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### Shattuc

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Shattuc

## Part I, The Center of Things

We moved to Shattuc in the middle of a snowstorm. It was just a week after my fourth birthday, and all I can remember of the trip is the truck and its contents being covered with snow and my mother complaining about the roads. My uncles helped my father carry old furniture made of rotting wood into a two-story plantation house with a tacked-on bathroom and a sagging front porch. And my sisters followed their belongings into the biggest house we'd ever seen.

When I was a kid, Shattuc was four blocks on each side of a set of railroad tracks. The houses were mostly built in the 1940s and 50s, but ours was a holdover from a different time. It was built in 1887, and the previous owner once owned all the land that eventually became the town. It was a farm before the land that makes up the town was sold off to individual buyers. The rest was bought by another local farmer who added the land to his acreage. So the house stood near the center of a town separated by railroad tracks.

By the time we moved in, it had gained both a garage (attached to the old outhouse) and a bathroom. It had also suffered all the abuses of owners who decided to update the house with the times. Just inside the front door, the 70s had brought with them all the wood paneling that made pornography such an easy cliché. The paneling was dark to match the dark brown shag carpeting. One wall was covered entirely with mirrored shelves; the mirrors were snaked across by gold paint like the bedroom at 112 Ocean Avenue. As the house filled with the trinkets of my family, these shelves became populated with ceramic and stuffed clowns. My mother's collection, the clowns started off as a small bunch, and then spread over the years, out of these shelves and into cabinets my father made and boxes hidden out in the garage.

Down the short hallway to the stairs, two rooms opened up on the left and right. The kitchen was a large square with torn linoleum that my mother would eventually replace with black-

and-white checkered tiles that were too cheap to be a good choice for a rowdy kitchen. When we first moved in, we brought with us a kitchen table from a diner in downtown Belleville where they filmed *In the Heat of the Night*. My Great Aunt Loretta had given my parents the table and six chairs when they married and moved into a small trailer on the West End. Now they had loaded the table into my uncle's truck and carried it 50 miles away—to live a different kind of life. The table lasted us nearly ten years, until the weight of our lives pulled it down to the ground underneath us. It was replaced by a bleached-wood island my grandfather built. It spread out from the far left side of the room with cabinets beneath the tabletop. It left a great hole inside for the stove and managed to make the large room seem crowded with furniture.

The refrigerator always sat too close to the island, and whenever my mother or father opened the door, and whenever we had dinner in the kitchen instead of the dining room off to the left, we'd have to seat everyone before my father sat in the chair wedged between the fridge and the island. And when dinner ended, he stalked out of the room—leaving dishes for my sisters and me to clean up. He walked across the hallway to the dining room, which most of the time we lived in the house had no dining table in it at all.

The dining room started out as a family room, but it quickly became clear that two living rooms ten feet apart was silly at best and wasteful at worst. So it was used as storage and then an office and then a bedroom and then, finally, a dining room once my father's parents were willing to let go of an old table and chairs. The entire room was a single color, and it seemed to seep through the rest of the house. Mauve walls bled down onto mauve carpeting that stretched up the stairs that the room opened onto. When my mother's mother was disappearing on the inside, we hung mauve curtains along the walls and in front of the banister to hide her body from the rest of the house. The curtains stayed up for months after her death, and when they were pulled down, we stripped the

paint off the banister and made a year-long project of staining and varnishing the wood.

The banister's railing had been painted before we moved in. It was the same painful off-white as newly painted apartments in complexes two days before you moved in and destroy them with nail holes. But throughout the years in the house, the banister was strangled by the cigarette smoke coming first from both parents and then just my father, so when the time came to pull down the curtains and strip the paint, it was needed as much as it was welcomed. We pulled up the carpet when we were staining, and stapled it back down onto the wooden stairs once we finished with each one. We needed the carpeting. It was softer when we fell—and when we were pushed. The walls along the stairs were the same creamy off-white as the banister, but we never pulled the wallpaper down, and when we left the house, the tiny blue flowers just inches apart were the only things that never seemed to die.

The stairs opened up onto an open space that became mine and Kelly's. At first my parents painted the walls pink for their two young daughters, just little girls at this point, but throughout the years, it was painted over with blues and that terrible mauve that crept up from the dining room and bled into what could never really be a private space. The room was like a dormer but much taller. No one hit their heads on the slanted ceilings, and Kelly and I were able to tape posters of Jonathan Brandis (before his personal tragedies) and Whitney Houston (before she became someone we were ashamed to love) onto the caked layers of paint over our bunk beds.

The bunk beds moved into the house with us, and stayed through most of our years in this bedroom. They started out brown—like everything else in the house—but they quickly became scratched and destroyed by years of abuse at the hands of rowdy country girls. So it wasn't surprising when our father painted them over with cheap white house paint. But it was surprising when we were installed on mattresses in the living room waiting for him to finish adding “a little

touch,” as our mother called it. When Kelly and I made it up the stairs the next night, we found our beds painted with Sprites and Rainbow Brite. Mom had put on a new set of Rainbow Brite sheets, and Dad had painted on our favorite characters. We lived in those beds with those characters way past their prime. They stayed with us until we grew into oak day beds with heart cut-outs and the head and foot. And those lasted us until we left the house as adults.

The bunk beds knew us better as children than as adults. They were with us before we knew to take our choices outside the house and hide them from the family we could no longer trust to carry them safely. The crowdedness of my bunk bed and the emptiness of Kelly’s became regular states—even with our parents hiding behind a thin door to the next upstairs room. They never came out and scolded me for the mess I was making of myself in a twin bed in their big, messy house. They never found me in the mornings with someone they knew from the high school in the next town. I knew better than to force an acknowledgment. And they knew too. They hid behind an off-white door and waited for sounds outside and downstairs to stop before opening up their room and travelling down the stairs to the piles of drunken bodies on the shag carpeting.

When Heather left, her absence opened up a room and forced our beds to splinter and took Kelly away from me and installed her in a space of her own. She took her bed into the room and stuck Nirvana posters to the corkboard closet and let male friends piss out the window onto the red cedar tree over the well. Her clothes and old Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls took the place of Heather’s textbooks and yearbooks and an old bassoon she never touched anymore. Heather had hardly been there at all, it seemed; though, we knew this to be false. Heather’s years in our house were easily erased because she was the only one who could live her life quietly, without upsetting the balance of miseries milling around beside her. She moved out to take care of someone else, and she left Kelly and me in charge of carrying the family through to the next Christmas and the one after

that.

Without Kelly, I repainted the room for the hundredth time, and I asked my grade school best friend to come over and paint white clouds on my then blue ceiling. She didn't make it over before we painted the walls yet again and starting peeling decades of linoleum from underneath the carpeting. Alone in this room, I wasn't sure how to fill it, so I spent nearly every night on the floors of other people's homes, drinking other people's booze, and sleeping beside other girls' boyfriends.

My parents enjoyed the freedom of my absence. They slept with their door open and let the cool air come in from the windows in my bedroom, cutting through the thick and sticky air that usually permeated their sleep. Walking up the stairs, we could now see the hunter green walls of their bedroom clearly, and the room invited us into it more openly. This was years after the closet doors had been destroyed and removed and after the squirrel had moved into the wall and died, making my dad rip out a section to remove his red, furry, and rotting body.

From the windows in this bedroom, we could see the ash trees in the front yard and the hill that rose up in front the railroad tracks. We could see the cat lady across the tracks. And we could watch people come and go, something I always wondered if my parents did on Saturday nights.

The front yard was the victim of much abuse over the years. In towns like ours, you could expect neighborhood pranks, but ours was the target of nearly every late night excursion. We awoke all throughout the fall to toilet paper hanging from our three ash trees, forks buried in the soft grass, and newspaper confetti in our bushes. When the trees were bare we lit the toilet paper on fire. It was the only way to free the branches of their burden.

In the summers, the squirrels and birds made homes of the yard, and I remember chasing a fat, red squirrel around the front tree in circles until I tripped on the broken concrete giving myself a scar on the palm of my hand. It was in the same spot I found a baby opossum on the patchy grass

and putting him inside a birdcage to keep as a pet. Not knowing how to care for him, I am sure it was my fault he died three days later.

It was in the front yard that Kelly fell, and the neighbors ran over having heard the bone in her leg snap on the way down. She had cried for hours before being told they'd put a pin in her ankle and that it would be months before she would recover completely.

It was through the front yard that I ran when I realized what was happening. I was the only one to run, and my family today laughs at this, as if terror of this sort is fodder for their version of comedy.

In the grass that wrapped around the side of the house from the front yard, Kelly and I first discovered matches, lighting the leaves on fire one by one until Dad found us and we ran into the back yard, tearing open the falling down shed and hiding among decades old clothes and furniture handed down to our parents and our parents' parents in years past. On most days, I wasn't able to maneuver my small child's body among the remnants of my family's past as it scattered throughout a large space with no discernable purpose, other than to hoard the relics in which my mother found an indefinable meaning.

I wandered through tables and chairs from trailers and rental houses we'd had before Shattuc became our home. I played (even as I grew older) with the *Strawberry Shortcake* kitchen that had been a gift for Heather when I was too young to care about it. When I was eleven, I took a boy into the garage to tell him I had a crush on him. When he rejected me, I knew it was because we were trash, as our shed so clearly suggested.

Attached to the large, long shed was a smaller room with a single door. This was the bathroom to the house when it was originally built in 1887. No indoor plumbing led to this outhouse-turned-workshop that filled up with the same things populating the shed itself. My

father's tools, which were never used, became buried on the wall hooks in this outhouse after my grandfather used his tools to pull out the toilet and build shelves that would be destroyed by years of rain and wood rot.

It was in front of this small room that we kept our dogs in the summers. On a long lead into the backyard, they would bark from their home on the lawn, and I would go out to play with whichever mutt was living in our yard at the time. We were a country dog family. Outside animals suited us because we spent nearly as much time out there as they did, and they passed through our family as quickly as bill collectors and Barbie dolls. We must have had twelve dogs in the sixteen years we lived in the house. Each one later faded into the memories of a childhood littered with more violence than happiness, and they lose their place in the forefront of the mind when the battle between blows and barks comes to an end.

This backyard where the dogs would roam and bark is where family sat on weekend visits. My father's parents visited nearly every weekend, and they and my parents would sit in lawn chairs in the backyard playing cards on a fold up table under the trees while my sisters and I splashed around in a metal pig trough we used as a swimming pool during the moist Midwestern summers until we knew what this metal swimming hole said about us to the neighbors, but with summers growing hotter each day, we cared too little to dispel the white trash rumors floating through the few blocks that made up Shattuc.

The gravel road led out of the town led to others of similar composition. Leaving town from one end, we would take Shattuc Road through miles of corn and bean fields to find Centralia, with its single Wal-Mart and various family-owned shops and factories. It was here we paid a dollar and fifty cents to see movies that had already been released on VHS to the video stores in towns

nearby. The theater was a hold-over from what seemed like vaudeville days with ceilings so high you couldn't reach them without a fireman's ladder. The blue paint was always peeling but beautiful to my child's mind, and when my father told me that snakes crawled out of the ornate vents directly above our heads, I believed him whole-heartedly, and I kept watch of these vents through each movie until the owners flashed on the bottom of the screen toward the end of each feature "Our concession stand will be closing in then minutes." It was here that my father took us to see *Edward Scissorhands* and *Beetlejuice* (a later inspiration for his Halloween costume that year). It was at this theater that I applied to work when I was sixteen but was rejected when they saw which town I lived in.

I did manage to get hired on at the Wal-Mart, rushing in my 1988 red Beretta to the store from my school seventeen miles away in a different town. I worked in the toy department, and I spent most of my work hours talking to the boys at the Sporting Goods counter, looking at guns through glass cases or playing with the toys in the infants' aisle of my home department. I worked at this store for nearly four years, and I met and lost people along the way, as teenage employment often requires.

This small town Wal-Mart closed at 10:30 every night, and the staff would congregate in the parking lot, pulling beers out of trunks of cars and joking and bitching about the awful job we were forced to do for such shitty pay. I found lovers in this parking lot, and I found enemies. It was in the parking lot of the Wal-Mart that I first kissed a girl, drunk and careless, I am sure I would have made a terrible lover to a curious girl with no interest in doing anything other than exciting the watching boys. I wouldn't know until later that kissing girls was going to be the path for me.

The crowd assembled was careless and carefree, most of them expecting to stay at the Wal-Mart or a neighboring factory until their lives ended in this same town. No aspirations were spoken

of. It was trysts and drinks and occasionally drugs. We smoked pot in the parking lot, and we fell into each other's arms, having clumsy sex in the backseats of cars while everyone else continued on with drinking and general debauchery. These are the nights of country kids who have only isolation to look forward to in their nature-surrounded homes with their exhausted, overworked parents.

Shattuc was smack in the center of towns like this. Taking Route 50 out of town in one direction, you would end up in Sandoval, the only town that rivaled Shattuc for its poverty, though still losing by a mile. It was here that my father went to buy cigarettes for himself and lottery tickets for my mother. Just three miles away, we often had to run to Sandoval first to fill the gas tank so we could make it in any other direction.

On nights of luxury, my parents took us to Taylor Made, the only restaurant in Sandoval. This diner was a family-owned establishment known for friendly service, orange vinyl seating, and the best cheeseburger basket east of the Mississippi. The grease dripped off the burgers and onto the waffle-cut French fries making them soggy and perfect. The family each ate these meals, and then we ordered hand-dipped ice cream cones and carried them back to the car, finishing them before we completed the three-mile trek back home.

The only other town in the area had less than 4000 people in it. Carlyle is where my sisters and I went to school, less than a mile from largest man-made lake in Illinois. The high school was built in the 60s and stood as one of the weakest schools in the district. They offered no advanced placement courses, so being seen as a smart kid was not only easy, but almost impossible to avoid. The only students who didn't manage this status were the ones who came to class drunk and high—or never came at all. I sometimes fit this category; though, I always managed to maintain a high

grade point average in spite of my rebellious and destructive teenage lifestyle, spending weekends in family hunting cabins getting drunk on Nat Light, Stag, or Boone's Farm and ending up in a pile of bodies on the cots the families had set up for their weekend hunts.

Carlyle offered nothing more than the lake, so in the summers, we all sat on the South Shore Beach or camped in Hazlet State Park with tents and booze in tow. The police never stopped us from our "kids will be kids" behavior, finding it more important to pull people over for speeding across the bridges that crossed the lake. We spent weeknights as well as weekends on these shores and in those cabins.

