—for us to talk like we used to. There are so many questions I want to ask him, like why he's not angry about having to give up his independence and move away from his wife and his work and the daily traditions that have defined his later years. I want to ask him how it feels each morning when he wakes up to know this may be the last time he'll eat wheat toast or hear his roommate tell a knock-knock joke. Has everything become a series of lasts?

What we talk about is not death or illness or that there's a good chance this will be the last time I'll get to see him. In a couple of days I'll be leaving Pittsburgh and heading back to Florida, and won't be home again for months. What we talk about in those final five minutes of my visit is the weather.

It's a dismal Pittsburgh day, the kind that makes me remember why I left the city in the first place. The sun is setting and it's begun to lightly drizzle. It will rain tomorrow and probably every day for the next week. The window in Jack's room overlooks a back street full of bare trees and row housing, and the gray cloud covering matches the mood in the nursing home.

"It's not a very nice day out," I say.

Jack looks toward the window and shakes his head.

I think of all the times Jack assured me I'd swim well at an upcoming competition, the nights we talked on the phone about trusting myself and letting my body relax before I raced. No matter what we talked about—swimming, school, work—he always told me to stop worrying; whatever I wanted, I'd get it. There was something about his words that made me believe him.

“But I hear tomorrow will be nicer,” I say, forcing a smile.

This is a lie. The weather report calls for rain for the rest of the week.

As I make my way down the hall toward the elevator, I walk past the row of women parked in the same spots they were in when I arrived. Some are strapped into their wheelchairs and others gesture whimsically with their hands as though they're conducting invisible symphonies. A heavy-set woman with gray curls and thick-rimmed glasses motions to me. Maybe she's somebody's grandmother. I come closer and she extends a box of Kleenex.

“Here, take my baby,” she says, shaking the empty box.

* * *

Several months after I graduated from college, my mother and I sat in the waiting room at the vet's; she in a chair and me on the floor holding our thirteen-year-old Basset Hound, Tyrone. He was blind, nearly deaf and was bleeding internally, and we were there to have him put to sleep.

The dog had been my birthday gift when I was in elementary school. He was hopelessly stubborn and had so much skin that we could wring out his folds after a bath without him noticing. He once ate half a raw Butterball turkey right off of the kitchen

counter and was too busy sniffing the garbage can to see what he could have for dessert to notice he was in trouble. On Halloween one year, Tyrone found and ate all the candy that was hidden beneath my bed—at least forty Reeces cups and a fair number of wrappers. Back then, he didn't even get sick.

As I sat on the floor with the dog in my arms, I was crying in a way that would have been embarrassing in any other context. It was the first time I'd ever broken down in public or expressed emotion in front of a room full of strangers. Just when I'd calm myself down enough to control my breathing, he'd lick my hand or I'd feel the cluster of tumors jutting out from his stomach. I'd look up at my mother and we'd both break down all over again.

After a couple of minutes, there was a light tap on my shoulder. A woman with short brown hair and striking green eyes was leaning toward me, her arm extended in my direction. I looked up and saw she was offering me a handful of tissues. Our eyes met for a brief moment before I took them, and I realized that she, too, was crying.

For the first time I was aware of my surroundings. Sitting in a chair across from me was an old man holding a tiny white poodle close to his chest. Next to him was a young woman with a large gray cat. Near the front desk sat a blonde woman with a Golden Retriever whose head rested on her pant leg. Everyone in the waiting room was looking at Tyrone. They were all crying.

* * *

My grandmother moved into our house when I was in tenth grade, shortly after the doctor found a mass on her lung. Some days my mom was busy with my brother and sister, so I drove her to chemotherapy on my way to swimming practice or picked her up at the

hospital on my way home from school. In the first months, she wore makeup—thick rouge, deep red lipstick and perfume that smelled like hand soap and talcum powder. Then, as the treatment wore her out and the cancer spread to her brain and liver, she went to the hospital in black slacks and a puffy painted sweatshirt with an image on the chest of kittens playing with yarn. Some days she left her wig at home and wore a blue velour turban.

On the way home from the hospital in the afternoon, my grandma usually offered to buy me lunch. The first few times I agreed and we stopped at the diner near my house. She ordered a Reuben and coffee, and insisted I get a whole meal as well as dessert. “We need to put some meat on those bones,” she said, grabbing my already meaty shoulder.

While we ate, I listened to her tell me the same stories I’d already heard several times, about her deaf next-door neighbor’s obsession with buying lottery tickets, or her friend Ann’s son who was a doctor in South Carolina. Twenty minutes after the end of the meal, I got antsy and impatient thinking about all the work I should be doing. I had papers to write, college applications to finish and a second swim practice at five that would take up half the night. When I made a move to put on my coat, my grandma beckoned to the server that she’d like another cup of coffee.

On these days lunch took over two hours, and I drove the rest of the way home angry. When my grandma asked me a question, I gave a curt, short reply. She never got mad when I dismissed her; she stared out the window or tapped her fingers on the door, humming and acting like she hadn’t noticed. After a few meals, I declined her lunch offers, telling her I had too much work or wasn’t hungry. I brought her back home and

she wandered up to her room and lay in her bed all afternoon, watching *Teletubbies* then *Oprah*.

Eventually she stopped suggesting we go out to eat, and instead rolled a twenty dollar bill into a ball and wedged it under my palm while I was driving. “To cover the gas,” she insisted when I tried to give it back. “Don’t make a big fuss—just take it.”

After months of treatment and several rounds of failed chemo, the cancer continued to spread. There was nothing more the doctors could do; my parents were told to make her comfortable and were given the number for hospice.

My bedroom was across from the hall from the room that became my grandmother’s. Sometimes she moaned from pain; she repeated the same word or sound dozens of times, “no, no, no,” or “oh, oh oh,” and the springs on the old mattress squeaked from her rocking. There were days when I went in to sit with her or watched my mother rub topical morphine on her back in smooth circular movements. Other times I shut my bedroom door, put a Beatles CD into my Discman and turned the volume as high as it would go.

After a week of daily visits, the hospice nurse arrived with a small book they give the families of patients to help them cope with the dying process. The nurse left this book, along with a bottle of liquid morphine that was to be administered beneath my grandmother’s tongue as needed, no questions asked. Once the morphine treatments began, the nurse told us, there would be no going back.

Ten days before she died, my grandma stopped eating. I watched her thin frame shrink further, till her face looked gaunt and stretched. Seeing her that way was terrifying; even though the nurse said she was in no pain and assured us that rejecting

food was the body's normal response to the transition process, I couldn't watch her starve.

As I sat next to my grandma's bed, I thought back to when I was six years old and got to spend the night at her house. She let me stay up till after the eleven o'clock news, then we headed down to the kitchen for a midnight snack. Some nights she took the cookie dough from the refrigerator—a covered bowl we had made earlier that afternoon and were saving for the next day—and baked a tray of cookies. We watched through the small, stained window on the oven as gobs of dough melted, spread and expanded into puffy circles. When the cookies were just a touch undercooked, my grandma pulled them out and plated them. We sat in her bed on plaid flannel sheets, watching TV and getting crumbs everywhere as the warm chocolate dripped from our chins and fingertips.

When my mother went out to run errands one afternoon, I melted a handful Ghirardelli chocolate chips in the microwave. I stirred the chocolate until it cooled into a thick dark glob, then carried the bowl upstairs. As I opened my grandma's mouth and pasted the sugary coating onto her tongue, I thought about how important I had felt to be allowed to stay up late at her house, how indulgent it was to eat cookies when the rest of my friends had been asleep for hours. After I plastered her tongue with chocolate, I shut my grandma's mouth and waited for some of the sugar to travel down her throat, then gave her a few drops of water. I repeated the process several times, pasting and washing, till the bowl was nearly empty.

I pulled the chair close to her bed and listened to the rhythmic sound of her breathing. Every few moments my grandma inhaled deeply, then air poured out the crack in her mouth. Staring at the bowl of chocolate—the only thing she'd eaten in days—I felt

a hot slap of shame about the afternoons I had blown off her lunch offers, then came home and downed an entire box of Wheat Thins in my bedroom, listening to her shuffle down the hall in her slippers.

Once the chocolate was gone I stood to leave the room. When I bent down to kiss my grandma's cheek, I realized she was silent; there were no breaths coming from her mouth. For a long moment I stared at her, not sure what to do. Then, her chest began to move up and down as though she was struggling to get air. Panic set in; my mother wouldn't be home for another hour and my dad was out of town on a business trip. I'd been trained in CPR when I worked as a lifeguard, but wasn't sure I could perform it on someone who was terminal and aspirating. For a long minute I stood there watching as she gasped, her eyes never opening but her face scrunched up as though it registered the pain her body was experiencing. Just when I was about to call 9-1-1, my grandma coughed once—a brittle, wet cough—and began a round of shallow breaths.

The blood slowly returned to my face, and I realized that I, too, had stopped breathing for those suspended moments.

* * *

When three Marines wearing green uniforms showed up at Mr. Kenny's front door at 1:23 a.m., he knew before they said anything that his son was dead.

Lance Corporal Patrick Kenny, my twenty-year-old neighbor and childhood friend, was killed in a roadside bombing in Iraq in 2005. He was one of 846 Americans who died that year fighting in combat. It was his second tour of duty.

From the time he was little, Patrick read books about the Civil War and spoke nonstop to anyone who would listen about how he wanted to be a soldier. His ultimate goal, he told friends, was to be an infantryman and serve his country during wartime. Patrick missed his high school graduation because he left for boot camp as soon as his last class ended. His sister Katy, who joined the Marines to take after her big brother, said he even wore G.I. Joe briefs.

In the years following Patrick's death I sometimes passed the Kenny's house on my morning run through our neighborhood. At first there was a single large flag hanging from their porch, its blue and red in sharp contrast to the drab brown of the wood. Then, a few weeks later, there were two additional flags, one on each side of the door. The next time I passed the house, there was a new flag on a pole beside a tree in their front lawn. Last week, I counted twelve flags and a red, white and blue banner dangling from the ledge.

