

2017

# Gnaw Bone

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Gnaw Bone

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Tiffany Joslin

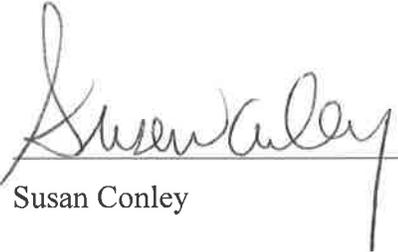
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2017

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2017

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Tiffany Joslin entitled *Gnaw Bone* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
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## Abstract

Even in the woods of Indiana (in an unincorporated community called Gnaw Bone, to be exact) life happens much as it happens elsewhere—people fight, they fall in love, they go to jail. I escaped this place of my childhood and moved to Washington, D.C., where I learned that much is the same no matter where I go. By exploring significant moments of my childhood in the region many call the Heartland and comparing it to my new city life, I touch on themes our country as a whole is pondering—identity, belonging, acceptance, and greed. I shine a light on an often-overlooked part of the country that, for me, contains a family that is beautiful and loving because of their imperfections.

## Acknowledgements

I owe deep thanks mainly to one person—my boyfriend, Joey. He was my sounding board, refused to let me quit when I threatened to, and held my hand when I became afraid I wasn't good enough. My thesis would never have come together without his gentle push from the back.

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## Preface

I wish that the story I had to tell about living in the Midwest did not include poverty. That my life somehow subverted the stereotype of poor hicks living in the woods. On the surface, unfortunately, it does not. My family seesawed between being impoverished and working poor—the difference unnoticeable at the time. And, spurred by our lack of money, my parents stopped caring for our house. My mom rarely deep cleaned, only swept the floors every other month, and let dust build up on the furniture. My dad owned a landscaping business, but did not tend to the yard, aside from mowing the grass (one of those cobbler’s children go barefoot situations). Their lean bank accounts did not allow us to fix problems that arose, like the septic system that leaked into the woods my entire childhood—and still does, although it is technically illegal. Or the shifting foundation of the house that is slowly spreading cracks on the walls along the upstairs hallway.

As a child, I picked up the slack—I cleaned inside the home and nourished the flowerbeds, even when I was 10 years old. And all this work created a deep-seated resentment toward my parents and housework. I didn’t realize any of this until I started writing my thesis. Subconsciously, I may have known it, but I hadn’t connected the dots. In high school, I pitied my friend, Abra, because her mom expected Abra to raise her four younger siblings while she worked or went out with men. I used to ask myself, “How could her mom expect such things of a child?” But, while editing this thesis, I realized that, in many ways, Abra and my childhood were the same. Except for me, the younger siblings were the carpets, the linen closet, and our dog, Shadow, that we adopted even after I objected but my older brother begged, saying, “All you have to do is feed it.”

Shadow became my responsibility, one of the many that I never asked for but was handed.

At 28, I have only recently been comfortable saying out loud that my family was poor or that I dislike the idea of domesticity because of my childhood. Writing this thesis helped me get to that point. In fact, the writing process may be the only reason I can sit here and say it today—by putting it on paper, I made it acceptable. Through workshops, I became accepted. Yet it took a lot of time, patience, and coaxing from fellow students to get a point where I was comfortable writing about myself or putting myself out there.

When I first entered the program, I had a specific idea of what I wanted to write about—my generation’s obsession with domesticity. I looked around at my millennial friends and saw that carefully curating one’s home, along with homemade tasks like knitting and baking, was cool. Design blogs flourished with millions of viewers per month, most of them women. At first I was confused. But then I read Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*, and I became afraid that we were repeating the mistakes of our foremothers.

First, Friedan said that housewives of the 1960s tried to make their homes the creative focus of their lives, but that none of them found it fulfilling. She conducted extensive interviews with housewives in many parts of the United States, and most of them admitted they were not content with their only priorities directed at their home. Others told Friedan they were happy, but by the end of the conversation, the housewife revealed a secret misery that may have surprised even her. The only women who appeared fulfilled with their lives were the women with non-domestic pursuits. In my writing, I explored whether millennial women were making the same mistake.

During my first workshop at Stonecoast with Deb Marquart in the summer of 2015, I had submitted an intentionally vague manuscript. My goal for the program was to avoid writing about myself. I thought I could be more effective if I wrote about other people, and also more marketable (a constant itch that comes from growing up poor—how to make money off of any pursuit). I did not want to write a memoir. Please, God, don't make me write a memoir. It wasn't that I felt there was no use in writing a memoir, but I assumed I didn't have enough experience yet. I was only 26, after all. Plus, I needed to be marketable.

In the first workshop with Deb, I struggled with knowing that my writing was imperfect. In an effort to prove myself as a talented writer, I brought in a new printout of the first three paragraphs—copies for each of my classmates. I had re-worked the introduction because I knew my first attempt had failed, and I was also impatient. (I hadn't quite grasped the fact that taking a rest from the writing is one of the best things you can do gain perspective.) The thought of someone reading my drafted writing and possibly judging me terrified me—especially that they were strangers who could be more “literary” than me, or have come from well-educated backgrounds. I wanted to prove that I could write.

Several minutes before our workshop started, I showed Deb what I considered my improvements, and she asked, “Why did you already edit it?” I wanted to say “because since submitting on May, I have become what I think is a much better writer,” or “because I don't understand how to rest,” or “because I am afraid I am a bad writer.” Instead, I said, “I couldn't help myself.”

But the writing didn't make sense to people, even with my added edits. My readers were interested in the idea, the commentary on my generation, but felt it lacked consistency. For consistency, the writing needed a main character, a narrator living her life, me. But I still thought I could make my writing more marketable without writing about myself.

So I avoided it for the next two residencies, in January and July—I wrote about domesticity in a broad sense. During the next January residency, I submitted another piece about identity and millennials' struggle to obtain it and their efforts to find an identity through domesticity. But once again it was vague. My friend Heather said to me, "I don't get it. Why are you writing this?" She didn't understand why I cared about it. And I couldn't answer her. Others in the workshop offered similar thoughts, and suggested I needed to physically complete the domestic acts in order to work through my problems. They said I needed to cook, to sew, and to garden, but it didn't click with me yet.

That following semester (my second), I worked with Jaed Coffin on a series of longform essays. I told him I wanted to try longform journalism and he was excited to work with me. I reached out to a local non-profit in D.C. that focused on gaining and protecting rights for the African American population in the city. When I attended their annual members' meeting, I asked if they had any stories I could write. Immediately, I met a guy named Will, a housing rights lawyer, who was ramping up his efforts to create a campaign to protect lower income people who would potentially be pushed out of their affordable housing units when a housing complex, Brookland Manor, would be renovated the following year. They wanted me to write a story about the threat the residents faced.

I jumped on the assignment. For the next five months, I interviewed residents, attended meetings, and researched urban housing issues. It was exhausting on top of working full time, but Jaed allowed me to fold in my drafts as part of my monthly packets for Stonecoast, which was a huge help. For one of the packets, I tried to smash all of the information I gathered into one essay, which ended up being an 18-page monstrosity. Jaed convinced me to cut it down. In the end, I produced a 5-page essay that I was proud of, and the non-profit published it on their website.

This experience was one of the more challenging and fulfilling of my entire time at Stonecoast. I loved feeling like my writing brought a little more attention to an important issue. I met wonderful people while conducting interviews (along with scummy people like the president of the development company who practically threatened to sue me if I published the article, but I like to stay positive). But at the same time, it felt too far out of my wheelhouse. When I submitted a longer version of this article for the Writing About Race workshop at Stonecoast the next summer, one of my fellow students said, “This is not the essay that you meant to write.” And I knew they were right, although I wasn’t sure what I was meant to write instead at that point.

For the other workshop that residency, I had submitted an essay about motherhood, even though I am not a mother. I used an example from my friend’s life of struggling with postpartum depression but not seeking help, along with samples from a book by Rachel Cusk called *A Life’s Work* about the struggles of motherhood. I felt that both represented the sides of motherhood that no one talked about—the sadness, the emptiness, the depression. Yet almost every student in the room was a mother, and their reactions were unanimous—this darkness was not their experience of motherhood. For

them, it was the opposite. Part of me wondered if they were covering up at least some of the hardship, because surely it wasn't all joyous, but the other part of me got the message—I needed to write about myself and my own fears about becoming a mother and why I had those anxieties. The problem was that I didn't know why I was afraid yet.

One of the women in the class—someone who grew to be my friend in person—reacted so harshly to my writing that reading her notes on my manuscript felt like a personal attack. Her cursive grew larger and more erratic as I flipped the pages. About two thirds of the way through, she scrawled in large red letters, “Who cares?” At that point, I had to close the manuscript. I threw it in the trash, out of self-preservation. There was nothing she had written that would serve me. I had struck a nerve, and she should have read back over her notes and realized they were too emotional, but I forgave her. It did surprise me, though, that my writing could elicit such a fervent reaction. This experience allowed me to see that I did need to come from a personal place in my writing, or else it could easily be torn apart.

Also, in Susan Conley's workshop, she asked us to complete a writing exercise with a scene where something unexpected happened. I wrote the scene of seeing my dad, post-divorce, in his new house that I rarely visited, sleeping on a plastic lawn chair rather than a bed. When I read this piece out loud, I started crying in the workshop. I was embarrassed, but others had cried, and someone complimented me, saying, “I didn't know you could go there.” These tears focused me, since it was a release I needed. Before that, I was nervous about being vulnerable in workshop. I was afraid to write about my dad. But when my reading got such a positive response, it showed me that I

could face my demons among these people. And, that short writing sample turned into an essay for my thesis.

After Susan's workshop, all of my school friends told me, "You need to write about your dad. You need to write about your family." So I did.

For my third residency, I returned to my mother's house in my writing to explore her hoarding. I never expected such an essay to be easy to write, but it flowed from my fingers. When I re-read my first draft, I realized that my classmates had been right—this was interesting stuff! Finally, I was gaining the distance from the subject matter, allowing myself to be more objective and to create a narrator, rather than re-living each essay on the page as I wrote it (and breaking down into tears). I felt a voice start to form—a straight-talking persona that I could use to confront difficult situations.

During the next semester, I wrote about my brother and doomsday prepping; the Trump election and how my entire family voted for him when everyone I knew in D.C. was in mourning the day he won; my grandmothers and their ties to domesticity. I began using my grandmother's 1950s Singer sewing machine as a vessel to explore sewing and dip my toe back into it. However, Susan's advice was that I had become too attached to the sewing machine—the situation of sewing had become my crutch to propel the essays forward rather than focusing on the story. I had to scale back how much the sewing machine showed up in each piece and make my family appear more. This was difficult to start, but once I got going, it made sense and created more interest in each essay.

Then, during the residency last January, I signed up for the playwriting workshop taught by Tom Coash. I always had an interest in playwriting, but assumed it would be too impossible without training. I had been highly involved in high school technical

theater and stage-managing for several of the plays, but had never tried my hand at playwriting. Tom's assignment was to write a three-page play. I knew I wanted to write about my brother and his doomsday prepping. The two main characters—based off of my brother and me—evolved over drafts of the play. First, it was a friendly encounter between two siblings (part of me wanted to prove that a liberal and a conservative could get along) that finally morphed into a tense hunting trip where both parties are trying to save the other—the brother saving the sister from her lack of survival skills and the sister saving the brother from his paranoia. By the end, the two characters represented a realistic sibling relationship. Writing this play was a breakthrough for me—mostly because I could write it in fiction and it was a nice change.

All the while, I read several writers who inspired me to open up about my past, to admit that although I came from the middle of the country, it was not a shameful secret that I needed to keep to myself. Sarah Smarsh is a longform journalist, who comes from Kansas and writes about the middle of the country, but uses a personal lens—for example, growing up without dental care was her starting point to talking about “poor teeth” in general. She writes about the people as though they are human and their experiences matter. Also, her memoir about growing up in Kansas will be released this year. I felt I could relate to her, and if she could be so open about people in her family having crooked teeth or her constantly smelling like cigarette smoke when she was a child, maybe I could as well.

Then I read the book that was a sensation last year, J.D. Vance's *The Hillbilly Elegy*. He called himself a hillbilly! I was shocked he was open about where he was from, even though he had left the Midwest and gone on to Yale Law School. To me, that was

like fresh air, like permission not to hide who I was or where I came from anymore. Although I could never personally identify as a hick (I always pushed back against that culture), half of my family most certainly did, and I loved them not in spite of it but because of it. I wanted to share the love I felt toward them with the world, especially in these trying political times.

All the while, the other students at Stonecoast forced me to open up. My friends challenged me to perform in the talent show with them (a Firstie act that became a series of song-and-dance performances each residency) even though a ball of dread hit the pit of stomach at the idea of performing. But by the third time I performed, I wasn't nervous anymore. I also pushed myself to read in front of everyone, even though it scared me. Then my friends and I went swimming in the river one day when it was unbearable and 90 degrees, even though we didn't have bathing suits—we just stripped off our clothes and jumped in in our underwear. I had never done that before, and it is an experience I will never forget. All of these situations allowed me to become more comfortable opening up to a group of people that I was afraid were more literary than me, and potentially from a higher class or better educated than me. Opening up allowed me to write much more personally than I could have imagined.

In the future, I hope to write a book derived from these essays. Ideally, it will focus on domesticity, but told from a much more personal lens, a perspective that I would have never reached without Stonecoast. These will most likely take the form of a series of personal essays, although, the craziest thing could happen—I could write a memoir. I plan to send out some of these essays to magazines or contests in the meantime to try to get them published.

Last February, I went to the AWP conference that Suzanne Strempek-Shea encouraged me to attend. One panel focused on the working poor, and each panelist had come from a poor background and was now a successful writer. I was blown away that there were other people like me. Candid discussion about the absurdity of magazines celebrating people who were the “Top 40 Under 40” filled the room, and how, as people who grew up poor, we had to play the long game. That this work was not about becoming famous or being welcomed in elite channels but about finding something that makes us feel accomplished, and we might not get there until later than our peers.

Afterward, I went up to one of the panelists named Tennessee, who was from the Midwest, and told him my current situation—I worked in an elitist think tank in Washington, D.C. with scholars and fellows who had attended Ivy League schools. He said, “Oh my god, how do you survive?” All I could say was, “I don’t know.”

This panel inspired me to think of my writing trajectory differently. If I play the long game, I don’t need to worry about being a completely successful and published author at age 28. In the long game, 28 is very young, and I still have plenty of time. My childhood held me back—I didn’t have the financial or social capital that it takes to become successful at a young age—but that doesn’t mean I can never make it there. Plus, most successful writers don’t find their footing in their 20s.

I’m starting to accept that a writer’s life is often full of zigs and zags, and although I faced challenges in my childhood, I can still pursue writing as seriously as other students in my class and other writers in the world. In fact, I can use my disadvantages to my benefit—like when I was able to gain a more critical perspective of domesticity than my peers, only because of the struggles I faced in the past. My

deprivation does not have to define me. Anyone can be a writer, including a poor girl from the Midwest.

## **The Blue Kayak**

My therapist believes my mom is a hoarder. When I described my childhood home, my therapist diagnosed it as a clinical thing, an offshoot of obsessive-compulsive disorder. And I believe it. It makes sense. In fact, it was a relief to hear.

If it's true, it means my concerns growing up were valid. The frustration I felt with my mom's inability to let go of objects is sensible. Her attachment to the magazines, the cheap paintings, the antique figurines, the supposedly valuable doll heads stuffed in a box then forgotten, and her grandmother's old furniture is abnormal.

Worst of all is the blue kayak that has lain unused in her backyard for two years. The original clear plastic still drapes around it. During my visit home last June, my mom and I stood by our ice-rink-sized pond, playing with the dog. I stared at the kayak and said, "I'll take it out for a test ride."

"No, I want to use it first," my mom said.

“It’s been sitting here for two years.” The banana-shaped boat was planted on top of the round concrete septic cover crumbling beside the pond. “It’s probably molding inside that plastic.”

“I bought it. I should get the first try.” My mom is nothing if not stubborn.

“Great, so no one will ever use it.” I rolled my eyes, trying to convince myself that because it wasn’t my kayak, it wasn’t my responsibility.

My mom bought the blue kayak in 2014 after her best friend, Cathy, passed away. Her death was sudden and unexpected. Cathy had been almost ten years younger than my mom and maintained an active lifestyle, often hunting and fishing in her camouflage jacket. My mom only tagged along for the kayaking. Before she passed, Cathy and my mom had talked on the phone every day for years. “Wow, I can’t believe that,” my mom said to Cathy as she held the cordless phone up to her ear, more of a listener than a talker. The blue kayak has become an informal memorial to Cathy, but my mom didn’t seem to understand that it was merely a boat. It couldn’t bring back her friend.

In the house where I grew up and where my mom and brother continue to live, every room contains signs of hoarding. In the same way a hiker creates a trail through bramble, over time my family formed a walking path through the rubble in the garage—the unused kitchen table and chair set, threadbare tires, a broken desk, crates of scratched vinyl records, spare five-gallon buckets, stacks of chipped flowerpots, and two-dozen dried-shut paint cans. Along the sidewall, my family piled wrenches and hammers on the workbench and then heaped rusted bicycles and rakes and air pumps and old litter boxes—even though we no longer owned a cat—in front, so no one could even reach it.

The back room contains trash bags and plastic containers full of forgotten future yard sale items, even though both my mom and I know that we will never hold another yard sale.

Inside the house, she stacked 30 empty picture frames, some broken, in the corner of the front living room. In the next room over, the office, cookbooks and recipes are shoved into the tall lavender cabinet so full that the doors no longer shut. The wall holds a wooden sculpture in the shape of a crescent moon with several small shelves protruding out from it, which my mom decided was a good spot for all of her miniature items—a tiny teapot, gumball machine, and clock we had collected together when I was a child, in addition to at least a dozen more she had added in the last year. This crescent moon symbolized my mom’s view on decorating—the more, the better.

In the kitchen, the original dark wooden floors make the room more claustrophobic. The cupboard under the kitchen sink was already stuffed full of cleaning products my mom picked up on sale, but, during my visit, I saw a new addition—plastic bags. My mom heard that the state of Indiana might add a five-cent plastic bag tax at stores, and I found these bags spilling out from under the sink.

“Mom,” I said, in shock. “What the hell are all of these?” What had been frustration turned to fear. I couldn’t even see the cleaning supplies underneath the sea of transparent white blazing with colorful Kroger and Wal-Mart logos. She stood on the other side of her rolling kitchen island.

“Don’t get rid of them,” my mom said, familiar with my habit of cleaning house. My mom’s hair was long and straight, but puffy like mine after I shower. She dyes it brown rather than letting the gray grow in. Five years ago, it wasn’t obvious that she was

an older mom (she had me at 41), but in the last few years, her age is more apparent. Her skin is wrinkled and she lost two inches of height.

“Mom, you don’t need this many. What are you even going to do with them?” I asked.

She thought for a second. “Maybe I can sell them.”

My mouth dropped. “Sell them? Who are you going to sell them to?”

“Well, if the tax is five cents, I could sell them for three cents each.”

My jaw tightened. “To who, mom? Who in God’s name is going to come to your house and buy a bunch of plastic bags?”

“Well, I don’t know,” she said, sipping coffee from the mug in her hand. “They’re mine. Leave them.” She started to walk away.

“No freaking way am I leaving these,” I said. “This is serious hoarder stuff.” I took in a deep breath and put my fingertips to my temples. “Mom. You always say you’re worried about becoming a bag lady. What does this look like to you?”

She stopped walking and laughed, almost spilling her coffee. At least we could be honest with each other.

“What about half, then?” I said. “I throw away half of them and you keep the other half.”

“Fine.”

“OK. That’s something.” She walked upstairs and I emptied out half of the cabinet into a larger trash bag and hung that from a nail on the wall of the garage. I knew I was only passing the buck to a room less used, but at least they were out of sight. I put

the rest in the back of her car and offered to take them to the recycling center. When I went home six months later, the cabinet was full of bags again.

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As a kid, I was the designated house cleaner. Nobody forced me to clean, but I couldn't live with the dust and the disarray. By the age of nine, I knew my mom wouldn't clean before we had company over. And it wouldn't have even occurred to my dad or my brother. One Friday, when I was nine years old, we invited my dad's family over for dinner. Many of our Hoosier relatives lived within a 20-mile radius of our home. Two sets of aunts and uncles were coming, along with my three cousins, and my grandma and grandpa. I knew their houses were much more put together than mine. Even though they were family, I thought they might judge us. Without saying anything to my mom, I grabbed a dust rag and a can of Pledge from under the sink and headed to the front living room.

I moved the ashtray crowded with butts and stray papers from the top of the thick antique coffee table to the floor and sprayed the rag with Pledge, wiping the layer of dust and flecks of cigarette ash from the dark wood. Two open pockets on both sides of the coffee table were stuffed with boxes of family photos and magazines she swore she would read one day. I swept the rag along the outer edges of the pile of magazines even though I knew it wouldn't make a difference. After I emptied its contents in the bathroom trashcan, I placed the ashtray back on the table. A gold candleholder with a Goodwill sticker on the bottom sat candle-less, so I shoved it into the drawer in the side table. My mom would never notice it was missing—she only got upset if you threw away something in front of her. Then, after dusting the rest of the furniture and rearranging the

paraphernalia to look halfway thought out, I took a vacuum to the chestnut carpet. This room was one of the least-used spaces in our 9-room two-story house, which made it more manageable for organizing. It was also the first thing guests saw when they walked in.

“Are you cleaning?” my mom asked from the hallway after I flicked off the vacuum. “You’re so sweet,” she said. She thought I was doing this to help her. In reality, I was trying to make myself look better. My mom wasn’t a helper type—she didn’t jump in and help others in the kitchen or while cleaning. She continued up the stairs.

My family came over that night, and I was a nervous wreck the whole time. I kept thinking, “Please don’t walk into the office or you’ll be able to see the hundreds of Post-It Notes and scraps of papers with notes my mom made to herself on her desk,” or “I hope the smoke smell isn’t too bad.”

In my new apartment in DC, I now pick up before people come over; I dust the furniture; I make sure the bathroom is clean. It’s borderline obsessive, but my upbringing makes me a bad judge. Do I clean like a normal person or am I overly anxious about things being perfect? If the floor is dirty or my apartment becomes cluttered, I get stressed. On Sunday mornings, the first things I do are make the bed, wipe down the counters, and start the laundry. It’s not that I’m pressed for time. I find it difficult—if not impossible—to be calm in an untidy space.