The lake was large and spilled into creeks throughout the county, so they built a dam to control the waters. The dam rose high above in the distance of South Shore, and in the winters, when the snow came down in its heavy blanket, everyone from the town pulled out their sleds and flew down the grassy sides of the dam in large groups. Sledding was discouraged by park rangers, but no one ever stopped someone from shoving their children quickly down a hill. Knees and arms and legs and wrists were broken in the process, but nothing could stop the flow of bodies on wooden and metal sleds from flying down that hill.

The lake was the location for everyone in all the surrounding towns. The off-campus lunch the high school offered led all the high school students to park their cars in front of the lake feeding the gulls French fries out the windows of their used cars before heading back to school for a class they would inevitably sleep through in the warmth of the school room and the breeze of the overhead projector's fan.

Upon leaving the front doors of the school, students piled into their cars and took the sometimes paved and sometimes gravel roads out of town. All roads led back to Shattuc for my sisters and me, and we often found ourselves speeding down Fish Hatchery Road to get back

through the after-school traffic and off to work or back down to Sand Ridge Road and then Shattuc Road and then, finally, parked in front of that old plantation house that always called us back.

## Part II, The Queen of Carrot Flowers

### *Missing*

She first disappeared when I was six years old, only I didn't know it at the time. I was gone with my sisters to my summer-long stays with my grandparents just an hour away. By the time we all returned, she was back—and relatively normal. We came home to our reformed two-story plantation house to find Mom sitting at the kitchen table and the smell of the stove hanging low in the hot, unconditioned air.

It was always in late July that we came back. Mom would be cooking dinner for the first night of the summer the whole family would be in the house. It was the five of us and whichever country dog had lasted through the rough summer and found his way onto our peeling linoleum floor. We had no idea what had happened while we were rolling down the hills in the back yards of senior citizens on Benevolent Avenue.

For the first few years, she disappeared just once a year, always at a time when no one would be in the house. My father had adopted the same code of silence that would hover over my mother's mental health until it was no longer a secret he could keep. He watched over the house with a cigarette in hand and never complained that he had a loony for a wife.

### *Out in the Open*

It was in a string of deaths that the secret came out. From late 1997 to early 1999, cancer caught the entire older generation of our family. My father's mother died first, taking all those summers with her. Spending time in the house with my grandfather became something sad, and no

one (especially not teenagers—as Kelly and I were at the time) wanted to ruin the one freedom they had all year. Second went my mother’s mother. Grandma Jean was a bitter woman who’d been widowed at 49, but my mother knew her before the death of her husband had turned her into the woman who no longer cared about the state of her house or her family.

Grandma Jean died in a hospital bed we’d installed in our dining room. We hung curtains from the ceiling by the staircase to close the room off temporarily while my grandmother suctioned fluid from the tracheotomy hole in her neck. When the hospice people came, the curtains were pulled back to reveal the mauve walls of a dining room turned sickroom with all the beeps and hums that go along with it.

My aunts and uncles had been sleeping on old comforters on the living room floor for the nearly two weeks she’d been in a virtual coma as we all waited for her to die. At six o’clock in the morning, my mother came upstairs to wake my sister Kelly and me in the room we shared. Opening the door, she said, “Girls. Your grandma died this morning.” And then she shut the door, and we listened to the stairs creak under her slippers. Kelly and I went back to sleep—waiting to grieve until the morning.

When I walked down the stairs a few hours later, I was greeted by a house full of relatives with red faces. My oldest sister Heather had come home from the house she shared with her first husband; she was on the phone with the medical supply company, eager to get the bed our grandmother had died in out of the dining room and into the world outside. I walked into the kitchen and waited for a mother that never appeared. After a few hours, the crowd had disappeared, and my grandmother’s body had been moved to the next holding facility, Johnny Barnes Funeral Home on the west end of Belleville.

*Heritage*

Southern Illinois, like large parts of the United States, was settled by European immigrants who tried to avoid being too assimilated, so they created towns that were largely reserved for people of their heritage. In Belleville, this meant Germans. It meant German Catholics specifically. And a few Irish families sprinkled on the west end. When my grandparents were children, the west end of Belleville was filled with pubs and restaurants and cemeteries and general stores all owned by first generation Irish immigrants.

By the time my mother grew up, her parents had moved her and her five brothers and sisters into a row house in North Saint Louis (just twenty minutes away and across the river). In the years before industry in Saint Louis died and left hollowed out factories along Washington Avenue, families settled there to find the only jobs people would give them. My grandfather started in the factories working a position on the line and ended up a line foreman. But as time passed and racial diversity spread out among the inhabitants of Saint Louis, white flight took hold, and my grandparents went home to Belleville and stayed there until the end.

*The Last of Her Line*

Johnny Barnes Funeral Home was a part of the sprinkling of Irish Catholic businesses on the west end of Belleville, and it wasn't until we sat there on a sun-bright September morning that I saw my mother again. My aunt asked that my sisters and I come to the funeral home to help make arrangements. Heather drove us in silence. I finally saw Mom when we sat down in the funeral

director's office waiting for him to show us caskets and incorrectly describe plots in cemeteries we knew we wouldn't be buying. She would be buried by her husband, where all the Catholics in the area are buried, Mount Carmel Cemetery. But no one wanted to speak, so he talked for 20 minutes about Mount Hope before Heather said, "She'll be with her husband—in Mount Carmel." From that point on, Heather made the arrangements—blue steel casket, pink flowers, any music as long as it was quiet and instrumental. She talked and everyone else watched.

On the way out, Heather drove us home, and Mom did not come with us. She got in the car with Aunt Kathy without saying a word. She hadn't even looked in our direction. We drove home without mentioning her absence and what that might mean.

At the funeral, no one cried. It was a death a long time coming, and for my sisters and me, it was only the latest in what seemed like an endless stream of deaths. We left the funeral home playing "Bali Hai" in the background and went to Saint Augustine's, where Father Andy chanted and burned incense before we all huddled around at the graveside and watched the same pattern we'd been watching for months. By the time we made it home from the dinner and settled ourselves into our slowly emptying house, we were all too tired to address the issue of Mom.

We fell into bed and awoke the next morning to 6 a.m. phone calls from Aunt Kathy—first to Dad and then to us. She told us that Mom was sick. She had gone to the hospital the night before, and she was on the psych floor. I had no idea what that meant.

No one told me exactly what happened, but a few days later Heather told me that she'd tried to kill herself. When I reacted with the appropriate shock, her face was calm, and she told me that it wasn't the first time, that Mom had been hospitalized like this before. Secret after secret spilled out,

and I discovered that Mom had disappeared in the summers, just like her girls, leaving Dad alone in the cavernous house.

### *Hospital Stays and Involuntary Violence*

While Kelly and I were nearing the end of high school, Mom got sick in other ways. She had reproductive problems and found herself getting a full hysterectomy at the age of 40—just months after her mother died. A few months after she had returned from the hospital, her body had finally begun to recover.

She was working overnights at a fuse factory in that working class town just seven miles away. Because of this, Kelly and I drove my our Beretta the ten miles in the opposite direction to for school. We left early, just a few hours after she came through the door and fell into bed. By the time we got home from school, she was ready for work and heading out the door.

Driving an old car had its drawbacks, though, and Kelly and I found ourselves stranded from time to time. In the snow of a late winter, we went down to the car to find it unable to start. As we usually did, we went upstairs to wake Mom and ask her if we could take her van. Upon waking her, she rose from bed like Regan MacNeil and started throwing things all over her upstairs bedroom. By the time her tantrum finished, she had broken ceramic plates, her anniversary clock, and all the figurines on her nightstand.

Kelly and I snuck out during the scene and went back downstairs to try the car again—maybe it needed to warm up a little. Sitting in the driver's seat, I nearly screamed when mom knocked on the window dressed in a tank top and shorts in the snow. I rolled the window down.

“Come back inside, girls. I’m sorry. You should stay home with me. I’m sorry.” She was

crying.

“Mom, we have to go to school. We need to get the car started.” Kelly shouted from the passenger seat.

“You can skip school. You should stay home with me today.”

“Mom...”

“Please, I’m sorry.”

We went inside and ate chicken soup and watched soap operas all day until she went off to work at 4:30.

These kinds of things happened every few days until she was carted off to the psych ward yet again. This became the trend for a few months. She started going to a therapist across the river in Saint Louis in the hopes that she would begin feeling and behaving differently. She would no longer take more Xanax than she needed, and she would no longer hurl ceramic piggies and froggies at her teenage daughters and then force them to stay home from school.

She was never really cured, and she was never really the same person who cleaned the Methodist church across the tracks and took care of the old man in the house down the road when we were kids. She lost her job at the factory—and the job she got after that. She said she’d be staying home for a while, and we all knew it was because she wouldn’t be able to keep a job. Her doctor medicated her, as usual, but her demeanor didn’t change, and she tried to kill herself again just before Kelly’s graduation.

Another overdose and Mom entered a long-term facility an hour away from our home. She stayed in for two months, leaving only to come to Kelly’s graduation and the party afterward that

Heather had planned. She sat with no expression all day and night until Dad packed her into the car and came back three hours later looking just about as depleted as she was.

I never visited her in the facility. I never saw the inside of Hyland Behavior Health Clinic. My sisters complained that I never went, and my mother tried her best to manipulate me, complaining that I must not love her if I refused to visit her. My father did not complain. He wanted to go as little as I did, but he was compelled by his loyalty. He'd stayed with a woman who had ruined him financially, been unfaithful at least once, came damaged from another bad marriage, and was now killing him with her mind. He and I were on the same side—for the first and only time. We knew what was happening, and we both knew I would never be able to watch it.

#### *How It All Could Have Ended*

In the spring of 2007, long after the first days of repeated 72-hour holds in local small town hospitals, my mother almost died. For two years she'd been on Lithium, after being diagnosed as bipolar. She took the Lithium religiously, hoping it would save her from her constant bouts of depression and mania. Eventually, it took away everything that we knew to be her. She hardly spoke, and when she did, her words came out slurred. We never understood her. She could have been telling us all her secrets or that she was sorry for all the days she'd missed and all the moments she could not prevent. We wouldn't know. There was a fog between us, one that no one could penetrate.

My father called me during the last week in February. He said he was taking Mom to the hospital. He'd tried to give her her pills for the night, and she could not even close her mouth around them. She was drooling and barely conscious. I drove to the hospital immediately.

In the emergency room, they explained to us that Lithium is toxic if you take too much or if

you do not monitor the levels very closely. Her psychiatrist had neglected to have her blood levels checked. She was being poisoned by the Lithium. They told us they had to do dialysis. They had to get the Lithium out of her blood right away. She went into Critical Care.

Two days later she was in a medical coma. The dialysis put too much stress on her already failing body. She had developed Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome. She was going to die. They told us everyday, "Prepare yourselves. It won't be long." They told us that the fatality rate for someone with ARDS is 60%, but in Mom's case it was worse. They told us there was a 90% chance she would not make it. For three weeks they told us this before anything changed. She was 49 years old.

After the three weeks, she did not die. She had been intubated, extubated, reintubated, and extubated again. Until, one day, she finally woke up. She couldn't speak because of the tubes that had been removed from her throat. She couldn't do much but lay still. But she had lived, and the doctors believed that she would be okay; though, it would take her quite a while to remember anything that had happened in the weeks prior. She would have problems, they said. Being on 100% oxygen for any length of time caused brain damage. We wouldn't know how much or in what ways it would manifest until much later. Once she did remember the weeks in the hospital, she seemed like a different person. She was happy to be alive, something we hadn't seen since we were small children. She was okay, and she was never going to attempt suicide again.

### *Shock Treatments*

She made it through an entire year without falling into familiar patterns. I moved a thousand miles away, and I wasn't worried that my absence would cause problems like it would have a couple

years earlier. Everything was as it should be.

But five months after I left the Saint Louis area, my father called to tell me she was on another 72-hour hold. He hadn't told me she was sick again. He hadn't told me anything, and she had hidden it too. Neither of my sisters knew either. She was back in, but this time she hadn't overdosed. She'd gone for kitchen tools. She tried to slit her wrists with a steak knife, not knowing how badly it would hurt and how long it would take. She wasn't thinking about the things that mattered.

After the 72 hours, the doctors suggested electroconvulsive therapy. Shock treatments. And all I could see was Jack Nicholson. I was nervous about it, and for some reason, they all wanted my opinion. I had no time to do the right kind of research, and I found myself saying "yes," hoping that something (anything) might be better than the last 15 years.

I did not go home for the treatments. I stayed in my apartment by the phone, waiting to find out if I needed to buy a plane ticket back to Saint Louis. That call never came, but I received daily updates on my mother, how the treatments gave her a headache and how she'd thrown up on the nurse. Once she was normal enough to talk, she called me herself. She told me she had nightmares about the treatments. She told me that they were mean to her, a lie. She told me anything to get me to come back to Saint Louis, if only for just a little bit. I didn't go back. I was waiting to hear things had changed.

### *The Time Bomb in Her Brain*

She recovered from the treatments and seemed to be well—emotionally at least. She came home from the treatments, having hated them, saying that she felt better than she had in years. She

was able to laugh. She was able to cry only when the situation really warranted it. She seemed more normal than she had in years; though, she still had a slippery tongue and problems with her memory. The doctors told us this was normal, that the lung problems would have damaged her brain permanently and some abilities would never return. Still, talking to her on the phone from my city home was no longer painful; it was no longer an exercise in watching someone's life slowly fade away. But these things don't last for long.

Less than two months after her shock treatments, my mother's head betrayed her again. She went to doctors. She had tests. She had aneurysms. Three. All were small, but given her general health, the doctors were concerned. She asked me to come home. She asked me would I be there when they took them out of her head.

I took the first flight I could get out of New York and back to my river home.

By the time I got there, they were running more and more tests with names I cannot remember and do not care to recall. They finally told us that they would try coiling—even though the position of the main aneurysm was not necessarily conducive to the procedure. They warned us that they may have to open her up completely, cranial surgery. She was terrified, and so were the rest of us. We hid it. She could not.

We sat in waiting rooms again, for hours and hours, and we were surprised to find that the coiling was successful. She would be fine, they said. They didn't know her. Her brain would be fine. The blood would flow, but her body was failing her at fifty. We could only guess what could come next.

I flew back to New York and waited for the next alarm to go off.

*The New York City Life*

I missed my mother, living in this city so alienated from the closeness a small town life creates. I missed knowing her day-to-day struggles. I missed her reassurances, when she was capable of them. I missed her failures and successes. I missed the mask she wore for my friends, trying to impress them so they would love me more than I thought they already did. I wanted her with me. I wanted her to come to New York and to be proud of the life I made, however small and simple it might have been. I wanted her near. I wanted to know I had some control over what happened to her in the day—even if that control was something I only thought I had. Because women like her cannot be controlled. Some outside force propels them into the patterns they have, and nothing, no amount of care, of watchfulness, can stop the progression they have.