My community is so small its members consider trips to the local grocery store and post office to be social outings. Everyone knew Patrick and felt his death, felt a sliver of the pain his parents were experiencing, even though Mr. Kenny told those who came by with casseroles that Patrick had "lived a full life." A fund was taken up in his honor and the athletic field down the hill from my house was renamed to the Lance Corporal Patrick Kenny Memorial Field. The five fire trucks in Patrick's borough were decorated with images of the fallen soldier. On an average day, one third of the cars in the parking lot at the Giant Eagle, our grocery store, had yellow "We Support our Troops" ribbons on their bumpers and small American flags attached to the antennas.

Shortly after Patrick's death, the American Road Line trucking company, headquartered in Pittsburgh, decal'd each of its 550 semi tractor-trailers with an image of Patrick. The picture is roughly the size of a car window and has an American flag waving in the wind as its backdrop. On the left side of the flag, there's an image of Patrick standing in full combat fatigues, his right hand casually resting on an M-16. He's not quite smiling, but he looks comfortable, even happy. To his right, "Some Gave All" is written in flowing script in colors that fade from red to white to blue.

At the dedication ceremony at which the image was unveiled on the truck fleet, Mr. and Mrs. Kenny stood with their twenty-two-year-old daughter, Molly, one of their three remaining children. Molly wore a knit sweater with an American flag on the center and quietly wept. Though the pain of Patrick's death hadn't melted, she was happy his memory would live on.

"My worst fear was that people would forget about him," she said.

In addition to the fleet of trucks that now carry this image, it has been made into a limited-edition bumper sticker which can be purchased for five dollars, or three for ten. The proceeds go to the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund. There are hundreds of cars driving through the streets of my town with Patrick's smiling face on their back bumpers. Although Patrick never traveled beyond the Pennsylvania state line save for his deployments, his picture will go from coast to coast.

Even though I've studied the picture on the sticker countless times, the image I will always have of Patrick is as eight-year-old with flushed cheeks and spiky brown hair. His father was the coach of my softball team, and his sisters were the second baseman and catcher. One night after a game we went back to the Kenny's house for a cookout.

After we'd finished our hot dogs and chips, Mrs. Kenny found us flashlights and Patrick chased us through the yard with beams of light. We screamed as he ran after us, the high-pitched shriek kids make when they're having so much fun they can barely breathe. We hid behind trees and piles of wood in the Kenny's back yard and worked to silence our pants as we crouched onto the ground. Patrick tried to creep up and surprise us in our hiding places, but his bursts of giggles always gave him away with just enough time for us to escape.

When I first heard about Patrick's death, I tried to picture him in the jeep the second before it was blown up. I tried to imagine what he was thinking as he drove through the streets of Al Karma that October afternoon, what song was playing on the radio. But each time I carried this thought through to the moment before the explosion, Patrick would transform into his eight-year-old self, the child who will be forever suspended in my mind. I'd see him driving the jeep, his small head nearly covered by the oversized green helmet. I imagined him straining to see over the steering wheel and then sliding down in the seat to reach the pedals. Instead of his hand resting on a gun, he held a neon yellow flashlight with just enough battery power left to illuminate the road ahead.

THE OTHER GIRL

I feel him watching me as I step off the curb, sense him timing his pace to my strides.

When I cross the yellow line in the middle of the road, he does the same.

It's a little after eleven p.m. on a Saturday, two days before the start of my junior year in college. The night is clear and warm, and the street is nearly deserted. I walk briskly, glancing back every few steps to see if he's any closer. I tell myself I'm overreacting, that I'm not the only person who's allowed to be walking on the public street on a weekend. I don't want to turn around, to look at him and directly acknowledge his presence. But the way he moves feels too deliberate. I pick up my pace.

As I round the corner onto Beeler Street, I hear leaves crunch on the dirty sidewalk behind me. He's closer now, maybe fifteen yards back. I shove my hand in my purse and wrap my fingers around one of the bottles of hard cider I'm carrying—my alternative to the warm beer that will be on tap at the party. I choke up around the neck of the bottle and feel the cap's teeth dig into the skin on the palm of my hand.

I quickly scan the street for anyone sitting on a porch or walking home for the night—someone who may be able to help me. But the stretch in front of me is silent and still. A single dim light burns halfway up the street at the place where the road begins to bend. As I near this spot, I hear him approaching; for every crunch my shoes make, his make two. Unable to resist any longer, I glance back and see that he's ten feet away and gaining on me. My body feels numb, heavy. There's no time to scream. I begin to run, and he takes off after me.

My leather sandals rub against the tender skin between my toes, and my denim skirt restricts my thighs. I'm quickly losing ground. I run forward but my legs refuse to carry me fast enough. Just below the streetlight, the man catches up with me. I weave into the road as I sense him approaching on my right.

His hand tugs on my elbow. I jerk backward and lose grip on the bottle in my purse. He stands directly to my right and releases my arm. The two of us are now in the middle of the street, side-by-side, staring at one another. For the first time I get a clear view of the man's face and his body. He's not wearing a shirt, and his pale chest reflects the overhead light. He's got a thin, muscular frame and short brown hair that's no more than a half-inch long. He's younger than I expected—probably a couple of years older than I am.

It's his eyes that scare me the most. Deep brown, pupils dilated. They study me, implore me. He takes a step back and scans my body as though he's taking inventory of a new car. His eyes trace down my face, my chest, my legs. I shiver despite the sweat gathering between my shoulder blades.

Before I can move, his eyes dart back to my face and stare at me in a way I immediately recognize. I've seen these eyes before—on nature shows about wild wolves—predators that want something and aren't afraid to rip through whatever's stopping them to get it.

Everything suddenly becomes real. I shake my head no and run around him. My sudden movement catches him off guard and he stumbles. I'm able to get a slight head start as he chases me up the street. I know that if I can make it to the party, everything will be okay. My friends' house will be full of college swimmers—guys with broad

shoulders and protective instincts. But their driveway is still another thirty yards away. I tear over the broken cement sidewalk, run past dying shrubs and square patches of grass. His breaths behind me are angry and irregular.

As I approach the driveway I hear music blaring from the second floor—the part of the house my friends rent. The lights are on and figures are visible through the white drapes. I nearly lose my balance as I round the bend and begin to scale the steep driveway. By now the man is only a few feet behind me; he pants and grunts from the effort of the run. When I reach the top, I dash up the concrete stairs toward the door that leads to the stairwell to the second floor.

The music is throbbing; it pours out the windows and swallows the quiet night. My sweaty hands wrap around the doorknob but it won't budge. I scream loudly but my voice is lost beneath the boom of the bass. This is my first real moment of panic, when it registers that I'm trapped outside with this man and nobody can hear me scream. I pound my shoulder against the door, hoping the force of the blow will loosen the stubborn wood.

It does. The man is directly behind me as I fall into the stairwell. His hands swoop down as I crawl up the steps on all fours. Fifteen feet above me, people are laughing, talking. I scream again, but still nobody hears. Halfway up the stairs, he grabs my right ankle and pulls hard. I fall down several steps, my palms sliding over the tread marks worn into the wood. When I'm able to regain my balance, I kick him and he lets go. I run up the rest of the way and into the living room.

Twenty or so people are gathered in small groups drinking beer out of red cups and watching TV. My friend Billy, the captain of the swim team, looks up as I run past. He's standing behind the makeshift bar mixing drinks.

"Hey Corey, what's up?"

As I dash by everyone, I scream *get him the fuck away from me*. This time I'm heard.

I run directly through the living room, past my roommate Heather who's standing in the corner with her boyfriend, past the people sitting on the couch. The only thought I have is to keep running, to not slow down. I run through the adjacent room, past groups of people playing beer pong, and into the kitchen.

By now my friends realize something's wrong and they begin to shout. They watch, startled, as the topless man tears after me and chases me through the house and up the stairs toward the attic.

The back stairwell is dark and dirty; boxes and piles of old clothing litter the yellowed carpet. I take the steps two-at-a-time and dodge the accumulated trash. When I reach the third floor, I run toward the empty bathroom at the end of the hallway. I slam the door behind me right in time; he pounds on the other side and screams. With my left shoulder propped up against the door, I put the slide lock into place. Then I turn and push my back against the wood in anticipation of him breaking through. This is the end of the line; there's nowhere left to run.

There's a commotion in the hallway, followed by more screaming. There are loud voices issuing orders, then a thump. The pressure on the door immediately slackens. I

turn and face the door and stare at it as I move away. When my back hits the opposite wall, I don't know what else to do; I put the lid down on the toilet and sit.

My whole body is shaking. I wedge my hands beneath my thighs and stare at the white cabinet in front of me. I realize I've been holding my breath; I exhale deeply, then choke down mouthfuls of air. The voices in the hall become fainter and fainter, and pretty soon there is silence.

After a moment, there's a gentle knock on the door. I hear Heather's voice. She asks if she can come in.

I try to say something but the words are caught in my throat.

"Corey, are you okay?"

I nod.

"Can you open the door?"

Slowly, I stand and take a step forward. My fingers are too unsteady to undo the lock; I push the metal bar with the palm of my hand.

The music downstairs is off and people are standing in small groups talking quietly. They turn toward me when I walk into the room; it's like they're waiting for me to issue some sort of statement. I look down at my feet. I've already told Heather what happened, and now I want to be alone.

Billy comes up to me, a look of concern on his normally relaxed face.

"We called the cops," he says. "They're on the way."

"Can I go home?"

Billy pauses and glances to the side. He looks upset. “We were holding the guy down, but he broke free. He’s a lot stronger than he looks.”

“Where is he now?” I ask.

“Well, he ran outside.” Billy pauses and looks at the floor. “We looked all around, but we couldn’t find him.”

I imagine the dense spread of trees behind the house, the dark woods that surround campus and my apartment—all the places where a person could disappear.

“We’re gonna go out and look again,” Billy says. “We’ll kick his ass.”

He leaves with Duncan and Bobby, two other swimmers. The slam of the front door cuts through the now silent house.

I make my way to a deserted couch in the living room, take the unopened bottles of cider out of my purse and set them on the table. If I’m going to have to talk to cops, I don’t want to risk getting an underage drinking citation.