I judge others peoples’ homes for how they look as well. Most people do this, I think, but my judgments are more personal, like it’s a moral failing if the person has a cluttered home. My mom failed in some ways, and I struggle to overcome those ideas today, as if her failures as a housekeeper mean she also failed as a mother and a wife.

When I was a child, I sat in the faded navy blue armchair and flipped through *Good Housekeeping* magazine, which my mom subscribed to. In each of the orderly pictures, I saw my desired future—a bright white living room with walls of windows; a pair of standing lamps on each side of a pastel orange couch that fit a beach theme; a white-and-blue striped decorative life-preserver placed exactly in the middle of the mantel over a stone fireplace. If I could have that home, I could be a different person. I would be a better person. I could pretend I was normal.

Yet now that I've grown up, pretending has become exhausting. I pretend every day at the prestigious think tank full of promising young Ivy Leaguers where I work that I am one of them. After six years, I have grown accustomed to city life, but in many ways, I am a country girl at heart. My workdays are spent surrounded by Harvard and Princeton graduates, yet my childhood passed among the walnuts cracked open by the squirrels, the cattails in our pond that tasted like cucumbers when you ripped them out and crunched on the ends, and the tea parties made of inedible berries piled on oak leaf plates. Now I am behind a computer, sometimes using my mind for research, but more often playing secretary for over-sized egos.

Three years ago, when I was relatively new at work, a scholar asked me where I went to school during our forced communal Christmas party with its cloth napkins and tacky crimson tablecloths. I knew the answer wouldn't live up.

“Indiana University,” I said. My face matched the tablecloth and I felt like everyone was staring at me, trying to decipher this Midwest enigma. It reminded me of elementary school, when kids asked what my dad did for a living, which I dreaded.

“Landscaper,” I choked out, since it was the most civilized word I could think of to describe a man in ripped jeans and sweatshirts with holes from getting caught in thorns and whose hands were calloused and brown. I got the think tank job because I was well traveled and could function in an international environment, since we worked with people from all over the world. Also, I had worked in a coffee shop, which, to my boss, meant that I knew how to work hard. But when I put on a work outfit, like my forest green pencil skirt and black suede wedges, I don’t feel like it shows the real me.

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My mom often accused me of recklessly disposing her belongings.

“What if we need those?” she asked when I chucked a broken pair of gardening shears in the trash when I was living with her after college. She also fished her 15-year-old hair dryer out of the garbage the following year, even though it smelled like burnt hair and I had bought her a new one for Christmas.

“I can still use this,” my mom said. The two times in my entire life when she did need something I had thrown out was proof to her that she was right.

Then, the following December, my mom and I discussed her house over the phone ahead of my Christmas visit.

“I just don’t know what to do with this front living room,” she said. “I feel like I have a hundred pictures sitting in there and have no idea where to put any of them.” I knew she was playing the victim.

But then aunt texted me: “You need to help your mom organize her house. She is struggling.” I almost responded that my brother lived with my mom, did not have a job, and therefore had all the time in the world to help, but I refrained.

I agreed to help. I expected to have to pick between two or three wall hangings, but, when I entered the front door, I saw at least 15 paintings, plaques, and framed art she had bought at Goodwill resting against the oversized chair and along the near wall. She also had formed a collection of orange and pink candles and vases to match an oversized painting of poppies (which I liked). A mishmash of colorful pillows crowded on the sofa. I almost cried.

I got down to work the second day of my visit, even though it was Christmas Eve. I cleared out everything from the room, even from the walls. I wished I could paint because the walls were stained from cigarette smoke, but I stuck with a manageable goal. While I was picking up the stack of picture frames in the corner, I saw what looked like a desiccated piece of fruit. I leaned in closer and realized with a fright that it was a dead frog that had been there for a long while. I showed it to my mom, a look of horror on my face.

“I thought a frog had gotten in here,” she said, chuckling to herself. “And now that I’m thinking of it, I guess I never saw it again.”

“When was that, mom?” I said, my mouth open in shock.

“Oh, a couple of years ago.”

I felt my stomach turn. Did she not realize this was what happened on that TV show about hoarders? They found dead cats in the back of a closet that had not been cleaned in 10 years. Her lack of reaction worried me more than the fact that my mom had a dead frog in her living room for years and had no idea.

I regained my strength and picked only the items that would fit, trying to force my mom to get rid of the rest. However, she made me tuck several pieces into a bin in the

garage to save for a future yard sale that will never happen—she needed to hope she could regain some of her lost money. I spent the entire first half of Christmas Eve organizing that room. It felt both draining and cathartic.

But when I returned home six months later, even though I joked with her that she wasn't allowed to touch anything in that room, she had switched out every single picture and added a two-foot-tall fake daisy in a pot. I groaned as I walked by but didn't say anything about it. I knew there was nothing I could do.

My mom and I were surprisingly close while I grew up, despite our opposing viewpoints. We seemed to stumble into little adventures, like the time she won tickets to New York City in December and we spent the frigid weekend running down the streets, hopping from mini-mart to tourist shop because we couldn't handle the strong city wind in our faces for more than a minute. Or, on a drive to the airport in the middle of the night one January, when she said from behind the wheel, "I feel like I'm ice skating!"

"What?" I said, "I don't want to hear that!" We both burst out laughing. Her wild sense of humor is my favorite quality of my mom's.

In a way, though, our closeness made her hoarding more difficult to handle. My mom wanted me to grow up in her image, but, for whatever reason, I already had a pretty clear idea of who I was. She wanted me to wear pink frilly dresses, but by the time I was six, I stomped my feet and screamed when she tried. She still won't buy me pink clothes because I expressed such a hatred against the color as a kid. When she tried to teach me how to cook once every six months until I was a teenager, I stuck out my tongue.

My mom has been financially independent since she was 15. Her dad was stingy with her and her siblings and only bought them clothes once a year. Her shoes were often

too small. When my mom asked her parents to buy her a new dress for a dance when she was 15, her dad yelled at her, saying, “You don’t need a goddamned dress.” My mom ended up going to the dance in an old dress. That day, she decided never to ask for money from her parents again, and she didn’t. She survived the rest of her teenage years with babysitting money.

Today, my mom is Gail, the Coupon Queen. I have seen her reduce a \$300 grocery bill to \$75 by using double coupons and only buying what was on sale. It was impressive, but she caused long waits for the people behind her at the store. As a kid, I stood by her cart, feeling the tension grow in the customers behind her as she spent five minutes looking for one coupon in her overstuffed purse. My brother and I squirmed at her side. My frustration was more internalized than my brother’s—he huffed out loud. My mom joked with people behind her about being forgetful, but they didn’t find it funny. If she couldn’t find the coupon, even after five minutes of delay, she asked the cashier to put the item back on the shelf.

When I was 17, my mom and I took a flight together to a family reunion in North Carolina. My mom worked for United Airlines, so she was able to obtain free or nearly free plane tickets. My family of four had flown to Hawaii for \$75 total. The flight attendant stopped by and asked me if we wanted anything to drink, but I declined. My mom ordered a Pepsi, and, as the attendant was grabbing ice for her cup, she said to me, “Don’t ever refuse free things if they’re offered to you.”

“But I’m not thirsty,” I said.

“So what?” she said. “You can keep it for later.” My stomach churned. Her advice felt like sandpaper against my still-developing morals. I wanted to live my life as simply

as possible. Ordering a soda so I could get something free felt gross to me. My mom didn't drink her Pepsi, but shoved the can into her already-full purse.

My mom hoarded certain things and completely skimped on others. Although she shopped after-Christmas sales, she considered gift bags and tissue paper excessive. We reused old bags each year, some for so long that they became outdated and giving them away was embarrassing. Except for crinkled scraps from Victoria's Secret bags or other people's presents, we didn't have tissue paper to put over gifts. I learned as a kid to live with what I had, and I still hesitate to buy tissue paper.

But one Christmas, right after my dad was arrested, my mom was determined to make it magical. To her, this meant gifts, so my brother and I came downstairs to a mountain of presents that reached halfway up the tree. The pile was taller than me, and was made up mostly of tiny, individually wrapped packages. It must have taken days for my mom to wrap all of them. They turned out to be rubber Disney characters, like Chip 'n' Dale and Mickey Mouse, that she had gotten for free by sending in UPCs from cereal boxes. Although we didn't know how to play with them, Ryan and I had gallon Ziploc bags full of these characters for years after that because we couldn't bear to throw them out.

It is difficult for me to admit that my mom is a hoarder because it means that she isn't perfect. She handed down to me the tension she feels when looking at a price tag, something I still experience even though I moved away from rural Indiana six years ago. Money was tight, but there were other families with less that reassured their children more.

“Why didn’t you ever tell us things were going to be OK?” I asked her about four years ago when we were sitting in our living room. “That we were going to be fine and that we were safe?”

“I didn’t want to lie to you,” my mom said. “How was I supposed to know?”

Today I’m left with a certainty that things will not be fine, that I am not safe, and that nothing is guaranteed to be OK. Although I am financially stable, I never have enough money. I could always use more. I am nearly obsessive about cleanliness and order. Dreams where I am trapped inside my childhood home still haunt me.

And that damned blue kayak continues to lie there.

## **Gnaw Bone**

When I was a kid, I refused to tell people I was from Gnaw Bone. The name embarrassed me. I always said “Nashville” when people from out of state asked, since Nashville was the closest real town and was our technical address. When anyone who knew the area asked specifically where I lived, I said, “Towards Columbus.” Even today, I live in Washington, D.C. but I would never say I was from Gnaw Bone. I don’t think I ever have.

Unless you saw the sign, you might not even know you were driving through Gnaw Bone, Indiana. There are only a few businesses, like the auto shop Charlie Wright owns just off of the main Highway 46 strip. My mom insists on taking her car to Charlie even though her previous Kia was there every other week for one headache or another.

Wright’s Auto Parts is tucked behind the Gnaw Mart, where they sell gasoline and famous pork tenderloins that were featured in *Gourmet Magazine* in 2003. I ate their pork tenderloin once—it was tasty, for fried pork. The store is unassuming; you might think it was abandoned since the unpaved parking lot swirls clouds of dust in the summer. The

shop used to be owned by a man named Beni, my elementary school bus driver and softball coach, but he sold it over 10 years ago and the pork tenderloins disappeared. It passed through several hands, and after a multi-year hiatus, the tenderloins returned. Now, an Indian man who my mom befriended after running there for cigarettes enough times to learn of his struggles to maintain customers owns the store, although I'm not sure my mom knows his name. My dad and I used to eat there when it was called Gnaw Bone Food & Fuel when I was nine. We bought the most delicious cheese sticks I have ever eaten—they were gigantic and full of gooey mozzarella, and came with a healthy helping of marinara sauce for dipping.

The community is growing in some ways—it's the new home to the Bear Wallow Distillery, which offers tours of their warehouse whiskey production, and the Brown County Winery has been there for years. The Gnaw Bone Sorghum Mill—a large roadside market adjacent to the Gnaw Mart—stocks persimmon pudding bars to sell in the fall. Persimmons grow down the road a little ways, near the field just past the Gnaw Mart where a gospel church and a Pentecostal church (also owned by Charlie Wright) share the space. A right turn there onto Valley Branch Road leads to my house. Once, my grandmother stopped her truck on this road to nab a bucketful of the orange mouth-numbing fruit that she later crushed through an antique sieve to bake into homemade persimmon pudding, an Indiana staple.

But it is shrinking in other ways. Gnaw Bone used to be known as the Flea Market Capital of the World, but the Wikipedia page no longer boasts that label. Three flea markets are left, stationed on either side of 46 just past Valley Branch Road, but even they are covered in blue tarps most of the year. I often accompanied my mom to the flea

markets as a kid to scope out cheap deals. I asked to visit the stand run by a Native American man who sold miniature statues of eagles, rabbit's feet, and leather pouches. My mom bought me a dream catcher from him, saying everyone needed one. Black leather wrapped around a circular base that was woven with string in spider web pattern. Three soft leather straps hung from the bottom and knotted around velvet feathers. To my mom, dream catchers were lucky because they warded off bad dreams. To me, it was soft and comforting. I fondled the leather between my fingers and stroked the feathers as if they were still attached to a bird. I didn't believe it would catch my dreams, and especially not my nightmares, but I hung it over my bed anyway to appease my mom.

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No one knows for sure where the name Gnaw Bone came from. Some theorize that it came from the French name Narbonne back in the late 1700s when French settlers ran around naming things. ("Indiana" originally meant "Land of the Indians." So much for that.) Others say the name came from a traveling sideshow performer Robert Gee who passed through during the Great Depression and saw the hardship that people in the community faced. "They ain't nuddin' here. How dis people stayin' alive without any more than a bone to gnaw?" Gee said, supposedly. The phrase "a gnaw bone" grew to symbolize an impoverished town, and the Indiana community embraced it.

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While I was growing up, my dad took me with him on logging trips into the woods in the area surrounding Gnaw Bone. My dad chopped up the wood and sold what we didn't use in our wood stove for \$40 per rick. His Ford truck rumbled under my butt and diesel fumes wafted into the open window. I'm not sure whether he cut down these

trees legally. It may have been friends' properties—it probably was—but my dad wasn't a stranger to skirting the law. Not only was he already a felon, but, when he saw a freshly struck deer on the side of the road after an accident, he skated to a stop and threw the carcass in the back of his truck. That was not legal, but in his mind, it was better to use the meat and stock our freezer than for it to go to waste as road kill.

The truck growled up a steep hill. When we got to the top, my dad jammed his floor shifter into first and turned off the engine.

“Stay inside,” he said as he creaked open the rusted door and slammed it again.

I fingered the tan padding coming up through the rips in the black truck seat. The radio started playing Bad to the Bone, which my dad sang along to every time he heard it, sputtering out the b's in “bad,” causing his moustache to twitch. I rolled my eyes at him when he did this, but I secretly loved his playful side. His chainsaw growled to life and I looked out the back window. He sawed a chink out of the far side of the tree, which tilted the tree's balance so it fell the right direction after he sawed all the way through. I watched him in his coveralls, scuffed leather boots, and clear plastic goggles. Wooden shards sprayed past his head and piled up on the leaf-covered ground. I worried about the tree falling the wrong way. How did he know which way it would go? Then I heard a wild crack. I wanted to jump into the floorboards, but the tree fell the way he planned—away from me.

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Growing up poor taught me that the tools to smooth out the knots of life cost money, so there was no use searching for them. My Hoosier family couldn't afford a central heating system, so we hauled logs from the bottom of the driveway to stoke the

wood stove in the winter. My dad couldn't buy a new work truck, so he maintained a steady rotation of two or three rickety ones and hoped that one of them started each morning. This was how life had to be.

I went to a sleep-away 4-H camp the summer of my ninth birthday. My mom doesn't remember how much it cost, but she said, "It couldn't have been much or we couldn't have afforded it." The list the camp director gave us said I needed a rain poncho. I stood in the upstairs bathroom of my house, looking at myself in the mirror wearing a pink polka-dotted raincoat I had used when I was much younger. "Do you think it will work?" my mom asked. I told her it would, even though it was about a foot too short and barely covered me from the rain. I figured it was the only option. Then a few days later, at camp, I remember having to don that too-short raincoat when it rained while we were on a hike. My cheeks grew hot while the other kids surrounded me in their oversized blue and black disposable ponchos. I willed the rain gods to go away. If it would only stop raining, I kept thinking, I would be normal again. Even though plastic ponchos run \$2 each, which my family could have managed, poverty made us assume that certain things—items designated luxuries—were out of our reach. We didn't bother shopping for it.

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When I was 14, my whole family gathered for dinner at my grandparents' house on the eastern edge of Gnaw Bone, less than five minutes past the flea markets. They had assembled their log cabin from a pre-built design about seven years before, after their original stone house had burnt down from a wood stove accident. The house sat in a valley with Highway 46 to the front and three acres of wooded land to the back, along

with a flowing creek. Their lawn alone expanded over an acre, and the upkeep was constant in the summer. My grandma dug up trees, replanted begonias, and trimmed hedges (I sometimes helped) while my grandpa whirled around the lawn on his riding mower.

We got together as a family almost every Friday, which my mom resented because she felt she never quite fit in with my dad's relatives. I was happy to have time to play dress up or splash in the creek with my cousins. This Friday in June, though, my grandpa had a job for us.

"You all see that organ right there?" He pointed his rough-skinned index finger to the brown boxy instrument sitting just inside the back doorway in the high-ceilinged kitchen. "I want you all to haul it out back and destroy it." My brother squawked with laughter. My mouth dropped.

"Wait, what?" my uncle Tim said with a fork full of apple pie lifted almost to his mouth.

"You might think I'm joking, but I'm serious," my grandpa said, adjusting his goggle-like eyeglasses. He adopted his preacher voice—the serious story-telling tone he used when he led grace with us as a family before a meal and when he delivered sermons at the church a few towns over every Sunday. "Grandma doesn't want it anymore. We have tried to sell it, and no one else wants it, either. We are tired of it sitting here taking up space. Now me, I'm tired of looking at it. You can take it apart however you see fit, but I want it in pieces before the night is over."

Everyone in the room perked up. I grew slightly anxious, imagining splinters flying and my dad and brother getting too wild. I wasn't sure I wanted to take part.

But 15 minutes later, my dad and my uncles had hoisted the organ through the doorway and down the back steps. Out came the sledgehammer. All 12 of us stood in a circle in the clearing under the giant tree beside the creek, staring at the beast.

“Who’s first?” Uncle Tim asked.

“I’ll do it,” my brother said. Of course he was going first. He was a 16-year-old boy.

Tim handed Ryan the sledgehammer, and he wasted no time—after everyone backed up to widen the circle, and my younger cousin, Emily, was at a safe distance, Ryan lifted the sledgehammer over his shoulder and slammed it down on top of the lid. The wooden board split in half. Everyone jumped. Ryan’s eyes grew wide as he smiled and plopped the hammer on the ground.

“So cool,” he said.

“Here, let’s hit the keys,” my uncle David, the youngest of my dad’s brothers, said. “Let’s see what it does when we open the flap and hit the keys directly.”

For my family, the purpose of a challenge like this was not to get it done the most efficiently. Instead, the point was to have a little fun. When we played Jenga, we didn’t try to win; no one (except for me) pulled out the easiest blocks—everyone yanked on the bottom-most block to see how far he or she could push the structure’s limits. When we destroyed the organ with a sledgehammer, we needed to test how the keys exploded.

David grabbed the hammer from my brother and swung, a little harder than my brother had. White and black stones flew out from the blast. Everyone laughed. I picked up a white key that had landed a few feet in front of me and felt its coolness, its broken end sharp. A few rounds later and it was my turn—even though I was hesitant.

“How heavy is it?” I asked of the sledgehammer. “How do I do it?” I made my way to the middle of the circle.

“Just take the hammer and put it behind you,” my dad said, showing me how to prop the hammer behind my shoulder. “Then just swing and slam into... something.” He laughed.

“It doesn’t matter where I hit it?” I asked.

“Does it look like it matters?”

I looked at the half-leaning structure. “OK, here I go.” I gripped the hammer and swung it over my head. A loud crack. I realized I had closed my eyes, because when I opened them, the hammer was on top of a broken leg of the organ.

“Not bad,” my dad said. I was proud that I could swing a sledgehammer.

Next, when it was my brother’s turn again, the head of the hammer came loose, as my brother was mid-swing. It flew through the air and landed on the dirt with a loud thud, just two feet in front of my six-year-old cousin Emily. Everyone screamed. Emily’s eyes grew wide.

“Oh my gosh, are you OK?” her mom asked as she leaned down to hug her.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Emily said, but seemed like she was in shock. Others crowded around her.

My grandpa picked up the head of the hammer. “Well, I’ll be,” he said and examined the hole where the wooden post had been. “I mean, I knew it was old but I didn’t think it was falling apart on me. I guess I have had it for over 40 years.” He paused. “I just have to thank God no one got hurt. Don’t worry about the rest, all. I’ll finish tearing this thing down in the morning.”

My grandparents were not poor, per say, but they lived like they were. My grandpa had a decent pension from Cummins, the manufacturing giant that supplied Columbus with a steady flow of good jobs and where my grandpa had worked as a maintenance man for 30 years. But they lived below their means, having grown up during the Depression. My grandma reused old T-shirts as dust cloths. She cut old sheets into strips and turned them into rag rugs to sell at the church sale. My grandpa hunted squirrels. But even still, they knew when it was time to move on from something, like a broken organ taking up too much space. Plus, they understood how to enjoy the journey.

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My dad is skilled at construction work, so any time something on our house needed repairs, he would do them himself. Sometimes he employed the help of a friend or my brother, but usually my brother refused. Ryan didn't want to spend the afternoon with someone who yelled at him, even if that person was his father. These projects tended to take at least six months longer than they should have. When I was around 11 years old, my dad began replacing the pressboard siding on our house with cedar because the pressboard was crumbling apart. When he first started the project, I woke to pounding on the outside of my wall at seven in the morning. However, my dad soon lost focus. Because he was unconcerned with appearance—he could have used an extra dose of vanity—my dad left the front side (the most visible side) of the ivory house unfinished for half a year because he said he didn't have time. I think he was afraid of finishing things.

Sapphire tarps blew in the breeze in front of the one white wall on the otherwise chocolate home. For me, a soon-to-be teenager, my house might as well have been

moonings people driving by, its buff ivory bottom flashing people from inside its mahogany-colored cedar shorts. Every morning, when the bus pulled up in front of my house, I sprinted to a seat so the other students couldn't stare for long at my crude home.

## **Felony**

One of the most difficult things for me to admit out loud is that my dad is a convicted felon. It sounds wrong to say because I know my dad. When I think of a felon, I think of a large man with a septum piercing and a shoulder tattoo that says “MOM.” I don’t picture a slightly overweight balding man with a country accent and whose hardest drink is Mountain Dew. But he is a felon. His record shows it. His lack of job prospects shows it. And it has been that way since I was six.

I remember the night he was arrested. If it isn’t my earliest memory, it is the most vivid. My mom tucked me in around 8 o’clock and rubbed my back until I fell asleep with my clown blanket my grandma gave me. The next thing I remember is hearing a loud banging. I sat up in bed and stared into the darkness. More pounding, and then someone yelling.