I bought her a ticket. I said, “Mom, how about you come visit me for your birthday? We’ll have a party for you at this Greek restaurant on the Upper West Side. We’ll go for a walk in Central Park. I can take you up in the Empire State Building. I can show you my life here.”

She gratefully told me she would love to come, but that I should not get her a Christmas present or a Mother’s Day present. And I gratefully accepted that offer. And I made plans. I wanted her to meet the people in my life. I wanted them to know where I came from, and I wanted her to know I had created a family in New York, one that rivaled the one I left behind. I wanted her to know that she’d given me this capability, to pick people out of crowds and know which ones to love.

She arrived at JFK International Airport late in the evening, and I took the subway with her the two hours back up to our apartment in upper Manhattan. She was excited but tired, and we used the rest of our time ordering in from the Indian restaurant in Washington Heights, and then I

sent her to bed—my bed. She could sleep with my dog, and I would take the couch.

She hadn't planned anything to do in New York, so I was planning for her. I called my friend Cesar, who works at the Empire State Building. He took us up express and at half price. My mother's swollen face lit up upon meeting Cesar. He was kinder to her than was necessary, and when she saw a snow globe she liked (a family totem for us), he was kind enough to buy it for her—refusing to take “no” for an answer. This was Cesar. He would do this for me and my mother, but then I wouldn't hear from him for six months while he was dating some new boy in some new neighborhood that I couldn't afford if my life depended on it.

But to my mother, Cesar was the highlight of the trip. She talked about him constantly. At dinner, on her birthday, surrounded by all the people who are supposed to love me, she spoke of him and no one else. She did not even speak of me. She gets this way from time to time. She holds onto things tightly for fear they will escape her memory—as they often do. So she told the story of this snow globe to everyone at the table. She told Brett, Yazmin, Stephanie, Kat, and even the waitress. It was the thing she could carry back from here that meant more than just seeing my life.

When my mother came up, she did not ask to sit in on my classes. She did not ask to see my office; though, she did accidentally one afternoon on the way to Canal Street. She was going to pee in her pants, and we were a block from my office at Broadway and Spring Street, so I took her up where she met everyone. Yes, it's true that a part of me wanted to introduce her to them—to prove myself right, selfishly. I wanted them to see her weight, her short stature, her thinning hair, her slurred speech. I wanted them to see how frail she was, to see I wasn't lying when I said someone needed to take care of her.

My roommate Tara and I have this habit of buffering for each other when our families visit

us. We both have complicated relationships with them at best—and terrible ones at worst. So on the morning I came into Tara's room and asked if she had any extra sheets, I was trying to be stoic. I was angry. I was angry at my mother for being someone so physically burdened that she could not make it through a night without messing the bed. I was angry at her for trying to hide it. She'd covered it with a blanket.

Tara, however, knew what I meant when I asked and started to cry. She's known my mother since she was four years old. She is, in a sense, hers too, and her failures are almost as difficult to watch—even if they aren't her responsibility. Tara gave me the sheets, and I took them into my bedroom, stuffing the soiled ones into a blue laundry bag and dragging them to the laundromat down the street. When I went back into this room, I went with the ritual in mind. I thought I could avoid humiliating her or incriminating myself by simply acting as if this was normal procedure.

In the shower, I cried. She doesn't know this. I cried for a body I once knew to be beautiful and strong and capable of saving me from oncoming traffic. I cried for her new knees, swollen and aching with each asphalt step. I cried for a body that was dying before my eyes—and this time, it wouldn't be her fault—at least not in the ways it had been before.

On my mother's final morning in New York, Tara and I made her low calorie French toast and packed her into one of the Dominican cabs and sent her off to JFK. She'd gotten confused, but I knew a two-hour commute with her and the goodbyes that she is so bad at would be too much for me to handle. I did not want weeping on the subway or in the security check line. I didn't want her to fake it, which is a suspicion I always have—whether it's fair or not.

I stopped calling when she went back to our river home. She noticed but did not say anything. Every time she picked up the phone, I thought I would have to learn some new ailment,

and I thought, “This is why I left. I am a thousand miles away because I cannot be the one to save her.” But this plan didn’t last. My addiction to her crises grew back stronger than ever.

I sometimes hear from her four times a day. She tells me nothing some days; others, she tells me she misses me, that her life has no meaning when her daughters stop needing her. And I find myself in the reassuring role again, familiar and uncomfortable at the same time. I never tell her that every conversation we have feels like talking to a stranger. I do not tell her that I can hear her pulling away from this Earth. I do not tell her because we do not believe the same things, and I know, when she goes, she is only gone. And we are left to fill the holes. We fill them with other people, but the shapes of some grow so deep that all you can do constantly run your fingers across the gaps in your mind and wish things could be so very different than they are. People like us, my sisters and I, we know these people-shaped holes, and we know we will never let go of them—even with the help of all the modern world has to offer (drugs, therapy, sex, new families and friends)—because she is the one who carried us, and now we must carry her.

### *Safety*

She was an amazing mother. Despite her insanity and my father’s violence, I remember happy moments in that old house in Shattuc, just an hour away from the grandparents who watched me through the summers. I can remember playing whiffle ball and badminton in the backyard. I can remember the smell of my father’s fried chicken hovering in the house long after we’d done the dishes. On weekends her brothers and sister drove out to the house, and they played cards. Spades and pinochle tournaments lasted through to the night, and with her family in tow, my mother’s laugh was the loudest sound in the house, bursting out of her and shaking the photos nailed into the wood paneling.

My mother never hit us, and she would sometimes scream and yell from outside the bedroom door while we cried for her to stop him. The violence was not as frequent as it sounds, though it fills my memories of the sixteen years we lived in Shattuc. But I can remember her trying to stop it—as she'd tried to stop her ex-husband in the years after she had Heather.

This was in the years before I knew the truth. This was in the years when I felt safe in spite of my reality. I thought then that she would always be around. A friend once told me that when someone attempts suicide over and over again, it's just a matter of time before they succeed. There is inevitability to my mother's behavior that is comforting. I know how this all ends.

### Part III, The Handshake for the Fist

#### *Letters*

My grandfather left me the letters. However unintentionally, that's how I found out, but he doesn't know. My mother didn't know either. When Grandpa died, I was the only one to be specifically mentioned in the will. I was the one who heard the stories. And when he died, the box—filled with the pictures of Pork Chop Hill, of letters home from Korea when his oldest son was growing up without him—was dropped on my bed in that house in Shattuc waiting to be opened.

Pulling out his uniform and the flag Uncle Billy refused to keep after the funeral, I uncovered letters home to my grandmother asking about this son he hardly knew. I read through them and wondered about a marriage I never saw from the inside. Deeper inside the box was my father's photo. He had no mustache, something I could hardly imagine before looking at this photo. His hat was high on his head. He did not smile, a more familiar image than you'd expect. When I set the photograph down on the bed, I saw what it had been covering. Beneath the photograph of my father was a stack of letters, not my grandfather's. The letters were from my father to his parents while he was in Basic Training.

And this is how I learned where it comes from.

#### *Bodies*

I don't remember him with hair. In my imagination, he has always been bald. He has always looked like a harsher version of his father. He had always been tall and ruddy and silent. He raced through trailer parks and back yards with just that mustache and a shiny head. Sleeping in the car, he did not notice when we used Silly Putty to make faces on his bald head, and he never complained

when the cousins would stand on dining room chairs while he played pinochle, using our mother's makeup to paint shapes over the blank canvas.

He has horseshoe baldness—that U-shape that spreads around a man's head just above his ears. It's this thin, dark brown that looks almost sickly. He has always used soap to clean his hair, a bar of soap, and never shampoo. It has gotten thinner and thinner as the years pass, but when I was younger, he chased me down the street with thick, wavy hair falling almost down onto his shoulders still with a shining bald spot at the top, a true working class white man.

My mother is the one who made him shave it. The year they both turned forty, she was looking for changes. She let them take away her uterus and ovaries, and she shaved his head with an electric razor—revealing a large brown mole on the side of his head that could only be called a beauty mark. It was the kind of mole they'd reference on a cop show when the victim's face had been destroyed. He would always be identified by this mole.

He was covered with distinguishing marks, it turned out. I had grown old enough to notice him as a man and not just as my father. I saw him on South Shore in Carlyle, waiting in the sand, still secretly afraid of water. His moles were like mine, symmetrical. Not always, but in general, you could hold our arms up and see our moles and freckles correspond to ones on the other side. And the freckle on our lips, he gave me this. We both carry a freckle on our bottom lips.

The freckle is not the only thing of his I carry along with me.

### *Rules of Engagement*

It was my grandfather's rule that made things this way—the grandfather I'd never met. He'd obeyed some rule of his father's, and then my mother carried it down into our family. You don't hit a woman. Of course, this is a popular belief for gentleman and benevolent discriminators alike, but

my mother's family added a caveat. You can discipline your child, but you can never hit a woman, so when your daughter has a period, you have to keep your hands off. And for the most part, he did. For the most part.

### *Legacy*

My father joined the army in 1975. He was eighteen years old. He was following his father and his family's politics. They believed you had to serve your country, a very common mantra of Midwestern working class families who have no other outlets for sons who will never be able to go to college.

My father was a veteran's son, a special kind of enlisted man. He was trying to become a legacy—like wealthy families' legacies in Ivy League schools. And when he went into Basic Training, he was not the man he imagined himself to be.

In the letters my grandfather safely hid at the bottom of the box only he knew would end up in my hands, I discovered my father's stories. My father had written of missing his mother's shit-on-the-shingle. He wrote about his high school art teacher, the one who'd convinced him to paint the huge canvasses slowly rotting in my parents' basement. He wrote about loneliness, but he never called it that. As the letters progressed, he admitted to his mother (these were only addressed to her) that he'd been down, and he'd been sent to the doctor. The letters became less frequent after that. The dates grew more intermittent, and the letters were truncated. It was difficult to believe he wasn't just offering what his friends had offered to their parents just days earlier, more comments on the weather and how tired he was.

Eventually he revealed that he had been kept in the base hospital. He was there for nearly a week. The last letter in the pile still came as a surprise. He was coming home. He would be home

at the end of the month—a medical discharge. He didn't say what this meant, and there was language in the letter that I could not understand. It was when I asked my mother what it meant that she first learned how alike she and her husband really were.

She asked me not to tell my sisters. "He wouldn't want them to know." She sat on the couch in the living room with the last couple of letters in her hands, and she did not look up from them when she spoke.

"What does this mean?" I asked her.

"You know what it means."

"No, I don't. Why did they send him home?" The letters were hiding causes, and I was seventeen and unable to understand these vague words, his trying to tell his mother that he was hurting without being seen to be the coward he began to believe himself to be.

"He had a nervous breakdown, Missy." She shoved the letters back into my hands and raised herself off the couch. "Keep this between us." She left me on the couch, and I shoved the letters into a bag and hid them under my mattress before finally burying them among the books piled up on my bedroom floor in my all-grown-up apartment.

### *Ditches*

On Halloween when I was sixteen and only a little bit drunk, I called him a prick. I'd driven my car over a cooler in the neighbor boy's front yard, and my red Beretta got a flat. I drove it home anyway, and left it sinking into the grass of the front yard. It was early in the morning. Mom was working, and Kelly was passed out in her bed upstairs. And I fell into bed thinking I'd deal with it in the afternoon.

But he saw the flat tire slowly disappearing into the mud in our front yard, and he woke me.

He told me to get out there and move my car. I told him it was fine. I would get to it later. But he wouldn't hear of it. When he yelled at me to get the hell out of bed, I told him I was coming right down. And five minutes later, when I was sleeping in my bed, he dumped a pitcher of well water onto me, sleeping in my pajamas.

I rolled out of bed almost as angry as him. That's when I called him a prick.

He dragged me down the stairs, and I stumbled to find my footing on the carpeting at the bottom of the steps while he railed on about my irresponsibility—a popular topic. And I made it into the kitchen just seconds before him. I was on one side of the table and he on another, so when I saw him lift the stool, I started to run for the bathroom. But I was too late. He brought it down on my back, and I fell over. It didn't hurt in the way I would have expected. It was a sharper pain, like slipping on the ice of a gravel road. The stool had broken into two halves, and he took half of it and broke through the bathroom door while he was yelling for me to move my car. When the wood from the bathroom door had joined the pieces of the stool littered around my head, he walked back to the living room and turned on the television.

I dug my car out of the mud and left—flat tire and all.

### *Halloween*

My mother tells me I didn't particularly like him when I was a little girl. She says I would never sit beside him on the couch, and I would get angry if he tried to sit next to me. This is not something I can remember. I know him only as the man who became my friend by making me watch a horror movie in a living room in Southern Illinois when I was six years old.

It was fall, and my mother and sisters were at religion classes. I was home sick and waiting for my mom. He flipped through channels and found nothing. So he packed me into the car and

drove me to Sandoval for videos. He left me in the car when he went into the tiny clapboard video store and brought out *Halloween*.

I was leaning over a plastic grocery bag from Country Fair when he said, “You’re going to like this one.”

I threw up.

When we returned to Shattuc, he lifted me out of the car and threw my bag of vomit into the trash. He took ice out of the fridge and used a meat mallet to break it up into tiny pieces. He poured the pieces into a bowl, and he fed me ice chips while I watched Laurie Strode run from Michael Myers and find Annie and Linda and Bob dead in Lindsay Wallace’s house.

I was scared. I asked questions, and I got no answers. I cannot remember ever shutting my eyes during the movie; though, I know I must have. I remember Michael’s long knife. I remember Laurie searching for the keys to Tommy Doyle’s house in the pockets of her high-waisted jeans. I remember his fists coming through the closet door and reaching for her down in the floor. And I remember her fighting back.

### *An Almost Ending*

He was not the problem in their marriage. When my mother was unfaithful for the second time, she could not keep it a secret. Her almost lover was hit by a car on the bridge crossing over the lake in Carlyle. He was rushed to the hospital, and her grief became too obvious. She left the house to sit beside him. And Dad was home with us. He pulled out a tan leather suitcase and started throwing things into it. He was leaving. He wasn’t a Catholic. He could get divorced if he wanted to; though, my sisters and I would never have imagined that as a possibility.

In my memory, he was wearing a trench coat and standing with this suitcase in front of the

back door when Heather slid in front of him. Kelly cried in a kitchen chair, and I stood in front of the doorway to the hall. He must have screamed for Heather to move. I could only see his red face just inches from hers and his hand going through the glass window on the door beside her head.