After several minutes of awkward silence the party begins to pick up. People gather in small groups and sip beer as they watch the images on the muted television screen. But the Saturday night party feeling has drained from the room, and the mood now feels forced.

Ten minutes later Duncan runs up the stairs, alone and out of breath. He comes over to the couch where I’m sitting.

“We found him; he was hiding in a bush right behind the house, watching us the whole time.”

My body is cold and clammy as Duncan speaks. “When we tried to grab him, he took off,” he tells me, fixing his blue eyes on the wall behind me. “We chased him the

whole way down the street. Billy and Bobby finally got a hold of him right when the cops were pulling up.”

I want to thank Duncan, but no words come out.

“The police officers will probably want to talk to you,” he finally says.

I pull myself up from the tattered couch. Heather stands, grabs her purse and follows me toward the door. An entourage of my friends trails behind us as we head for the stairs. As a group, we make our way down the driveway, over the potholes and bumps. The normally dark stretch is illuminated by the flash of red and white lights. When we turn left onto Beeler Street, I see two cop cars crookedly parked at the end of the road. The previously deserted street is now crawling with people—sorority girls heading to the next party, groups of students making their way home after a long night of drinking. Several people have gathered around the police cars and watch the scene unfold.

As we approach, I see the black and yellow letters that spell out “Pittsburgh Police” on the side of the cars. Two officers are there—one is talking to Billy and Bobby, and one is near the intersection, holding down the man who chased me. I stop walking as I watch the officer struggle to keep him on the ground and to force handcuffs onto his flailing arms. I don’t want to get any closer. Billy turns and points to me and the smaller officer nods and slowly walks in my direction.

He asks me to explain what happened, and I recount the details of the past half hour. As I speak, he nods and quickly jots notes in a small tablet.

“When he grabbed you in the stairwell, did he hurt you?” the officer asks, looking from the notebook to my ankle.

“No. I mean, I fell down a few stairs, but I kicked him off before he could do anything.”

He looks up at me, then begins writing again. Every few seconds the man who chased me moans and screams. I glance past the officer who’s questioning me and see the other cop on top of the man, shoving his face into the cement.

“So you were never harmed?” the officer asks.

His question catches me off guard. I turn my face back toward him, stare into his dark eyes. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The man never actually harmed you, then?”

Suddenly I feel stupid standing there, answering his questions. My body is tired and I wish I was alone in my bed.

“No, I guess not. But he would have if I hadn’t outrun him.”

The officer looks down. “Unfortunately, we can’t hold him for that. Unless he actually harmed you or threatened to do so, we have to let him free.”

Anger registers in a part of my brain that feels disconnected from the moment. It’s as if the past twenty minutes hasn’t happened, like I’m hearing the unsatisfying end to someone else’s story.

“You’re kidding, right?”

He shakes his head no.

“So that’s it, you’re just gonna let him go? What if he does this to someone else?”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “It’s the law.”

The rest of the conversation melts in my mind; it blurs into a series of nods, shrugs and one-word answers to his questions. The officer gives me his card and tells me if I need anything, to call him. He turns and heads toward the commotion down the road.

Heather walks up to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. “Let’s go,” she says.

My friends and I begin walking toward campus. The sidewalk is completely blocked by the officers and people who have gathered. We step into the street to bypass the man on the ground. Even though I don’t want to see his face and I don’t want him to see me, I can’t help but look at him one last time as we walk past. Between each scream, he lifts his head from the rough cement and jerks it to the side. It’s red, twisted with rage.

“I’ll kill you,” he shouts at the officer who shoves him into the ground. *“I’ll kill you!”*

I lie in my bed staring at the ceiling, looking at the spots where the paint has begun to peel. Heather is downstairs with her boyfriend watching TV, and I have the room to myself. My other housemates have all returned for the night; they sit in their rooms, unpacking and preparing for the new semester.

The white overhead light feels brighter than usual. It makes my head hurt, but I don’t turn it off. I listen to its steady buzz for several more hours, till Heather comes into the room and hits the switch.

I wake up early the next morning. There’s a dull throbbing in the back of my skull, and I feel dizzy as I climb out of bed and shuffle toward my desk. Heather is still sleeping, though she stirs when I turn on my computer. By habit, I call up my email, which has

eight new messages. The one at the top of the list immediately catches my attention—it's a campus safety bulletin. Every so often the entire student body receives emails that detail crimes that have been committed on or near campus. They're designed to help students make more informed decisions while commuting to and from class. The subject line of the email reads: "Urgent Crime Alert: August 25, 2002 - Sexual Assault at Geisling Stadium." My stomach knots.

The body of the email is in all capital letters. I read it quickly once, then scan it several more times before falling back in my chair. This morning, a little after one a.m., the email says a female student was "partially" raped at the football stadium. The perpetrator is described as a white male, thin build, approximately 5'9". Anyone with details concerning this crime is encouraged to call Campus Police immediately.

The words jump out from the email and wrap around me. *Partial Rape. The football field*—directly across from Beeler Street—a block from my house.

I let out a single cry, and Heather rolls over in bed. "What's wrong?" she asks groggily as she sits up.

I read her the email. She looks down and shakes her head.

For a long time I stare at the computer. My eyes go out of focus and the white screen blurs, swims. I look at the boxes I still have to unpack, the clothes that are piled on the dresser waiting to be put away. The thought of the upcoming semester feels heavy.

I wonder what she looks like, if I know her. I wonder what she's doing at this exact moment—if she's still asleep in her dorm, delaying the slap of reality that looms only a few blinks away.

I grab the black cordless telephone, then sit at my desk with it in my hand. Eventually Heather gets up and goes downstairs to make breakfast. The screensaver on my computer switches on, and I watch the small blue bubbles bounce off the sides of the screen. The cabinet doors in the kitchen creak open and slam shut. The TV in the living room is turned on.

I dial the number at the bottom of the email. Immediately, a woman picks up on the other end. She asks how she can help me, and I realize I don't know where to start. After the initial stuttering, I tell her I'm calling to find out more details about the rape on campus.

"We can't disclose information about the incident at this time," she tells me.

"It's just that I need to know what happened. I think this man tried to attack me last night."

"Oh, are you the other girl?" she asks.

I say yes before I realize how strange this statement is. *The other girl.*

"The Pittsburgh Police filed a report about what happened last night and sent us a copy."

"Oh."

"But they didn't include your name or contact information. So we were hoping you'd call."

"They never asked for it."

"Are you okay?" Her tone sounds genuinely concerned.

"Yes, it's just—it's just that I can't help but feel this could have all been prevented—that this girl didn't have to be raped by him."

The woman on the other end corrects me. “It was a partial rape,” she says.

I can feel my voice rising, can feel the pressure rushing to my throat again, expanding like a slowly inflating balloon. “I don’t know what that means.”

“There was penetration. That’s all I can say.”

There is silence on the telephone while I take this in, try to make sense of what she’s saying without losing my temper.

“Well, if there was penetration, then it was rape.”

“I—I’m sorry. That’s what the report the Campus Police filed says. Those are the only details I was given.”

I realize then that the word “partial” is not her terminology—it’s the word on the report filed by a member of the all-male police squad—the word she’s been instructed to recite to those calling with questions.

“Let me transfer you to the officer who was on duty last night.”

“Thanks.”

After a short pause a man picks up the other end of the line. He has a deep, paternal voice, and asks me to recount what happened in as much detail as I can recall. I tell him everything I told the officer the previous evening. As slowly and carefully as I can, I go through the entire night and try to be thorough and exact. I emphasize the end of the story—the part where the cops said they were going to let the man go since he hadn’t harmed me.

“All I can think about is that the man in the crime alert was the same one who chased me—that this could have all been prevented,” I say.

“Well, the report the Pittsburgh Police submitted says they ended up taking him in since he threatened to kill the officers.”

I swallow. When the officers—the ones with the guns, mace and clubs—felt threatened, action was taken. But when I was chased two blocks and right through my friends’ house, this wasn’t good enough to prove this man was dangerous.

I hear the officer shuffling through papers. “But their report says they released him after questioning.”

“They released him? Why?”

“It doesn’t say. I guess they decided he was no real threat.”

“What time was that?” I ask as I watch my hands shake and I try to steady my voice.

“He was questioned till about 12:30.”

I do the math in my head; the man who chased me at eleven was caught around 11:30, released at 12:30, and then, shortly after 1, a woman was raped in the stadium across from Beeler Street—twenty yards from the spot where I was followed. The timeframe matches perfectly, and I point this out to the officer.

“No, it most likely wasn’t the same man.” He responds quickly—so quickly that I wonder if he’s even considered what I’ve said. “That would be a lot for him to do in one night.”

I realize I’m shaking all over; the phone is heavy in my hand, and I prop it up with my shoulder. All of a sudden I feel defensive, overwhelmed with the need to make him understand what I’m saying.

“You weren’t there last night—you didn’t see the way he chased me up the street and through my friends’ house. He wasn’t going to stop unless someone made him. And even when they tried to hold him down, he still got away. He was hiding in their bushes waiting for me when they found him.”

My voice teeters but I’m too mad to stop. “Then, the cops come, tell me that he didn’t ‘harm’ me, and they’re about to set him free till he threatens to kill them. So they take him in for questioning and release him a little while later when they decide that he’s an okay guy. Then, a woman happens to be raped at the field right next to the spot where he started chasing me, and the man who does it perfectly matches the description of the man I saw, but you’re telling me it’s not him? It’s just all one big coincidence? Is this what you’re telling me?”

“Ma’am, I know you’re upset, but first of all, it wasn’t a rape.”

I don’t give him time to finish his thought. “Look, I don’t want to argue about syntax,” I yell into the phone. “Yes I’m upset. A girl was *assaulted* on the field across the street from my house, and I’m going to have to live with knowing that it probably could have been prevented.”

“What that man did last night to you was wrong, and what the man did to the girl at the field was wrong,” the cop says in a hollow, placating voice. “But there’s no way to prove it was the same person since he got away before we arrived.”

There is silence on both ends of the line—a pronounced moment that drags on and on.

“So that’s all then?” I finally say when I realize this is the end of our conversation.