“Open this door.” And then more muffled screams I couldn’t make out from upstairs. The slamming on the door continued. I slowly lowered myself out of bed and

trudged across the dark carpeted floor to the hallway where the light had just been switched on. I heard the door open downstairs.

“Mommy?” I said. She didn’t hear me.

There was a shuffling at the bottom of the steps. “Ma’am, are you Gail A. Joslin, wife of Jerald P. “Cub” Joslin?”

“Yes.”

“Is he home tonight?”

“Yes. Why?”

“We have a search warrant out and are going to need to speak with him.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Please move aside, ma’am.”

The boots of ten police officers filed into my front entryway. I saw my brother emerge from his room on the other side of the stairwell. Ryan was eight. I hoped he would come over and comfort me. But then my mom walked up the stairs, a woman in a brown uniform behind her. I had never seen this woman before, but I ran to my mom. My mom hugged my brother and me, and I started to cry. She led us to the spare bedroom and lifted us onto the thin gold-and-sunflower comforter that scratched my face when my brother and I decided to sleep in there instead of in our own rooms. The police officer stood behind my mom as she crouched down in front of us.

“OK, kids. Do you remember what I told you last night?” she asked. “That something bad might happen with the police very soon?”

“Yes,” my brother said. I nodded.

The officer gasped. “You told them? You knew this was going to happen?”

My mom looked over her shoulder. “Yes, of course I knew what was going to happen. It’s hard not to figure out when you have a row of police cars aimed at your house for days on end.” She turned back to us as the officer shook her head in surprise. “Well, that is what is happening,” my mom said. “But I want you to know that you are going to be fine. Everything is going to be OK. Your Aunt Vicky is on her way right now.”

“You mean we can’t stay with you?” I asked.

“Well,” my mom hesitated. “I might have to go away for a few days, too.”

“No, mommy.” I pulled at my Beauty and the Beast nightgown. My heart felt like it was exploding.

“Ma’am, I’m sorry but we need you to come with us,” the officer said.

I looked up in horror and wailed. “No, mommy, no!” After the police officer escorted my mom out of the room, I yelled until my throat was sore. She shut the door and I felt like a piece of me died. My brother sat in silence on the bed, staring at the ground.

About five minutes later, the police officer came back, but without my mom. She bent down and held my hand. “I’ll tell you what,” she said. “I’m not supposed to do this, but do you have a favorite stuffed animal in your room? I can go get it for you.”

I moved my head up and down but was unable to speak, my breath coming only in bursts. I took a deep breath and calmed myself down a little, enough to say, “My lion.”

“OK, sweetie. What color is it?” she asked.

“Brown.”

“I’ll be back in one second.” The officer left the room. I felt a small tinge of relief knowing that she would be bringing my lion to me. I looked at Ryan. His eyebrows were furrowed—he looked more frustrated than upset. I knew he was thinking I was a crybaby. He always thought that when I cried. But I couldn’t help it.

The door opened, and I heard a lot of chatter and movement outside the room. The police officer came back, holding my lion, and a wave of comfort washed over me. I hugged my lion to my chest. Then the officer brought us clothes. I felt panicked when I saw them.

“Where are we going?” I asked, sniffing.

“You all are going to your aunt and uncle’s house tonight,” the officer said.

“What?” The news was like a blow to the stomach. I couldn’t even stay in my own house. I started breathing heavily. “But why?” I squeezed my lion. The police officer explained that they had to take our parents away for a few days. My head spun. I feel like I had no tears left.

The next thing I remember is the police officer walking my brother and me downstairs. We stood against the banister to the staircase as my mom was being led away in handcuffs.

“Mommy,” I said through the bars, “can’t I just kiss you one more time?” My mom looked back at the officer behind her, hoping for approval.

“No,” he said.

My mom’s eyes glossed over with tears. “Honey, I’m sorry, but they won’t let me. I love you both.” They walked her down the stairs and I heard the front door open and then shut. I sobbed again but didn’t make a sound—I didn’t have the energy.

The officer walked my brother and me down the stairs and into our low-ceilinged kitchen underneath the rectangle of a fluorescent light glaring overhead. I rubbed my eyes. I looked to my right, to the living room, and my dad was sitting in a chair with his arms behind his back and handcuffs on both of his wrists. He looked into my eyes. His were red and puffy, and I saw nothing but shame. I was ashamed at seeing him. I didn't want to see him like this.

My dad was 34 at the time; he is now 60. The felony is still on his record. Before the police launched a 6-month-long investigation into the goings-on in our home, he had been selling small amounts of pot to his friends for years.

After a bad accident where he fell 30 feet off the roof of the Columbus Hospital and barely survived, he couldn't work. He ran his own landscaping business, so disability wasn't an option. Our family needed money, so his marijuana operation ramped up. His friends came over to hang out in the garage. They smoked together and then he sold them what they wanted. One of his friends, Tony, turned into an informant for the police and came into the garage one day wearing a wire. They recorded my dad selling Tony pot, and also my mom bringing my dad change for the transaction. "Wanna smoke some pot?" my dad was recorded asking my mom. "No, I have children to raise," my mom said. However, that tape implicated my mom, who ended up with a misdemeanor for harboring a common nuisance.

My dad's fall wasn't his fault. A fellow construction worker hadn't correctly tied off the boards he used to stand on the hospital roof, so it gave way underneath him. Even though he was working at a hospital, it took the staff two hours to figure out how to get him down. He only survived because of a three-inch thick piece of foam on top of the

roof. His knee was destroyed. His nose was almost completely detached, since he landed face first. When he finally made it home, he lay in bed for over a month. He had to stop playing softball, one of his favorite hobbies. And he couldn't work for many more months, but our family still needed money.

The police officers took both my parents away that night. My aunt Vicky and uncle Tim arrived just before my parents left. My brother and I stepped up into their truck. I don't remember the drive over. But I remember getting into bed with my cousin Abby and finally falling asleep, but waking myself up with my own screaming. "Mommy! Daddy!" I cried, as if it were all a nightmare.

I was annoyed at myself for waking everyone up, for making my aunt run into the room multiple times that night to calm me down. I felt like a burden.

All my brother said was, "Quit crying."

My mom scrounged up \$400 in bail money from a friend of my aunt's the next day to get herself out of jail. We reunited the next day, and that night I slept in my own bed without screaming. However, my dad was sentenced to three months in the county jail. We didn't see him at all in those months, since my parents weren't allowed to visit each other, except for the two times he had a friend who was supposed to drive him to work release at a construction site instead drop him off down the hill from the house and ran up to see us. He wasn't supposed to visit.

I don't remember him appearing during those illegal visits, but I do remember the house feeling empty while he was gone. In a way, it was easier because we didn't have to deal with my dad's unpredictable rage. But we also couldn't leave when we wanted because my mom was sentenced to house arrest for 60 days. She could only leave the

house to go to work and to go to school (she was taking a computer class at a local community college). She wore an ankle bracelet everywhere she went, even to class. Initially, she wasn't even allowed to go grocery shopping. People from the church dropped off bags of food a few times, but my mom had to negotiate with the officers even to get one and a half hours every week to drive to Kroger to buy food.

She worked the night shift delivering the local newspaper, *The Republic*. But she couldn't leave my brother and me alone, even on a weeknight, so she took us with her. We helped her wrap each newspaper in a rubber band and, when it was raining, a yellow plastic bag. I sat in the back, handing a newspaper to my brother in the front seat, and my mom pulled our station wagon up close to the paper box. Ryan stuck the newspaper in and my mom pulled back onto the road. I stuck it out until midnight, when my fingertips were blackened and I grew too tired to keep my eyes open, when I climbed into the hatch and fell asleep on top of the piles of papers smelling of ink.

The week after my dad was arrested, my brother and I returned to school. As I was standing in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade lunch line, my neighbor named Rachel—Cheryl's daughter—joined the line behind me. "I hear your dad is in jail," she said, loud enough for the other kids around us to hear. My stomach sank. I turned around to look at her and felt surprised. We were supposed to be friends.

I scuffed my tennis shoe on the ground. "Umm... yeah," I said. "He is." I wanted her to shut up, but in a way it felt good to have someone to talk to.

"For how long?" she asked. "I heard it was a long time."

"Just for three months," I said after a pause.

"My mom said your mom went to jail, too," she said.

“I mean, yeah. But just for one night.” I hung my head. I was happy to get to the cafeteria line and be able to distract myself with Jell-O. Great, I thought. Now the whole class will find out. The whole class probably knew, but no one else said anything to me about it.

During their search, the police rifled through everything. “These people must be doing something wrong if they have so many toothpastes,” one officer said.

“I got those on sale,” my mom told them.

The police also discovered my mom’s semi-legal UPC operation. She had been sending in UPCs from cereal boxes to the companies and getting coupons for free food. She was supposed to have bought all the cereal, but was actually rifling through the recycling center to find extras. The police found the UPCs and a cash register she had been using to create her own receipts for proof of purchase. They confiscated the cash register and told her she may be charged with mail fraud. In the end, she wasn’t, but they held the register for over a year, leaving her terrified of ending up in federal jail.

Although that was the worst day of my mom’s life, she believes marijuana should be legalized so the police can worry about more important crimes. I can’t help but agree. For my family, the felony didn’t merely shift our path; it threw a bomb in the middle of road and annihilated any semblance of a way forward.

We would have never been rich, but my father never had the option to get a normal job after that. He applied, but didn’t hear back. Every time I fill out a job application, I think of how he checks the “yes” box when they ask whether you are a convicted felon. I feel lucky that I don’t have to do that, but I also know that it’s about a lot more than luck.

## Hillbilly Children

There are several benefits to having an older hoarder for a mother: A closet full of 70s clothes to rummage through when they came back in style, never having to go to the hardware store for a wood screw because it was bound to be in the junk drawer, and finding a vintage Polaroid camera complete with unused film tucked away—even though she wouldn't let me and my brother use it because “it might be valuable.” And then there was my grandmother's sewing machine.

My grandma (my mother's mother) was raised in a proper North Carolina tobacco farming family in Taber City, and gave my dad horrified looks when he put his feet up on her coffee table, like he was a Midwest hillbilly. So my brother and I, in turn, were hillbilly children. When I was ten years old, my family stayed in my grandma and grandpa's condo in the Florida Keys. One day during our visit, my grandma, wearing a crisp lemon button-up and full eyebrows, stood next to my cousin Jackie in the many-windowed, peach-walled living room of the condo that overlooked the Gulf of Mexico

and told her, “You could be a model.” She added, “You all could,” when her eyes widened after she looked at me and seemed to remember I was also in the room.

Jackie was my age, but she seemed older—she was tall, thin, and tan, a byproduct of living in Florida. Her mother had run out on her family a few years earlier, so she was forced to grow up more quickly than most kids her age, and in doing so, decided that wearing short shorts and straightening her hair was the path toward adulthood. I was still wearing my hair in a low ponytail and sporting my brother’s hand-me-down flannels, more accustomed to running around in the woods than running around with boys. My grandma often bought Jackie and my other cousins that lived in Florida gifts, but never sent any to us in Indiana. This infuriated my mom, but I didn’t notice it much. And, after my brother was born, my grandma stayed to help for three days and then said, “Well, I guess I’ll be going now,” which sent my mom into a state of panic since she had no idea how to raise a baby.

My parents met at a bar, and a few months later, they were pregnant with my brother. My mom was 39 at the time, so she figured if she ever wanted to have kids, she should probably go ahead with it, although she had been contemplating breaking up with my dad just before she found out about the pregnancy. They went on to have me two years later, but waited until I was two years old to get married. My mom’s parents were skeptical of the whole situation—my grandpa never warmed to my dad. He ignored my dad even when they shared a sofa, but he had been chums with my mom’s first husband, Steve, who was killed in a motorcycle accident many years before she met my dad, so my mom knew how her parents acted around people they liked. And, probably because we

were the offspring of a volatile start and a vulgar man like my dad, my grandparents assumed we would turn into hillbilly children.

Still, when I reached my mid-20s, I was happy to receive something from my grandma, even if she no longer had a say in it. During a visit home in 2012, I pulled out my grandma's 1950s Singer sewing machine from its case and set it on the Berber carpet of my mom's upstairs bedroom. It smelled like the inside of a rare novel, dusty and yeasty. Its belt—the rubber tube that made the machine run—was tearing from age, but otherwise it was beautiful: the body shone with a sleek black accompanied by a gold trim on the edges; when I twisted the metal knobs engraved with numbered settings, their click felt substantial, like a skeleton key turning in its lock. The pedal had a raised button perfectly suited for a big toe and was attached to a long black cord, which, when I unplugged it from its notch in the side of the machine, I noticed two brass prongs sticking out. Plugging it back in felt satisfying in a way that I rarely felt from modern machines. The rigid snap of the power cord to my Mac was the closest experience I could think of.

“Does it still work?” I asked my mom, who was sitting on the bed above me in her ruby robe.

“It better,” she said. “I paid those guys in Columbus \$100 to have it serviced. Although I guess that was 20 years ago.” We laughed. My mom had crammed the sewing machine into the closet of her upstairs spare bedroom in the early '90s after she got too busy raising my brother and me.

My grandma had given her the machine when she was 32 as an informal wedding gift for my mom's first marriage to Steve. When I was little, my mom used the Singer to mend holes in my dad's work clothes, but she was not a talented seamstress. She says

when my grandma tried to teach her how to sew when she was young, she only managed to create shorts that were too short and pants with one leg too skinny to fit her foot through.

“Can I have it?” I asked, unsure of whether my mom would be willing to let it go.

“Sure,” she said. “Somebody might as well use it.” I was surprised her hoarder tendencies didn’t flare up, causing her to cling to the machine. Instead, she let it go.

My mom drove the Singer to me in D.C. a few months later. I attempted to sew with it, but the purple thread bunched up like a bowl of spaghetti underneath the fabric, and I groaned. I didn’t know whether the machine could be fixed. After that, the Singer followed me to two different apartments, but I didn’t touch it. It became one of those tasks that grew to monstrous proportions in my mind. Whenever I walked by its spot on the wood-floored foyer of my apartment, it glared at me, abandoned and upset. Sewing was something I thought I should do—maybe it would allow me to be the type of girl that my grandma respected (and my mother, for that matter). I had never stepped into the role Jackie embraced—overly feminine, interested in looks, unmotivated to pursue a career—but a small part of me felt like I should. Maybe sewing could bring this femininity to my life.

My anxiety also hindered my ability to tackle the task of taking the sewing machine to the shop. What if the people at the store tell me the machine is unfixable? Or what if they tell me I’m too incompetent to sew? Or what if I trip and drop it over the bridge on Connecticut Avenue and have to watch my family’s history sink to the bottom of Rock Creek? That was how my anxious mind worked. Plus, it meant I had to start

sewing again. I hadn't officially decided that I wanted to wade back into the pool of domesticity.

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For me, as a child, domesticity was a byproduct of living with a hoarder mother. It was forced upon me because no one else was going to handle it. My mom was more interested in obtaining new things—the closet in her room and the spare bedroom shoved full of on-sale clothing with the tags attached; three-feet-high stacks of 15-year-old magazines she swore she would read; long plastic tubs filled with unworn shoes expanding through the entire space under her king-sized bed—than she was in taking care of what she already owned. I became the caretaker of the dusty furniture, of the clay pots left outside to crack in the winter, of the neglected flowerbeds full of leaves rather than mulch. I morphed into a pro at organizing. My room was orderly, I purged old clothes on a regular basis, I re-arranged our entire garage after I tripped over a car jack in the middle of the floor and screamed in fury.

I talked my friends to death with my issues with domesticity. I complained about design blogs' unrealistic expectations; I refused to bake food to bring into the office for fear of the stigma it might bring; I relayed my fears of ever being a wife or a mother. I had already shouldered that responsibility—or, at least, a large portion of it—while I was a child. Yet I didn't receive any of the freedom or the joy that being a wife or mother brings. I only had the work and the dread. Yet my friends' collective response became: “You just need to do it. You need to sit down and be domestic and see how it feels.”

My mom never sewed more than dinosaur curtains for my brother's room. “All I wanted in life was to have a white picket fence, a big kitchen, and to be a mom,” she said

throughout my childhood. Even when I was young, I found this statement confusing. These typical housewife longings didn't fit my mom. "I never wanted to work. I always just wanted to play through life," she also said. Rather than wake up early, my mom preferred to stay up until three in the morning watching movies. Laundry sat crumpled in baskets in the dining room for a week, and by the time it made its way to my bedroom, canyons of wrinkles covered my T-shirts. Dust bunnies and dog fur lined the edges of the floor of our wooden hallway. I have seen pictures of our living room from when my brother and I were babies, and I am amazed that we kill ourselves on the piles of toys covering the floor. Padded floral deck chairs—one of those rare luxuries we bought new if they were on sale—sat outside on our deck all winter, becoming rusted and sun-bleached.

But my grandmother was a typical housewife. She dressed impeccably, she asked everyone to remove their shoes when they came inside, and her linen closet looked like she organized with a ruler. My mom was afraid of making messes in my grandma's house, and therefore made me afraid as a child of the same thing. Once, my cousin Jackie and I were painting our nails on the floor of her white carpet in the spare bedroom where my mom and I slept, watching *Melrose Place* on TV. Jackie was painting her nails red, and I moved to sit up from my stomach and knocked over the bottle of crimson liquid. It spilled onto the snowy floor. Our eyes grew huge as we looked at each other. I was sure that our grandma would be furious.

"What do we do?" I said.

"I dunno," Jackie said. "Get a towel?"

“But then we’ll just stain that red,” I said. I started breathing faster, feeling like I might cry.

“We could just leave it,” Jackie said. “She might not notice.” Jackie often had grand ideas.

“You think she won’t notice that?” I pointed to the blob of red in the middle of the floor.

“She’s not going to care anyway,” Jackie said. “She lets me do whatever I want.”

My eyes narrowed at Jackie. We found my grandmother in her bedroom, folding clothes. Our heads hung as we told her what had happened. She didn’t get angry. She came in the spare bedroom armed with fingernail polish remover and an old towel and worked for the next 20 minutes blotting it up. “It was an accident,” she said. “It’s fine.” I remembered thinking at the time that my grandmother was much nicer than I expected her to be. And that maybe it meant I didn’t know her at all.

For my grandmother, sewing was personal. She mostly sewed clothing for herself. In their house in Annandale, Virginia, where they lived when my mom was eight, my grandma bought the Singer and kept a back sewing room all to herself. My mom remembers her spending a lot of time in there. “Boy, she’d go on spurts where she’d be in that sewing room right after dinner every night for weeks,” my mom said.

I wasn’t sure I shared my grandmother’s enthusiasm.

But I also knew my mom was bad at taking care of herself—she always put others first. When I was a kid, the only time I remember her taking time away from us to do something fun for herself was when she and my aunt went to play bingo at the local community center every Saturday night. Yet my brother and I made even that hell for

her—we cried in the living room, screaming as she backed out the front door, a look of horrible guilt in her eyes. They stopped bothering after about a year because they felt like failures as mothers. I don't blame her for feeling that way, but even when we were older, she didn't take up hobbies or pursue activities on her own, and I resented her for it.

If sewing could somehow give me a sense of purpose like it did for my grandmother, I was willing to try.

## **Get Rich Quick**

“Please, please, please,” I begged my computer as YouTube loaded. Then I typed “How to thread a Singer Featherweight” into the search bar and clicked enter. “Please.”

Four video results popped up. In them, I saw machines resembling mine, and slapped my hand on my forehead. This was so obvious. Why hadn't I thought of it before? It felt like a miracle cure for a disease I had been carrying around for years. If all went smoothly, I wouldn't have to lug the machine back to the repair shop. I might sew something that day.

I took a deep breath and carried my laptop to the hallway where my Singer sat. I needed to try to thread the machine immediately or I might grow too afraid of failing and stall for another two years. A fear of failure plagued me, mostly because I was afraid of following my mother's footsteps. My mom was a woman of grand plans and little follow-through. She didn't play the long game with stocks or savings or choice of husbands or careers. “I should have been an FBI Agent,” she said more than once while I was growing up. Another day, she should have been a clown. And then a professional singer. Yet my

mom also claimed she never wanted to work and would rather play through life. My brother agreed with her. I was horrified. For my mom, this mentality resulted in a series of unfulfilling jobs—a reservationist at United Airlines, a home health aid, a newspaper delivery person.

I was determined to create a life polar opposite to my mother's. More than anything, I wanted a career. When I was about 10, I beamed into the kitchen and told her that I decided, "I want to find a job that I love waking up and going to every day." Her response broke my heart: "Good luck with that. That doesn't exist." And, as far as relationships, I refused to commit to someone until I was sure he would be a good husband—I would not end up with someone like my dad because I accidentally got pregnant. Education was important to me, and I excelled at school. My mom got her Associate's degree in business when she was young, but never went back to school. When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, she asked me, "Are you planning to go to college?" And I said, "Obviously." I had no idea how we would pay for it, but I knew it was my only option.

Most of my mom's scheming focused on making money, which, in her defense, was sparse in our household. But they were mostly get-rich-quick schemes rather than anything longstanding. My mom did not contribute to a savings account; instead, when I was about 14, she went alone to a closeout sale at a cutesy store in the city next to us and came home with 89 lampshades—she bought every lampshade in the store. They were \$1.50 per shade, and she planned to make a killing selling them for \$10 a piece at a garage sale. When she walked in the front door from the driveway, her arms full of heart-and-flower speckled lampshades, her face displayed a mix of wild abandon and remorse.

“Look what I got,” she said. “And there are more in the car.” I descended into a quiet despair because I knew what would happen with those lampshades. I knew there would be no killing made, and how long it would take to be rid of them. She did sell a handful for \$10 at a garage sale at my grandmother’s house, but the following year lowered the price to \$5 each. Many of those 89 shades hogged up space in the spare bedroom for five years, when she moved them to the garage to wilt on a tarp. And, 14 years later, my grandmother is still trying to get rid of them for her at the annual church sale.

One of my biggest fears in life is to end up with my own version of 89 lampshades sitting in the guest room for years.