I have no memory of him sitting down, of him deciding to stay with us until she returned. But I know this is what happened. I know he never walked out the door. I know he never really considered leaving his family behind.

Mom came home puffy-eyed and angry. Her lover would never walk again. We knew this from a neighbor who could hear the commotion and decided to save us girls from whatever terror was striking our house in our mother's absence. She didn't know what this information would do. By the time our mother came home carrying the same information, we were waiting in the living room with no television or radio in the background. It was just the three of us and our mother's clowns, making shadows on the gold, mirrored shelving.

When she came in she asked where Dad was. She started to head upstairs to talk to him, but Heather stopped her. She wanted to know what happened. She wanted to know what this meant.

"I don't want to talk to you about this, girls," was all she said before disappearing up the stairs.

### *The Painter*

He was a painter before I knew him as my father. His mother gave him this. She was a natural with a pencil in hand, for tales or illustrations. During the school year, when my sisters and I saw less of her, she mailed us drawings with stories attached. They were children's books without the binding. The pictures were void of color, and at the end of each story was a note to us to color in the drawings and mail them back to her by the end of the week, the best homework we'd receive

while in elementary school in the town just ten miles away.

This spread down from her and into my father, who drew cartoonish representations of Obi Wan Kenobi on his napkins at restaurants and on the score sheets for my family's weekly pinochle games. He invented characters as often as he appropriated them, and throughout our house were stacks of paper with triangular aliens with wide grins and lizards with human features and thought bubbles poking fun at his three daughters.

But he started out with classical training in drawing and painting. He took art classes throughout high school, and in the hallway leading to the stairs there was a drawing of him, in younger days, that his high school art teacher had made of him. In it he wears a stocking cap, as if waiting for the cold to set in, and he gazes off to the side, showing the sheer length and thickness of his nose, one I do not share with him. This was the only piece of art in the house that came from an artist other than him, with the exception of my mother's purchases from Home Interiors parties and garage sales.

In the dining room of our home in Shattuc were two of his paintings. On the wall facing the front of our house, there was a canvas four feet tall and nearly six feet long with an image of the American flag. Underneath the red, white, and blue were the faces of soldiers—from which war was hard to tell. Their faces were empty and tired, and I can remember feeling lonely, even as a child, when I looked at this painting.

The second painting hung on the east wall of the dining room. Four men tumbled out of a helicopter in what looked like a desert, but the images were cartoonish, almost like a comic book. One of the men was being held up by two of the others and raising his leg up off the ground. I can remember being seven and not understanding who was carrying him and why. His body was not so badly damaged, and out in this country, it would not have happened this way. He'd have crashed his

bike on the culvert in the ditch by the Wohlwends' house, and he'd have to drag his broken bike back to the house with blood running out of the hole in his jeans. I couldn't understand how weak this man looked, but I stared at him just the same. And he lived on that wall in pain for nearly sixteen years, until my parents packed up and moved, and my father finally threw his paintings away.

### *Run*

I can't tell you why I'd never run before. It seems to me now like an obvious answer. But I never did before that day—or after.

Kelly and I had found matches in the kitchen junk drawer. We were seven and eight. We took the matches out into the grass under the ash trees and lit the grass on fire, watching it burn slowly until the small box of kitchen matches was depleted.

When Heather found us in the yard with a black circle of dying grass and the smell of sulfur still hanging in the humid summer air, she told Mom. Mom told Dad. She must have known what he'd do.

He dragged Kelly onto the bed first, and I watched as she took it. He swung the belt down hard, and it didn't matter that Mom had instructed us to stuff our underpants with toilet paper to soften the blows. Kelly was crying. Her face had puffed up and was turning red and then purple. I could see the backs of her legs rising up in welts.

When he finished and she rolled off the bed, I ran out of the room, down the stairs, and out the front door. I made it down the block in front of the post office before he caught me. He carried me under his arms, like a heavy bag of dog food, back into the house and up the stairs. He tossed me onto the bed. I thought it would go by quickly; it had seemed to in the past. But it didn't. And even he now admits that I "got it twice as bad." That was the rule after this. If you run, you

get it twice as bad. The skin on my thighs split with the last blow, and I bled just slightly from the tear. No one nursed me. I pulled the toilet paper out of my little girl underwear and wiped the blood off the backs of my legs. I never ran again.

### *Snow*

The winters in the Midwest were thick and hard to survive—especially out in the country. The snows came down so heavily they almost reached the top of the house’s foundation, one that stood three feet off the ground. When Heather, Kelly, and I were younger, our grandparents bought us full-body snowsuits to keep us bundled while we rolled in the clean white snow everyday of our winter break. Mine was pink. We wore tube socks underneath the mittens of the snowsuits and invited Dad out to have snowball fights on the weekend days when he was home with us to play.

He came out in long johns and a flannel shirt—always capable of living with any temperature when we were children—and he packed snowballs so hard, they stung and left red marks on our stomachs and arms and legs. We raced around the yard dodging his snowballs and failing to make ones with quite the force he managed with his own. We spent every possible moment outside in the snow in the winter, and we never had to wonder if we’d have a white Christmas.

My mother likes to remind me that I was born in a blizzard. The Blizzard of ’81, she calls it. The snow came down like crazy and never seemed to end. And I was sick. I was jaundiced at birth, and it took them time to let me out. Once they did, I fell ill again. Scarlet Fever. My mother tells this story better than I can, and my father never mentions it. There was five feet of snow. And the car was buried. My father bundled me up and carried me to the hospital for treatment, leaving my

mom to recover from what she calls “the birth that kept her from havin’ any more babies.”

He walked me to the hospital and waited to hear what he already knew. There was only so much to do. They did not admit me. No insurance. Some things never change. He carried me back home in this snow, and he watched me through the nights, holding a cold washcloth over my face to keep the fever down. He never talks to me about this, not like my mother who reminds me of watching over my sleep when I would have seizures or asthma attacks.

My father doesn’t need to tell me this story. I think of it when I think of him.

Winters in Shattuc were always blizzard-heavy, and the silence that crept over the town would have been unbearable if it weren’t for the few children who poured out of the few front doors and built snow forts in the front yard of the church and went into battle with each other. Dad was the only adult to help break the snow’s silence and administer our building of forts and strategize our military plans, how we would take out the neighbor kids. He had always been good with children.

But it wasn’t always this.

### *Cunts and Knives*

I don’t remember what I’d done that day. To be truthful, I don’t remember what I had done most days. I remember hands around my throat. He’d grabbed me by the neck. We were in the kitchen. I know this because I kept focusing on the black-and-white checkered tiles on the floor trying to breathe under the force of his hand. I think he must have pushed me up against the cabinets by the sink. He must have. He found the knife too easily.

After holding me like that, red in the face and beginning to cry (something I tried never to

do), he dropped my feet back to the floor and put his forearm against my chest, an action someone else would repeat later in my life. He held me still and pulled the knife up to my throat. It was serrated. A steak knife. We never had nice knives growing up. We never had much of anything.

He took this serrated steak knife and pushed it deep into the skin of my throat. He did not slash me. He did not. This I know. The small amount of blood that resulted came only from the points of that serrated steak knife. And he said only this at first.

“If you say another word you fucking cunt, I will cut your fucking throat so fast.” I didn’t respond, just stood there staring at him, this man, my protector. He sat down at the table, looked down and yelled one more thing, “When I am finished with you, they won’t find the fucking pieces, you stupid cunt.”

### *Runaways*

I wasn’t an easy teen. I snuck out of windows and drank beers with boys who don’t take no for an answer. They were men who hadn’t yet learned that the nature of a place like ours turns them into beasts. So in my haste to show my father how little control he had, I ran with a crowd even the worst of families would be ashamed of. My seventh grade best friend, then four months pregnant, did not care when I bedded down with the same man. We all shared. Like family dinners, there was only so much to go around.

It was this that gave me more of what my father had to offer. I do not know if he actually knew who or what I was doing—he just knew I shouldn’t be. We fought. And by the time I reached college and my family had abandoned the house in Shattuc for a rental in a dead industrial town forty minutes away, I hadn’t changed. Neither had he. Our battles became ones for control. We both thought we were in charge of me, and I had no choice but to prove otherwise.

In each fight we stood face to face, inches apart, him screaming and me asserting myself poorly and shaking under the influence of his anger. I can't say for sure this happened, but I remember it this way. I wanted to back away from him, but I know I didn't. Finally he told me what he'd been thinking. My mother cried in a chair watching this match—these two people, so much the same, fighting for space in one life.

"If you think you can run around like a whore and do drugs in my house, you've got another thing coming," he'd yelled.

"I don't do drugs in the house." That was all I had. The rest was true. And my mother taught me well to never tell a lie.

"If you think you can act like that, you get the fuck out of my house."

"It's not your house. It's a rental. People like us don't get houses anymore." A cruel thing to say to a man carrying the shame of his working class position.

"I mean it, you stupid cunt. Get the fuck out!"

Walking through the tiny house to my bedroom, I called a friend to pick me up with his screams in the background. He was shouting from another room as I jammed all I could into a bag.

"You can't take anything out of this house! I own everything you put on your back!"

I didn't listen.

I walked out into the living room with a bag on my shoulder and the beer my father was holding, still full because he so rarely drank anymore, came flying from his hand and into my face.

I did not cry.

I walked into the bathroom, plugged my bloody nose, and waited on the curb for my friend to carry me away.

The second time I ran away there was no violence. In late night phone calls to grade school best friends and college cohorts, it was decided. I had to leave. The same friend drove up in the middle of the night, calling my cell upon her arrival. I left a note for my mother.

Mom,

I'm staying with a friend for a while. I will call you soon.

Love, Missy

This note hurt her more than any of the things I'd done before or after, it was the thing that showed her how much he'd really done, how much he could do. She pretended not to care. But my sisters told me about the crying and the calling, about how she was slipping down into her valley—because of me. No one blamed him. He was who he was, they said. How could I expect any different? I hadn't. I expected exactly what I got.

### *Home*

I could never stay away long. The pull of a people like them is stronger than any other force, and no matter what he did to me, I felt his presence in me wherever I ran. Hers too. They were the center of an impossible circle. One with walls so thick, you cannot penetrate from inside or out. No amount of distance removes me from their radius, and I always ended up back inside their grip in some way or another.

Even now, years later, grown into someone very different from the child I was when I lit the grass on fire with kitchen matches and packed clothes into Superman and CareBear pillowcases waiting at the end of the block for some rescue that would never come, I have always come back to them, to their circle, to their home.

I have made it about him over the years, this need to run away. I have said that I wanted to

prove I was smarter than him. This is a story I still tell, but I know it isn't true. It's something else. I want his pride in me. This is the thing he has given me, the desire to know more, always to know more. He is the point of reference for me, no matter how much I pretend to be my own person, he has spent years defining me, and in most ways, he always will. He is my father, and he is my aggressor, my attacker. He is my protector. He is the man who fed me ice chips and taught me how to love the girls who always drop the knife with the killer on the ground and still alive behind them.

And while he is the mystery man who haunted my young girl's dreams, chasing me from door to door with a butcher's knife, he is also the man I know—whose hands would wrap around the neck of anyone who hurt me. This is why my secrets are so well-kept. He would protect me, so I protect him from his own instincts now—and even in the past—to know that the circle cannot be broken. We need it whole. All five of us. No one comes and goes. Distance does not matter. We are all inside his house.

Part V, Middle Cyclone

*Trash Fire*

The school bus dropped me and Kelly off at the end of the street. I was fourteen and running silly toward my sister's trailer at the other end. Kelly was trailing behind, walking slowly and dragging a likely empty backpack. In mid-horror movie jaunt, Mrs. Price, the neighbor and kindergarten teacher, grabbed me by the shoulders and said, "Miss, stop running. Don't go that way." By the time Kelly caught up to me, Mrs. Price had told me that Heather's trailer was on fire. They thought lightning hit it. The fire trucks were pulled up behind the trailer. I could see the lights now that she mentioned them. It had taken them nearly an hour to get out to us, a normal response time for emergency services out where we lived. The neighbor had saved Chance, Heather's dog with one leg shorter than all the rest, and neither she nor her husband Jeff were home when the trailer caught fire. In fact, no one had been able to get a hold of them at all. Heather was working at a hospital an hour away and had no cell phone; Jeff, who also had no cell phone, was working at a nursing home thirty minutes away.

While Mrs. Price told the same story to Kelly, I slipped away and watched the water from the fire trucks splash down onto a quickly burning home. Kelly followed shortly after, and I watched my mom crying in the driveway as everything her oldest daughter owned burned up for good.

The fire department didn't let us go back in to the trailer for two days. By then Heather and Jeff had taken up residence on an air mattress in the living room of our house. The dining room was already full up with my mom's mom, who was coughing and slowly dying of lung cancer behind

the mauve curtain. So Heather and Jeff and the clothes they bought at Wal-Mart the night of the fire slept on the air mattress, rising before 6am and pushing the mattress up against a wall before driving to work in the mornings. They came home at night after everyone else had already been watching TV and doing homework for a couple hours. Bike riding time was over; the streetlights were on. We all sat in the living room waiting for it to become a bedroom.

Jeff came in first, a minor abuse. Being forced to talk to a man you hardly know and do not at all like after a personal tragedy is like a quiet form of torture. Showing sympathy for someone you hate is a challenge—even at fourteen. But we all managed. And Jeff was made to feel at home on the brown, shag carpeting in our living room.

### *Full Mass and Grand Mals*

Heather married Jeff in a disastrous wedding ceremony in July of 1996. They put banana clips in the eight bridesmaids' hair and hoped they'd hold until the reception in the evening. My hair was too short for a clip, so they kept me until the end, thinking I'd be the quickest to style. Instead, I ended up finishing late, nearly an hour later than planned, and I had to be taken to the church by an older cousin whose hair had been finished for nearly two hours. We sped down Drake Road and prayed that none of the potholes would do us in before we got to the church. We pulled up to Saint Augustine's right as Jeff's mom arrived—in a police car. She ran out of gas on Route 50, and the police had pulled over upon seeing a woman in formal wear kicking the wheels of a Grand Am. The police drove Judy to the ceremony, and we were able to start only thirty minutes late.