“I’d like to give you the number of campus counseling services so that you can talk to somebody about this incident, get some help coping.”

While he rattles off the number, I say nothing, wait long enough to pretend to write it down, then hang up the phone.

I climb back into bed and curl up into a tight ball. Immediately, everything I wish I’d have said rushes through my head. I wish I’d have described the man’s eyes to the officer—the sharp, hungry edge in his stare. I wish I’d have told him about his dilated pupils, how the cop told me he seemed to be strung out on something. I wish I’d have mentioned how he broke away from the hold of two national swimming champions—guys who could bench press 250 pounds. I wish I’d have told him something, anything, that would have made him understand that it was him—that he was the one.

But it wouldn’t have mattered. Linking them to the same man meant nothing more to him than a slight change on the statistic generated for the annual campus crime report. This was not a matter that would keep him awake for weeks or cause him to shoot up in bed in the middle of the night, wet with sweat from the recurring chasing dream. He wouldn’t feel the need to carry a butterfly knife in his pocket, mace tucked beneath his sleeve, finger always ready on the trigger.

COUNTING

I calculate the values of my allotted food for the day on the side column of my notebook as the professor lectures about *Titus Andronicus* in my night class. The woman sitting next to me is eating a pita sandwich, and I smell the roasted vegetables and barbeque sauce. My stomach growls and I rustle my papers so nobody will hear. The professor probably thinks I'm taking notes because I pause every few moments, look up and act like I'm mulling over what he's saying. But really I'm trying to figure out how many calories would be in a pita sandwich with a side of macaroni salad.

Before class I ran ten miles on the treadmill in an attempt to work off last night's debauchery. When I felt the tearing in my side—that throw up feeling creeping from my chest to throat—I swallowed and thought about the half-gallon of ice cream I ate at midnight, the crumbled up chocolate chip cookies I mashed in and the caramel sauce I drizzled on top. I wolfed it down with a fork, even though I wasn't hungry and I'd already eaten two plates of pasta. It was a Monday night—my healthy day—and I blew it on ice cream.

One mile on the treadmill is 156 calories if I really work it, even more if I can finish under seven minutes. The first mile alone is two pieces of light bread and as much spinach, cucumber and tomato as I want. Fat-free dressing, that's another half mile. Hummus for the bread, two miles. Cheese, another four. As I was running, I decided to skip the cheese and have a vegetarian hot dog instead. 80 calories, half a gram of fat. Ten miles at about 150 calories would allow me 1,500 to save for dinner. I could have two hot dogs if I wanted—buns and condiments, too—and still come out ahead.

Sweat soaked through my shirt and shorts and dripped down my arms and onto the black plastic strip on the side of the treadmill. When I climbed off, I blotted it with a towel so the next person wouldn't have to touch my puddles. I downed the rest of my bottle of water as I walked toward the lat pulldown machine. Lifting would allow me another 150 calories, and five hundred sit-ups, at least one hundred more. 1,750, minus the carrots and apple in my backpack—it would be a good day if I could maintain through dinner.

4:00 p.m: one apple, skin on. But is it a medium or large apple? How do I measure? Seventy-two versus 110 calories—that's a big difference. Does the core count? What if I don't eat the bruised parts? Should I assume that would be seventy-two calories, or just list it as 110 in case? It looks like a medium apple but I'll give it one hundred to be safe.

Baby carrots: four calories each. Twenty carrots, eighty calories. That's not too bad. I can have all the carrots I want and not have to worry. Maybe tomorrow I'll skip the apple and have forty carrots instead.

My mom says the only time she's seen me "really gain weight" was the summer of my tenth grade year. My family was at the beach in South Carolina for vacation. The swim season had just ended, and I had a three week break before practices resumed in September. I could sleep in for as long as I wanted, and stay on the beach for hours without having to worry about being late for afternoon practice. Each morning before I walked to the ocean, I ate cinnamon buns and fresh bagels. For lunch I had chicken salad

sandwiches and potato chips. With dinner, I ordered sweet tea, fried green tomatoes and hush puppies. I didn't exercise once.

My mom's comment was intended to reassure me that I'm thin, that I'm lucky to not have to struggle like she and my dad and sister do with their weight. After our talk I go up to the attic to find the box of family photographs. I dump its contents onto the carpet and sit next to the pile, searching for the photos from vacation that year. When I come across the one of myself on the diving board at the pool, I pull it from the stack and place it in the pocket of my jeans. Later that night I study it—rippy thighs, beefy arms, stomach rolls expanding the tight-fitting floral print one-piece. I fold the photo in half so I don't have to see it anymore, then take it outside and set it on fire with my mom's red lighter.

Last month, a channeler named April told me that in a recent past life I died in a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. I have dreamt this before—a recurring nightmare—and saw myself in the camp during a past life regression in high school. April said my fragile body didn't make it to the gas chamber. She told me I was a fourteen-year-old girl when they separated me from my mother. One night I curled into a bony ball on the wooden floor, alone, and died of malnutrition.

I used to think drowning was the worst way to die—trapped, choking for air that would never come. The more I imagine how it must have felt to waste away—the slow process of succumbing to black dots and dizziness—the more horrible it becomes.

I don't have a scale in my apartment. I know better than to buy one. When I'm back in Pittsburgh visiting my parents, I spend too much time in their green and orange bathroom, staring at the face of their electronic white square. Every morning, when I return from the gym, I go through a ritual: I pee, take my clothes off, step onto the scale and close my eyes until I hear the monitor beep. In the second before I look down, I feel sick nervous, like I'm seeing the results of a home pregnancy test or midterm grades or my time at a state qualifying swim meet. I assure myself I ate a lot of salt the night before, that it's water weight, no matter how bad the number might be. Before I look down, I exhale and brace for the worst.

Sundays are the best day because I eat whatever I want. Usually it's all the things I don't get during the week. If I make an omelette, I put some yolk in it. Oil in the pan to sear the potatoes. Cheese in the grits, and maybe a swatch of butter, too. An entire sleeve of mini candy bars and peanut butter for dessert. Maybe chocolate chip pancakes afterward.

Sunday is the best day because I know going into it that I'm going to be excessive. It's part of the plan, an expected turn on an already-charted map. I know I've earned it because I've done twenty extra minutes of cardio, taken the dog on a long nighttime walk and scoured the tile in the bathroom. I know I've earned it because I've skipped so many breakfasts and lunches during the week that this meal can be as excessive as I want.

As I sit on the floor staring at my computer, I gorge myself and write until the pains in my protruding stomach make it too hard to sit up and type. Then I lie on my back on the carpet and search with my fingers for my ribs. My stomach sinks into itself and it feels like I'm thinner than I am. This is my favorite post-overeating position because I

don't have to suck in the roll above my shorts. I can let it out and not worry about how I look or who will see me.

I keep eating because it's Sunday and I have until midnight to indulge. I keep eating till I'm fully anchored to the world, till it hurts to swallow another bite. I eat until I'm nauseated and sweating, and then I walk to the kitchen and heave into the sink. I know I won't throw up because throwing up is the most awful feeling in the world, but part of me wishes I could get it all out of me—these calories, this mass of food trapped behind my flesh, clogging my arteries and sticking to my hips.

I wonder how my sister does it, how she's able to pull the trigger so easily, to hit that perfect spot that releases the food from its hold in her stomach. I see her three years ago when she was a senior in high school—the year she lost sixty pounds—kneeling in the bathroom we share, drunk and sick. She cradles the toilet and I hold her hair as she sticks her finger down her throat, over and over. It's as if there's a magic button right next to her tonsils that sets it all free. For hours we sit there—me running the sink so my parents won't hear, her throwing up and throwing up until there's nothing left inside. Then, throwing up bile and air as she softly cries.

Later, after I go to bed, I lay on my comforter with a garbage can propped up next to my pillow. I try to sleep on my back and feel for my ribs, but it's more comfortable to roll onto my side. My fingers run over the bulge below my belly button and I'm disgusted. I promise myself that next Sunday I'll be reasonable, that I won't do this ever again. I suck in the roll of flesh and fat and tighten my abs to flatten the pocket. For hours, I toss and turn as I try to find a way to fall asleep without unclenching my stomach.

Today, on the way back from the gym at my apartment complex, a woman who lives in the building next to mine stops me.

“Look at you!” she says, gesturing to my sweaty body. “You’ve lost so much weight—you look like a different person!”

I smile at this near stranger, the woman who stopped coming to the gym but still sees me on the elliptical machine each morning when she leaves to take her dog for a walk, who sees me on the same machine an hour later when she gets back. For a few moments I feel good, looking down at my smaller breasts, my lighter thighs. It’s embarrassing how happy her words make me. But as I walk the rest of the way toward my building, I begin to wonder what I looked like three, six months ago, before I started really watching, before I buckled down. Who was the person she’d seen then?

ADULT SWIM

It was well over a hundred degrees by the time we got outside, and I assured myself that if I *were* to take off the top piece of my bikini, my nipples would immediately burn.

My three friends and I were sprawled out on matching lounge chairs, sitting poolside at our second-rate hotel on the edge of the Vegas Strip. It was the Fourth of July weekend and we had flown into town three days before for our annual post-college get-together. It was our only chance to revisit the excesses of college life the past two years had made us crave. That morning we had found the pamphlet for the “adult swimming pool” beneath our door amid a stack of flyers and advertisements for dance clubs, trendy bars and stretch limo tours of The Strip. The small, discrete paper offered a “relaxing European swimming experience” for guests twenty-one and older.

“Let’s go here!” Sara said, waving the advertisement toward us.

I studied the paper, its smooth cursive letters and soft pastels.

“Really?” I was wary of the ad’s promise of naked tranquility. I had been happy at the family pool on the fifteenth floor, the one we had gone to the previous mornings. Sure, there were loud, spoiled children there who ingested a continual stream of sugar while their parents slept off compounding casino losses—but I was comfortable there. I knew what to expect.

“You don’t have to get naked—it’s optional,” she assured me from her spot on the bed as she pulled her black hair into a ponytail. “I’ll probably keep my suit on.”

I nodded, still not completely convinced. While I doubted anyone would require me to leave my suit at the front desk, it seemed strange to go to a strip pool without stripping.