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I scooted the Singer over to make room for my tiny laptop. I lowered the sound on the Mac so I wouldn’t disturb my roommate next door and pressed play on the first video. A user named The Treasure Cellar said in a southern accent, “This video’s gonna show you how to thread a Singer Featherweight. I already covered the bobbin in another video but I can quick show you.” His tone sounded annoyed, as if he was making the tutorial against his will. He might as well have said, “I’m trying to make a quick buck off of ads, and if you don’t like it, you can shut up.”

The Treasure Cellar would not be my guide. I needed someone softer, someone gentler, who would hold my hand through the anxiety-inducing journey of threading a sewing machine.

The third video in the list looked promising. A man name Michael Ryan spoke in a kind voice. “Hey everybody, thank you very much for checking out this video.” His

profile picture showed a smiling bearded man posing next to a woman, presumably his wife, and I thought, “OK, Michael, we can be friends.” I skipped past the basics on the video—turning on the machine, packing the machine into the case, threading the bobbin spool—and dove into how to place the bobbin into the machine. But I soon realized that I had done exactly what Michael did, and it hadn’t worked for me. Crap. So maybe the problem was more complicated.

As I followed along with threading my own machine—from right to left, like Michael said—I paused the video to make sure I was looping it in the tension discs correctly or the take-up lever the right way. When the thread was nearly to the needle, I almost cried. This was exactly what I had done before, when it didn’t work.

But Michael mentioned a last step that took me by surprise. “Now into the wire thread guide, which is right here.” Michael pointed above the needle. “Just hook it around.” His thread clicked. My mouth dropped. Was that piece on my machine too? I didn’t remember seeing it. My eyes narrowed, and I saw it—a wire thread guide that had been completely hidden. I had never used that before. I tried to copy Michael and click my own blue thread through. It worked. It went right in.

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When I was nine years old, my mom got into the habit of dumpster diving for empty cereal boxes and Pepsi bottles. She cut out and collected the UPCs to mail them to the company and they sent her back a free gift or coupon. Pepsi also sponsored contests, where they placed numbered codes on the inside of their bottle caps, which my mom gathered to enter online. After the recycling center closed in the evenings, my mom, my brother, and I drove there to smuggle out their garbage. The recycling center was in a

small ravine, and although two thin roads intersected next to it, we remained hidden. But I still worried as my brother reached the rubber-ended trash grabber into the dumpster and lifted out bottles to throw at our feet.

One Saturday, my mom agreed to babysit my classmate, Spencer, who happened to be the most popular boy in class. I also happened to have a crush on him. He was one of those curly-haired brunette boys that exuded confidence even at the age of nine. I remember feeling giddy when my mom told me he would be coming over to spend the day with us. When he arrived, I showed him my black Lab, our pond, and the Barbie on top of the roof that my brother had thrown there six months earlier—anything I thought would impress him. My mom needed to run into town, so Spencer and I piled into her blue Oldsmobile.

“Hey, Spencer,” my mom said as she looked in her rearview mirror after we had picked up her prescription at the pharmacy. “Do you want to go on an adventure?”

“Uh, sure,” Spencer said.

“How do you feel about finding some empty boxes at the recycling center?”

My mouth dropped. “What? Mom.”

She glanced over at me in the passenger’s seat. “What? Honey, it’s not that big of a deal.”

“No way,” I said. “No way.” The last line came out in a pleading whisper.

“I don’t mind,” Spencer said. “But why?”

“Why can’t we just do it tomorrow?” I asked.

“I need more lids for the Pepsi contest. It ends tomorrow and I haven’t won anything more than a hat yet.”

I wanted to die. I had narrowly convinced the cutest boy in class that my family was halfway normal, and my mom wanted to take him dumpster diving. I couldn't believe it.

My mom pulled up into the gravel parking lot. In small towns, no one expected to come across entire dumpster diving families, so they didn't bother putting up a fence.

"I'm staying here," I said.

"Oh, come on, it'll be fun," my mom said as she patted my leg.

Spencer and my mom got out of the car. I watched them walk across the parking lot through narrowed eyelids, and then said, "Fine." I followed them. My mom handed Spencer her grabber tool and told him how to use it.

"You just have to step up there," she said, pointing to a small ledge on the rusted metal dumpster. "Then you can reach over and get whatever you want. Any Pepsi product will work. Look for Mountain Dew, Sierra Mist, and Gatorade."

"You're making him do it?" I said to my mom as I walked up.

"It's fine." Spencer laughed. "I think it'll be kind of fun."

"Just be careful," my mom said. I looked at both of them with a pained expression.

Spencer did as my mom instructed, and soon was tossing empty soda bottles onto the ground in front of my mom.

"Yippee!" she said as she knelt down to pick up a Gatorade bottle. I hugged my shoulders and prayed for a time machine so I could flash forward ten years when I would be out of this life, this state, this family.

Spencer brought the incident up years later when we were in high school. He smiled and said what a funny thing it was that we did together. I was grateful to him for not spreading a rumor about my family. It would have been easy—my mom gave him plenty of material. That was one of the first moments that solidified my need to leave the state, not necessarily because I disliked the state, but because I needed to distance myself from my family.

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My mom staked no claim on artistic ability—she couldn't even draw a stick figure—and so placed little value on art, unless it was a skill that could be monetized. She knew I liked to draw, so employed me to draw on envelopes to enter in sweepstake contests. I reluctantly agreed, and used silver Sharpies and rainbow Crayola markers—some leftover from when we were kids that disintegrated on the paper—to draw ruby-colored bottles for a Coca-Cola contest or a set of golf clubs on a vibrant green course for a Callaway contest.

Last Christmas, I asked for a watercolor set because I needed something to soothe my anxiety, and she added two extra booklets of blank postcard canvases to my gift.

“What are these?” I asked.

“I thought you could make me some colorful postcards that I could mail in to contests,” she said. Needless to say, the gift only added to my anxiety.

When I was 14, I began taking pictures with a digital Nikon camera my mom had won in a contest. I wandered to the picnic table by our pond, carrying a cantaloupe-colored rose from my mom's flowerbed. I laid the flower on the table and took several shots with the Nikon, my favorite a vertical frame elongating the grain in the wood and

highlighting the orange of the rose. I spent hours taking pictures of gnarled tree roots, spikes of cattails in the pond, and the pops of purple wildflowers in the grass. The rest of the weekend, I edited them on our computer—cropping, contrasting, and playing with black and white. I felt like I had accomplished something amazing, and wondered if I had tapped into a new hobby. After showing them to my mom, she expressed enthusiasm about the photos.

But, two weeks later, my mom mentioned to my brother that they needed to defrag the computer because it was slow. I overheard this conversation, but they never mentioned when they were planning to do it. The next day, when I walked from my room to the kitchen, my mom sat in front of the computer and said something like, “It’s a lot faster now.”

I stopped. “Wait, you didn’t defrag the computer, did you?”

“Well, yeah,” my mom said.

“What? Doesn’t that erase everything on it?”

“Yeah, it does.”

I cried out in anguish. “My pictures were on there,” I said, not believing this was really happening.

“Oh, I forgot about those,” my mom said.

I started breathing harder. “There’s no way. You can switch it back, right?” I looked at my brother.

“No,” he said. “We can’t do that.”

I ran to the computer and opened up the picture folder where I saved them. The folder was completely empty. Not a single picture. I burst into tears.

“Why didn’t you tell me to save them to a CD?” I said through tears. “You could have warned me.”

“Well, you heard us say we were going to defrag the computer,” she said, not apologizing.

“Yeah, but I assumed you would say something to me first,” I grew angry. “It would have been simple—‘Tiffany, do you have anything to save from the computer before we erase it all?’”

I had to get out of that house. I ran outside and tromped into the woods beside the pond. My dog, Shadow, followed me. I passed a tree that I had taken a nice picture of and felt a pang. I couldn’t believe my photos were all gone. I spent so much time on those. Shadow perched next to me on the moss mound covered overhead by the branches of an ash tree. I sat with my knees in my arms, staring at the water. My mom didn’t even say she was sorry. She sometimes shrugged off my feelings like they were unreasonable, as if I had no right to them.

I thought about a time several years earlier, when my brother and I were playing in the front room of our house. I sat on the couch, and he grabbed his BB gun and pointed it at my face. I squealed and held up my hands.

“Stop it,” I yelled. “You’re going to shoot me.”

“It’s not loaded,” he said.

I didn’t believe him, and I didn’t care whether or not it was loaded. I grabbed a pillow from the couch and covered my face. I heard my brother take a few steps forward and click. Then I felt a searing pain in the top of my skull.

“Ouch. Oh my god.” I yelled. My hand flew to the top of my head as I felt for blood or broken skin. Ryan threw down his gun down and ran up to me after realizing what had happened. I felt his hands run through my hair, searching frantically for a wound.

“I don’t see any blood,” Ryan said.

It hurt so badly it was almost numb. “You shot me,” I said. “You freaking shot me.”

Ryan laughed and released a long sigh of relief. “God, I can’t believe there was a bullet in there. I swore it wasn’t loaded.”

“Obviously it was. I told you so.” I said. After a minute of rubbing the top of my head, feeling a large welt rise up already, I added, “Thank god I put that pillow up to my face or I might be blind right now. Mom is going to freak.”

He ran upstairs to my mom, who was washing her face in her bathroom. My brother said something to my mom, and she said, “What?”

I yelled up the stairs, “He freaking shot me.” My brother said something else, and my mom laughed. She laughed. Why was she laughing? If she had been in the room, she wouldn’t have found it funny. When my mom came downstairs, she acted as if nothing was wrong. She checked my head and said, “I’m sorry, honey.” But she didn’t react. She didn’t treat the situation like I expected—especially when one sibling shot the other one in the head.

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After I threaded the needle of the Singer, I could tell it looked much more stable. Maybe this was the solution, the simple answer I had missed all along. I scrambled to

lock in the bobbin and pull up its thread. I pushed both threads to the left before I put a scrap of fabric between them, copying my YouTube friend Michael exactly. I pulled the lever that pressed the foot against the fabric and held it in place. Everything felt right.

Slowly, I depressed the pedal with my bare foot. My jaw closed tight. I winced, looking at the machine through squinted eyes, a defense in case it didn't work. Click, clack, click.

The thread was running along the fabric, forming dashes that morphed into one long seam. It seemed like it was working, but the ultimate test came after I lifted the foot and pulled the fabric away from the machine. I expected to feel the awful tug of jumbled thread. But no. The fabric pulled away easily. Only two strands, rather than the usual six. What? It worked? I laughed out loud. My head started spinning.

When I tested it for a second time, the same positive results emerged. Yes. I stood up from the chair and wandered around my apartment, filled with joy. If I were anywhere near a rooftop, I would have yelled, "I can sew." Immediately, I recorded a video and texted it to my boyfriend, my friends, my mom, and my aunt. I then shouted from the social media rooftop of Facebook. I had to share it with everyone. They cheered for me. Now I'm just waiting for the day that my mom suggests I start up an Etsy shop to sell home-sewn crafts.

## **Girly Girl**

“Come on,” my mom said as she stood at the counter of our 1970s kitchen. Her hands were sticky with bread dough. “I can teach you to bake.”

“No,” I said. “I wanna go play outside.” I was ten. I preferred to swim in the pond with my brother. The closest I wanted to get to cooking was whipping up a fake dinner out of crushed oak leaves and acorns.

“You need to know how to cook,” my mom said.

“Why? I’ll learn when I’m older,” I said. Somehow, even at ten, I knew my mom was trying to trick me into becoming more of a girly girl. And, ultimately, into a woman with domestic skills. I never heard her asking my brother to help her in the kitchen. Maybe it was a Midwest thing, an Indiana thing. I was on to her game, though—when she tried to force me to wear a white lace Sunday dress to church when I was six, I screamed until she conceded and let me go in cotton overalls.

At age 25, I slowly began to bake and cook on my own. I found myself rolling out pie dough on the weekends, and recalling some of the lessons my mom had shown me

when I conceded as a child. I bought cookbooks. I brought homemade pasta dishes to work parties. Then I even asked her if I could take my grandmother's 1950s Singer sewing machine to my apartment in D.C. so I could sew.

One Saturday last July, I decided to take the Singer in to get serviced. It had not been repaired in 20 years. When I looked at my phone, I saw that the L2 bus was leaving for Cleveland Park, where the repair store lived, in ten minutes. Yet the sun was scorching—it was one of those days when you could clearly imagine what the surface of the ball of fire in the sky felt like—so I dragged my feet. I remembered the latches on the Singer case, its original, were broken. I ripped off two pieces of duct tape from a roll I had bought over five years before and tried to slap them on the sides of the case, but the tape was so old that it stuck to my fingers. After I got the tape on the case, I grabbed the handle with my marshmallow-y fingertips and headed out the door.

Five seconds later, in my apartment's maroon hallway, the duct tape latches gave out and the case buckled open. I had to set it on the ground. Crap, this had worked last time, but last time the duct tape hadn't been as old as my sewing machine. I grunted and picked up the case, carrying it like a bulky antique baby.

What felt like every drop of water evaporated from my skin as soon as I exited the front door. A few people gave me side glances. I figured that as long as I didn't accidentally leave the case somewhere and create one of those "unattended items" they are always yelling about in airports, people wouldn't be too wary. At the bus stop on the corner, a woman sitting on the short steel bench scooted over when she saw my load. I unloaded the case and thanked her.

"That looks old," she said. "What is it?"

I told her it was my grandmother's sewing machine, and I was taking it to Cleveland Park to get it fixed. The women smiled and said she knew the store. I mentioned that they had told me the machine was valuable, but when I looked online, it seemed like they were going for very little.

"Sometimes these things have mostly sentimental value," she said. I didn't mention that the sentimental value was limited in my case.

She was a neighbor I had never met named Jane who had lived in my 100-unit building for 35 years. Jane's pale ears were adorned with bright gold earrings, and she wore an aquamarine shirt garnished with a matching sun-shaped necklace. I couldn't see her eyes through her oversized sunglasses. I wondered what she thought of my high-waisted hipster shorts and lack of jewelry. Jane said she had been in the neighborhood when they blasted under Connecticut Avenue to create the Metro tunnel.

"It felt like bombing," she said. "The windows shook. I know what the Nuremberg blitzkrieg was like."

When the bus came, Jane let me on ahead of her and we sat facing each other in the front seats. The air conditioning chilled my sweaty armpits. Jane asked if the machine was heavy. "Naming the thing a Featherweight is deceiving," I said. She laughed. Five minutes later, I pulled the cord to request a stop. Jane got off at the same time and we waved goodbye to each other.

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Besides cooking, one of the only crafts I remember my mom doing when I was growing up was sweepstaking. She entered hundreds of sweepstakes per month. A sweepstake newsletter she subscribed to advised readers to use colorful envelopes,

since they were more likely to be picked. My mom bought reams of colored crafting paper from Hobby Lobby to make her own envelopes. A wooden cutting board served as the base of her assembly station as she stood at the dining room table—her informal office—slicing the paper to size with a utility knife. A stream of cigarette smoke rose behind her.

“Well, this is my first envelope,” my mom said, holding up a lopsided teal paper that looked more like a diamond than a rectangle.

I laughed. “Nice,” I said. “At least it’s bright.”

“I don’t think I can use this,” my mom said. “I seriously doubt the mailwoman is going to see this and think, ‘Oh, gee, this looks like a normal envelope to me.’”

“Just keep practicing,” I said. And she did. Eventually she was creating a stack of about 20 envelopes each week to put in the mail.

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The Brother store was one block down the road, tucked into a row of low shops that looked like they had been there for over a hundred years. Above the front window, a white vintage sign displayed the word Brother in blue, accompanied by a drawing of a sewing machine. Ten machines were lined up in the front window, some plastic and new and some metal and old.

A thinning blonde-haired man stationed in front of a sewing machine at the window said, “If you sell five machines a month in the city, that’s good.” The young woman seated next to him giggled.

I set down my machine and stood in the middle of the small store, waiting to see if the teacher man would notice me. An online description of the store seemed apt:

“Stores like this don't exist anymore! What a treat.” I looked it up later and learned that the store was open since 1956. Both walls, along with high shelves close to the ceiling, were lined with all shapes and sizes of sewing machines and vacuum cleaners. The various machines on the row of tables in the center of the room caught my eye: a tiny black machine sporting a Victorian disposition; a persimmon dwarf that looked like a toy; a modern white plastic machine wearing oversized cherry red knobs; an antique olive apparatus that appeared built into a pink snakeskin-covered case. I took down notes on each of these machines and made a mental note to research them later.

After several minutes, a tall man came out from the back of the store. His brow furrowed when he saw my pen and paper.

“Can I help you?” His tone implied that I looked too much like an inspector, so I put away my notebook and lifted the machine off the ground.

When I walked back to him, I placed the Singer on a low table that extended off of the cash register counter. The small workroom in the back of the store reminded me of a bike mechanic's shop, with workbenches, tools, and boxes full of spare parts sprawled all over.

“I was hoping you could fix this,” I said.

The man wore a gravel-colored T-shirt with a Levi's logo across the front and leather loafers on his feet. He wasn't the sewing machine repairman I had expected, although I didn't know what to expect. I opened the case. He looked at my machine, without moving, and said, “This is a very good machine. Very valuable.” I heard a hint of an African accent when he spoke.

“Really?” I asked, surprised. I told him I thought I had looked it up on eBay six months before and it was only selling for \$30.

“Yes. It’s a good machine,” he said, again without reaching for it. I wasn’t sure what to do next, so I stood in place.

Finally, he grabbed the machine from the box and set it on the table. He reached around me and plugged it into a power strip on the table. As he reached, I worried that he might cut his arm on the sharp broken clasps of the box. I almost warned him, but I told my anxious brain to shut the hell up. His movements were slow and deliberate. Of course he didn’t cut himself.

A flip of the switch on the base of the machine turned on a light. He took the rubber belt between two fingers on his right hand and stretched it out as he depressed the pedal with his left to make the machine purr. The whirr got louder by the second, but his fingers stopped the belt from moving. A smell of burning rubber filled my nose. I had no idea what the guy was doing. Was he breaking it? I started to get a little nervous. Then he ripped the belt off of its holder. He crumpled it in his right hand—I had already known that would have to go, so it was oddly satisfying to see him throw out something old and useless, given that he could replace it.

“We can fix it,” the man said with certainty.

How could he know so quickly? It would be \$125 for everything. Yikes. I didn’t know what price to expect, but that wasn’t it. I wanted to ask what “everything” meant but the mechanic didn’t seem to be in a chatty mood. The conversation paused and he stared at a far wall. I thought he might be waiting for my go-ahead, so I began to form the words, but then his hand reached for a blank yellow tag. He continued to stare at the wall

and handed me the tag without a word. Well, I guess I was doing this. I looked at the yellow tag, unsure.

“Name and phone number,” he said.

After I filled out the tag, he ripped off the bottom portion with the registration number and returned it to me.

“How long?” I asked.

“Wednesday.” It was Saturday.

“Wow, that’s fast.” He said nothing as he tried to fasten my case. I told him it was broken, and asked if they sold them at the store. He shook his head but a glimmer of a smile appeared.

“Check eBay. Singer 211 or 122. Something like that.”

I told him I would and then left the store, passing the man and woman still chatting in the window. I hoped for her sake the woman had wanted the lesson.

I was back on the bus, going the opposite way, at half past three. Sweat rolled down my back, but at least my hands were free. I studied the notes I took in my little notebook. Then I looked up and saw that Jane was on my bus, sitting up front. I waved at her and she waved back.

“Did they take it?” she asked.

“Yes, they said they could fix it.”

“Good.”

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Moments like those remind me of living in a small town. When my dad and I stopped at the Bigfoot station for gas, he waved to his friend Smitty walking by while he

pumped. I sat in the front seat watching as a different man I didn't recognize in beige coveralls yelled, "Hey, Cub!" at my dad from across the parking lot.

"What's up, man?" my dad said. My dad lived in Nashville his entire life. He and I attended the same high school. A picture of him as a 17-year-old wearing a blue-grey leisure suit perched in the manager's seat next to that year's basketball team hangs in the school gym. My math teacher, Mr. Langell, also taught my dad algebra. Now the two golf together, my dad using a variety of used clubs he collected over the years. I miss that sense of belonging and of having a history in a place.

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The Brother store never called. Plus, I had forgotten about my sewing machine. Two weeks later, the memory of the machine waiting for me rattled into focus. I dialed the number of the store while my boyfriend, Joey, and I were waiting outside for a seat at a local D.C. diner, Open City. We hunched down on a bench, trying to avoid direct sunlight—the heat index was 111 degrees. I heard two rings on the other end and a friendly man picked up. He said my Singer was ready. The store was open until six o'clock on Saturdays.

Joey and I ended up at the Brother Store at three o'clock that afternoon. Inside, I spotted the same man I had met on my first visit sitting on a stool in the workshop scrolling through his phone. He looked up at me but did not acknowledge that we had met before.

A silver-haired man who emerged from the back room seemed excited when I told him my last name. "Oh yes, you have a very good machine on your hands." He sounded like the man from the phone.

“Really?” I asked. “But I looked it up on EBay, and it was selling for like \$30.”

“Don’t let anyone online tell you that you should sell it for \$30,” the man said, looking at me over his glasses. “This is worth \$400 or \$500.”

“Wow,” I said. I was beginning to believe that my machine was worth some money. He told me to look up Singer Featherweight 221.

The man walked to the storeroom and came back with my case in his arms.

“I should show you how to thread it because it is backwards from most machines,” he said. I hesitated because I knew our bus was coming, and the next one wasn’t for another 20 minutes. But I knew I needed any advice I could get. A spool of aqua thread sat on top of the machine, and the man took me through each step: from right to left, the thread goes through the circle thing, then clicks around the spinny thing, then lifts up the hooky thing, and then down through a series of latches and, finally, through the needle. (These weren’t his words.)

I understood sewing machines fairly well, as I had been the head of costume design for several of the plays in high school. That didn’t mean I was talented at it. I had never sewn anything more than a button before joining the costuming team, and we learned everything on the fly, so I never picked up the terminology.

Joey had wandered off by the time my lesson ended. “You lost me five minutes ago,” he said when he came back.