Heather had been pressured, by Mom, to have a full Catholic mass. The wedding ceremony would take nearly an hour and a half, and we were all expected to be on kneelers for most of the duration. None of us had eaten in the morning, and most of us had not slept. In fact, we were

mostly hung over, more parched than we'd ever been. I went up to my kneeler last, and I knelt down on it after arranging Heather's train. It didn't take long for me to get dizzy. I was exhausted, and I started shaking almost as soon as I knelt down. But when Father Andy's voice started to echo inside my head, I got scared. I started to open and close my eyes, but my vision became white. I couldn't find Father Andy in my view, and I started to breathe heavily. Then I felt like I was shaking a little more vigorously. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in Heather's lap. I'd had a seizure in the middle of a Catholic mass. My mother would be so embarrassed.

I wasn't the only accident. Kristen Boeker, Heather's high school best friend, took over for me while I recovered in the Cry Room. She slid up to my kneeler and followed Heather's train up to the altar when she and Jeff lit the unity candle. It blew out, but not before Kristen knocked a glass vase on the marble altar and it shattered—sending pieces in all directions. And then the ceremony ended. The bridal party, including my newly recovered self, piled into cars and proceeded to drink away the memories of such a horrible spectacle at Demo's, the sports bar of choice.

By the time I made it to the reception, I was already drunk. And when we sat down to dinner, I hardly noticed when the centerpiece between Heather and Jeff caught fire. All the Irish Catholics in the room failed to find a suitable extinguisher, and Jeff's sister finally appeared with water in hand and put out the flames. Leaving the smoke mess behind, I stumbled onto the floor with my dance partner and hopped around a bit before my uncle pulled me by the arm into the hall's kitchen where he pointed out three bottles of champagne he'd hidden for me and for my cousin Lisa, now four years sober and drug free. Lisa and I spent the rest of the evening finishing off those three bottles of champagne between occasional Jell-o shots before our uncle dragged us to the van and drove us home at nearly midnight. We ate pizza on the living room floor and threw up into plastic trash cans in the middle of the night. Heather and Jeff went to Branson, Missouri for a short

and inexpensive honeymoon that would be cut even shorter by the death of Jeff's grandmother.

### *Possessions*

When the fire department let us back into the trailer, we found most of their belongings in tact. They were damp and smelled of a certain kind of smoke, a smell like fireplaces with unopened flues. We walked carefully over weakened and burned spots in the floor back to the bedroom to try and save their clothes. At the back of their closet, we found Heather's wedding dress, in a clear plastic dress bag that had saved it from damage. It was the only piece of clothing in the closet that hadn't been destroyed by smoke damage. Heather pulled it out of the closet and hung it from the wall in our living room.

Heather and Jeff lived in our living room for three months before they'd finally saved up enough money to move back out on their own. Replacing years of clothes and household supplies was a challenge, even on a good salary, which theirs were not. They spent unused hours working additional shifts and avoiding spending too much time in our house. Heather had long since moved on, and sleeping on an air mattress in our mother's house was not her idea of adulthood or freedom or any of the things we went looking for as soon as we'd hit our teenage years.

Heather had been smart. She'd moved an hour away as soon as she graduated. She started working at a hospital and got promoted and promoted again, and she never came back until Grandma got sick, and she had to make sure our mother knew how to care for someone in her condition. But even after she knew we could handle Grandma, she never left. She rented the trailer on the same block, and she brought Jeff into it almost immediately.

It took Grandma five years to die, and in the meantime, Heather's marriage had ended, begun again, ended, and then begun again after the fire. When Heather was finally able to hold a

pregnancy, Grandma faded, and Kelly and I were glad Heather had stayed to help us with our mother, who lost herself almost immediately after the doctors carried her mother away. We all pitched in then, paying bills for Dad, who never left his room while Mom was away.

But it was after the fire that Heather decided to stay with Jeff, really stay. She had his baby after several tries, and she decided they would be together forever, whether or not they really loved each other, because they had a child, and Heather, for some unknown reason, wanted a family like ours.

### *Snow Globes*

At sixteen Heather was in love. A boy named Tim had stolen her heart, and she could see no one but him. From the outside, I saw her only obsessing over a red-headed boy who was kind to her little sister but never kind enough to her. She was an easy grab for him, him being so popular, but he never attached himself in the way she would have hoped. He would have been a football hero, if towns like ours had things like that. He drove a 80s Camaro, bright blue. She loved him as she loved his car and would have done anything to make him the man she would spend forever with.

On a Friday afternoon, as I waited for my mother in a booth at the local Hardees' where she managed the day staff, Heather came running in more excited than I think I have ever seen her—even to this day. She had a box in her hand. Mom and I gathered at the front counter and watched Heather open this box, a gift from her dream boy. She pulled out a snow globe. I can't remember what the tiny flakes fell upon or what the tune was that came out when she turned the key on the bottom, but this snow globe meant Tim was hers, or so she thought. In her excitement, her hands slipped, and the snow globe fell in slow motion onto the hard, gray-tiled floor of the restaurant.

Shards of glass and snow and glittery sprinkles spilled out all over the floor. Heather's face contorted, and she began to cry. Only five minutes into her declaration of Tim's love for her, and it had been shattered. Heather cried for teenaged hours, and Mom spent the evening trying to calm her down. This I remember. I also remember that Tim was never the boy she imagined him to be.

I have since learned that Heather and Tim consummated their relationship. I think sometime around the time she received this snow globe they became lovers of a sort. Not boyfriend and girlfriend in the traditional sense. After all, we were poor. Poor girls had poor boyfriends, and Tim was not poor. But Heather was popular, with her beautiful round face and blonde hair, so she had to be hard to say no to. And when Tim was given his opportunity, he took advantage. He took her and paid her for services rendered.

In one of our waiting days at the hospital to see if our mother's lungs would carry her through to the next day, Heather and I sat in cardiac chairs in the glow of the vending machines beside us talking about her loves lost and found; I was still searching in all the wrong places. She told me about Tim, for the first time as two adult sisters sharing secrets. I could barely see her face in the light, but she cried remembering his snow globe and how he never lived up to the image she had of him, how he grabbed onto her and let go so easily. She holds onto him, I'm sure. He is the thing in her mind that she strives for. He is the thing she never forgets.

### *The Illustrated Man*

This is how my father referred to Heather's Chris. He was a tall, skinny man with a crew cut—not Army. This would have made my father proud. He was simply a man from a world like our own, not what anyone wanted for our talented bassoonist and beautiful nurturer. Chris had

tattoos. Everywhere. I cannot remember what half of them were, but I know they were all those non-threatening kinds, cartoon characters, funny villains of his own design.

Chris was cool to my pre-teen mind. I saw him taking Heather to Depeche Mode concerts and turning her on to Danzig, and I did not care that they'd met at her after-school job at Taco Bell. I thought he was cool, and he'd made Heather cooler by extension. Gone were the days when she was a preppy high school almost-cheerleader. Now Heather was cool, and her little sister was impressed.

Heather was studying to be a nurse, but it didn't take long for this lifelong restaurant worker, just like her stepfather, my father, to put a ring on her finger. She would marry him, she told us. She loved him. And she did. Even I could tell this, her little sister, who still cannot tell the difference between love and loyalty. I could tell she loved him and even that he loved her too.

But he was what my father'd said. He was a fuck-up. He was trash, too bad my father hadn't noticed that we were the same as him. Chris cheated on my sister. He sold drugs to kids in Centralia. Chris was everything Heather was trying not to be. But it still took her too long to let go. And it took her even longer to get him out of her.

## Part V, If You See Her, Say Hello

### *How To Look At Things*

We have this picture of Kelly when we were little girls. She is inside the playpen in the grass on the lot of the trailer we had before we moved out to Shattuc. I cannot remember this day, but this picture is how I see Kelly in my imagination when I am trying to remind myself why I love her. She has caramel-colored pigtails sticking out of the sides of her head. She has her hands raised up on her cheeks, and her mouth is hanging wide open. This picture is older than Macauly Culkin, and she is funnier and more beautiful than any child locked inside a house in upstate New York.

When I think of us as children, this is the version of her I see. But I know this is not who she is. And I have spent the last twenty years re-learning her and wishing she were that little girl again.

### *Extra Baggage*

Kelly weighs more than five hundred pounds. She is nearly six feet tall, and she is mean. She lives in Dogtown with her husband in the basement of her husband's parents' house. She is more than an hour from where we grew up, and I see her now only once when I travel back to the Midwest to deal with the various tragedies that befall a family of our class and size on a regular basis. She gets tired less than an hour into any visit, and she removes herself, and I wait another three months before I am pulled back to the open fields and see her again, weighing just slightly more than the last time and still as cruel as ever.

Her husband John is abused, it seems. She yells at him at five minute intervals, criticizing him for every little misstep. He has not fit into our closed dynamic yet, and no one protects him from her violent tones and judgmental glances. He's not learned how to take her. There is no

stopping her. On holidays, their two large bodies take up the loveseat in my parents' living room, and they sit as if in judgment of the rest of us, our lives so scattered and stressed, without considering the display of unhappiness that pours from their corner by the Christmas tree or the Easter baskets.

Kelly is twenty-nine years old. She has the liver of a fifty-year-old alcoholic. She makes trips to the emergency room at least once every month (usually two or three times) for aches and pains that she cannot or will not associate with the four hundred extra pounds she carries with her with each step. She says it is her ovaries, and it is, but her weight makes them worse. She says it is her back, and it is. But the weight makes everything worse. She never addresses her weight—never. She never mentions diets. She never mentions gastric bypass, something Heather (weighing two hundred less pounds than her) underwent to save her from the same fate.

In all these hospital stays, my mother, my other sister, and I ask the doctors as much as we can. She tells them to tell us nothing. She tells her husband to tell us nothing. The two of them form a barrier. We try to know the truth, but it is only in the moments when we arrive before John or while she is still unconscious that we can speak to a doctor with no expectation of him or her being evasive.

Roughly a year ago, I flew back to Saint Louis to wait Barnes-Jewish for her to be taken in to have an ovary removed. John, my mother, and I sat in the waiting room for four hours to see what the doctors would say. When the doctor finally came down from the operating room, he pulled us into those small rooms off the waiting room to give us the news. Privately crowded into a closet designed for delivering bad news, he told us about her liver—that she wouldn't survive past thirty. She needed to lose weight. This we knew. But Kelly had needed to lose weight all her life. Nothing

could make it seem as urgent as it really was. She'd heard this hundreds of times from plenty of doctors, and still, her weight has steadily increased since we were young girls.

But this time when the doctor said, "She'll die before she's 30," I began to really worry. I worried about all of us, who carry the same genes and have the same struggles. When I was in her hospital room for a visit the next day, John came in with a burger and fries. I watched my sister eat this burger and fries, and I said nothing. I learned early on that commenting on her weight and diet was beyond the limits set before us. I learned to keep my mouth shut.

### *Additions*

After Kelly had lost one ovary, the doctors told her that getting pregnant would be difficult—if not impossible—with her weight, Diabetes, and ovulation problems. Having been married just two years previous, Kelly was devastated. She told me that she couldn't live without being a mother. It was all she'd wanted. She wanted to be our mother, she said, before she went crazy. Kelly was always the one to hold onto that image of our mother, while Heather and I saw her as something to be taken care of.

When Kelly asked me if she could have my eggs, I said yes. I said yes because you don't deny your family the thing they want most. I said yes because I knew she could never love me if I said no. I said yes because I wouldn't be needing them. But set conditions.

I told her that she could have my eggs if and when she was ready to raise a child with John. I did not tell her what I meant by this. She knew. She knew I wanted her to be physically healthy. She knew I wanted her to have a good job. I wanted her to have her own home. I wanted that baby to have a bedroom, not a corner in a basement in the Irish part of Saint Louis.

And so I waited. I was ready to give her my eggs when she was ready to use them in a way

that was safe for her, her child, and her entire family. I waited.

I thought she was lying. She called me first—suspicious. I thought she was telling me because she knew I could carry the secret, and she knew I wouldn't ask her if she was lying. She told me she was pregnant while I was sitting at my desk in my cubicle. I barely knew what to say.

“What?”

“I'm pregnant. About two months.”

“But you don't have both your ovaries.”

“I know. It must be a miracle or unbelievably good luck.”

A miracle. This is how she and my mother would see it. They wouldn't see the problems. They wouldn't see the references to another diabetic who nearly died giving birth—one who weighed a third of what Kelly weighs.

When Kelly finally told my family, there were mixed responses. Everyone gave them their congratulations, but phone calls lit up bedsides like crazy, and Heather and I told our mother what we really thought. This pregnancy was not good news. We alluded to the only solution we could see. She knew what we meant, and she told us that it would never happen. She wouldn't allow it. No daughter of hers would have an abortion.

No one mentioned it to Kelly.

### *Patrick on Saint Patrick's Day*

He came into our family on Saint Patrick's Day 2010. He was almost two months early. I was in a meeting when I got the message from my sister:

“I'm on my way to the hospital. I'm in labor.”

A text. Short. Simple. It was all I needed. I hadn't expected it so soon. I thought I would take the time to process her pregnancy. I thought I'd get used to the idea of Kelly being a mother. I thought maybe she'd somehow magically become ready to be a mother. I was wrong.

He wasn't meant to be born on Saint Patrick's Day. Everyone told Kelly and John they should change his name. They said he'd get picked on. But he's an Irish boy, and maybe growing up in Dogtown, he might just be all right. Maybe he'll make it through elementary school without too much trouble.

I haven't met my nephew. I only know his name, his weight. He's big like his mother, like his father. I can picture him in a basement crowded with the remnants of lives and families past.

I am waiting to see him in a life he might deserve.

## Part VI, The Bedrooms of Our Friends

### *Dub*

Dub kissed me in the second grade. He had Andy Koch hold me back in the sand in front of the swing set at Carlyle Grade School, and he kissed me. Just a little while later, on Valentine's Day, Mona, Dub's mom, came over with him, and he handed me a small ceramic bear. He'd painted it white with little red hearts on the pads of his paws. The bear still sits on a bookshelf in my bedroom, in front of copies of college textbooks and old high school German books.

Dub was one of few children in the town of Shattuc. My sisters and I played with him and the Wohlwend girls and the Muenches, the Mormon family from our side of the tracks. The town was separated by a line of railroad tracks dividing rich from poor. The poor were on our side of the tracks, and the rich were on theirs. How Dub and JR and their mom and dad ended up in a trailer on the other side of the tracks is a mystery to us still. In the summers, we played hardball in the front yard of the Methodist church, and in the winters, we built snow forts, and my father threw snowballs packed so hard it stung when we they smacked us on our backs and on our legs.

Dub was a boy in the way Midwestern public schools expect. He played rough, and he was vulgar and sometimes cruel. He got into fights on the playground, standing over his victims curled up on the asphalt under the basketball hoop. He grew smart though, and the same Midwest that embraced his violence and aggression was quick to turn away from him when he gave it up to pursue academic competence. He'd abandoned the dictates of his station and gender. He wasn't supposed to be one of the college-educated, and they didn't love him for insisting they let him in.