“Oh come on, it’ll be fun!” Libby said as she lathered sunscreen onto her freckled face.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been to a naked people pool.” My tone professed a bit more curiosity than I had intended.

I considered my other options, which included lying on the bed for three more hours watching infomercials, playing nickel slots all morning while sipping bottom-shelf Tequila Sunrises, or going to the family pool alone and taking personality quizzes in smutty magazines.

“What the hell,” I said as I searched for my suit.

By this point in the trip my body had adjusted to extreme heat, lack of sleep and excessive alcohol consumption. I had grown used to strangers wearing sombreros and platform shoes waving hello to me as I walked into casinos, to hookers eating hot dogs for breakfast as they leaned against light poles, to the gluttonous display of wealth, intensity and smarmy charm men freely offered as they sat at blackjack tables, in poker rooms and at bars. I had even come to accept the artificial nature of the place; in a two mile stretch one could walk from the Eiffel Tower across the street to the Great Pyramid, and then, on the way to the circus, stop by for a swim with the sharks or a twenty-five cent hamburger in a revolving restaurant. But as I sat on the roof of my hotel at the adult

pool, gaping stupidly at my surroundings, I realized there was a limit to what my liberal mind could wrap itself around.

The pool itself was small but inviting—probably no more than twenty yards long and twenty feet wide. The edge of the wooden deck was decorated in a fake, moss-like covering that looked more like the putting green on a miniature golf course than a tropical rainforest. There were plastic palm trees in the corners and a painted jungle motif on the bathroom walls. The pool would have been quaint but otherwise unremarkable if it hadn't been for the fifteen or so semi and fully-naked pool-goers, sipping beer and smoking cigars, floating on blue rafts and tanning on lounge chairs.

From the moment we walked on deck, I felt as though I had taken a detour from reality and stumbled through a cosmic wormhole that transported me to a place where it was acceptable to sit next to two thirty-something topless women applying sunscreen to each others' backs, or to see a naked man swagger out of the bathroom, indiscreetly adjust his waxed genitals and do a jackknife into the deep end of the pool.

While my friends sat in their bathing suits, casually leafing through *Cosmo* and sipping bottled water, I rocked on the edge of my chair, squirming and fidgeting, unsure of what to do with my hands, my eyes. I gratefully drank from the water bottle I'd had the foresight to fill with Bloody Mary and tried to understand the situation—to place it within a framework that would help me figure out what the hell was going on.

Behind my dark sunglasses my eyes wandered. I began to apply tanning oil to my already burnt skin as I watched naked husbands talking to other naked husbands, topless wives swimming sidestroke down the side of the pool. *More tanning oil.* Sweat trickled off my forehead and gathered at the nape of my neck. I saw two guys across the deck

who couldn't have been much older than we were, lying face-down on their towels, their unnaturally-white asses reflecting the sun. *More tanning oil.* And, directly across the pool from me, there was a man who looked exactly like my sixth grade math teacher, with toned arms and sunburnt skin, reading *The Sun Also Rises*, the tattered book resting on his stomach, casting a rectangular shadow over his exposed penis. *Lots more tanning oil.*

Amid the poolside spectacle, the real appeal of Vegas began to unravel. It wasn't just about the cheap food, the craps tables or the Elvis impersonators and their late-night polyester encores. A city built on excess doesn't define itself by any one overindulgence; it takes them all in and raises the stakes to create a binge metropolis concerned only with outdoing itself. People come to Vegas to feel exposed and raw, to embrace an extreme that isn't available at their cubicle or Bridge group or local Lion's Club meeting. They come to sample "too much"—too much rum, too much peel-and-eat shrimp, too much pole-dancing and sweating and grinding. Then, to top it off, they head to the naked pool to lay it all out for a whole-body bake before starting the cycle again. No inhibitions, no regrets, no second thoughts. While I was able to lay a claim to nearly every other extreme Las Vegas afforded, here I had found my limit. Knowing that bothered me.

After five or so minutes, I had applied such an excessive amount of oil that my skin resembled a Butterball Turkey after its final basting. I could barely sit upright in the chair without sliding off like a Slinky.

The half of me that wasn't freaked out was envious of these naked pool-goers. They were genuinely okay with their bodies, even if they weren't perfect. I thought back to the thousands of sit-ups I'd done in the weeks leading up to this trip, the hundreds of miles I'd run on the treadmill and how, in three days, all my hard work was hidden

behind a thick wall of stomach fat. It was a struggle to be in a two-piece bathing suit, let alone to fathom taking the thing off.

On top of that, I had no idea what the protocol was at a place like as this. There are certain life skills that can be taught: riding a bike, sewing, changing a flat tire. But our education lacks many of the things we will one day need to help us function in the adult world. Schooling takes us only so far; we learn how to spot alcohol poisoning, how to put a condom on a banana, how to “just say no!” to drugs. But in terms of practical advice, my education had gaping holes. Not once in the past two-and-a-half decades had anyone instructed me about what to do at a naked swimming pool.

I wondered: was there an agreed-upon timeframe between coming outside, laying out my towel and taking off my clothes? And what would be the best way to make this process look “natural”? Should I pick up my unopened book and read a few pages, and then, as if I had simply forgotten, casually unhook the back of my bikini top and let it fall beneath my chair? Or was the first step to whip off the suit and then pick up the book? What if I made a *faux pas*? Would anyone notice if I violated this unspoken game plan everyone else seemed so sure of? The only thing worse than being naked in front of all these strangers would be to set myself apart further as The Clothed Outsider.

The suit stayed on.

And I was confused. I considered that women were admitted to this pool for no charge but men had to pay ten dollars at the door. I’d been to clubs like this, bars in Pittsburgh where it was polite to waive the cover costs for women. But those places were equipped with their own set of rules. Even if nobody verbalized it, everyone knew they were there to be looked at; men had come to meet women, and women were there to

peruse the men. Patrons may have chosen the adult pool to feel free and uninhibited, but their nakedness seemed to come with baggage. Had I come to this pool to look? Or, worse, had I been admitted without a cover to be studied?

I didn't like the idea of being gawked at, and wrapped my oily body in my towel. So what that nobody was looking at me—the sweaty, awkward blonde, the least interesting person at the pool. On a certain level I knew my nakedness would be safe here among exposed strangers whose faces would disappear from my memory before I'd walked off deck. Part of me knew I should be comfortable with my best friends who had seen me compete in a tiny racing suit for four years of college swim meets, who changed in a dressing room with me after each practice. I wished knowing this was enough, but it wasn't. No amount of rationalizing could make it okay to see myself as I was sure they would all see me—awkward and imperfect.

My friends looked completely comfortable lounging in their suits, napping off their hangovers, metabolizing the ninety-nine cent margaritas we had found at a dingy, off-road casino and the greasy fries we had consumed at our four a.m. trip to Denny's. They had managed to transcend the initial awkwardness and saw nothing wrong with coming to the adult pool and enjoying the quiet it provided, even while wearing suits and tank tops. I couldn't relate.

After a long swig of drink, I headed for the water. It took several steps for my feet to register the slap of ozone and sun the deck had spent the past four hours absorbing. Despite my intention to be discrete and quiet, I swore each time I made contact with the blistering surface. Over a yard away from the edge of the pool, I lunged into the water.

When I surfaced, I realized everyone was staring at me. I slouched down in the water and wished I could disappear. As quietly as I could, I waded toward an unclaimed raft. In the least graceful gesture imaginable, I attempted to hoist myself onto the wet blue foam without attracting too much attention. I pushed down on the raft's slippery surface as gently as I could and tried to ease my right leg over the side and throw myself onto the top. But my limbs were so covered in tanning oil that I couldn't feel the water around me, let alone the raft. *This is how bacon must feel in a Teflon pan.*

I was making a scene. My end of the pool was full of waves and white choppy water—the kind you'd find in the ocean before a storm. People were studying me, watching the show as I tried again, unsuccessfully, to mount the raft. Up and down, up and down—I wasn't giving up. My friends stared over the tops of their magazines while I thrashed and flailed; they shook their heads and gave me the *why can't you just behave?* face.

Finally, I made it onto the raft. The combination of exertion and sun had completely worn me out; once my breathing was controlled, I put my head down, closed my eyes and felt that floating feeling that precedes a nap. The cool water lapped onto my sides and over my feet, and helped to keep my body temperature regulated. *This isn't so bad*, I assured myself as my muscles relaxed.

Some time later I heard a laugh—an unfamiliar voice right next to my head. I peeked out from beneath an eyelid and saw I was no longer in shallow water. At some point the raft had charted its own course toward the other end of the pool, straight for a small congregation of naked swimmers. It was too late to bail out without making a scene—to indiscreetly paddle away. As the voices grew closer I tried to divert my eyes

and gently nudge the raft back toward the other side without acknowledging the people who now surrounded me. I didn't want to look. I tried not to look. I did everything I could to stare at the sky, my hand, the large fake palm tree by the bathroom. Then, after about ten seconds, I looked.

Floating next to me on a raft was a naked man old enough to be my grandfather, talking to another naked man and his topless wife. His arms were folded behind his head and he periodically extended them from his body in an emphatic stretching motion that caused his back to arch and the bottom of the raft to dip below the water. The four of them were laughing about a show they'd seen the night before and exchanging advice about which clubs to visit. They talked with one another the same way people would chat while waiting in line at the bank or sitting at a PTA meeting. The younger couple seemed oblivious that the seventy-year-old's flaccid member was floating several feet from their faces.

Directly to my right a large, dark-haired woman with stretch marks on her sides and arms was wearing a thong bottom and no suit top. Her cantaloupe-sized breasts floated on the surface of the water like buoys in a storm. She seemed to be engaged in some sort of water calisthenics—combining workout with fun—and paused every ten or so jumps to sip from a sweaty can of Bud Light on the edge of the pool. We briefly made eye contact and she smiled and said “Hi there” in a friendly voice.