I had come a long way from childhood—I felt proud that the directions to use the sewing machine mostly made sense to me. Sewing had become a rare skill that few people knew how to do. Although, even during its heyday, I knew that Joey would not have been taught how to sew. I realized how little the roles of men and women had

changed since then, but I also knew that for me to choose to sew was fine. I could choose to carry on that tradition if I wanted. My grandmother did not have a choice to be a housewife, and, in that way, I understood that the precedent had changed quite drastically.

Joey and I missed our bus. Wanting to avoid becoming shriveled jerky, he lifted the machine into the back of a taxi.

“I wouldn’t expect a sewing machine to be so heavy,” he said. I raised my eyebrows, reminding him I had offered to carry it.

When we got to my apartment, I looked again on eBay. Apparently I had researched the wrong machine, because there it was: the same Singer as my grandmother’s for sale for \$395. The case was in perfect condition, unlike mine, but still, the guys at the shop were right.

Yet I didn’t think I would be selling it anytime soon.

## Meet My Family

Every time I visit my hometown of Nashville, Indiana, other customers in the IGA grocery store stare at me like I'm running through the aisles—no one walks that fast in those parts. Nashville is so quaint that the town council refused to let Starbucks come in for fear of overrunning the smaller coffee shops. And when CVS Pharmacy wanted to build within town limits, the council placed restrictions on the outer appearance of the pharmacy, forcing the store to mold itself to the wooden clapboard theme of the town. Brown County folks spread themselves out on a map, too, though so everyone drives. Only one of my high school friends lived close enough to walk to school.

Only 12,000 people inhabit the homes along the winding roads that contain only three stoplights—the one by the McDonalds, the one by the Speedway, and the one by the Hob Nob Restaurant. Nashville recently made the *Buzzfeed* list of best road trip destinations across America, which noted that “it's a historic, artsy, small town that will make you feel like you've stepped into an episode of *Gilmore Girls*.” Once you enter the town, you see a leather craftsman, landscape painters, an old-fashioned candy store, and a

toy store I never shopped at until I was in high school because my parents couldn't afford it. The Copperhead Creek Gem Mine offers oversized bins of water for kids to mine rocks out of sacks of dirt, which was affordable, so my mom took us there often. Fearrin's Ice Cream—where I worked my junior year of high school scooping pumpkin and rum raisin—resides beside the brick-lined street where the town trolley parks. Just across the way is the resting spot for the Clydesdale that trots tourists around in a carriage. I have never ridden either of these.

Where I live now, in D.C., my boyfriend, Joey, reminds me to walk more slowly. He pulls my arm and says, "Enjoy the view. We aren't in a rush." I have fallen into the habit of hurrying, but Joey is a good person to give the reminder, since he grew up in southern Maryland, which, in my opinion, should be considered a part of the Midwest—people hunt, they fish, they grow corn, and live in towns with populations less than 2,000.

I didn't expect to meet someone like Joey in D.C., someone who could combine my new life with my old. He reminds me of home in so many ways that even he doesn't realize. At times, when he and I are ending a phone call, he says, "Aight," and I could swear I was talking to my brother. He drinks Mountain Dew, like my dad. He feels at home in the woods, but also understands how to use the metro and enjoys living in a city. And, most importantly, he is the only man I have met since I moved to D.C. that I could even dream of taking home to meet my family.

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For months before Joey and I moved in together last November, I felt both compelled to create a perfect new home and repulsed by the idea. I liked the concept of

sharing a living space, but I was afraid I would once again be forced into a domestic role that I did not sign up for.

Growing up, my mom didn't outwardly ask me to take the lead on domestic tasks around the house, but she never stopped me, either. I knew if I didn't clean, it would not happen. When I was 15, I spent an entire weekend rearranging the garage—junking three trash cans full of garbage like old paint cans, mouse-chewed gardening gloves, and the rusty head of a broken rake. My mom poked her head through the doorframe to marvel at my progress, but didn't jump in to help or tell me to stop. She took any help she could get, even if the one doing the work was her teenage daughter who should be riding around in her boyfriend's Celica instead of cleaning her house.

But as I scrolled through design blogs while lying on my couch, pictures of Joey and my fantasy future apartment swirled in my head. The Internet told me I could have a white marble kitchen with a fancy gold faucet and trendy knobs on a pauper's budget. One idea I stumbled upon on *Design Sponge* was to create "DIY Fabric Buckets" that would go on the floor, next to a not-yet-purchased armchair that would hold toys for our not-yet-adopted rescue dog.

But, in order to sew them, I needed stiff calico fabric, and I had no idea what that even looked like. I remembered my grandma mentioning calico fabric at some point, but she could have been sewing anything from a baby's blanket to a cover for her truck seats, so that didn't help. I kept picturing yards of calico cat fur.

The District of Columbia contains no craft stores. The closest fabric stores are in the suburbs, which I both enjoy and despise. One recent Saturday, I tagged along with Joey as he ran errands in Rockville. He pulled up his silver Subaru in front of my

apartment on bustling Connecticut Avenue, a main artery to and from Washington, D.C., at two in the afternoon. I ran out the front door and hopped in the passenger seat.

“Hey, Smelly,” Joey said and I gave him a peck on the cheek. Sometime in the middle of our two-and-a-half year relationship he had nicknamed me Smelly. I didn’t mind. His dark beard and ringlet hair were long for summer, but made his blue eyes sparkle more brightly. He sported his standard outfit of dark Levis and a speckled gray T-shirt.

“Hey, boy,” I said. “You’re fine with going to Jo-Ann’s?”

“Yeah, I could use some art supplies,” he said, his laidback approach to life shining through.

As we drove, I failed to Google “What does stiff calico fabric look like and where can I find it?” I only briefly considered looking it up on my phone. Looking around and asking for help was not my strong suit. From growing up poor, I assume that getting help will cost money, so I don’t bother looking for it.

After Joey and I entered the suburbs, we saw fewer than a handful of people walking on the sidewalk. Most crowded into minivans or sedans. Rows of wooden telephone poles lined streets of strip malls dotted with fish stores or Party Mart or AT&T. We passed the freshly built Rockville Town Square that turned into an ice rink in the winter and was surrounded by pricey restaurants and coffee shops. It was an attempt at community that I almost appreciated. Life was faster here than in my hometown. Even though I had lived in D.C. for six years and adapted, I sometimes missed the Midwest.

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Once, when I was about 9, I stayed the night at my cousins' house. In the morning, Abby, Adam, and I rose early for breakfast, and my aunt Vicky served us her homemade grape juice—a delicate liquid full of floating grapes that looked like they had been preserved in formaldehyde for years but were delicious. Then we took off into the corn fields that had recently been harvested behind their house; only sharp beige nubs of stalks remained. We headed toward the creek Abby didn't wear shoes, so I took mine off as well. Except when I took my first steps onto the jagged fields, I felt the stalks jab into the bottom of my feet. I stumbled and lagged behind Abby, who ran through the field.

“How are you walking on this?” I yelled.

“What do you mean?” she said, turning and looking at me like I was crazy. “You just walk.”

“But it's like stepping on briars.”

“Well...” she hesitated, looking ahead at her brother who was halfway to the creek already. “You can go back if you want.”

I was confused. Just a few years before, Abby and I had been equals—we squished our toes in the clay in the creek bed, grabbed crawdads from hiding spots in the rocks, and rubbed the blue clay over our skin that dried into a flaky gray mask. What had changed? And when had Abby grown stronger while I became weaker?

I pursed my lips. “I'm going to grab my shoes.”

Ultimately, I made my way to the creek, wearing my shoes, but I felt like I had failed. It was one of the first moments that I felt different from my Indiana family.

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Joey and I made it to Wheaton, Maryland, a visibly poorer community than its neighbors, 20 minutes later. Small houses with chipped paint and upturned couches in their front lawns lined the four-lane road. The Jo-Ann Fabrics was not in a strip mall, like we had expected, but in Wheaton Westfield Mall. Both Joey and I disliked malls, for the crowds and the capitalism on display. We ended up in the parking spot farthest from the entrance, next to a field of dirt with an empty steamroller stationed in the middle. It looked like the mall was still settling in. Or maybe we didn't belong. "Where are we?" I asked.

We trekked to the windowless Jo-Ann Fabrics. The store had an appealingly utilitarian vibe—no cinnamon or pumpkin scents smacked us in the face when we entered, nothing sparkled, and the walls resembled ivory soap. I bee-lined for the fabrics, hoping to recognize the stiff calico. I grabbed the first fabric I saw, cotton with purple spots, and felt it between my fingers. Nope, not stiff. I made my way down the row, but aside from burlap and a horrible fabric that felt like Velcro, none of them were thick.

I soon realized I needed to face my fear of asking for help. A woman in a green Jo-Ann Fabrics apron was restocking the fabric in the middle of the aisle. I walked up to her and cleared my throat.

"Do you carry stiff calico fabric?" I said.

She shook her head, a small curl falling from her short black hair onto her forehead. "We don't have what you need," she said. "I don't think any Jo-Ann Fabrics store has what you need, except maybe Columbia."

She meant Columbia, Maryland, which was another 30 minutes north of where we already had driven. My heart sank. After raving about the extensive fabric supply in

Columbia, she recommended I buy something called stabilizer to iron on to make the fabric thicker. I knew I had several yards already at home that I bought for a separate project I'd failed to start, but instead of despairing over having come all this way, I decided to buy more. I thanked her and found the Pellon 809 Decor-Bond fusible stabilizer.

I took the bolt over to the cutting counter, when a short man wheeling a cart of bolts of fabric saw me and pushed down on the cart's wheel lock with his toe. He trudged over without smiling and asked how much I wanted.

"Two yards?" I said as more of a question than a statement.

The man flipped out two yards onto the counter. "Do you want the instructions?" he asked, referring to the white tissue paper sheet that accompanied the fabric.

"Yes, please." I said. With five fewer dollars in my pocket, we emerged from Jo-Ann's with a glimmer of hope that I would finish this project.

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Two weeks later, I started on the fabric buckets. Joey stopped by to fill out the rental application for our new apartment. He perched at my desk while I sat on the floor with the Pellon stabilizer and scanned the directions to assemble the supplies: an iron, four yards of fabric, and scissors. I chose a dark indigo fabric—one where white tie-dye circles offset the deep blues—an older colleague had brought back from Nigeria. She said to wash it before I used it, but I didn't bother. I wasn't planning to store liquids in the bucket, so I figured it would be fine. Sabrina the Teenage Witch, a show I used to love as a kid, provided background noise on my small TV.

The instructions on my phone said I had to cut out long rectangles of both fabrics. I laid out everything on the floor and started snipping the indigo fabric with the new sewing shears I had just bought. “Maybe I’m learning how to buy things that make my life easier,” I thought.

In the twelve years since I had moved out of my childhood home, I had gotten better at taking care of myself. In that house, asking for anything meant suffering at least a little. My third year on the high school tennis team, I needed \$100 for a new uniform. I procrastinated until the last minute, and even though I worked a weekend job as a housekeeper with three of my good friends at the Brown County Inn and raked in a few hundred dollars a month, I didn’t think my parents should get off the hook. The Sunday before the money was due, I walked up to my mom in her informal office, the dining room. Cigarette smoke curled around her while she sat at the table, her long hair dyed brunette, wearing a fuzzy blue robe that was her standard evening outfit even in the early spring. The dinner table was covered with stacks of colorful envelopes and handwritten notecards containing my mom’s name and our address. Cigarette ashes dotted the tablecloth. An oversized antique dresser squatted behind my mom’s chair, every inch on top containing dusty boxes of old papers, an under-watered plant, and mismatched canisters loaded with free pens, dried-up highlighters, and Dollar Tree scotch tape. In an attempt to bring in extra resources to our family, my mother entered her name into hundreds of sweepstakes every month.

“Honey, you’ll have to ask your Dad,” she said.

I cringed. “Can’t you ask him?”

She hesitated, then stood up. She called herself Marshmallow Mom for a reason.

My dad sprawled in his tattered blue recliner placed beside the couch in the adjacent living room. A football game blasted on the television.

“Cub,” my mom said, using my dad’s high school nickname that stuck. My dad looked up and cocked an eyebrow at us, seeming to notice me standing a few feet behind my mom in anticipation. His gray moustache matched the little hair he had left on his head. I scanned his face to try to decipher what mood he was in. “Tiffany needs \$100 for her tennis uniforms.”

“What?” he said, louder than the cheering crowd at the football game. He scrunched his face and he let out a loud sigh. Oh no. I knew what was coming.

“What do you want me to do, shit it out?” His eyes bugged out. My stomach dropped. Why did I bother? I felt tears come to my eyes and was glad that most of the lights were off so he couldn’t see me. He gave a small laugh that sounded more like a scoff.

“God, Cub,” my mom said, echoing my thoughts.

“Well, whatever,” he said, his voice high pitched. “Sure, I’ll get that money right away, boss.” He used to call me ‘boss’ as a term of endearment. When I was six, I rode in the middle of the bench seat of his old Ford truck, holding his Mountain Dew as he headed to work at a construction or landscaping job, whatever he came up with that week. As his truck rolled down the driveway, he said, “Where to, boss?” I felt special, important. Using that name in this context made it a much harder slap in the face.

“Forget it,” I said. “Jesus.” I stomped to my room. My dad gave me the money the next day. He probably felt bad about what he had said, but he wasn’t one to apologize. He reacted like that because he didn’t have the money. Plus, he didn’t bother controlling his

outbursts. In theory, he could come up with it, but that \$100 was another unexpected charge on top of all the endless bills.

Now, in D.C., I have my own money and can buy myself things I need and want. But the guilt associated with spending has been more difficult to shake off. The pink-handled scissors sliced through the material like it was tissue paper. When I was in the middle of cutting through the indigo fabric, Joey asked me, “Am I done?” He somehow managed to program computers all day but couldn’t fill out a form. I groaned and said to give me a minute before I hopped up and looked through our application.

“Looks like it,” I said. I already occasionally felt like the secretary. I was terrified of that increasing when we moved in together. I had spent so long as a child taking care of everyone else—cracking jokes so my family laughed in times of tension, sacrificing material items so my mom wouldn’t worry about money—that it was familiar to me. So maybe I brought it on myself. Then I noticed that my fingertips were blue. And my palms, too. I held up my hands to Joey in surprise. “Oops! I guess I should have washed it!” He laughed.

Joey kissed me and headed home. I felt the relief of being alone.

After positioning the Pellon stabilizer on top of the indigo fabric, I cut four pieces to size—in rectangles two uneven feet long. Then I ironed the fabrics together; steam from the iron should adhere them into one piece of stiff fabric. I wondered whether the stabilizer might stick to the wood floor, or whether the indigo fabric might dye the boards blue. I decided to worry about both of these things later. The instructions said something about a damp cloth, but my head hurt, so I skipped it. The steam kissed my sprawled-out legs as I held the iron on each section for ten seconds. My foot fell asleep. After I

checked to see if the two fabrics were bonding, the corners were still disconnected. I couldn't believe it. But I powered through, assuming something magical might occur.

By the time I finished 30 minutes later, I considered the whole thing a mistake. The corners weren't connected. My hands were teal. My foot might have needed medical attention. Then, when I lifted up the cloth from the floor, I noticed white dots starting to form on the wooden floorboards. I licked my finger and tried to rub it away with my saliva. The spots—like patches of white mold—reappeared instantly. Oh no. Had I ruined the floor? Only then did I realize that hot steam on a wooden floor was a lousy idea. I stood up and figured I would deal with that later. Plus, I would be moving soon.

I needed to give up for the night and take a bath. After I sunk into the warm bubbles in the tub, I thought about the night I realized I was not re-creating my parents' flawed relationship. It was during the trip when I took Joey home to see my family. He had already met them several times, but each time was stressful—he had to stay in my mom's hoarder house, be around my dad with shifting moods, and run around with me to make sure I saw everyone in time. The day before we left, we met up with my dad's entire family at Big Woods Pizza in Nashville, and were all seated at a long pine table on the top floor. There had been confusion with my grandma about where we were going to meet, and she ended up getting mad and not coming.

Joey and I sat on one side of the table and my mom and dad sat on the other (my parents got along well enough after their divorce that they were fine with seeing each other). My mom started bickering with my dad.

“The mix-up is your fault, you know,” she said, her voice low and rough.

“Wait, what? My fault?” My dad’s mood changed from happy to miserable in two seconds.

“Tiffany told you she was coming weeks ago,” she said. “You were supposed to tell your mom.”

“Says who?” He shook his head and started turning red.

“Mom,” I said, just wanting to enjoy the evening. “It’s not a big deal. You’re just making it worse.” Now half of the table was staring at them. I felt Joey’s hand squeeze mine under the table, and in that moment I realized that he and I were nothing like them. I would never start a fight in front of everyone, no matter how upset I was. I would wait to mention it until we were alone. It was like I was lecturing my parents on how to behave, which felt strange, but also liberating. I was immune to their anger toward each other.

### **My Brother, the Doomsday Prepper**

“Wanna shoot a gun?” my brother asked me while cradling a gigantic Russian rifle. I was visiting Indiana in Christmas of 2015, wiping a dust rag across the far table in the front room of my childhood home. I turned around to see Ryan standing across the room from me, next to the front door, the oversized gun tilted at the floor.

“Not that one,” I said. “It’s from a freaking James Bond game.”

His eyebrow cocked. “Why not?” he said, “It’s fun.” His gray Indiana sweatshirt frayed around the collar. He had our mom’s cocoa hair, which was cut short. Dark stubble lined his chin.

“Mom says it’s ridiculously loud,” I said, turning back toward the window to dust. “And I don’t want to rip my shoulder out of socket.”

Ryan laughed. “It doesn’t have a kick to it. Mom shot it.”

I shook my head and began to gather spare picture frames and empty candleholders from the tops of the tables to hide from my mom. Our 1971 split-level house was a challenge for my mom to keep clean. The house was too big and my mom

had hoarder tendencies. Each time I came home, the clutter incited my anxiety, and the only way to quell it was to organize or dust the neglected spaces of the house.

“But, yeah,” Ryan said as he ogled the gun, “it’s one of the loudest things I’ve ever heard.”

“Mom says she was surprised Cheryl didn’t call the cops,” I said, referring to our one and only neighbor.

Ryan gave up trying to convince me. He strapped on protective earmuffs that he said amplified squirrels rustling leaves but normalized the sound of a shot next to his ear. Our eighty-pound malamute, Zane, wagged at the door. Ryan tried to fend him off, but Zane wouldn’t budge.

“Fine, just stay behind me.” Ryan patted him on the head. I almost yelled out the front door that it was a bad idea to let the dog outside when bullets were flying, but I stopped myself. I was sure he’d done this a hundred times. I was the one who didn’t live there anymore.

Our childhood home sat on over four acres of what my city friends would describe as the middle of nowhere. Cheryl’s one-story house was visible only in the winter months after the leaves fell. A country road winded on the northern edge of our property, which was unpaved until I was eight, when a new elegant housing development called Henderson Meadows invaded across the street. A few years later, the phone company came to the area to install underground cables, but decided it wasn’t worth digging all the way to our road because so few people lived there. My mom still doesn’t have high-speed Internet.

Ryan had moved back from Indianapolis at the age of 28. He stockpiled pistols, shotguns, and rifles in his bedroom, invested in a portable solar panel to charge his cell phone, installed a bullet reloading station in the back room of her garage in order to make his own ammunition, and bought a pump that turns the pond water potable. My mom had told me all of this in the months leading up to my visit. Much of what I knew about my brother's life got filtered through my mom. Ryan and I only talked outside of my visits when someone in the family died. She also mentioned Ryan had bought "survival seeds."

"What the hell is a survival seed?" I asked her over the phone. "Wouldn't that just be a seed?"

"I have no idea," my mom said. It sounded like she was smiling. "But he's got these jars of dirt in my freezer." She said Ryan was storing jars containing survival seeds to prepare for spring. I looked them up, and online prepper sources advised creating a "seed food bank." *The Prepper Journal* said, "Some people have created a personal seed bank as insurance against crop failures. Others believe a personal seed bank is necessary in the event of a partial (or total) societal collapse." I checked the Wal-Mart in the closest city next to my mom's house. The store carried "survival seeds" that cost anywhere from \$20 to almost \$200.

Even though I knew some of these details before I visited, it wasn't until I saw Ryan in person that I grew worried. Ryan already lived off the grid more than most people I knew. He didn't have a formal job, and never had, aside from odd jobs like bussing at Olive Garden in college. He attended Indiana University for six years, but, when he was a three-month internship away from graduating with an outdoor education degree, decided that he didn't want to do it anymore. He was talented with computers and

taught himself how to program mobile apps for Android phones. He supported himself through ad revenue on his apps. It was a mystery to everyone in my family exactly how much money he made, but it was enough to buy a brand new limited edition Subaru. Living with my mom rent-free helped. But he still struggled—he didn't have health insurance, he stayed up all night, and he was becoming more and more anti-social. He had never lived outside of a 60-mile radius from my mom's house, aside from a 6-month stint driving trucks in Milwaukee.

I thought moving to Washington, D.C. meant I escaped my family, but there I was again. To the south of our house were acres of untouched forest of maples and beeches. When I was a child, I refused to walk that direction because I imagined getting maimed by one of the hunters whose gunshots blasted in the distance, or losing my way, or falling and breaking my ankle. It didn't help that my mom openly feared these things as well. My worst childhood nightmares consisted of creatures like red-eyed gargoyles or large black bears emerging from the woods behind my house and trying to break down the door.

I had my favorite spots as well, during the day anyway: the moss mound under the low birch branch beside the manmade pond in the back yard; the picnic table on the dam that offered the perfect stargazing spot, wrapped in a fuzzy blanket next to my black Lab, Blacky; the skinny footpath that led to the dirt plateau in the middle of the miniature canyons carved out by the creek where my brother and I played Army. And there were favorite moments: almost walking on top of a turtle the size of a truck tire and prodding it with a stick to see if it was a snapper (it wasn't); stepping into the mush on the edge of the pond only to cause a thousand newborn frogs the size of jacks to start springing all

around me; trying to fish with my dad when I was five, but catching a bullfrog with my yellow Snoopy pole and sobbing because “it’s a fish pole, not a frog pole.”

The summer I turned eight, Ryan decided one afternoon that he wanted to swim in the pond, which we did every few weeks. I invited myself to join him. Ryan’s swim trunks had dulled from neon orange to a rust color from the muddy water. I ran upstairs and put on a loose white T-shirt my mom won in a sweepstakes contest and old shorts. We went to the garage to grab the black rubber inner tube dotted with patches my dad glued on each time the raft sprung a leak. Ryan stretched his body over the lawnmower and three mismatched trashcans blocking the path and reached the tube on the floor with his fingertips.