When Dub and I were in high school, we became regular fixtures in each other's working class homes. On weekends we both threw parties, inviting all those who fit into our particular socioeconomic box. We assembled twenty or forty kids from poor parts of the county, and we drank Nat Light and Boone's Farm until we managed to get drunk enough to forget there was nothing else to do. I had more freedom at the parties Dub threw. I was never worried about cleaning up after the guests, and I was usually free enough to behave in ways my mother would have sent me to confession for.

On most nights, I slept in Dub's bed beside whoever else ended up there. I rolled over to find another girl who hadn't handled her booze that well or a boy who couldn't have been a lover even if he had been sober enough to keep it up. A few times, I drove my car to Dub's house; it was the easiest way to transport beer and cheap wines. After the party, I drove away from Dub's trailer in a 1988 red Chevy Beretta, running over coolers in the yard and crashing into a ditch just before making it to my house. I stumbled out of the car and walked across the narrow street and through my front door. By the time I woke up, my dad had pulled the car out of the ditch and installed it in its spot beside the house. And it was time for the next party, this time in the backyard of our hundred-year-old plantation house.

In the summers, Kelly and I blew up a plastic pool and filled it with water from the garden hose by the back patio. Heather bought us beer, and we proceeded to get drunk and wade in the tiny pool. Kelly got drunk quickly, drinking more in a few hours than most could in an evening, and she passed out in a plastic lawn chair before one in the morning. Just a couple hours later, Dub and I were the only ones left standing. We stumbled into the patio door and then up the stairs to my bedroom. Dub and I weren't well-suited in bed, but we knew each other's bodies, and we went

forward without hesitation. His girlfriend never knew, and whichever boyfriend I was with at the time was probably too temporary to remember and passed out beside someone else in the backyard.

When I started kicking and pushing Dub from my bed, I crawled up to the window to see him stumble naked to his car, throwing up under the ash trees in the front yard. By the time he made it across the tracks, I'd fallen back down onto the bed and passed out on top of the covers. He wasn't the first to get kicked out of the day bed in my sometimes-pink, sometimes-blue bedroom.

Dub and I never mention the night in my tiny bed in Shattuc. Not even now when he comes to visit me in my new city life. We talk about who we used to be. We talk about 4H and baseball games in the summer, and we talk about my father falling asleep at the wheel after a late night managing a fast food restaurant more than an hour away. We talk about what it would have been like growing up if we knew the things we know now, if we knew each other like we do now.

When my parents ask me if I've seen him lately, they know I'll answer "yes" and tell them he's doing all right, setting controlled forest fires for a living, climbing mountains and drinking too much beer at Yosemite. He still calls me when he's drunk. He tells me about the mountains and the trees and how he saw the waterfall from the opening credits of *Twin Peaks*. He tells me he wishes he'd taken the time to know me years ago. When he's drunk like this, he tells me he wishes we'd been together more. When he's drunk like this, he remembers what happened, but he thinks of it as something it wasn't.

He tells me he loves me still; he wishes we could be a couple. It doesn't matter that I am a lesbian, that I could not be with him now even if we didn't have the past we do. I don't remind him of this. I just pretend he's sweet and his pangs for a past we never really shared are no imposition

on me. I let him have his moment, drunk and alone on top of a mountain, because I know he would give it to me.

*JR*

Lying is a habit of mine. My mother still doesn't know. She thinks JR was the first lover I ever had. She does not know about all the bodies I'd touched before. She doesn't know about the few who came after. She thinks I slept with JR just the once. She thinks he manipulated me into going upstairs into a supply closet and taking my clothes off for him. She thinks I didn't want him to shove me down onto the dirty carpet and rub the skin on my back raw. She thinks I am someone different than I am.

When I started working at the Pie Pantry, I was seeing someone else, someone I would never take to bed, as was the custom with most of the men I dated at that time. JR came nearly two years after I'd dumped this boy and picked up another, a waiter at the restaurant, one we all thought might have been gay. JR was my boss by all conventional standards. He was called a manager; though, he never seemed to manage anything in particular. He sat on the smoking side of the restaurant counting money and smoking cigarettes with the patrons who sat for upwards of four hours in the same seats day after day. They bought chicken salad on cinnamon raisin bread with homemade chips and paid 4.25. They left fifty cent tips, and the waitresses complained about being stuck with these tables.

JR sat there counting out money after the waitresses surrendered their money bags to him. He always had one of us seated next to him, waiting for him to count out what was left and offering them up as the tips each girl had earned during her shift. He flirted with all of us, making rude

comments about our asses or asking when we were going to leave whichever boy we were with at the time. But a few months into his tenure at the Pie Pantry, he started touching me. I would sit down next to him, and he would put his burning cigarette into his mouth and put his hand on my thigh. I never complained. It was not my habit to do so. I thought he was charming, if not a little sleazy. He thought nothing of coming to my house before my shift. He walked in the front door shouting my name.

I ran to the door in a towel, putting my finger up to my lips. My father was in his basement office. I pulled him by his arm into my bedroom and shut the door, certain my father had fallen asleep at his desk again. JR was quick to take advantage of any moment alone, and he slipped my towel off before I had a chance to object, not that I would have. We fell onto the wooden daybed I'd had since I was thirteen. JR climbed on top of me, and I hooked my heels into the heart-shaped cutouts at the end of the bed. He put his hand inside me, and instead of giving in, I pushed his hand away, and I slipped from beneath him. JR quickly got up and tried to pull me back down onto the bed, but I was pulling clothes on before too long, and I led him to the doorway. I did let him kiss me as he was walking out the door. I told him I'd see him at work.

JR and I closed the restaurant alone that night. We were slow, and he let all the staff go home, except me, one cook, and the dishwasher. The kitchen took longer to clean, and I had finished the dining rooms before they'd even started pushing dishes through the big machine in the kitchen. JR asked me to wait, and he walked into the kitchen and told the other two men they could leave whenever they had finished. He would be upstairs in the office taking care of some things. He came back out into the dining room and asked me to follow him to the office. He wanted to talk to me. I'd already changed into a blue tank top and jeans and thrown my work clothes into a

bag. I had another job to go to, but I still had more than an hour to get across the small town.

JR opened the office door and pulled me through. He closed and locked the door behind him. I stood in the center of the room, the desk behind me and stacks of Styrofoam take-home containers lined up against the walls. There was a set of windows on one wall covered with thin white curtains pulled closed. He didn't turn the lights on. He came over to me and pulled my blue tank top over my head and walked me backwards toward the desk. I sat down leaned back on my elbows, lifting myself up off the desk while JR pulled my jeans off and then my underwear. He climbed on top of me, but he had trouble finding his way in. He lifted me off the desk and told me to get onto the floor. On the floor he found his way, and he pushed me into the carpeting over and over. When I got up off the floor, I had red streaks running down my backside. JR was dressed and getting ready to open the door when he turned around to me and told me he'd see me at work in a couple of days. I walked out the door, down the stairs and to my car.

Two days later I showed up at work and finished cleaning the dining rooms before the dishwasher and the short-order cook finished with the kitchen. When JR led me up the stairs, I expected the same. He closed and locked the door behind me, but this time I sat on him, moving up and down until two feet appeared under the door. The dishwasher's voice filled the tiny office. He knocked two or three times between his calls for JR. I sat completely still on top of him, afraid I'd be seen through the windows. The dishwasher's feet disappeared from under the door, and I climbed off of JR and got dressed. I followed him out the door toward the stairs only to find the dishwasher waiting at the top step. Whatever lie JR told him was revealed by his zipper still undone and both our faces flushed.

I left the restaurant and drove my car to my next job. When I went back to work the next

week, I'd been taken off the schedule. When I asked why, I was told I had offended one of the customers. I was told my behavior was inappropriate. I never saw JR again. And I haven't waitressed since.

### *Travis*

Travis fell off a swing set at twelve. When he landed he bit down on his tongue. His teeth pierced his tongue and nearly tore it in half. The Muenches' parents drove him to the emergency room in the old, brown Dodge van. When he came back, he had dissolvable stitches in his tongue that would disappear in a short amount of time, leaving behind a lined scar across his tongue. When I kissed him after the 4H competition, I could feel the scar on his tongue on my own. I remember his tongue better than anything else.

I barely remember the field and the fence. It was against the fence where it started, one of those that surrounded a cornfield to keep out certain animals. The imprint of it was pressed into my back before Travis pulled me onto the ground, drunk as we ever were, and we lay in the dirt between stalks of corn as Travis shoved himself into me with the eagerness and quickness of a high school boy. I lay completely still and silent as he grunted on top of me. When he finished, he rolled away, and we never spoke again. I was fifteen, too old for 4-H. I never went back, and he never sought me out. I spent the next week putting clear nail polish on the chigger bites on the back of my body.

### *Tanner*

Tanner had Tourette's Syndrome. He sat in the driver's seat of his middle class sports car

touching his left ear to his left shoulder every thirty seconds before sniffing compulsively. By the time we pulled up at work—a Wal-Mart in a neighboring factory town—our conversation was stilted by his tics, and his ears turned pink at the tips. We walked into work silently, and he stood behind the sports counter two aisles away while I played with toys in the infant section of the toy department.

Eight hours later, Tanner met me at the time clock, and said, “You want to get some booze?”

I didn’t have to say “yes.” I followed Tanner out to his green Camaro and sat in the passenger seat and waited while he went into The Blue Goose to buy SoCo from his cousin and took it back to my house where we were greeted by Kelly and a host of fellow country kids who had brought bottles of their own. We sat down in our brown living room with parents safely snoring upstairs and opened bottle after bottle and emptied them between us. We stayed up until late and set alarm clocks to rise us before work the next morning.

When the alarms went off the next morning, Tanner and I rolled off the floor and made the same journey to the same place and waited until the hours when we’d set ourselves free and end up back at another country house with another cooler full of booze, an endless succession of summer nights even when the seasons changed. We treated every night this way.

I only slept with Tanner once. He’d been with his girlfriend for three months—a record for him. She was a friend of mine, though not a good one, from Patoka, Illinois. She drove a nicer car than me, and as a result, she earned my secret resentment, the cattiness and jealousy that follow a working class child into adulthood. Tanner and I left work together on a week night. It was four o’clock in the country winter, and we made it to his car, but not to my house. When I sat down in the passenger seat of his pretend luxury sports car, he leaned over and kissed me. It wasn’t the first

time we'd kissed. It was the first time it mattered.

Tanner pulled me from the passenger seat into his lap. I was thinner then, and my body was easily manipulated into positions that would injure me in this body I now have. Tanner unbuttoned my top and pulled up my skirt as I unbuttoned his pants. He struggled with my panties and eventually just slipped them to the side before putting himself inside me.

Tanner did no work. I raised myself up and down on top of him, and he squeezed my breasts, painfully, until he left red handprints on each one a mark that lasted almost to the next day, one that people noticed peeking out from under my shirt at the party we ended up at after. Tanner and I did not kiss again. When he came, I slid off of him, and back into the passenger seat, and we resumed our pattern of buying booze at the Blue Goose and heading out to Shattuc to get drunk with the rest of the crew. When we made it back to my house, I climbed out of the passenger seat, headed toward the bathroom to get cleaned up, and he pulled me back with his hand, slapped my ass, and said "thank you," the second person to say such a thing to me after taking what he wanted and leaving me with the mess.

### *Harold*

Harold was someone else's boyfriend. A boy from Keyesport, a town fifteen miles south of Carlyle and filled with trash like me. When Kelly graduated and I quit working at the Wal-Mart in Centralia, my parties moved to Keyesport. I fell down drunk in the back yards of the Evelands, Kuhls, Prehodas, and anyone else who went to Carlyle High School.

Harold had been making me drinks all night. Vodka slammers. He wanted me drunk fast, so did I. I remember his hands on me in the lawn chair in the Evelands' backyard. I remember kissing him in front of everyone. I don't remember following him into a bedroom. I don't

remember taking my clothes off or him taking his off. I don't remember the bedroom at all. After the backyard, I only remember the morning.

I woke up early with only a mild headache. Hangovers never tortured me the way they did my high school counterparts. I was naked beside Harold. He was naked too. I pulled back the sheets and could see the stains on them. He hadn't come inside me. No condom. That's how I knew what happened. I slipped out of the bed, and pulled on clothes I don't remember removing. I pulled them on, and I drove my shitty car back to Shattuc and slipped into my bed without anyone noticing. This wouldn't be the only time this happened, but it would be the last.

### *The Boy I'd Never Seen Before*

I thought I knew everyone in the tri-county area. I had been drinking in family clubhouses in the woods for nearly five years, and I had been to every farm house deserted of its owners and filled with pot-smoking, Stag-drinking teenaged children. But I must have missed this one.

I was at a party at the Jonderosa, the name we'd given the hunting clubhouse owned by the Jondro Family. It was a small space, but there were private areas. I can remember going mudding with Cayce and her brothers, owners of the Jonderosa. I can remember drinking by the fire with Dub and Tanner. I can remember my sister leaving early, not feeling well, she'd said. I can remember all the sounds of a summer night in the woods near Shattuc. Crickets and owls. I can even remember going into the back room of the clubhouse to lie down, knowing I would pass out soon. I can remember all this perfectly well, but I can't remember this boy.

I woke with the sun in the morning, and he was there beside me, like so many before him, only he was no one I knew. I looked down to find myself and this stranger naked. My clothes were crumpled on the floor as if I'd disappeared from inside them instead taking them off gradually, piece

by piece, as was my habit in these all too common evening encounters. A condom wrapper was on the floor beside the pile of mud-covered clothes. There was that at least.

I slipped out of the bed without looking at him again. I got dressed, and I walked over bodies piled like war victims on the floor of the clubhouse out to my car. I got in, drove home, took a shower, and pretended I'd never been there. No one mentioned him to me, and I have never seen him again.

### *You Know I Love You More Than My Luggage*

I met Steven at The Pie Pantry. It's this specialty mom and pop shop restaurant in downtown Belleville, Illinois. They sold thirty-six different varieties of pie, and claimed to have the tallest meringue in the tri-county area. "Foot High Pies," they called them, and they were.

The place was part of an indoor shopping center called The Old Towne Mall. There were only three businesses left in the building before The Pie Pantry moved in and pushed the Stock Pot out the back door. There was Keil's Locksmith. They shared a back wall with the restaurant, and inside the kitchen you could hear the owner grinding keys for his patrons every time you stopped the dough mixers.