I paddled furiously and put the muscles I'd honed during my thirteen years as a swimmer to use. As quickly as my shaky arms could muster, I propelled myself to the shallow end. I didn't look back. Once out of the water and safe on my towel, I downed Bloody Mary and broke into a fit of nervous giggles. At first it was just a snicker I could

easily muffle with my towel. Then, I found it funny that I was laughing and the situation became even more absurd. Here I was, sitting at the naked people pool, drinking vodka for breakfast and cracking up. I'd become the child they were all hoping to avoid, the obnoxious one whose stare hung a bit too long, who clearly wasn't mature enough to handle a small naked gathering.

"Are you drunk? Sara asked as she wiped the sweat from the side of her nose.

I thought for a second, then shook my head no. I wasn't drunk—just giddy. Sara studied me as though I'd offer an explanation, but none came. After a minute she shrugged her shoulders and lay back in her chair.

It occurred to me then that I was more threatening to the people at the adult pool than they were to me. None of them seemed to care that I was sporting an obnoxiously polka-dotted suit or judged me for drinking vodka out of a water bottle for breakfast. I was the only person staring, the only one with wandering eyes and a curious, stupid expression. Behind the crimson slap of sunburn, my cheeks blushed.

We left the adult pool shortly after my swim, wearing wrinkled clothes over our suits. As we walked down the hall toward our room, I couldn't help but feel as though I'd failed—and that this failure went deeper than my inability to take off the top piece of my bikini. I watched from behind as my friends compared tan lines and felt a strange detachment from the moment, from the vacation. It was like there was a glass bubble around me that separated my world from theirs. I could look out and see the three of them laughing and walking forward—just like I had seen everyone at the pool—but I couldn't break through.

I felt as though I'd screwed up on a cosmic level, that I had blown a chance I would never get back to make some sort of statement. The last thing I wanted to do was sit in the room all afternoon, primping and getting ready for the night ahead. I didn't want to pretend to be happy as we sat on our beds, watching Jerry Springer and trying on various outfit combinations for dinner. I wanted to get drunk, and I wanted to be alone.

In Las Vegas, there's no such thing as alone time. The closest thing The Strip offers to physical seclusion is loneliness—of which there's plenty. There are hundreds of thousands of people, clones of clones, some single, some with partners and some in groups so large they've already lost themselves and don't seem to care. This feeling of isolation amid masses finally made sense to me as I walked behind my friends toward our stale hotel room with generic curtains and matching framed reprints of the beach.

I told my friends I'd meet them in the room, then took the elevator to the first floor of the hotel. There, at the massive round bar in the center of the lobby, I sat on the edge of my black vinyl stool and ordered a fresh Bloody Mary. I wanted to shut off my brain—to feed it enough liquor to make my thoughts melt into a cool red haze and grant me a stupid smile for the remainder of the afternoon. Sure enough, since I hadn't eaten yet that day, the drink offered the reassuring numb feeling that promises a wave of drunkenness isn't far away.

It was a relatively calm afternoon at the casino; the patrons seemed to be hungover en masse from the night before's losses and silently roamed from machine to machine with the hope of some divine retribution that would make it all worthwhile. I couldn't make up my mind whether it was sad or funny to watch as they scattered from one side of the room to the other, looking for the next minute of diversion to stall the

inevitable wave of reality from which everyone in Las Vegas seemed to be running at their respective paces.

Slot machines buzzed all around me and blared the theme music from movies and eighties television shows. Lights flashed, people swarmed and coins rattled the metal mouths of the slots. I heard muffled, stray conversations from around the room, a periodic cheer and the sound of feet shuffling across the scratchy maroon carpet. For a brief moment I felt claustrophobic; even though I was sitting in the middle of a well-lit, vast room, I couldn't kick the feeling that the walls were going to tumble down on me. I doubted anyone would even notice; I was just another straggler in a sea of faceless swimmers, most of whom had already begun to drown but were unwilling to admit defeat just yet. The fact that I was still treading water at the top was only reassuring in that it meant I'd managed to postpone the inevitable a bit longer than the rest.

Among the throngs of strangers, it's hard to stand out in Las Vegas unless you're doing something excessively deviant. Every face a sad blur, a nondescript outfit of khaki shorts, sunglasses and the occasional black leather fanny pack. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a transvestite with blue hair dressed like Wonder Woman, a midget cowboy, a group of Klingons looking for Captain Kirk. But these things too seemed normal after a while and left me wondering, as I beckoned to the bartender that I needed another drink, what exactly "normal" meant.

From what I could figure, normal seemed to be a completely relative term, like calling a car "good" or a person "nice". Especially in a place like Las Vegas, with its array of subcultures and microcosms, normal seemed like the worst possible criterion for evaluating a situation. Maybe I was the only one in Vegas who felt the need to categorize

my experiences, to compartmentalize them and shove them into neat little slots labeled “normal” and “deviant”. It seemed as though this made me the outsider, the abnormal one.

As the alcohol ran through my body and settled in my brain, I thought about how much I’d seen in the past days and how little of it had changed me. I recalled the hopes I’d held for this vacation and how yet another event I’d organized had fallen short of my lofty expectations—how I had failed, again, to relax. Would I ever ease up and let myself go enough to have fun? Or would I always be the one sitting on the outside, judging the situation because I’m too afraid to jump in?

My hair hung limply around my face, thick with sweat and chlorine. I was wearing a grimy Beatles T-shirt and jean skirt, and looked like the “before” shot in a makeover story I’d seen on TLC. Even for Las Vegas, I was sloppy.

For a fleeting moment I considered running back up to the pool, taking off my shirt and suit and diving into the cool water. I wanted to be liberated, freed from the self-analytic, self-deprecating voice that was narrating this vacation as well as my entire existence. I wanted to say “fuck it,” to leave my stale self at the bar and go back to the twenty-fifth floor armed with the reinvented, recharged Me—the one I often imagined would be the life of the party. Then, I wanted to have the guts to throw my exposed flesh into the pool and make the biggest splash I could muster.

Instead, I stirred my drink with the sprig of celery and considered how bloated, sunburnt, and generally unattractive I was. I studied my body with quiet contempt—the way a disapproving parent would look at a child who is misbehaving in public. The thought of seeing myself in the mirror, let alone parading my naked ass around a pool,

wasn't something I could fathom, even after a few drinks. I was ashamed that I'd considered going back up for a second round.

Three stools down from me a man sat hunched over the bar, his elbows resting heavily on the cool glass surface. It was only a little after noon but he seemed to be sullen and defeated, the embodiment of so many others I'd seen on the trip. It looked like days since he'd slept and possibly longer since he'd showered. His blue button-up shirt clung to a patch of sweat that had gathered by the pocket. The first three buttons were undone, revealing a thin, sagging stomach with patches of gray hair. His filth and solitude didn't seem to bother him; he wore them with a cultivated indifference that made him almost attractive.

I watched as he stared into his gin and tonic with empty, anemic eyes—seemingly oblivious to the room around him. With each new sip of his drink his facial muscles appeared to relax further and melt deeper into a well of apathy, of calm acceptance. For this, I secretly envied him.

CODA

“I have lived on the lip
of insanity, wanting to know reasons,
knocking on a door. It opens.
I've been knocking from the inside.”

~Rumi

MEMOIRS OF A PSYCHONAUT

When I arrive at Andy's house, I'm ready to go. I know from past experience my body often goes into shock from hallucinogens; even though it's a muggy July night in Pittsburgh, I'm wearing a T-shirt, long-sleeved shirt and a hooded jacket. I'm carrying a bag full of pot brownies, Kleenex for when my sinuses drain, two boxes of sparklers, a quarter ounce of dried mushrooms, gummi worms, glow sticks and a notebook to record any drug epiphanies the night may afford. Once, while tripping, Andy wrote a note to the pockets on his cargo shorts, begging them to please never run away. God forbid I have a thought like this and lose it before it can be committed to paper.

As a rule we're well prepared for trips. Our ever-expanding drug arsenal has included a variety of misfit items that may come in handy at any point during the evening: glow-in-the-dark finger paints and poster board, a Jesus action figure with extendable arms, silly putty, Zen koans, water balloons, pop rocks, a Dictaphone, an African drum, pomegranate juice, a Ouija board, feathered masks with matching boas, Gong's *Mother Egg* album, yoga DVDs, sunglasses, Tarot Cards and metallic pinwheels.

It's best to have all sorts of items ready because we never know where the trip will lead. There are a variety of directions in which it could go, depending on the type of mushroom we ingest, how many we take and our mental state prior to the journey. There have been trips that leave Andy and me doubled over in convulsive fits of laughter, when we can barely breathe from hours of uncontrollable giggles. On those nights all it takes to set us off is something as simple as looking at our hands or our reflection in the bathroom mirror. Sometimes we have a visual trip. I've seen cheetahs in my back yard climbing

trees, Technicolor trains traveling through the park by my house, entire bodies of water breathing and bright orbs of light floating around my kitchen like fuzzy, celestial pinballs. There have been auditory trips, too, in which I can hear the sound each tree in the forest makes, combine them, and form a transcendent, divine note. Other times it's a mental trip. I re-enter vivid dreams I've had in the past weeks at the spot where I was when I awoke. I leave my body and wander around the neighborhood unobserved. When I close my eyes, dams burst, worlds collapse and my physical shell dissolves into a brilliant fist of light.

Our favorite trips, though, are the ones that take us beyond the visual and auditory, to a realm where physical reality is an afterthought, a stepchild of pure consciousness. I ride the wave that threads in and out of the now, let my ego melt into the folds that have kept it in check and give myself permission to be enveloped by the current of impulses I've been conditioned to ignore. My pupils dilate. The room melts. And I take off. It's down this path we hope to travel tonight.

As I cut through the lawn and head toward Andy's front door, I think of all the times he and I have wandered down his street with a head full of psychotropic drugs. On those late afternoon journeys, we laughed like fiends as we watched his neighbors prune shrubs and water their hedges. From behind sunglasses with huge black lenses, Andy and I studied the normal people riding bikes and playing basketball in the cul-de-sac. We tried not to be too obvious and let on that we had special eyes hidden behind our special glasses, but we usually had to run full speed back to his house for cover when the weight of our collective insanity became too much for us to cloak.