“Are you two going for a swim?” my mom asked as she loaded the washing machine on the far side of the garage. She wore long white shorts and a pink flower top. “Be careful.”

“Nope. We’re going to drown,” Ryan said, hoisting the giant inner tube onto his shoulder. I laughed.

“Uh, not funny, Ryan,” my mom said as we walked away. My mom worried about most activities my brother and I did—hiking in the woods because of snakes, wading in the creek behind my grandma’s house because there could be leeches, walking along the road because a stranger might kidnap us. Once, when my brother and I asked to go to the gravel lot across the street to ride bikes, she said, “What? Do you want to get run over by a semi?”

Blacky joined us as we passed the honey-colored bricks on the face of the house.

“Why are you wearing that shirt?” Ryan asked me when we got to the pond. He squinted in the sun, and his hair, which looked like an overturned chocolate bowl, almost reached his eyes.

“Because,” I said, “I don’t want to my new suit to turn brown in this dirty water.”

“Whatever,” Ryan said. He opened the valve on the raft and blew in more air.

I slipped off my sandals and placed them on the wooden picnic table my grandpa had built for us. Blacky jumped on top of the table and licked my face. The picnic table roosted on a long, skinny strip of grass that formed a dam. The other edge of the dam sloped off suddenly deep into the woods, forming a perfect sledding hill in the winter.

I waded into the stewing water, my feet sinking six inches into the slough at the bottom of the pond. The mud was cold and filled my nose with the smell of rotten eggs. Hundreds of cattails spiked up along the edge of the water, and beyond those were small tree-covered hills surrounding the pond, like we were in the middle of a ladle.

“You’re walking through that?” Ryan asked. “Gross.”

I turned to look at him on the bank. “What? It’s only for like three feet.”

“That’s why you get a raft,” he said. He threw the black inner tube into the water and leapt onto it. He landed and kicked with his back legs to get to the deep water. Suddenly, I felt ashamed, like I was gross. I lifted my feet out of the muck and began doing a backstroke away from shore. I wiggled my toes to dislodge the mud in between them and swam toward Ryan. My T-shirt billowed around me after I grabbed onto the big raft.

After five minutes of paddling around, Ryan tried to back flip off the inner tube but slipped and fell sideways into the water. “Good one,” I said when he came up. I dipped my head into the water to wet my hair.

“You couldn’t do it either,” Ryan said. “I dare you to try to touch the bottom.”

“What?” I said, wiping water out of my eyes. “No way. Can’t you get stuck?” I imagined my whole leg swallowed in the muck on the bottom.

“It’s freaking 20 feet deep,” he said.

“Really? But couldn’t you still get stuck?”

“I dunno,” he said. “We’ll see. If I don’t come up in two minutes, go tell mom.”

I tried to protest, but he took two deep breaths and went under, his hands disappearing last. The seconds ticked by. I couldn’t see anything other than the reflection of the puffy clouds. As soon as I started to worry, an amber-colored circle appeared below me, which grew bigger and paler until I saw Ryan’s face. He emerged, sputtering and laughing. “I almost touched! I swear I did.”

“Geez, how was it?” I said. “It took you forever.”

“Yeah, you can go farther than you’d think,” Ryan said. “Try it.”

He dared me. I had to do it. I filled my lungs with air and used the raft to springboard me under the water. Blackness enveloped me as the water became cool, then freezing, as I stretched my legs as far as they could go. I held my nose with my fingers, and when I couldn’t take it anymore, rushed to the relief of the warm surface. My face pushed through the water and I sucked in a gulp of air.

“It’s so cold down there,” I said after spitting out pond water from my mouth. “I didn’t touch. I don’t think I was even close.”

We dove for another half an hour, until we were out of breath and sore. Neither of us touched the bottom of the pond that day, but our faces were bright and happy.

An explosion ripped through the back yard, and I jumped to supervise from the window. My brother stood, legs locked, aiming the rifle into the woods at a person-shaped target pinned to an oak. The sky was overcast, but warm for Christmas Eve. No snow yet. Another detonation. I saw it that time—white powder sprayed from the nozzle. Zane jumped, not even three feet behind the blast. I groaned with anxiety, fearing for everyone involved, including the neighbors in our back woods who might be taking a Thursday stroll. Then I remembered Cheryl didn't take walks.

After five minutes of gunshots from the back side of the house, I made my way to the upstairs bathroom to distract my anxiety. My brother had propped a shotgun against the wall in his room, right next to the door. I shrank away from the gun even though no one was around to pull the trigger. As I was brushing my teeth, Ryan raced up the Berber stairs to his bedroom. Zane's footsteps pounded behind him. I spit in the sink and peered into the hallway—the Russian rifle hung over his left shoulder and a grin smeared across his face. My eyebrows furrowed as I clung onto the edge of the doorframe.

“I thought Zane was a goner,” I said. I went back to applying mascara at the chipped sink.

Ryan chuckled. “I'd be more worried about him going deaf.”

I paused and looked at myself in the mirror. “God, you're right.”

“You're not deaf, are you Zane?” Ryan clapped to see if the dog would come. I didn't hear the stir of Zane's feet moving. I called his name from inside the bathroom. At

first Zane didn't come, but on the second call, he sauntered toward me, and I breathed again.

"He's just a dummy, I guess." I kissed our dog on the head.

"He's fine," Ryan said, trying to play it off as if he wasn't worried. But I could tell he felt relieved.

Before it entered my own family, I labeled prepping paranoid or crazy, but I was forced to admit that maybe it was more complicated than that. The movement is widespread—at least sixteen states across the U.S. hold preparedness conventions, from California to Maryland (Indiana included). Preppers fear an array of catastrophes: economic failure, collapse of the food system, terrorism, invasion by a foreign government, nuclear war. Some, like my brother, feared multiple of these possibilities. They figured it was better to be prepared for the worst-case scenario than to not. It seems plausible until I factored in the reality that most preppers expect these crises to take place soon.

Later that night I played tug-of-war with our dog Zane in the living room while Ryan hunkered on the couch. He opened an envelope and pulled out a matte black object—it slowly registered as a high-powered scope that must have come in the mail that day. He looked through the thin tube at the television blasting CNN. He smiled. A tiny shiver ran down my spine. A scope only shows up in movies right before someone dies.

"What are you scoping out?" I asked.

"You never know when you'll need a scope," Ryan said, not answering my question.

He handed me the instruction manual and said, “Russians make everything better.” The journal-sized booklet was written in Russian.

“How helpful,” I said to Ryan. “Although maybe good practice for your Russian.” He nodded, blowing out a stream of cigarette smoke. I flipped the manual over. The back page had been hand-signed by an inspector during the manufacturing process.

“It is cool that a real person signed it,” I said. I was trying my best to find common ground.

“They do everything better,” he repeated while polishing the lens. I didn’t ask where the sudden interest in Russia came from because I was sure I wouldn’t like the answer.

“Not everything.” I said.

“Like what?”

“Like freedom of speech. They don’t do that very well.” Ryan was silent. It felt like my only true win of the week, and it just made my heart heavy.

## **Gun Party**

The first and only time I shot a gun was during my Christmas visit home two years ago. I'd laughed when my brother asked me if I wanted to shoot.

"I don't think so," I said. But then, when he kept prodding, I decided to open up. Maybe I was being too close-minded. I wanted to get closer to my brother. Our most common family activity was watching Jeopardy on TV—which generated a surge of competitiveness in me to prove to my mom that I was smarter than my brother. Plus, like Ryan said, I should know how to hold a gun. I agreed to try. Ten minutes later, my mom joined us, carrying her antique revolver, on the wooden deck behind our house that my dad had built 20 years before, back when he still lived there.

Our Hoosier woods—made up of sugar maple, black oak, and sycamore trees—sprawled out in front of us. Down the hill from the deck steamed a boggy area where we knew not to walk because our sewage system was broken and my parents never had the money to fix it. When the wind blew up from the woods, it smelled faintly of waste, but that was the sort of thing we stopped noticing after a while. Even still, on summer days

like that one, the place was heaven—verdant leaves splayed overhead and filtered the sun onto my arms; acorns fell and cracked on the wooden deck; birds chirped with the joy of warm weather.

“Oh, great,” I said after seeing my mom carrying her gun. “It’s a gun party.”

“I thought you’d want to try shooting this one,” my mom said. “It’s easier than that one.” I sighed, but had to admit that her revolver looked less intimidating than the silver handgun my brother pulled out of a black case.

My blood pumped in my temples. “This is what police use,” Ryan said of his gun, telling me it was called a Glock 22. I groaned that I thought it looked familiar. I’d seen similar weapons in movies. While Ryan showed me the safety built into the trigger, my mom, not thinking, pointed her gun in our direction.

“Jesus!” I yelled and jumped back.

“Yeah,” Ryan said, “point that thing away from us.”

“The safety is on,” my mom said, as if we were the irrational ones.

“That gun doesn’t have a safety,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “How many years have you owned that?”

My mom laughed it off. “I’m actually very good with guns.” Ryan and I exchanged a worried glance.

He pointed his gun at the floor or at the trees at all times. I was surprised by the care he took in being safe. He knew what he was doing. He even scolded our mom. Maybe this wasn’t so nuts. When he handed me the gun, I felt the cold steel in my hands. The grip was like a rough metal nail filer. Then I lifted it to the trees to ready myself to

shoot, but Ryan said, “Oh, hold your fingers low on the back of the gun or they will get ripped to shreds.” I lowered the gun.

“Are you kidding me?” I said. “When were you going to tell me that?”

“I just did, didn’t I?” he said.

While glaring at him, I stood in place for several seconds. I couldn’t believe this was the story I would have to tell friends in D.C. when I returned from the holiday—I imagined looks of horror on their faces.

Then I went through with it. I aimed at the closest tree, a thick silver oak, and I pulled the trigger. The gun jumped back with a bang.

“Woah,” I said. My fingers were fine, and my pulse quickened as I grinned. I shot the gun four more times, not caring that I probably missed the tree.

I looked back at Ryan. “I did pretty well, huh?” He shrugged.

As I put the gun back in the case, I understood the thrill of shooting a gun a little more. It was fun. But they still terrified me. I knew shooting would never become a hobby of mine, mostly because it didn’t fit the life I wanted. The life I created for myself was thought out, planned. Guns were spontaneous, immediate, like the sometimes-reckless ways of my family. It was nice to step into their shoes—to loosen up—but I knew my ideal future required keeping my five-year goals on hand and my linen closet organized.

Someone could cut Indiana in half with a knife and people might not notice. The northern portion of the state gravitated toward Chicago, while in the south, we had more of an affinity toward Kentucky. A hick accent flowed thickly from many people’s mouths, including most members of my Hoosier family. Many people wore camouflage

coveralls, went mudding in their big trucks, and hunted for morel mushrooms in the spring. My high school friend, Ashley, once went deer shining on a date, which meant she and this guy drove around one Friday night spotting deer with a high-powered flashlight. I met multiple people from northern Indiana since I moved to D.C., and when I say I'm from the southern half, they say, "It's another world down there."

But my county is also a former artists' colony. Landscape artists—the most famous being T.C. Steele—moved to Brown County in the early 1900s and set up shop. The earth is hilly rather than flat, and the Brown County State Park is the largest state park in Indiana. In October, thousands of tourists flock to the antique shops or leather maker's store or the glassblowing shop. They mostly come to see the leaves change colors. On the best years, driving through the park is like entering a yellow, orange and red paradise. Also, Indiana University is in Bloomington and is only a 30-minute drive away, and the liberal culture from that city spills over into our little town, showing up in the form of a new brewery or a Unitarian church. If one wants to avoid the hick lifestyle while living in Nashville, it isn't too far out of reach.

Still, where we lived on our winding country road, Nashville felt far away, and we mostly kept to ourselves. Just after I graduated college, I met a Swedish guy named Magnus in a running club I had joined in Bloomington. I had just returned from studying abroad in Italy, and was living back at home with my mom for a few months before I figured out what I wanted to do with my life. Magnus symbolized all the things I wanted to be—European, well read (he introduced me to Kafka), and a creative type (he was a musician and played the lute in a classical orchestra).

I knew I would have to bring him home eventually, since I only lived 30 minutes away, but my childhood clashed in almost every way with his upbringing—my house was dirty and my mom smoked inside. But, one night, we made plans to cook at my mom’s house. Magnus was vegan, so we stopped at the store to pick up the supplies to make vegan risotto—my mom didn’t use olive oil or drink wine, so we bought everything.

Things were going fine—Magnus and my mom talked for a few minutes, and then my mom went to watch TV—until we went to leave. Since he didn’t have a car, I told Magnus I would drive him home. As we were walking out the back door to the garage, my mom sat at the dining room table, her sweepstakes entries fanned out in front of her, cigarette smoke fogging around her face, her fuzzy robe tucked around her body. A feeling of immense shame overtook me as I looked from her to Magnus. She embarrassed me. As we said goodbye, I looked into her eyes in a way that still pains me to think about—it was a stare of disgust, like she wasn’t good enough for me.

When I returned home, she confronted me.

“Do you even like me anymore?” She had been crying. She had noticed the stare.

“What? Of course I do.” I didn’t know how to apologize.

Her words slapped me out of my condescending fantasy. I realized Magnus was no better than my mom just because he was European or had read Kafka or played an archaic instrument. That night, I promised myself never again to allow myself to feel ashamed of my mom, or anyone in my family, and to never again treat them with such contempt.

## **Get Out of Here**

When I was 15, my dad told me to “find work you can do with your mind, not your body.” We were standing in the cramped kitchen lined with buckeye-colored cabinets of our 1970s home. “When you get old, your body gets tired.”

He had just returned from a job planting trees for a client, and wiped sweat from his forehead that was flecked with bits of bark. His white T-shirt, stained with sweat, matched the rest of his ensemble of blue jeans with a shredded knee and leather boots that were caked with fresh mud. I appreciated his advice and was glad that he expected me to get a job. Being the girl of the family put odd pressures on me—to get married, to become a secretary rather than pursue a career that I wanted—but those pressures mostly came from my mom. My dad believed that I would do something great.

He owned a landscaping company called C&S Landscaping. The name came from my dad’s high school nickname that stuck, Cub, and his friend and former partner, Scott. Somehow my dad was always busy—designing rich people’s gardens two towns over, caring for the flowerbeds overflowing with carnations and impatiens at the Brown

County Inn, doing construction jobs on the side—but managed to make very little money. He was an unskilled businessman, and struggled with customer relations. Furious women often called my mom at home claiming they had been waiting for two hours for my dad to arrive. My dad showed up when he felt like it, rather than when he said he would be there.

He is now almost 60 years old. His knee gives him trouble, ever since he fell 30 feet off the roof of the Columbus Hospital when he was on a construction job. He survived, but with many scratches. After my parents got divorced 12 years ago, my dad lost my mom's health coverage she received from working as a reservationist at United Airlines, and my dad had no insurance until Obamacare came around. But he still doesn't have dental insurance, and the pain in one of his teeth keeps him up at night. His bald head turns brown in the summer, which matches his shoulders, except for the strips of pale skin covered by his red cotton tank top, creating tan lines that would make Kim Kardashian freak.

Around the same time, when I was in high school and we were driving to my grandparents' house, my dad's other advice to me was, "You have to get out of here. There's nothing for you in Brown County." My late aunt Susie was visiting, and she owned a highly successful interior design company in Florida. My dad may have been inspired to give me that advice while thinking about Susie's success. I had already planned to do exactly that—to get the hell out of Indiana—but his words gave me formal permission to leave.

I listened to him. Now, over a decade later, I am 28 and I work in an office in Washington, D.C. at the most brainy-sounding job site in the world—a think tank. I have

done what my dad told me to do. I obeyed my parental orders. But why do I still feel drawn back home? Why can't I quite find my niche here in D.C.? Why does it sometimes feel like a sacrifice being here?

About a month ago, a young woman in a silk shirt sat in the booth next to my boyfriend, Joey, and me at a pho restaurant in Adams Morgan. "I don't mind if people hunt," she said to her friend, "as long as they use the whole animal. Like Native Americans, you know?"

For some reason, this infuriated me. I knew a lot of hunters, and they were more in touch with their food source than any of us in this city. Many hunters were the original conservationists, like Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell, who founded the National Audubon Society—they were out in the woods, taking note of the declining animal populations due to deforestation and over-hunting. To me, it seemed presumptuous for a person in a Vietnamese restaurant in the middle of Washington, D.C. to assume she knew anything about how hunting worked. The D.C. culture cultivated this attitude—constantly needing to grandstand one's opinions as knowledge—but it was often accompanied by a lack of self-awareness. Had this woman never wasted food before? Would she drink up every last drop of the soup that came with her pho that night? I wanted to shout at her, "When was the last time you threw out rotten food from your fridge? That package of Whole Foods chicken breast you meant to cook but never got around to? What's the difference?" But I said nothing.

To help cope with the schism in my life, I plant flowers, herbs, and apartment-sized trees. Growing new roots makes me feel like I haven't abandoned my own.

We moved in together late last year, and our apartment was built in 1929 and is adorned with French doors, glass knobs, and a sunroom. Last Christmas, we sat on the floor of our new living room, the gray rug still smelling of plastic underneath us, and we opened our gifts.

“Open yours,” he said. Joey is impatient and bad with surprises. I was impressed that he hadn’t spilled to me what he bought me weeks ago.

I ripped the tape on the long box with scissors. As I opened the flaps, I saw a single sparse branch with five leaves growing from it. My forehead wrinkled. Joey had told me this present was something I wanted, but I didn’t remember asking for a leafless twig.

“What is this?” I asked.

“A lemon tree,” he said.

My mouth dropped and I took in a small breath. “Oh, wow.” I had completely forgotten that I had said months before that I would love to have a lemon tree. I gave him brownie points for remembering, even if it looked Charlie Brown-esque. “Thank you,” I said. “This is amazing.”

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About four years before, I had tried to grow a lemon tree from a seed and completely failed. I was living in a shared 1920s row house on Capitol Hill. While I was cooking pasta one afternoon, I sliced a lemon in half and scraped out the seeds. I held one of them up to the bright light from the large kitchen window, and thought, Maybe I could get this to grow. My tomato and herb garden flourished on the back patio, with a basil

plant that so healthy we called it a basil tree. Why not add one more plant to the mix? I pushed the lemon seed aside on my cutting board and called my dad.

“Hey there. How’s it going?” he said when he picked up. We had been talking more often recently. After my parents’ divorce when I was 16, he basically vanished. I only heard from him once every six months for five years. But now we were talking every other week, and even though his quick temper brought me a load grief when I was a kid, it was nice to have him back in my life.

“Can I grow a lemon tree from a seed?” I asked while fondling the seed in my left hand.

“Well, yeah,” my dad said, his thick hick accent more apparent from the East Coast. “Where do you think they come from?”

When I was a child, I told my dad that I refused to adopt his accent. I would correct his grammar if he used the wrong tense, to the point that my parents called me the English school marm. Rather than be offended, my dad chalked it up to six-year-old honesty. I copied actors’ speech that I heard on television.

“Sure,” I laughed at my dad on the phone. “But is it hard to do?”

“Just stick it in the dirt.” I felt like my dad knew everything about plants. He should, since he had worked with them every day for the past 25 years.

“That’s really all I have to do?” I asked. “I don’t have to scrub off the citrus or anything?”

“I mean, yeah,” he said. “You might wanna wash it off a little, but it’s not hard.”

Later in the conversation, my dad mentioned that some kids at work made fun of him. He had gotten a job with a local landscaping company in order to relieve some of

the burden from running his own company. This way, he could call someone when the truck broke down instead of having to fix it himself. “I only know the local names of the plants,” my dad said, “and these kids laugh at me.”

“What do you mean,” I asked.

“I don’t know, I’ll call a plant Virginia Creeper and they’ll say, ‘What? That’s five-leafed ivy.’”

“How old are they?” I asked, feeling sorry for him as I imagined him an older man among a bunch of bullying teenagers.

“I don’t know, 22, 23,” he said. “Some are just outta high school.”

“That stinks,” I said while fondling the leaves of a mint plant in my windowsill.

“Yeah, it’s all right. It’s a job.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I hate my job, too,” I said, happy I could relate. “The people are arrogant and have oversized egos.”

“Oh yeah?” he laughed. “Well it pays the bills, anyway.”

Later that day, I planted the lemon seed in a green pot by the kitchen windowsill, just like my dad instructed. But one month later, no sprout had come up. I dug out the seed and found a lump of browned mush. When I told my dad about it later, he said, “Oh, it just rotted away on you?” He sounded surprised. That was the first moment when I wondered whether those bullying teenagers were right. Did my dad not know what he was talking about?

The subject of southern accents came up three years ago in D.C., when I was working at a nuclear policy conference for one of the programs at the think tank. I was sitting in a circle with a group of junior fellows who worked with me, taking a break. One

of the junior fellows, who was 22 and had just graduated from Harvard, said, “All people with southern accents are ignorant.”

I sat to his left, wearing my uncomfortable suit I had bought at Macy’s with my small savings. “What do you mean?” I asked.

The room went silent as everyone stared at the two of us. I was only three years older than him, but it felt like a generation apart.

“I mean... aren’t they?” He held up his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

“My grandparents talk like that,” I said. “So, I’m not sure what you’re trying to say.” He apologized, but I realized later what I couldn’t bring myself to say in front of all those Ivy Leaguers—my dad also talks like that. My dad was too close to me, too representative of me as a person. I still couldn’t admit out loud who my dad was.

When I found myself at Christmas with a new lemon tree to nurse four years later, I wasn’t speaking to my dad as often. We were in one of our low dips in the waves of communication. I scanned the potting soil aisle of the Ace Hardware in Adams Morgan, a five-minute walk from my D.C. apartment. Sixteen sunflower yellow and lime green options rose above me. I didn’t want the Miracle-Gro variety because it contained fertilizer in the soil itself, and I vaguely knew that was supposed to be bad. I was hoping the store had an organic option. I had done research and needed a specific mixture of peat moss and sand to make sure the soil drained well enough.