Next to a completely traffic-free sheet music store, there was a knick-knack store across from B&M. Mary, the owner of this particular niche store, was a sweet lady in her sixties with more of an attitude than The Pie Pantry could readily handle. She sold Precious Moments and Emmett Kelly clowns to the Midwesterners of Belleville who still think that to acquire things will save them

from that something they always seem to be running just steps ahead of. Mary didn't mind making a buck or two off the folks who played the same game as her.

I can't say for sure when I first really met Steven. I must have been working there a few weeks before I did because I was past that entry period when you can't quite find your footing. I remember this: we were sweeping the non-smoking dining room. He was near the pie case, and I was up near the front windows. It was the afternoon lull—that time between two and four that didn't quite find the patronage it was always looking for. There may have been two or three people in smoking, but Steven and I swept the dining room alone. There were always two servers this time of day, and today, Steven and I stayed on the same side. I can't remember who was avoiding the smokers. We were talking about opera. I was taking a class called *From Literature to Opera*. And he was peddling his love of Elton John. He was trying to convince me that *Aida* was good, that my infectiously sunny teacher wasn't giving it a chance when he said it was trash. He said, "Come with me." He said, "I really think you'll like it."

And so we had a date.

Steven bought mezzanine tickets—the first row. We sat just off center to the left, and I could see the seats on the floor that had been obstructed at concerts just a year earlier. We sat through the first act, and it was better than I thought, revealing the cycle of these kinds of mythologically contrived stories. During intermission we went to the lobby to buy programs, something I never do. We talked about musicals most of the night, and when I went home that night, he wouldn't let me pay for my ticket. It was the best date I've ever been on.

Just a few days later, we were sharing a shift. When I went into the back of the kitchen to pick up the pies in the morning, Steven overheard the pie baker, Rob, making lewd remarks to me

and another waitress. He'd said something about sticking in his thumb and pulling out a plum—one of his favorites. And when I walked out to the pie case in the dining room, Steven was there ready to call him an asshole with more vigor than I'd had for these occurrences in the past.

We fell into a rhythm. Steven and I worked the dead shifts from eleven to five, and we swept the dining room together. I usually worked the smoking side, since I was still a smoker then, and Steven made even less cash on his empty tables. Around three or four, Norma Lee came in and sat in her sunglasses with long salt and pepper hair falling down her back. If it was as slow as it usually was, Steven and I sat down at her table and listened to her talk. She was hitchhiking across the country; she had been for years. She told us about her sister in Arizona who was living in an environmentally conscious trailer park. She told us about sleeping in parks in large and mostly dangerous cities. She drank sweet tea and ate two slices of pie, and Steven and I missed her as soon as her taxi arrived to take her back to the boarding house she was staying in. During the last hour or so of our shift, the old folks came in. Cora and Henrietta sat on Steven's side, but I always served them. He didn't have the patience for their slowness. They always ordered chicken salad on cinnamon raisin bread, and they ate it in tiny pieces they tore up with their fingers.

When Cora died, Steven and I tried to visit her grave, but we couldn't find the plot at Mount Caramel Cemetery, and we ended up walking through the rows to my grandmother's stone, my great-grandmother's, and my cousin Anne, who died from a hole in her heart when she was still a child. The stones in the cemetery were mostly new. There was a section in the back that was filled with the older graves, a small square of land with crumbling stones poking through the top of long blades of drying grass. The landscapers never cleared this section of the cemetery. It was far from the roads leading out, and none of the folks buried back there had relatives anymore. Steven and I wandered through the grass looking for snakes; though, we could never be sure which kind to look

out for.

I can't say this memory is true, but in my imagination, this is where Steven told me he was sick, sitting among the centuries dead waiting for something to happen.

When I got fired from The Pie Pantry, Steven and I had our first fight. He knew why the restaurant's owner had dropped me from the schedule. Though he'd said my availability was bad and I'd offended a customer, it was what the dishwasher saw that sent me out the door. The night manager, a married man with a kid and one on the way, had been trying to seduce me for months. He put his hands all over me whenever no one was looking. Steven knew. He saw me fail to object.

Steven wasn't working the day the manager took me up to his office. The restaurant had closed. I was the last server in the place, and the dishwasher was just finishing up. I followed the manager up the stairs into his office. When he shut and locked the door, I pulled him down onto the dirty carpet. We had sex twice in that office, and the second time, we were caught. The dishwasher knocked on the door while he was still inside me, and we were silent until his feet disappeared from under the door. When we came out, he was standing at the top of the stairs. He asked whatever question he had, and walked away—the tips of his ears turning pink.

I went home and was never asked back. I was taken off the schedule, and when Steven asked me why I wasn't working, I told him I was fired. I didn't have to tell him why. We fought for a total of two days, and when I called him to ask him to get me a pregnancy test, he only said I had to go with him because he didn't know which kind to get. I waited in the line while the cashier glared at him; we walked out laughing that people still confused us for a couple. When the test came back negative, Steven jumped up and down screaming. Then he took me out to dinner to celebrate. We had a few dates celebrating the bad things that didn't happen to one or both of us; we did this

more than celebrate the good.

Steven didn't mind when I fell in love with someone else. I met Shannon in a Western Traditions class in college. I mentioned in class that I loved Jane Austen in all her forms, and Shannon looked up from her notebook. She and I spent the next two years watching Jane Austen movies and mooning over Mr. Knightley. We said Colin Firth was cute, and we said Jennifer Ehle was talented. We both pretended we loved *Lizzy* for something other than we did. By the time Shannon made it into my arms, I knew she was a different kind of Catholic than me. I knew she would never be willing to give the things between us the names they had earned.

But I wouldn't let her go, so I pretended that the way she held my hand was the same way Steven did. I pretended that she was the same as every other woman in my life, and I never let her share my bed in the way I really wanted. On the nights when she stayed, I asked Steven to join us. I wouldn't touch her with him in the room. I would keep my hands to myself.

Steven had not been with anyone since we'd met, and I had always felt the wall he built up around our divided sex lives since the pregnancy test and the steak dinner. He could see Shannon and me moving forward, but he never addressed it, and I waited as long as I could to tell him.

We were riding in his white Cavalier down highway 159 when I blurted it out. "I think I might be like in love with Shannon," I said.

"I fucking knew it!" He started laughing.

"Shut up."

But Shannon and I didn't last past the words that defined us. When the same urge to burst out my love for her took me over in her presence, she was no longer able to sleep in a twin bed with me and wrap her arms around my waist. She told me she needed time, and I knew that was it. She

left for Europe two weeks later—a trip she said she couldn't take as long as we were in each other's lives.

Steven was there when she left. A mutual friend of Shannon's and mine told me she was spending the rest of the semester in England. She'd decided to give in to her anglophile fantasy.

It took me nearly two years to recover from Shannon. And Steven is what was left when it ended.

He and I returned to our rhythm when Shannon became an expatriate. Nearly every night, Steven slept on my bedroom floor, waking me with his snoring. I always planned to get earplugs, but there was something satisfying about smacking him with an old feather pillow every time he woke me up. He always fell asleep before me, and I would put a strip over his nose to help him breathe once he'd passed out on the floor. He still snored though, and I spent hours every night rolling from left to right trying to find the best way to block my ears from the sound.

We watched *Halloween* over and over and waited for the day when someone somewhere would make a decent horror movie again. We both had an unhealthy addiction to slasher movies and the controlled fear they inspired in us, but we hated the ones they were making of late. We still shelled out our money to see them in the theater, but it was rare when any of them could even make us jump.

During the month of October is when our tastes were finally satiated. The Sky-View Drive-In in Belleville was the only drive-in left in the area (since they closed up the one in Fairview Heights after someone was shot), and throughout the month of October they played classic horror movies triple-feature style. Steven and I drove out on the Beltline to the drive-in every weekend and watched the triple features. *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Halloween*, and *The Exorcist*. *The Texas Chain*

*Saw Massacre*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part II*. These were our favorites. No matter how much Dario Argento we watched, we grew up with Leatherface and Michael Meyers. No one could steal our love from them. It was zombie night that always made us fall asleep. Octobers in the Midwest were cold, so we would sit outside as long as we could. Once our fingers and toes lost sensation, we got inside the car and turned the heat on. The next thing we knew, we woke up to the end credits of *Dawn of the Dead*, and we had missed Romero's point about consumerism. But even when we wasted our five bucks and fell asleep, going to the drive-in was worth it. Sleeping in a 90s model Cavalier and making Steven go to the bathroom with me because I was too scared to go alone was something I always wanted to say I'd done.

By the time I moved to Saint Louis, Steven and I had become exclusive. I moved into a two-bedroom apartment with another girl named Melissa. Melissa's father came to help her move her things into the apartment, and my father came with my things the next day. Steven was in the hospital when we moved the last of the furniture in and loaded books onto shelves and old VHS copies of Judy Garland movies into stacks up against the wall. Melissa had her boyfriend on the floor in her bedroom (the larger of the two), and I waited for the floor in mine to be filled up by the only person I cared to share my space with. But he would be at Barnes-Jewish for three more weeks, and I would be waiting for them to remove the blockages in his intestines and set him free.

When Steven was released from the hospital, he was on a bland diet. He and I ate plain rice together and drank nothing but water and juice. It took him nearly two months to get back his strength, and we spent most nights watching taped episodes of *The Dolly Parton Show* and *Steel Magnolias*. We didn't talk about his being sick. We didn't talk about what it meant or that it would come back. And it did come back. In less than a year, I was stuck in one hospital and him in another. We couldn't escape the ebb and flow.

Steven grew into my family in ways that my sisters' husbands have been unable to. My mother loved him like her own, bought presents for his birthday and Christmas. And when she would overdose or try to slit her wrists, he would be the one to drive me to the hospital.

He never went in to the Psych Ward to see her, but he was there. She knew he was there. He was in the waiting room for the two hours a day they would let us see her at Barnes-Jewish and the one-hour increments they let us in for at Saint Elizabeth's. She tried this every few months, and Steven was patient with me and the crisis alarms that were always going off in my head and on my phone.

Steven fit in with us because there were no secrets from him. He knew exactly who we each were, and though my father never spoke to him, he knew Steven knew what he'd done. My father never spoke to anyone anymore, but he answered the phone when Steven called, something he wouldn't do for even my aunts and uncles. And when Steven knocked on the door, he opened it and let him in. On nights when there'd be fights, it was Steven who would pick me up and drive me, irrational, across the river and back to my apartment.

On the day Steven was admitted to the hospital I was working at a Barnes and Noble in West County fifteen miles away from my apartment. When I got off work I had a message to come straight to my sister's house in Dogtown. When I got there, she told me she'd gotten two messages. One was from Steven's mom. She had called to say he was in the hospital. He wasn't awake; he'd been throwing up all night. When he finally made it to the hospital, he passed out. The second message was from Dad. Mom had done it again, and she was in Barnes, stomach pumped and

waiting to see her three daughters. My sister and I got into the car and went to Barnes. Steven was still in emergency, and Mom was waiting during the two visiting hours the hospital had for week nights. We sat with my mother in community space, and listened to her cry and apologize, a typical night in the Psych Ward for us. She told us she hadn't meant to and that she would never do it again (until the next time, of course).

When I got to see Steven the next day he asked about her. I told him what had happened, and he was the first to tell me the truth, what he really thought.

“Missy, you know, she’s going to keep doing this,” he said.

“I know.”

“She’ll do it until she succeeds.”

“I know.”

“Even if it’s just an accident. She won’t quit until it happens.”

When Steven got out of the hospital, we didn’t talk about that. We didn’t talk about my mother’s suicide attempts or my father’s fits of rage. But he still drove me to the hospital, and he still sat in the waiting room on the nights when he was free from the same cage she was in.

When Steven got out of the hospital he had been put on steroids. In our history together, he had been the kind one. He had calmed me down when I was screaming. He had been the one to hold things together, but steroids changed him. The things churning inside him came out when he was on steroids. The things that normally propelled our relationship became sticking points, and Steven could not handle having me disagree with him anymore. When we saw a movie or went to a museum, I had to come to the same conclusions as him. When I was annoyed by something, he would have needed to be in the mind to be annoyed as well. He had lost his tolerance for our diversity—something we once both loved.

On most nights, I was quiet. I ordered the Chinese from the place down Hampton, and I let him pick the movies. I ended up sleeping on the couch most nights. I couldn't wake him up like I used to, so I slipped out of the bedroom and landed on the couch under the picture window, sometimes watching the sun rise through the tree just outside.

The steroids were doing their work though, and Steven's intestines were not swelling as badly as they normally did, and there was no reason to believe that the blockage would return. When he finally got off the steroids, I never mentioned what kind of man he'd been. He went back to being the better part of our pair, but I learned what my limits were.

It was another seven months before Steven was sick again. We were at a movie theater when it came back to him. He leaned forward in the nearly empty matinee theater, and groaned. I shot forward with him and asked him what was wrong. He grabbed my hand, and the next thing I knew, he was throwing up on the floor between the seats. The movie was loud, and no one heard, but he sat there, throwing up between theater seats, wishing to make it go away.

I dropped his hand and went to the bathroom to get towels. I came back and tried to clean up after him as best I could. I bought him water, and I took his keys. I walked him out of the theater and drove him home. He fell asleep on my floor early in the evening and did not wake up until afternoon the next day.

I left him just as he was waking up, asked him to lock the door behind him. I left to find my mother, practically stoned and unable to speak. When I sat down on the couch and tried to talk to her, my father said she'd just taken her pills. She wouldn't be able to talk to me. He came in to give her more pills (the nighttime ones). He told her to open her mouth, and when he did, she started to drool. The pills fell out of her mouth, and it took me ten minutes and two phone calls to my sisters

to get him to realize that something was wrong.

At the emergency room at Saint Elizabeth's they told us her lithium was poisoning her. She had a bladder infection; she was septic. She was dehydrated, and the lithium had become toxic. They said they needed to do dialysis to get it out of her system. When she went through the dialysis, her lungs began to fail. They had to intubate her. She had developed a condition called Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome. The doctors came to us once she'd been brought to a bed in the Critical Care Unit. They told us 80%. There was an 80% chance she would die. They told us to prepare ourselves.

By the time I was able to call Steven, he didn't answer. His mother called me later in the day to tell me he'd been admitted to Barnes-Jewish again. He was unable to keep anything down, and he could not stay conscious. When he was awake the pain was too much for him to handle. His mother took him to the hospital at 3am. She didn't know what they were going to do just yet.

I waited for word from both doctors, and I spent my nights sleeping in the CCU at Saint Elizabeth's. My oldest sister and I slept beside the soda machines in the waiting room. She once worked as a nurse in this CCU, and she convinced her friends to give us two cardiac chairs. We took two blankets and two pillows and talked about what we would do if her lungs never recovered.