Andy and I share more than an interest in ethnobotany and a love of drugs. We share a path—or rather, share the goal of finding our respective paths. Andy is the only other person I’ve ever met in the Pittsburgh bubble who is willing to go all the way—to risk his sanity for the sake of self-expansion and to lay himself on the line, time after time, to peel away layers of Catholic schooling and engrained societal norms. I feel safe with Andy because he accepts my flavor of crazy, and I accept his. We’ve known each other for a decade and he’s seen more aspects of me than I let out to even my family. Andy’s seen Concrete, Anal Corey, Freaking out Corey, Obsessive Corey and Fuck it All, Let’s Just Have Fun Corey. And still we’re friends.

Since Andy moved to New York and I moved to Miami, we’ve spent many afternoons talking on the phone—me telling him about a Tarot reading I’ve just pulled or describing the dots of colors I see floating around my apartment. We discuss his yoga classes and cleansing diets, my Reiki sessions and Transcendental Meditation initiation. It was Andy I told about my past-life regression and my astral projection experiences, and it was me he called on the thirteenth day of his lemon juice-cayenne pepper-maple syrup fast, when he was tuning out reality Space Cowboy style. He’s the only person I’ve ever met who also believes there is no such thing as physical reality, and is willing to do whatever it takes to ultimately shed the illusion. He and I share the belief that hallucinogenic drugs aren’t just a form of recreation, but are intended to take the ingester on a cosmic journey through self, to transcend the physical shackles and arrive, egoless, at The Core. Though they aren’t the only way to get there, mushrooms have proven, time-and-again, to be a natural, reliable path, and growing them has given us the means to frequently indulge.

Andy is home for a week, between waitering jobs, mooching off of his parents, and I'm back in Pittsburgh for the summer, working on my thesis and mooching off mine. I keep telling myself this will be my last summer home, that, at twenty-six, it's time to move out, move on and get on with life. But I recall saying the same thing last summer, and the one before that. And the one before that. Seeing Andy is the first social thing I've done in nearly two months, (excluding going to the movies with my parents and my daily trips to the senior-citizen gym six miles from my house), and we both know, on some level, what this means; we have a very short time to ingest a whole lot of mind-bending goodies.

At 8:30, we each down a pot brownie, which should help with nausea. Because of my inability to do remedial math that involves adding simple fractions, the brownies I made earlier in the afternoon from our friend Dominick's home grown pot are more than two times as strong as I had intended them to be—a quarter ounce in ten brownies instead of an eighth in twelve. Fifteen minutes after I eat the last chocolaty morsel, the telltale signs of being stoned set in: I stop caring about what time I have to wake up in the morning, my blood feels as though it's a cool mercury river, I begin to think almost exclusively about cake batter ice cream and kettle chips, and I can't help but note that Andy's shaven head and thick eyebrows make him look like the Dalai Lama.

It's been months since I've tripped and years since I've shed my ego and stepped outside the confines of myself. Even though I've ingested mushrooms, LSD and Morning Glory Seeds over fifty times, there have only been a handful of experiences I still consider to be truly transcendent. On those few evenings I transformed into something I didn't know I had the potential to be—a seamless entity floating in the abyss of the

Universe, a purple fractal dangling between notes on Beethoven's Symphony Number Five, a churning puddle of water spinning faster and faster until all that remained was an empty eternity where Everything and Nothing were two petals on the same lotus flower. The "I" I had previously associated with was skirting the threshold between stem and bud. I had seen a ruby city populated by huge, cone-headed energies. I'd been a shaman, taken a ride on a spaceship with aliens that made clicking noises, gone to California and driven on the PCH in a baby blue convertible in 1953. Then, when I came down, I tried to pretend I was normal, as if it was another day and I knew where to go from there. I had lied myself into believing things would be the same from that point forward.

The grass is still damp from the rain earlier in the day. My shoes slide as we traipse through Andy's back yard to gather wood for a fire. It feels good to be outside, to have the whole property at our disposal and know that his parents are away for the weekend and won't bother us. Andy's mom and dad love Jesus and George Bush, neither of whom has a place in our agenda. They don't know that Andy has been to Crazy Town dozens of times. His parents believed him when he claimed to want a pressure cooker for Christmas so he could make raspberry jam, and would be horrified to find he intended to use it for inoculating mason jars full of bird seed, Tyvek and drugs before he placed them in the makeshift fish tank incubator beneath his bed.

We take our time piling twigs and logs in the fire pit, making sure to have plenty of wood ready for the night ahead. When the stack reaches five feet tall, we go back to the kitchen for the next course.

A little after nine we sit across from one other at the kitchen table and each eat two cuts of Liberty Cap mushrooms Andy brought from New York. They're one of the

few strains we haven't grown or ingested, and I'm excited about the prospect of traveling to uncharted mental realms. Each of these tall, thin mushrooms looks like a half-cooked piece of angel hair pasta wearing a droopy rain hat. Andy tells me they're grown in the Pacific Northwest and are two times more potent than most other strands. In the off chance they aren't strong enough, I've brought a bag full of dried, home-grown Mexican Cubensis mushrooms—the kind that take those who ingest them to the Necropolis and make shards of turquoise light shoot from every living organism. I've just picked and dried them—my entire crop—and the thought of a good cup of mushroom tea has had me giddy for weeks.

Before he left New York, Andy ground his dried mushrooms in a coffee grinder, (which he has solely for the purpose of preparing drugs), making sure to pulsate the blade so as to not damage the heat-sensitive psilocin, the active chemical. Then he mixed dark chocolate with the 'shrooms and formed two, three-inch medallions, which he placed in aluminum foil and put between layers of clothes at the bottom of his duffle bag.

I gag as I eat the dessert, though it doesn't taste as bad as some of the other ways we'd prepared mushrooms in the past. There had been drug salad, drug-stuffed olives, mushrooms doused in honey, smothered with cream cheese icing, imbedded in oatmeal, floating in baked beans and sandwiched between two pieces of bread in a peanut-butter-and-drugs sandwich. We'd eaten them fresh, steeped them in tea, infused them in grain alcohol, ground them into a chunky powder and rubbed them on our gums—all the time trying not to dry heave or worse, throw them up. Any way we could get the mushrooms down the quickest and least painfully was the winner. It's not so much the taste that upsets me, it's the texture and the way the stems squish in my mouth like wet hay or a

moldy sponge. On top of that, I know stomach upset is an inevitable side-effect of ingestion; even if I plug my nose as I chew, my brain can't forget the nausea and knots my stomach has experienced during past trips.

As soon as we finish the drug medallions, Andy and I return to the back yard. It's almost completely dark by now, which means our pupils won't be bothered by light and can adjust gradually to the dilation. After a few tries, Andy starts the fire and we take our spots on a warped picnic bench several feet from the flames. I watch the purple and orange fingers embrace and twist as they reach toward the sky. The more I focus on the fire, the stranger my body feels. *Breathe*, I tell myself. *Don't fight the drugs—be one with the experience.*

Nearly an hour after Andy and I ingest the mushrooms, I begin to twitch. At first it's as if my body has made it a point to resist gravity. My frame is trying as hard as it can to support the weight of the atmosphere, but the smoky air is heavy, like cement. Sitting upright, let alone attempting to stand, is beyond the scope of my skeletal system. The harder I try to remain perched on the bench, the more my shoulders crumple and my posture slackens.

When Andy heads up to the house to get more wood, I start to see and hear things. One of the neighbors is setting off fireworks, and I briefly forget where I am. There's a part of me that wonders how I've become unstuck in time, à la Billy Pilgrim, how I've ended up caught on a battlefield in Gettysburg during the Civil War. This seems like a reasonable conclusion to arrive at, and I don't invest too much time or energy trying to unpack it. It's only a matter of time, I know, before some crazed soldier carrying a musket creeps out from behind the tool shed and blows my face off. What will Andy say

when he comes back and finds me in a puddle of my own blood with the side of my head gone? Despite my failing motor skills, I gather enough energy to crawl up the hill and hide behind a tree.

I'm dizzy. The world is flashing at me in bursts, like I'm trying to read a flipbook under a strobe light. I stagger around the yard and wait for Andy to come back down the hill. My face is numb, as are my hands and feet. There's a ringing in my ears, and I wonder whether it's brain static which has been building up for the past three months that's finally begun to seep out the openings in my head. Maybe Andy will hear it, too, and will be able to extract and decipher the muddled message it contains, which I assume is something too profound to be understood by the unaffected ear.

"Are you all right?" Andy asks as he throws huge logs onto the fire. The flames dart up in bundles, their purple arms reaching ten feet in the air. He looks concerned as he stares at me, which makes me wonder if I should be worried. One side of my face burns from the heat and the other is cold, like damp Play-Doh. I squeeze the clammy skin and imagine how a ball of flesh would feel apart from the cheek it's always known. I decide it would be like holding a huge, raw scallop.

Am I all right? I don't know. I guess that depends on what one means by "all right." The twitching has gotten worse, and in addition to the violent whole-body jerking, there's a quivering that started with my hands and is traveling through my upper body. I'm out of my mind on an assortment of drugs I've consumed after a ten-mile run and twenty-two hour fast, and I've only just begun to come up. Oh, and there's a woman in a red cloak standing over me, whispering things into my ear in the language I've convinced myself the inhabitants of Atlantis spoke. Other than that, everything's swell.

Somehow I make it back onto the bench. I try to sit up and focus on the flames, but it's a losing battle. My body has already resigned to return to the earth, to be absorbed by the ground and to sink into its warm fibers. The next thing I know I'm lying on a patch of damp grass next to the fire. I have no idea how I got here or how much time has passed. My knees are bent and I'm staring at the sky, which is melting into a thick purple soup. I swat my hand at it and the air feels as dense as tar. Then it, too, disappears, and all that's left is a black void. I wonder if I've closed my eyes, but when I poke my eyeball with the tip of my index finger, I find they're wide open.