I felt silly buying dirt. In Indiana, my back yard provided me with all the shovelfuls of dirt I needed. In the city, I spent almost \$10 on highly calibrated soil. But I didn’t have a choice. Growing plants was better than not at all. The last bag I looked at

was the best option: Miracle-Gro for citrus plants and herbs. There were no organic options, so I grabbed the sunshine-colored bag.

I also read that rocks in the bottom of the pot helped with drainage. I had never bought rocks before. It felt too ridiculous. When I lived in the row house, I needed rocks for the basil plant, but rather than spend the money, I scoured my neighborhood for stray gravel in the gutters and alleys. Back then, I was less busy and more broke. Apparently I had arrived at a place in my life where I was comfortable spending money on a plastic sack of rocks. I grabbed a bag of rounded tan stones. As I added the rocks to the pile in my arms, I promised myself I to keep this purchase a secret from my dad to avoid the ridicule.

When I got to my apartment, I plopped the load of purchases onto the glass kitchen table. I was hungry and tired. Joey came over and kissed my cheek.

“I’d rather wait until tomorrow to plant this beast,” I said. “But I might as well get it over with.” Actually, I was looking forward to it. I always liked nurturing things. I parked on the floor with the lemon tree and a paper bag to catch the loose soil. Joey sat next to me.

“Are you helping?” I asked him.

“Yeah, I thought I would,” he said. “Unless you don’t want me to.”

“That’s sweet of you,” I said to him. “Actually I kind of wanted to do it by myself.” We had only been living together for less than three months, so we were still tiptoeing around each other.

“No problem. I’ll go shoot some Russians,” he said, referring to his computer game.

“You do that,” I said. I settled in with my plant friend. I poured half the rocks into the bottom of the green plastic pot. My gloved hands placed the roots into a slot I dug out in the soil. I pressed the roots down to stabilize them and filled it with soil on top. Then I watered the tree and admired my handy work.

### **My Dad's House**

My brother and I never visit my dad's house, even though it is five minutes away from my mom's. Ryan probably didn't go there because of the bad relationship with my dad. I didn't visit because I preferred not to see the squalor my dad lived in.

My grandparents had bought the house for him he got divorced and became depressed. The property that contained the small red house linked to the back edge of my grandparents' land. It needed a lot of work, and my dad agreed to renovate the property if he could live there, but progress was slow.

The last time I went to my dad's house was a fluke—he had agreed to help me move into a new apartment when I was in college, but he didn't show up. My dad promised to arrive at my mom's house with his truck at ten o'clock to help me and my friend, Carolyn, move to a new apartment. Carolyn stayed the night before at my mom's, and we woke up at nine, and two hours later, he hadn't arrived yet. I tried to call but got no answer.

“I think we need to go over there,” I said with a groan.

“Isn’t it right down the road?” Carolyn asked.

“Yeah, it’s only five minutes away,” I said. “But it’s embarrassing.”

“Why?” Carolyn laughed while pulling her three-foot-long black hair into a ponytail. She was a hippie at heart and hadn’t cut her hair in years. “You remember that my dad lives in his best friend’s basement, don’t you?”

“Fine,” I said as we got in the car. “You’re lucky we are such good friends or I would never let you come with me. I barely let you spend the night at my mom’s place.”

We drove the five minutes in my silver Honda hatchback. I pulled into the driveway that was in desperate need of gravel, and both Carolyn and I got out. I tried calling my dad again. The weather was beautiful—bright clouds floated in a cyan sky. The house was not—the wooden siding had been painted maroon years before but was now faded and chipped. The yard consisted of scraggy weeds and empty flowerpots. My dad had mashed together various sheets of plywood to construct a six-foot-wide fence on the south side of his property, only big enough to block his neighbor’s house from view after they got in one of their most recent fights. I stared at the front of the house as the phone rang and told Carolyn he wasn’t answering.

“I’m not letting you come inside,” I said to Carolyn.

“Fine with me,” she said while standing by the open car door.

I took a deep breath and walked toward the front door. I knocked. No answer. I knocked again. Nothing. The door was unlocked; few people locked their doors in Indiana. I pushed it open and saw what looked like a construction site. The entire floor was plywood with red spray paint measurements streaked across it. The kitchen consisted of dark wood cabinets along one wall and no furniture except for a kitchen table with

unmatching chairs. Light streamed in from the windows on what could be called an eat-in nook if it were finished.

“Dad?” I called. No sound. God, what if he isn’t even here? But then if he is here, I have to wake him up. I couldn’t decide which was worse. I braced myself. I didn’t know where his bedroom was, but it was a small house, and I saw a step-up to a short hallway on my right. My foot stepped up and my body followed.

“Dad?” I called again. If he’s dead, I’m going to be so mad.

I saw a door frame in front of me and reached my hand out to hold onto it. “Are you here?” I said before I peeked around the corner, in case he was naked.

A rustling came from inside the dark room.

“Huh? What?” I heard my dad say.

I saw him lying in bed—or, what I thought was a bed, anyway. Looking closer, I realized it was a plastic chaise lounge chair people used in their lawns to sunbathe. His comforter was a ratty cotton with green palm leaves on it. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

“What time is it?” he asked, half asleep.

“Eleven,” I said, wondering if the frustration in my voice came through.

“Oh,” he said and grabbed his phone. “My alarm must’ve not rang.” He sighed and rubbed his face. He had trouble sleeping, so it looked like last night was another late one.

I stepped out of the room and went back to the kitchen, unsure of what to do with myself. I was afraid to touch anything, so I just looked out the far window, trying to push the image of my dad sleeping on a lawn chair out of my mind.

“It looks like you’ve done a lot of work here,” I said loud enough for him to hear.

“Yeah, nice place, huh?” he said. My dad didn’t require many belongings. When he went camping, he brought a sheet, a tarp, and a rope. That and a lighter was all he needed to spend the night in the woods by a fire. But this was another level of scrimping.

“I have a shitload to do still,” my dad said as he came out of his room in jeans and a gray T-shirt, his hair more gray than I remembered it. “I just can’t afford the materials.” His eyes drooped, which happened when he talked about his lack of money.

“Yeah, it’s got to be expensive,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. “But you’ll get it done eventually.”

I remembered Carolyn.

“Let me tell Carolyn what’s going on,” I said.

“Oh, is she here?” my dad asked. “She can come in, you know.”

“Right,” I said and thought for a second. I wanted to leave—both to get started on the move and because it was uncomfortable seeing the place. But I said, “Yeah, OK.”

I opened the door and waved for Carolyn to come inside. I held my breath as she stepped inside.

“Wow,” she said, looking around. “Are you doing all this work?” She seemed impressed. I inhaled again. Carolyn loved to work with her hands.

“Yeah,” my dad said while tying his shoes. “I’m about a quarter of the way done. Only taken me a year.” This last line came out like a loud squawk, but I could tell he was in a better mood because he was smiling.

“This is seriously impressive,” she said. “You built those stairs?” She pointed to a set of bare wooden stairs leading down to the basement.

My dad stood up. “Actually, I opened up this whole wall. See, this entire house was built wrong. Whoever built it was an idiot. All the floors were uneven.” He signaled for us to follow him to the laundry room. “See this?” He motioned to the spot the hallway met the laundry room floor—one side was about half an inch higher than the other. “That’s one I haven’t finished yet. It’s still crooked.”

“That’s crazy.” He was becoming animated—talking louder, his eyes getting wide, hands flailing. You get him going and he’s almost impossible to stop. Once, we were on vacation in Alaska—something we could afford because my mom worked for United Airlines and got us free plane tickets. We pulled onto an overlook to see the view. This poor tourist—a man in a polo shirt—was standing in the wrong spot as my family and I waltzed up to read the large wooden park sign. My dad made a joke to the polo shirt man about the view being terrible, and the man laughed. That was the opening for my dad to tell him every detail about these flowers we had seen outside of the diner we ate lunch in and then the elk we saw in Denali State Park and then another 15 minutes of facts from our trip. After five minutes, the man’s face grew more serious and his eyebrows furrowed. After ten minutes, he glanced at his wife.

Finally my mom said, “Cub, I don’t think he needs to hear every detail about our trip.” The man escaped. But my dad didn’t seem to notice the body language that the rest of our family picked up on. The same thing happened that day at his house—he talked for 30 minutes, forgetting that we were already running late to meet Carolyn’s dad.

When Carolyn and I finally got back in the car, I said, “Sorry for the monologue.”

“No way, it was so interesting,” Carolyn said. “He’s just excited.”

“Sure,” I said, knowing the pattern.

“Your dad is so smart,” Carolyn said. That was one of the first times I had ever heard anyone say that, besides my mom who complimented my dad on his smarts a handful of times but was sure to mention his flaws in the same sentence. Carolyn’s statement hit me hard in the chest.

“Really? You think so?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said. “Did you not hear all the math he was using? Some people aren’t smart in the typical way but they’re geniuses in others.”

Her saying this warmed my heart and made me proud of my dad in a way I hadn’t felt in years.

## **Rage**

“Do you see the things Ryan posts on Facebook?” my dad asked me over the phone a few months ago.

“I know,” I said. “He’s turning really ultra conservative.”

“It’s kind of scary,” my dad said. I was surprised he felt this way, since he was far from liberal. My dad lived a-politically.

But Ryan and my dad never clicked, even though they were father and son. My dad called him “little man” because he was short until junior year of high school, even though he was insecure about it. When my dad woke us up in the mornings for school, Ryan was terrible about getting out of bed on time. If Ryan slept for more than an extra 15 minutes, my dad’s rage spilled over the edge.

“Get your ass out of bed!” my dad yelled from the bottom of the stairs so forcefully it sounded like he might lose his voice. That day, I had overslept as well. I leapt out of bed and grasped my white nightgown in my palms, bracing for the worst. My heartbeat raced and I felt anxiety take over my insides, like it was squeezing my internal

organs. “I am fucking tired of having to come back here a hundred times every morning. If you don’t get out of bed in one minute, I’ll come up there and beat your ass.” I am still anxious when I wake up in the mornings, afraid I’ve done something wrong.

When I was 11 and Ryan was 13, we all went to Tombstone, Arizona for a vacation with my dad’s family. On the drive from the Tuscon airport to the dude ranch where we were staying, a rock from a gravel truck hit the rental car windshield. My parents panicked because it left a small crack.

“We didn’t get comprehensive insurance,” my mom said. “I told you we should have done that. What if they charge us for a whole new windshield? We can’t afford that.” My brother and I listened from the back. As I looked out at the scrub brush and low trees sprinkling the tops of low distant hills, I felt my own worry grow as well. Ryan played his Game Boy next to me, appearing to ignore them. The interstate cut through the short hills like a knife slices a cake. I wanted to run away to the far hills that were dark even in the bright afternoon sun because I had heard it all before—we had no money, we would have to put any extra charges on credit cards, my mom might become a bag lady. All the stress my parents felt compounded in me as a child, until I stopped asking for things. If I didn’t need to buy anything, if I could be a financial ghost, then maybe my parents would survive. But I couldn’t control the rocks that hit our windshield. As soon as we pulled in the long dirt driveway, I saw my Aunt Vicky and Uncle Tim standing at the end and I smiled again.

The ranch was an unfinished puzzle of low, one-story buildings placed throughout the property. The guesthouses fit together next to a dry field and an overlook with nothing but the horizon. The trip was going great—we rode horses, visited the historic

town of Tombstone, played baseball in the field. But on the fourth day there, my brother and dad been in too close quarters for too many days. We were in our guesthouse getting ready for bed. The room was reminiscent of the place—hanging on one side of the room was a painting of a buffalo between the two beds and on the other an ivory cowboy, and the bedding was marked with Native American symbols. An adobe fireplace occupied the corner next to the only window, the sliding glass door that led to the courtyard in the middle of all the houses.

I remember the room being dark, even though the two lamps hanging above the bed were lit. My mom sat on the bed in the far corner and took off her earrings. I crouched on a chair in a small seating area on the other side of the low-ceilinged room, taking off my shoes. My dad was in a bad mood because Ryan had complained all day about the Tombstone trip, saying he was bored. Ryan moaned again about how dull Tombstone had been, which pushed my dad over the edge.

“I’ll show you boring,” my dad said. “You don’t appreciate shit.” I tried to ignore him and started brushing my hair, which I often did in a futile attempt to make the fighting go away. My dad yelled for a few more minutes.

Then my brother mumbled under his breath, “Bastard.”

Everything after that happened in a blur. My dad rushed my brother and grabbed him by the neck and then threw Ryan up against the wall next to the buffalo painting.

“You son of a bitch,” my dad said. “Don’t you ever talk to me like that.”

I stood up and dropped my brush. My mom started screaming and beating my dad in the back. My dad let my brother go. Ryan fell over and grabbed onto the bed, holding

his throat. I stood frozen across the room. My mom cried and said, “Get the hell out of here,” while holding onto Ryan’s back.

I saw my dad’s red face furrow, and he opened his mouth to say something but only yelled, “Fine.” He stumbled out the door. I started crying, the shock wearing off. My mom hugged my brother but he pushed her away.

“It’s OK, honey,” my mom said, holding his arm. “Your dad is a terrible person. I might leave him. This might be the last straw.”

I remember more fighting when my dad came back two hours later. When I finally went to sleep, the rock in my stomach kept me awake until almost sunrise. The next morning, when I emerged for breakfast, my Aunt Vicky asked me whether we were OK.

“I heard a lot of yelling,” she said.

I looked at my feet and said, “Yeah. We’re fine.” I wanted to stay in my aunt and uncle’s guesthouse. I wished I could drive around in their car for the rest of the trip, but they were already a family of four—a complete unit. I tried to be extra nice to Ryan, but he would barely look anyone in the eye.

When we left Arizona a few days later, the people at the rental place didn’t even notice the chip in the windshield. My parents were relieved. My brother and I still didn’t hear my parents say the words, “It’s going to be OK.”

### **This Place is a Jungle**

I chose to leave the country for the city, while my brother stayed in Indiana. I traveled widely—in the Middle East, West Africa, Europe—but my brother had never left the United States, except for a trip to a resort in Cancun (which I don't personally count as traveling). I got my Bachelor's degree, and my brother never finished college. He became ultra conservative while I had preferred the super liberal life. Then he moved back in with my mom at 28. When I visited last Christmas, I realized how much these seemingly small choices we made had aggregated into divergent lives.

On the second night of my Christmas trip, my brother, my mom, and I went to Texas Roadhouse for dinner. I felt out of place in my skinny jeans and gray booties. When we walked back to the table, I felt like I was being stared at—but that was probably my imagination. My brother had gained an attitude since I last saw him, as if he knew everything.

"I have a knack for languages," he said. "I think my brain works that way. I'm just really good at them." I paused, wanting to say something. Two weeks before, he had

recently started teaching himself Russian through an online program—I didn't ask why. I wanted to mention that between the two of us, it was probably me who had the knack for languages, since I had spent three years in college studying Italian and made my way to Bologna for a semester to study abroad in a program where all the courses were taught in Italian. But I didn't say anything. Maybe he was going through an insecure phase and trying to figure himself out. I cut him some slack.

But then, on the drive back home, he said, "All Muslims are terrorists." He was speaking to my mom, who sat next to him in the front seat. I sat in the back, my phone's screen lighting my face as I scrolled through Facebook. I knew it was a trap, but I couldn't help myself.

"That's not true," I said.

"What about in the Twin Cities? There's a huge Somali population that's all turning terrorist."

I hadn't heard about that. "I don't care about that. I work with a lot of Muslim folks who are most definitely not terrorists."

My mom chimed in. "You'll see, honey. Just wait until something happens."

I rolled my eyes, deciding to give up, but they couldn't see me from the back seat.

And the next night, we got into a debate about presidential powers in deporting immigrants. Ryan said that the Constitution gave the president those powers in cases of national security. I told him that didn't sound right. He pulled up a website from Stanford University on his computer in his bedroom—his desk was covered in cans of soda half full of spit from his chewing tobacco habit and the floor was barely visible through piles of clothing. A shotgun leaned against the doorframe.

“See?” he said while pointing at the screen.

“Interesting,” I said after reading. “I’ll have to look into that.” It looked like he might be right. But then he flipped over to an article on *RT*, a Russian news source that I knew—because my boss in D.C. had been interviewed by them and they used his words out of context to support their false claims—to be a propaganda arm for the Russian government.

“You definitely can’t trust *RT*,” I said. “They’re totally biased.”

“Biased toward what? The truth?” He threw his hands up in the air and scowled. He acted as if there was one universal truth, and that he could find it on a website like *RT*. I didn’t know what to say, so I left the room.

Then, Ryan slept in late on Christmas Day, and that was the last straw. My mom and I sat around waiting for him until three o’clock in the afternoon, since he stayed up until seven in the morning (his usual bedtime). When he finally woke up, he joined my mom and me in the crowded living room. We each had our perches: mine in the small armchair, my mom in her oversized recliner, and my brother on the couch. He lit a cigarette, adding to the cloud from my mom’s. My head hurt from the smoke, but they complained when I asked them to go to the garage, so I didn’t bother. I was willing to get over Ryan sleeping in so late if we could just be a normal family for the rest of the day.

“I’d like to see that new Sandra Bullock movie,” my mom said. “I might order the DVD on Netflix.”

“Eh, I heard it wasn’t any good,” I said. “Let me check.” I pulled out my phone and searched for a review of the movie. “Yeah, this review is pretty negative.”

“Bummer,” my mom said and pouted.

“What, did you read one review?” my brother scoffed, coffee cup in hand. “You can’t just believe everything you read.” I narrowed my eyes at him while holding my phone. “You have to do research before you come to a conclusion.” The way he emphasized the word “research” made it clear that he was insinuating he did research and I did not. My patience fizzled.

“It’s a freaking Sandra Bullock movie. Who cares?” I picked up *The Count of Monte Cristo* and stomped into the front living room. I opened my book and started reading on the secondhand leather couch—this was how I rebelled. I wasn’t going to share what was supposed to be a happy holiday with someone who had such nerve.

“He is such an asshole,” I said to my mom when she came in to check on me, loudly enough for Ryan to hear.

“I know, honey,” my mom said. “I don’t know what gets into him sometimes.”

“He sleeps in until late afternoon on Christmas Day, and then comes into the room and immediately starts criticizing us? Nope. I’m not dealing with that.”

My mom stood in front of me, looking unsure of what to do.

“Just give me a minute,” I said. She left.

When I came back to the living room a few minutes later, my brother’s voice wasn’t so accusatory, and he wasn’t using such a snarky tone. He knew I was right. And, because I am the peacekeeper of the family, I forgave him.

After dinner that night, my brother and I were watching television. A commercial popped up on the screen with a woman in a canoe wearing high heels, complaining about the bugs biting. I said to my brother that no woman would actually do that. Ryan disagreed.

“You’d be surprised,” he said. “City girls are like that.”

“I live in a city and I don’t act like that,” I said.

“You can’t be a city girl if you grew up in southern Indiana,” he said.

I hesitated, unsure of what to say. “I don’t know what I am.”

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Once when I was 13, I sat out by the pond, having just returned from Bloomington, where my mom had driven me by the sprawling Indiana University campus, a section of the city that she avoided at all costs because of traffic. The buildings looked like Hogwarts—all limestone, etched with foundation dates, red brick paths leading in between them. In that moment, I told myself I would make it there. I would go to college. I would be one of those students toting backpacks around the campus.

I looked up at the stars outside my house and saw the planes full of people passing over the little pond, and felt a little less alone. I put my hand around Blacky’s neck, her warmth comforting me. I knew I needed to get out of there. I could go to New Zealand and see where they created The Shire. I could do it with my mom’s airline discount (we could fly anywhere for free because she worked for United Airlines). The peep frogs croaked all around my dog and me. No matter how many times I had come out there at night, the stars took my breath away every time. Then I heard a rustling in the woods to my right. Blacky barked. It was probably a squirrel, but I panicked and ran back inside. When I told her what happened, my mom said, “God, this place is a jungle.” I nodded.

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The night before I returned to D.C., my brother and I drove home together from dinner at my aunt and uncle’s house. The seat warmer took the edge off the chill as

Ryan's Subaru weaved along the country road. Our headlights flashed on the overhanging trees like paparazzi. A faint scent of smoke mixed with the smell of the leather seats. I remembered how Ryan swore he wouldn't smoke in the car when he first bought it, but apparently that didn't last.

"Something bad is going to happen," Ryan said. "I have this horrible feeling." My brother suffered from anxiety and panic attacks, so I thought he felt one coming on.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The world is going to shit," he said. "Our economy is falling apart."

"But the economy is actually recovering," I said, recalling the many news articles I read about how the economy was on an upward trajectory. "Jobs are coming back. We're doing OK."

"Have you seen how many trillions of dollars of debt this country is in?" he said.

"I mean, sure," I said. "But that doesn't mean the economy can't still be functioning well."

"And you, living in D.C.," he said, blowing out a puff of smoke. "That city is going to be the first place to get blown away."

"Thanks, Ryan," I said. "That's so sweet of you." I felt my stomach turn sour. It was like he was trying to be morbid.

"All I'm saying is when shit hits the fan, you make your way to Indiana."

I laughed. "I'll go live in the zoo." Maybe it was good for him to hear me making light of a world that seemed so scary to him. Then again, maybe it wasn't. It might have made him worry more.

A week later, I lay on the blue-striped loveseat in my D.C. apartment. It was a relief to be home. I could control my day, my surroundings. I didn't have to breathe in smoke. I cleaned my entire apartment when I got back, as a coping mechanism. It helped me feel separate from my messy family. My brother wouldn't get out of my head. Mostly, my frustration with him wouldn't disappear. Tightness formed in my chest. The way he behaved worried me. He is so out there and judgmental. Such black and white thinking. So wrong.

Wait. I stopped myself. I am the one who thinks he's wrong.

I paused. Slowly, coolness spread over the wildfire in my stomach. Am I no better? The thought rang in my head like church bells. I tried to stifle the sound. But it was undeniable.

Maybe I had my own part to play in this division between us. It wasn't only that my brother had gone insane. This realization allowed me calm down. For the first time since I returned, I didn't feel overwhelmed by aggravation and worry. Maybe I couldn't control other people. Maybe I shouldn't try. The best I can do might be to try to understand and empathize. He's my brother, for God's sake.