For the next few days, Steven's mother called me to give me minor updates, and we waited to see if my mother's oxygen saturation would rise high enough for her to be extubated. She was ranging from 80% to 100% oxygen, and the doctors kept warning us that much more of this level of oxygen, and she would suffer brain damage. One week after she entered the hospital, they told us they would try to increase her steroids and lower the oxygen saturation.

Steven's mother called to tell me he would be going in to surgery later that day. She said not to worry, that he'd had the surgery before. He had to have sections of his small intestine removed and a part of his colon. I hadn't been able to talk to him. He wasn't well enough, and the tube running from his nose down the back of his throat made him difficult to understand anyway. So I waited on word from his mother. She called me just as they were trying to extubate my mother. She said he'd made it through all right. He'd be in the hospital for at least the rest of the week.

My mother's procedure was not so successful. They extubated her, but her throat was striated, and it was beginning to swell shut. They didn't think the steroids would reduce the swelling soon enough, so they reintubated her. As soon as they did, her oxygen saturation dipped yet again. And the doctors came to us again and told us to prepare ourselves. They didn't think she would make it. That night while Heather and I stalked sleep in the cardiac chairs, she told me what that meant. She told me that we were looking at possibly having to take her off the ventilator. She had not woken up during any of the procedures, and there was very little chance her lungs would recover. Heather explained what all of this meant, that we would have to convince Kelly, our other sister, and our father to turn machines off and save our mother from becoming a brain dead vegetable. We didn't talk much after that; we didn't sleep either.

Two days after my mother was successfully extubated and she regained consciousness, Steven was released from the hospital. By this time, I had left Saint Elizabeth's and gone to Barnes-Jewish to see him. He was in good spirits, but when his mother left us, he was honest with me.

"I'm going to die young, you know," he said.

"No, you're not."

"I am. That's something you need to know. This will keep happening."

“You’re fine for now. That’s what matters.”

“I’m trying to be honest with you. This can’t last forever.”

When life went back to normal, Steven was sleeping on my floor again. I’d been applying to grad schools and getting yes letters and no letters. He was with me for each one. My hands shook opening the envelopes, but he was there to call people bastards when I needed him to. By the time my father had his heart attack, I thought he’d moved in.

Heather called me at 4:30am to tell me that Mom (who had only been out of the hospital one month) had driven him back to Saint Elizabeth’s. They took him right in when he complained of chest pains. He was 50 years old and smoked like a chimney. They determined that he had had a massive heart attack, and they put a stent in the blockage in his right coronary artery. It had been 90% occluded. Heather and I sat with Mom in the cardiac waiting room, and I left a note for Steven on the kitchen counter in my apartment. I asked him to lock the door and told him to walk my dog. I wouldn’t be coming back until late—if at all.

In the afternoon, Steven arrived at the hospital. He had taken my dog to my parents’ house and dropped off a few days worth of clothes for me. He stayed at the hospital with us for two days, leaving only to take my dog and my mom’s dogs out a few times a day. And when my father was better and getting ready to leave the hospital, he drove me and my dog home to our empty apartment. When I got in, I got the acceptance letter to the school in New York, the one I would end up choosing. He was more excited than me. I was immediately aware of what the letter meant I was leaving behind.

As summer drew to a close, Steven and I spent as much time together as we could. We went

to his aunt's house on the lake nearly every weekend when we weren't both working, and we swam with the fish off the private dock in their backyard. We went for rides in the pontoon boat, illegally as neither Steven nor I had a boat license. But the cops in Greenville didn't care. We were careful, and we never went into the no-wake zone, so they let us go. We had barbecue nearly every night, and the only thing spoiling the warm days was the vicious Illinois mosquito.

During the week, I was consumed by practical realities. I was filling out forms for the school I was heading to, and I was scheduling appointments to look at apartments. I was preparing my résumé and calling temp agencies. Steven was working during the week, and I saw him only on the weekends. But we made plans. He would move to New York after his lease was up in the coming year. We would find a way to stay together. We made the most of our time, but I had obligations to the 900 aunts and uncles I was leaving behind. A few days before I left, I said a proper goodbye to Saint Louis.

Twenty of my friends met me in Forest Park. We went to the zoo and the Arch, and we ended up at a Thai restaurant in South City near Tower Grove Park. We sat around a table for a few hours, and both Steven and I cried as we walked out together. He drove me to the airport as well. My mother said she couldn't handle it, and Dad always did what she asked. I packed my suitcase into his car, and he drove me to Lambert and sat with me while I waited for line to security to shorten. One hour before my flight, I hugged him and walked through security.

I arrived in New York after flight delays and toll bridges at two o'clock in the morning. I had \$300 to my name, and I paid nearly 100 of them to take a taxi to Manhattan from Newark, New Jersey. I had never been to New York before, and I took the subways alone the next day. I ended up in Washington Square Park. I sat near the dog run and cried.

One month later, my parents arrived at my apartment with my small dog and boxes of books. I gave them a crash tour of the city, running them past the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty before packing them up in their car to head back to Illinois. They stayed in my roommate's bedroom while he was touring with the cast of *Grease*. In the mornings, they told me that my neighborhood was safe, which is the lie it tells during the day. They stayed two days, just long enough to miss the gunshots that came days later. On the way out, we walked down to the parking lot together, and we said our goodbyes. I wouldn't see them again until Christmas.

I fell into this new place easily. I became isolated and irritable, like everyone who has to leave an office building in SoHo at six o'clock at night. And I was a staple of the neighborhood I had joined. No one spoke my language, and hiding from people was easier than I thought it would be. I walked down the stairs in my building three times a day and took my dog to pee on concrete sidewalks. She would stare up at me questioning the missing grass that was spread all over her last city home.

Routines are everyone's forte, and I found myself a decent job at a moderately socially responsible company. I started grad school, and I waited for people to show up on my doorstep, begging me to come back to the Midwest, to the people who loved me.

Steven came to visit me the week before Thanksgiving. He showed up at my office on a Wednesday night, and we walked all over the city over the following three days. I bought tickets to a reading we'd both wanted to see, and we fell asleep watching German films in my bedroom with

Latin music pouring in from the street. He'd been feeling sick again, and he fell asleep sooner than I did, so I had to get up in the middle of the night and move to the living room when his snores kept me from staying asleep as usual.

The day before he left, we were riding the subway when he was first mean to me. I can't say this is the truth, but in my mind, he told me that we couldn't be close like we were, that the distance was too much. He may have told me he needed distance. I can't be sure.

After he left, I called less and less.

I didn't see him again until Christmas. I came home on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December, and my sister met me at the airport. She hugged me, and she cried. I was happy to see my nephew in the backseat when I shoved my luggage, filled with presents into the open trunk. We drove the distance from Lambert Saint Louis to my parents' house in Illinois. I carried my luggage up to my old bedroom, one I hadn't used for more than two years, and I fell onto the bed and slept.

I spent most of my winter vacation with my mother. She cooked me tuna noodle casserole and potato soup and corned beef and cabbage, and we watched *The Dog Whisperer*. I waited for Steven to call.

When he did, he drove me to a movie I didn't want to see, and he fell asleep on my bedroom floor. We didn't go to dinner. We didn't talk. He left in the morning when my mother's vacuum woke us up. And he said he would meet on Saturday, after I had brunch with a friend.

I had brunch with Nancy on Saturday, and we sat for hours talking about all the things I had missed since I left the school she teaches at. I showed her pictures of my new life, and she smiled

and acted like she was proud. She was kind, and when Steven stood me up, she stayed with me while I tried to convince myself it wasn't something I'd done.

I was in her car, and I called him. I was supposed to tell him I'd finished with Nancy, and I was in the city, and we could meet. He said he wouldn't meet me. He'd thought it was tentative (a lie). He said he was seeing a movie with someone else—someone he'd seen several times while I was in town and who lived in the area. When he asked me if I needed him to take me to the restaurant for dinner to meet all the friends we share, I just said, "Yes. I don't have a car, remember?" He said he'd call me after the movie, and I went to my sister's house in Dogtown and waited for the two-hour movie to end.

But he didn't call me until five minutes before we were supposed to be at the restaurant. He said he'd be there soon. He said for me to wait outside. Ten minutes later, he picked me up on Pierce Street and we arrived twenty minutes late to dinner. We said goodbye that night, and I did not see him again before I left for New York.

When I got back to New York, I fell back into my pattern. I went to my classes and churned out my papers, and I showed up to work to make lines with a red china marker on book covers. I met with new friends and new teachers, and I made new plans. And when he called me two weeks after the New Year, I decided to tell him the truth.

He asked me if something was wrong, and I just let it go. I tried to be diplomatic—as much as I could in that situation. I told him how I felt, those old lessons from therapy I always thought I'd be able to use one day. I told him I felt hurt and abandoned when I was in town. I told him I was disappointed that we didn't really spend time together and that it did not seem to be a concern to him while I was there.

And he said I expected too much. I expected things to be the same, and that could never happen. I don't remember if this is true, but in my mind, he told me we weren't as connected as we were before.

And then he stopped calling.

When I hadn't heard from Steven in two weeks, I started to worry. I called a mutual friend and asked if she'd heard from him. She told me she had. He had promised to pick something up from her apartment, but he never arrived, and when she called a second time, he did not answer. She said she'd let me know if she heard anything. And when I heard from her, it was not about him. She had still not heard from him; she was looking for someone to housesit, and she thought I might be in town by chance.

When I could no longer get any information about him—whether he was sick or healthy—I emailed him. He wouldn't call. He wouldn't answer. So email was all I had left. I wrote him a message about worry and anger. I told him what I thought had happened and what I thought was continuing to happen. And I told him I loved him and missed him, and I would be waiting when he came around.

But he never did.

### *Jonathan*

Jonathan was a neighbor boy—sort of. His sister lived down the road, another of the few children to litter the streets of Shattuc. But he lived in Chicago. He went to a boarding school. He was sixteen years old.

Judith Ann was having a birthday party, but I hadn't planned to go. My mother convinced

me. She said Judith Ann had no friends. I was the only girl in town who would even talk to her. She said I should be a good Catholic—something I still cared about then. She told me it was a good deed to go. So I went. I didn't pack a bag. She lived only one block away, and we'd be sleeping in tents. I'd been camping a thousand times before. Only this time, there would be no lake, no woods. It was just a back yard with a fire pit and a dog barking in a pen behind us.

In my memory, Judith Ann is barely present. I can only see him. I was thirteen years old, and I had never been the focus of a boy's attention. He talked only to me, though I don't remember anything he said. Even when the three of us went for a walk around the few blocks that make up the town, I can only remember his hands gliding up under my shirt and into my bra—a silk pink thing with a bow between the cups my mother had bought. I never thought about bras before this. I never cared if they were pretty or tattered. I never thought about my body at all.

When we made it back to the house, Judith Ann crawled into her tent and went to bed. Jonathan and I sat up by the fire. I can't remember talking to him; though, I know I must have. I can't remember anything he said before. When I grew tired sometime after midnight, I went to my tent. He followed me into the blue vinyl tent and climbed over me once we were inside. He said nothing. This I remember.

When he kissed me, I didn't know how to react. I'd never been kissed this way before. His big tongue filled my entire mouth, and I barely moved. I could feel his taste buds run across the roof of my mouth as he moved his mouth in mine. I did not push him away. I did nothing.

Eventually his hands began to travel the length of my body. My jean shorts were easy enough for him to unfasten. And when he started to move them downward, I finally reacted. I pulled his hand off my body and let him continue kissing me. But his hands travelled down again. And when I pulled him away, he took my arms and bent them behind my back. He pressed his

forearm across my chest to hold me down, but I didn't squirm. I didn't move at all. With his other hand he got into my shorts and pulled them down.

It was then that I began squirming. I shuffled under his weight trying to free my arms, but I couldn't. I was small at that age, and his jock-like build was heavy on top of me. I wiggled as much as I could beneath him, but he'd gotten my underwear down around my knees. And he pushed me roughly into the ground beneath the tent, proving his strength.

I stopped moving when I realized he'd pulled his own pants down. I don't remember him doing so; I only remember seeing his jeans on the ground beside me. It was when he tried to put himself inside me that he realized he was too big. And I was too small. This is when I started to bleed. He moved off of me and put his hand inside me. When he pushed his whole fist inside me, I felt something tear—something I couldn't name. And the blood began pouring quickly and heavily from my body onto the bottom of the blue tent. When the blood had covered his hand, he pulled it out and pushed himself inside me, finding it much easier now that my body was wet with blood.

He was not on top of me long. I can't remember what his body felt like inside mine—only the burning sensation of flesh ripped open. He rolled off of me in a matter of minutes, and I still did not move. When he pulled his jeans on, I was only hoping he'd leave the tent, leave me alone. And he did, but not before he said the only thing I remember hearing in his voice. He turned to me before sitting up. He said, "Do you want me to leave?"

I did not speak. I only nodded.

"Thank you," he said. And then he climbed out of the tent.

I did not cry. I turned away from the tent opening, and I fell asleep. When I awoke, I saw the blood dried all over the blue vinyl of the tent, all over my legs still bare, all over everything. I was no longer bleeding, but I was sore. It took me what seemed like an hour to pull my underwear

and shorts back on. Both were stained with blood, but I pulled them on anyway. It was nearing dawn when I unzipped the tent door, so I ran from the tent, down the block, and back into my own home.

Everyone was sleeping. I'd counted on this. I pulled off my clothes in the bathroom and stepped into the shower. I only stayed in long enough to rinse the blood off my legs. I quickly got out and put on clean clothes, stuffing my old jeans, tee shirt, underwear, and pink bra into a plastic bag that I buried in the bottom of my closet, beneath old Barbies and CareBears from what then seemed like a lifetime ago. No one found the clothes. I waited until we were burning leaves again. No one watched the fires burn in the backyard, so I took the bag out while the rest of the family stayed in the house. I dropped the clothes into the fire and never saw them again.

I didn't tell my family. I didn't tell anyone, but my secret was almost revealed by someone else. It was junior high. People talked. When Judith Ann got to school early the next week, she told everyone. She said I'd had sex with her brother in a tent in her backyard. When the rumor didn't seem to excite enough, she amped it up. Midway into the school week, I was called to the office. I sat in a room with the counselor and the principal, a stern and imposing middle-aged man with a shock of black hair, and resisted questioning. Mrs. Nattier, the counselor, asked me over and over, "Did he rape you?"

"No," I said. "Nothing happened."

Nothing happened. I said this over and over until it was the truth. Nothing happened. Nothing happened.