The night speeds up. I die. Fifty seven times in a row. I can't say how or why I know this, but it seems truer than anything that's happened all day and perhaps in my entire life. After each death I leave my body, stand next to the fire and briefly mourn what's happened. There I am on the ground, but here I am, too, narrating, she said. Time accelerates and I snap outside the moment. Over the course of several minutes I weave in and out of my body, in and out of the life-death chain. I see things how they *really* are, without the confusion of the senses to muddy my slice of Universal consciousness. What worries me even more than what's happening is my complete acceptance of the whole sequence, as though it's the same sort of seamless transition one would feel switching lanes on the turnpike or surfing between television channels.

"I keep dying," I finally mumble to Andy, whose huge pupils stare at me with a combination of panic and intrigue. *Cat eyes*, I think. *Meow*. "And that lady over there is helping me." Though the words make sense in my head, they come out slurred and at varying pitches. My tongue is too heavy to say much more; it crumples into a pile on the side of my mouth.

Andy scans the yard and turns back to me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I don’t feel so good,” I tell him. “Maybe we should go inside.” I repeat this several times, though I can barely get myself up onto the bench, let alone walk the fifty yards through his lawn toward the driveway.

Being outside is overwhelming; there are too many variables and possibilities I can’t process. Finally, Andy hoists me out of the seat and loops his left arm beneath my right shoulder. I’m dead weight—since I’ve died—which strikes me as incredibly ironic. I giggle as he pulls me along.

“But what about everyone else?” I ask as we stagger away from the dwindling fire. Before he can answer, I turn around one last time to bid goodbye to the people we were sitting with.

“Who are you talking about? It’s just the two of us.” Andy’s got that look, the *I wish I was as fucked up as her* face, the expression that one of us usually has on a trip when the other takes off.

I don’t want to argue with Andy, but it seems pretty rude to leave the party we’re throwing, especially after we’ve invited them all out there. They may be bright orbs of energy that have opted to remain out of corporeal focus, but I still want to be a polite hostess. Andy assures me it’s okay to go inside, where he promises there will be new friends to meet. I send a telepathic message to the group, telling them it was nice to see them, and that I’m sure we’ll meet again. Now, though, we must go our separate ways.

Somehow we make it through the back yard and to the driveway. Most of my weight is being supported by Andy, who is trying to keep me vertical with one arm and shining the flashlight on the ground with the other. I know how heavy my body is, and I

wish I could be more help. I've got the sinking sensation I normally feel right before I faint, as well as a ringing in my ears that means I've got a few seconds before my body gives up. The last thing I'm conscious for is when my knees buckle halfway up the driveway.

Sometime between thirty seconds and forty-five minutes later, the world is spinning and I'm trying to not fall off of the chair I'm sitting on in the kitchen. Andy stands next to the sink and rests his hips on the counter. He turns to face me, and I watch his mouth move. His lips are flapping up and down and there's noise coming out of them, but the motions don't seem to line up with the sounds. Watching him talk reminds me of the time I went to see *Home Alone* when I was in third grade and how the words on the screen weren't in sync with the actors who spoke them. He's laughing and saying something about more drugs, and I think I'm nodding. But then the sounds coming out of his mouth shift sharply to the side, and I realize I'm hearing him from a different angle. I look to my right and see myself standing there, arms resting on the table, listening to the whole conversation.

How many of me are there? I look around but there are just the two of us, wearing matching gray shirts and khaki shorts, standing next to each other like twins from parallel earths. We're trying to be attentive and take in the conversation as best we can, but we don't know what to make of this funhouse with its purple floral ballooned drapes, mirrored tables and tiny bowls of apple-scented potpourri. Time shifts again, and my selves combine and jump forward. Now I'm on the leather couch in his family room with my head buried between two of the tan cushions. What am I doing here? Andy's sprawled out on couch perpendicular to mine, swatting the air with his hands—a cat

chasing an invisible ball of yarn. He's put on some sort of easy listening music, and all I keep hearing is the line *Let's make your dreams come true*, which seems at odds with the dozens of times I've already died this evening. The surround-sound speakers make it seem as though the voices are coming out of the wood in the walls, as though the house is serenading us.

"Andy, I think you need to know this. I may have lost my mind." As soon as I slur the words, this truth hangs in the air like the dying embers of a sparkler. The longer it sits there, the more true it becomes.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before something like this happened," I tell him. "One foot in reality, and the other out. Well, I've made the leap—there's no going back from here." I state this casually, as if the events of the evening could lead to no other conclusion, as if the past two-and-a-half decades was nothing more than the stretching routine before the real tap dance.

Andy doesn't discount the possibility I've lost my mind—that's what I like about him. Nothing is too far out there for Andy to at least consider. He nods and asks me to explain, but I can't articulate the panorama of thoughts. There's a part of me that knows I've crossed an invisible threshold, knows the piece that's always kept me tethered has been cut off at the root and fed to hyenas. I can feel the sections of my brain that are normally gray and unresponsive flash on like a Lite-Brite, and I can't decide whether or not this is a good thing. So I change the subject.

"I think you need more drugs," I chant to Andy. "More drugs. More drugs. More drugs." When I'm really fucked up, I feel a compulsive need to push drugs onto everyone else who I've decided is less gone than I am. I roll back and forth on the couch, my knees

pulled tightly to my chest, and moan. It bothers me that I have no idea how I got into the living room or how long we've been there. The room is still spinning, and I'm fairly sure there's a woman with glass eyes and a wooden tail sitting on the rocking chair, watching me unravel.

"I want to make sure you're okay before I have any more drugs," Andy says as he watches me roll. "Maybe you should eat something to bring your blood sugar up."

This thought has occurred to me, though I try to resist the urge. I've fainted in the past from dips in blood sugar, and Andy knows this. He's seen me have hypoglycemic lows on several occasions, both on and off drugs. Not only have I lost my mind, but I'm worried I may not be okay, physically. It's so hard to gauge how the body feels on drugs because normalcy is a hazy recollection of a previous state of existence, a memory from an almost-forgotten past-life. The numb cheeks, the tingly limbs—is it the drugs or is my body telling me something's wrong? Should the slurred words and mental confusion, the lost time and the dizziness, be a cause of concern? It occurs to me I may not be the best judge.

But do I really want to come down? It feels like I still have so much unfinished work to do, so many things to learn on this journey that I haven't let myself experience. To come down now would be like quitting the marathon before the final lap.

When tripping, there are two things that bring you down the quickest—food and 1,000 milligram Vitamin C tablets. Never have we had to ingest Vitamin C to prematurely end a drug experience, though we sometimes have it on hand. During past trips, once we're sufficiently satisfied that we've gone the whole journey, Andy and I agree to eat something. This is usually a collective decision, one we make only when the

mushrooms have run their course and we're tired, starving and ready for a debriefing session, which always follows a trip and can last till dawn.

Andy brings me a peach and I stare at it like it's a severed baby head. It rests on the glass coffee table on top of a napkin. The thought of eating it repulses me, but I know it will make me feel better, and that Andy won't have more drugs till I put something in my stomach. I feel guilty that I've become the needy one—that Andy's trip is being consumed by my sickness. I want him to have a good time and to be able to let go without having his energy sucked into my black hole. After staring at its furry face for so long it melts into an orange puddle, I lift the peach to my nose; the fruit smells sweet, like honeysuckle. I eat it slowly, taking a series of small bites which I chew solely with my front teeth, then lie back on the couch. When it's gone I'm still too weak to get up and move around, so Andy gets me two small chocolate bars, which I down immediately.

Time has lost all meaning—what does 11:46 really stand for, anyway, and how is it any different than 12:18? The thread of moments has unraveled to the point where one second doesn't precede the next; it's as if they're all a jumbled up mess on the parkway—a sixteen-car pileup waiting to be untangled. Then, for no particular reason, the moments become unstuck and expand like an accordion. I bolt up on the couch. Andy jumps, too.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I say to him. Andy nods, seemingly happy that I'm doing better.

The walk across the room and down the hall is long, and I almost fall several times. *If I could just get my sea legs*, I think as I steady myself on the wall, which seems much less solid than it did earlier that evening. I focus on the spot where the stripes meet the floor, but know this isn't helping to keep me anchored; maroon lines are spilling onto

the wooden panels on which I'm standing, and the entire room is full of patterned rays of color. When the dizziness makes the stripes swirl, I close my eyes, only to find the red rows imprinted into the darkness behind my eyelids.

Somehow I end up in the bathroom. For a good long while I stare at my face in the rectangular mirror. My skin looks splotchy and freckles creep across my forehead; if I concentrate hard enough I can make them come together into rows and bunches, and am able to reassemble my face as though it's a broken saucer. My flesh swims in slow, undulating currents, rippling toward my heart in a steady tide. I stare harder at my reflection and can see myself getting older, progressing quickly from my twenties to thirties and forties. My flesh sags and dark bags form beneath my eyes. Now I'm sixty, so tired and sad. Seventy, eighty, ninety, with gray hair and yellowed teeth, shriveling like a giant raisin. *It's not real*, I tell myself. *It's your Id playing a joke on your Superego*. I blink, and I'm back to myself again, pupils fully dilated.

I walk into the kitchen, where Andy's brewing water for mushroom tea. He takes the contents of my bag, runs it through the drug grinder and places the gray powder into the pot. His hands move quickly and deliberately, progressing through a set of motions I've seen him do countless times. It's like watching a pianist play a concerto. I'm fairly certain I don't need more drugs, but these are the ones I grew, the ones I've been pampering and watering for almost five months, watching them progress from spores to mycelium cakes to thin, gangly 'shrooms. They're my babies—all natural, organic, beautiful. To not have any would be like baking a cake without even tasting the icing.

There's a part of me—the old self, the one who speaks from a place of normalcy and societal constraints—who thinks I've already taken too much. She tells me to be

sensible, that it's nearly one a.m. and I should think about sobering up rather than putting more chemicals into my already shaky and drug-riddled body. She wants me to eat some Twizzlers and then go home to bed. But now there's this other self inside of me—a parallel self whom I've met on several occasions tonight, who has combined with the old me to form a new über self—who knows, without a doubt, that instead of taking too much, I haven't had enough. This self knows I've pushed it far, but can still go so much farther. She asks Andy for a small cup of bitter, murky mushroom tea, then chokes it down with a plugged nose and a crooked half-smile. She doesn't gag, not even once.