Ryan's outlandish statements—like that D.C. was a terrible place to live—suddenly appeared less opaque, like fog defrosting from a windshield. “When shit hits the fan, you come to Indiana.” These words made sense. They came from a fear for his little sister. He was afraid for me. All of a sudden it didn't seem so crazy. It seemed caring.

### **New Little Family**

When I first heard my dad had gotten a strange woman pregnant, I was appalled. It was my senior year in college, and my dad didn't have the nerve to call me. My mom told me. The two had been divorced for six years, so my mom was more worried about my reaction than any of her own feelings. She told me the woman, Eva, was no stranger to having babies with men she wasn't married to.

"Six kids by four different dads," I said to my roommate the next day. "That's so trashy." My roommate, Abra, who had attended high school with me, had siblings from multiple different fathers.

"Thanks," Abra said. "I see what you think about my family." I felt bad, both for saying that about her family and about mine.

A few weeks after Tristan was born, I showed up alone at a cookout at my aunt Vicky and Uncle Tim's house. My mom didn't come with me and my brother had stopped attending family gatherings several years before. I felt like an orphan.

Their house was surrounded on three sides by cornfields, but my aunt had transformed their large back yard into a sanctuary garden. I loved going there. My cousin Abby, who I had grown up with and was my same age, was also there. And my late aunt Susie was visiting from Florida. She was the youngest and the most vocal about problems in the family. I sat at a table with Susie and my cousin Samantha.

“I wonder if my dad is going to show up,” I said as I took a bite of a hotdog.

“You haven’t heard from him?” Susie said. “It seems like he would have at least called you.” Susie was one of the more reasonable members of my family.

“You would think so,” I said after swallowing. “That’s not really his style. But if he does come, I hope he doesn’t bring the baby.”

“Why’s that?” Susie asked. “You’ve met the baby before, right?”

“No,” I said. Susie’s mouth dropped. “I only heard that from grandma that he was even born.”

Susie became quiet in a way that I appreciated. I also didn’t have the words to describe the situation.

“Well, if he does show up, what are you going to do?” she asked after a moment.

I shrugged. “Be the bigger person, I guess. I don’t know.”

Just then a silver truck pulled into their long driveway and parked in the small gravel lot by the garage. “Great,” I said. “That’s him.” I started sweating more heavily than I had been before. I told myself to be cool.

Susie and I looked back at the truck. I squinted and thought I saw—although it was 50 yards away—a second adult hop out of the car. Wait, I thought. There are definitely two people, and they’re getting something out of the back. The baby. Oh my

God, he brought this new woman that no one knows and the baby. I saw the three of them making their way toward me, and all I could think was, “They look like a new little family.”

“He brought them both?” I said, completely in shock. “He could have at least warned me.” Great dialogue

Susie searched my face. “You can do this.” She braced the table with two hands, a pain in her eyes for me.

“No,” I said, seeing the little family walking toward us, my dad smiling. “I can’t.” I stood up, tears filling my eyes and ran back toward the house. I skipped up onto the deck, and almost ran into my grandfather. Salty tears flowed into my mouth.

“Well, what in the world—,” I heard my grandpa say as I passed. My grandma yelled something, maybe to my dad, but by this time I was inside the house with the door shut. I leaned over the kitchen sink, feeling like I was going to be sick. One minute later, the back door opened.

“Tiffany?” I heard my cousin Abby’s voice. I looked up at her and started sobbing. She ran up to me and held me by the shoulders, then led me to her parents’ bedroom. We sat on the edge of the tall bed, and she put her arm around me as I cried into my hands.

“We all think your dad is an idiot,” Abby said.

I took in a series of short breaths. “Really?” I asked.

“Yeah, mom and I talk about it all the time,” she said. “Like, what the hell was he thinking? Does he not know how to use protection? He’s an old man!”

“I know, right?” I felt myself laugh. “I ask myself the same thing.”

“Even grandma and grandpa are upset at him. Grandpa called him irresponsible when he found out.”

I felt a surge of relief. I had no idea anyone in my family even noticed what was happening.

I told Abby I couldn't go back there. “Come on,” she said. “Let's go hang out with the goats.”

We left the house through the front door and rounded toward the barn in the side yard. Treading through the grass and breathing in the fresh air cleared my head. It was refreshing to do what I wanted rather than what was expected of me, and to be able to be distressed. We stepped inside the tall metal fence that held their three goats. I petted the white one with brown spots. As it chewed grass from my hand, I felt lighter, inhaling that special power that animals give to sad people. I stepped onto a large boulder in the middle of the pen and tucked my legs under me.

My Aunt Vicky joined us. “You OK?” she asked me.

“Yeah, I'm feeling a little better,” I said as I played with my shoelace. “Thanks.”

“We were all shocked that he just showed up like that,” Vicky said, her straight blonde hair cut to her shoulders. “We're shocked about the whole thing.”

I nodded and said, “I wonder what my dad is thinking. That I'm not out there celebrating the new baby.”

“Who cares?” Vicky said. I smiled. I had never heard anyone in my dad's family talk so openly about my dad and his questionable decisions before.

My uncle Tim joined us next. I threw grass toward the nearest goat and Tim leaned up against the fence. I assumed he had come out to tell me I needed to go back.

Tim didn't say anything at first, and we were all quiet for a while. I looked up at the sky and noticed the translucent puffs of white in the sky and how the sun would be setting soon. Birds chirped from the nearby trees. The air smelled vegetal, like their neighbor about two football fields away had just mown their lawn.

After several minutes, I said, "I guess I need to go back now."

Tim looked at me and said something I will never forget: "No, you don't."

### **Lucky One in the Middle**

Even at 15 years old, I knew my parents' marriage was doomed. For them, communication materialized as my mom complaining to me about my dad while he stayed silent. But then came New Year's Eve in 2003, when their relationship started its slow, painful implosion. Around two in the afternoon, I had been practicing my drums in the computer room and walked into the kitchen for a drink of water. My mom stood, leaning against her brown recliner that squatted next to my dad's blue chair in the cramped living room that we could never figure out how to decorate. She stared at the floor.

When she saw me walk into the kitchen, she looked up, her eyes red. My brother came in from the garage at the same moment, smelling of cold air. The vent whooshed with the smell of burning wood—my brother had just stoked the wood stove. My mom told us to come into the living room. Her skin was powder white. "I have to tell you something," she said. "Your father and I have to split up." I stopped breathing. "He cheated on me. He's been seeing another woman. I just found out last night."

“Uhh... what?” I said. My brother said nothing.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

My world flip-flopped in one minute. One of the only things that had made me feel like I belonged among my peers was being able to say that my parents were together. Imagining not having that stability—a feeling I realized I had taken for granted—was like the ground rolling under my feet.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“You two could choose where you live,” she said. “Between me or your dad. You wouldn’t have to leave the house if you didn’t want to.”

Tears flooded my eyes. “I don’t want to leave.” I struggled to breath. “Where is Dad now?”

“I don’t know,” my mom said. “He left. He went somewhere. I told him not to come back.” She might as well have punched me in the stomach.

“I hate him,” my brother said.

“I do, too, right now,” my mom said.

About four months later, I stared at the desktop computer in the office as my parents discussed their relationship two rooms away. I tried to distract myself from their bickering by engaging in a Lord of the Rings fan message board with online friends. But I ground my teeth and held onto every word they said.

“What you did was wrong,” my mom said.

“What I did?” my dad said. “Do I gotta feel guilty for the rest of my life? And what about what you did? All those years, treating me like a dumbass.”

Five more minutes of this, and I couldn't take it anymore. This was the fifth day in a row I heard them repeat the same conversation and get nowhere. A couple's therapist had even told them their marriage was doomed. "Why are you two even bothering?" I yelled. "It's obviously not going to work." I had grown hardened over the last months, since the silence settled over the house like a fog that was even worse than the fighting.

They paused. "What do you mean?" my mom said from across the house.

"I mean that you two won't ever get along. Make it easier for everyone and just admit it." At that point, divorce felt like the pressure valve that needed to be opened. I didn't realize it would open a path for my dad to disappear from my life for five years.

They mumbled something to each other. My mom came over to me. "Is that really how you feel?" she asked, tears in her eyes.

"Yes. How can I not?" I said.

"Well, that just sucks."

"Yeah, it does." I stood up and walked upstairs to my room.

Yet my parents decided to try to work on the relationship anyway.

And in the middle of all the chaos, my mom won a trip to Ireland. She entered sweepstakes on a weekly basis, and one contest concluded in her favor with an all-expenses paid trip for four to Ireland. My brother refused to go, either because of my parents' fighting or a fear of flying, I'm not sure. We asked my cousins and some friends if they wanted to come, but nothing panned out. In a way, I figured it would be easier for me not to have someone else around to witness the bickering. At least if I went alone, I wouldn't have to explain my family to any of my friends.

Ireland was supposed to change everything for my parents. It was supposed to be a do-over, a lucky break from the sweepstake gods for my mom and dad's relationship. My mom put a lot of faith in luck. When she looked at my life, she saw a lot of what I accomplished as luck—that I had good grades, that I maintained an active lifestyle. And that her relationship with my dad didn't work well was probably a lot to do with not being lucky in love. But after winning the trip to Ireland, my mom was convinced that her lack of communication with my dad might be cured by her winnings.

And I was the lucky one in the middle. On the plane ride from Washington, D.C. to Dublin, my dad sat across the aisle from my mom and me. An unknown man sat in between my mom and dad in the seat that should have been for the fourth person on our trip. My dad started flirting with the flight attendant—he asked her too many questions about her personal life and laughed at her jokes too hard. As soon as she walked away, my mom confronted my dad.

“What do you think you're doing?” she said. The man in between them looked between my mom and dad, his mouth open slightly.

“What?” my dad said and threw his hands up as if in shock.

“If you talk to her one more time, I swear to God, I'll knock your teeth down your throat.” The man next to her grew stiff and stared at the floor.

My eyes opened wide. My mom looked at me. “Can you believe him?”

I sunk down into my chair, saying nothing, but wishing I could melt between the shamrock threads covering the Aer Lingus seats.

My dad loves telling strangers we are from Gnaw Bone. On one of our last days in Ireland, he and I drove to the Blarney Stone, a popular tourist destination. That day

was the first time I didn't want to hurl myself from the top of the nearest castle because my mom decided to stay back at Ashford Castle, an amazing castle built in 1228, where the contest housed us. I could deal with my dad when my mom wasn't around, and both he and I had adventurous spirits. The sun shone overhead as I sat in the passenger seat of our rental car while my dad drove the two-and-a-half hours on the left side of the road—something he had gotten used to in the past several days. I studied the paper map we bought from the gas station.

“How do I read this?” I asked.

“You just read it. We're starting here.” He pointed to the map. “And we wanna go here. So which road do we take first?”

“I think we want to take a road called R346 to Cross,” I said.

“Yeah, we went to Cross yesterday. I know how to get there. What about after that?”

“Then take...” I squinted at the tiny numbers on the paper. “I think R334. Take it south...west?” I pointed my fingers in the compass directions and used the NEWS acronym they taught us at school. “No, east. Southeast.”

“You can just tell me which way to turn on the road,” my dad said.

“Oh.” I angled the map. “Turn right.”

“Got it, boss.”

Several hours later, when we arrived at Blarney Castle, my dad started chatting up one of the employees. “Where you from?” the employee asked with a thick Irish accent. “Not here I can tell.”

I stood next to my dad at the base of the disintegrating castle. “Gnaw Bone, Indiana,” my dad said. I cringed. “You know where Indiana is?”

“Well, I can’t say I do.” The employee laughed. “What did you say the name of the town is, again?”

“Gnaw Bone.” My dad’s big grin showed up. He was wearing a T-shirt without holes, which I was grateful for, and had on shin-high white socks with his tennis shoes. Sure, we looked like tourists, but at least we could pretend we were normal tourists. Until my dad opened his mouth, anyway. “Like you’re gnawing on a bone.” He made the motion with his hand and his mouth.

“Oh, well,” the man said with wide eyes. “That is an interesting name!”

I gazed out at the expanse of rock-wall-lined fields of green. I wanted to belong to this place that felt more civilized than my home.

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In the months before we went to Ireland, my mother’s desperation caused her to forget that I was her daughter. She clued me into all of the details of my dad’s affair. When she discussed her fury toward my dad with her friends on the phone and I walked into the room, she didn’t bother changing the subject. On a drive over the one-lane bridge covering Gnaw Bone Creek during a trip to Columbus, I sat in the passenger seat and my mom talked.

“Cheryl saw that woman in the IGA today,” my mom said, using her name for the other woman. “I can’t believe she has the gall to show her face.” I looked out the car window at the land that was unexpected for that area of the country—even though there were hundreds of cornfields, I could not see for miles. Instead, there were hills. Passing

through the covered bridge at the entrance to the Brown County State Park—the largest park in the state—and going for a run on the miles of steep trails surrounding Ogle Lake was one of my favorite pastimes. The hills protected me, made me feel safe. Except the things I couldn't stand about this place currently outweighed the things I loved. Finally, I worked up the courage to stand up to my mom.

“Can you not tell me everything, please?” I said from the passenger seat.

“What do you mean?” my mom said. “About what?”

“Like about every detail between you and dad. I don't need to know what you two talk about when you talk. I'm not your freaking diary.”

She paused for a minute, her forehead wrinkling. I figured she would understand, since it was a reasonable request, even if it was kind of mean. However, she exploded.

“I can't believe you would say that to me,” my mom said, yelling. “I don't have anyone to talk to.” She started crying. “I don't have anyone to lean on. I need support, too, you know.”

Tears of frustration stung my eyes.

“Fine,” I said. “Forget it. I don't matter.”

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On the sixth day in Ireland, we stopped in a town called Castlebar. Yellow and crimson storefronts lined the street. Our car came around a bend and the view took my breath away. The town wasn't so different than other spots on the Irish map, but it felt different. It was hillier. It felt like home, but a better version of it. You could walk to bookstores and record shops. You didn't have to live in the woods.

I wanted to escape my family for a few minutes, and my teenage heart craved music, so I told my parents I would be in the record store while they shopped at a market across the street. As soon as I walked in the door, I pretended I was alone, as if I was an adult on vacation by myself. I was excited to be in the low-ceilinged record store in the first floor of the old house. I started fumbling through the punk section of CDs. No one else was in the store except for an older man with Einstein hair sitting behind the cash register. He leaned against the table and bobbed his head to The Police playing over the loudspeaker.

“I love The Police,” I said to him.

He looked up at me and smiled. “Oh, is that right? Well, where you from?”

“The United States,” I said.

“I thought so. Are you looking for anything in particular? The Police, perhaps?”

“No, not them. My friend burned me a CD of one of their albums and I listen to it all the time. I’m trying to learn how to play drums to Message in a Bottle.”

“Well, is that so?” The man perked up. “I’m a drummer as well.”

“No way,” I said, and smiled wide. Having a conversation about something I was interested in was like breaking my head free of a plastic bag that had been suffocating me for the last five days.

“Why, yes,” he said. “Drums are the best instrument, in my opinion. What kind of kit do you have?”

“It’s just a cheap thing called Coda.”

“I know Coda. It’s not so bad for your first one. You should have seen mine, it was horrible.”

I laughed. Just then, my dad walked in the front door.

“You ready?” He walked a few feet in the door and looked the man up and down. His body got tight, as if he was suspicious of the man. My forehead furrowed as I realized what my dad was thinking—this strange man was a danger to his little girl. I was embarrassed, both for the man and for myself, because I didn’t feel that way. As a 15-year-old girl, I had gotten bad vibes from other men in my life, but this was just a nice conversation. And I wanted to keep talking.

“I mean, I guess,” I said.

“We were just discussing playing drums,” the man behind the counter said, most likely sensing my dad’s discomfort. “Turns out this one is going to be a famous drummer one day.”

I smiled. My dad lightened up a bit, and shook the man’s outreached hand. “Well, we better get on the road,” he said. “Your mom’s ready.”

I sighed. “Fine. It was nice talking to you.”

“Same for me,” he said. “Keep with the drumming. You’ll get there.”

I had made an Irish friend. Even though my dad attempted to ruin it, it felt like an accomplishment. The man in the record store was my first taste of starting a life of my own, and I wanted more.

## Quitter

“Are you just going to quit this like you quit everything else?” My Indiana grandmother’s words rang in my ear. She was talking about drum lessons. My grandparents had told all of us grandchildren to let them know if we wanted to play an instrument and they would buy it for us. I was at a cookout in my aunt’s backyard, dressed in cut-off jean shorts and a thrift store T-shirt, when I finally took her up on the offer and asked her help me buy a drum set. I’d even practiced how to word the question with my mom on the drive over after she refused to ask for me.

“Grandma,” I’d said. “You remember how you said you would buy us an instrument if we wanted one?” My mom sat next to me at the picnic table, along with my two aunts.

“Yes,” she said, licking an ice cream cone across the table from me. Her bright blue eyes squinted slightly.

I gulped. “Well, I was wondering if you could buy me a drum set.” The words came like a waterfall.

“A drum set?” she said. She let out a high-pitched laugh. “What, now you wanna play drums? What happened to dance lessons? Or softball?”

My mouth opened slightly. I didn’t know what to say. This wasn’t how I expected this conversation to go.

“Umm...” I said. “No?”

I hadn’t realized this was her opinion of me—that I was a quitter. Suddenly, the image of my cousin Abby swimming on her school’s swim team for that last four years appeared in my mind. Abby wasn’t a quitter. Maybe I was. I already felt bad for quitting softball, because it was one of the only activities my dad and I had together. We went to the dusty field at the elementary school on the weekends and practiced pitching and hitting. My dad had played softball when he was in his 20s, and had a fondness for the sport and came to every one of my games. But my seventh grade year, I decided I was too afraid to play with the older girls; the speed of their pitches terrified me. I was the youngest, the underdog, so I ducked out.

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When I was a junior in high school in Nashville, I needed to sew a velour cape for a wizard in the spring play, so my Indiana grandma and I headed over to the small Methodist church across the street from her home in Gnaw Bone. My grandma had keys to enter on a Wednesday afternoon because she helped with the food bank they ran out of the church. She pulled her emerald Ford Ranger up to the front of the one-story stone chapel and we hopped out, walking up the short sidewalk to the back entrance. Once inside the cramped meeting room about the size of a large gas station that was lined with blood-colored carpet, we set up two folding tables in the middle of the space. A kitchen

the size of what you might find in a hotel suite huddled, unlit, to our right. I knew the far corner contained the closet full of canned peaches and instant mashed potatoes that my grandmother and her fellow parishioners handed out to the needy on Saturday mornings.

“First we gotta lay it out, folded,” my grandma said. “It needs to be even.” Her short white hair curled on her head, and she stood several inches taller than me. I considered her a large, indestructible woman. She wore an oversized pastel green sweatshirt with a patch of a teddy bear sewn onto the front that juxtaposed her gruff manner.

I was 16, so perfection did not suit my impatient teenage heart, but we spread the soft navy fabric onto the plastic table and folded it over itself once, straightening the corners.

“So where’s your pattern?” she asked.

I grabbed the pattern from my backpack, wanting my grandmother to know I was a hard worker. She had privately criticized my cousins to me in the past for not working hard, so I wanted her to think better of me.

“I don’t understand what all the numbers on the back of the package mean,” I said. The pattern might as well have been written in ancient Greek.

“Well, that’s easy. Here, let’s find the pattern you need. You’re making a cape?” she eyed me as she ripped open the package.

“Yes, for the play,” I said.

“I figured it wasn’t for you.” She laughed and pulled out the pattern, splaying its beige tissue paper onto the second table. “Who’s wearing this cape?”

“A wizard. A guy named Richard. He’s kind of weird.”

“Weird, huh?” she said as she examined the pattern. “How tall is he? Did you get his measurements?”

I froze. “Well, no. Should I have?”

She looked up at me over the top of her round glasses. “Well, yes. We need to know how tall he is.”

A wave of guilt spread through my stomach. I should have thought of that.

“Can we work around it? Since it’s just a cape?”

“Maybe,” she said, standing up. “It ain’t ideal. But about how tall is he? Is he around Ryan’s height?” she said, referring to my brother.

“He’s shorter than Ryan,” I said. “But definitely taller than me. Like here.” I held my hand above my head as a measurement.

“OK,” my grandma said, examining my hand. “So he’s about Adam’s height.” Adam was my younger cousin.

“Yeah, that sounds right.”

“All right,” she said, giving me a wry smile and shaking her head. “We can make it work. I’m gonna make it longer so you can take it in if you need to.”

We worked until eight in the evening, cutting and pinning, her trying to make it perfect and me being less concerned. “You’ll regret not making it as close to right as you can once you try to put all the pieces together and they are crooked,” she said. She was right—because of her insistence that we take more time and make things right, the cape was one of the more impressive pieces the costuming team came up with for that play.

It was dark outside by the time we re-folded the tables and balanced them against the wall.

“Thanks for the help, grandma,” I said. “I would never have figured this out on my own.”

“Well, it’s not that hard, now,” she said. “Is it?”

“I guess not.”

“You could do it on your own. You just gotta be patient.”

Every time I saw Richard sporting the cape backstage, the bottom dragging exactly how it should and the hood lying smoothly, I felt proud. But I was also aware of the fact that it was only girls on the costuming team and only boys on the stage-building team. And that the costuming team automatically was assigned the task of applying makeup for all the actors, even though we had as little an idea how use costume makeup as everyone else. I knew my grandma was good at sewing, as well as cooking, and cleaning, and yard work. But I also knew I couldn’t live the same life she had.

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When I first moved to Washington, D.C., my grandmother was upset. She would never say it directly, but she teared up when I said goodbye. She seemed to want all of her family to stay in a 30-mile radius, like she had done with her family. Her parents had raised her and her siblings in Columbus, 20 minutes from where she lived now, and my grandparents had never lived further than one and a half hours away, in a brick house in Clay County. They only lived there because their house burnt down and they were waiting on the new one to be built. When my cousins and I spent the night there when we were six or seven, we crossed the street in the morning to play in the small park across the street.

My grandma stood beneath the drawbridge on the playground and growled, “I am the troll who lives under the bridge. Who dares try to cross?” We ran across the wooden planks as my grandma reached her hands up and tickled us, causing us to melt with laughter. Those memories are some of the fondest I have of my childhood.

In some ways, I feel like I should have stayed in Indiana. The guilt I experienced for leaving kicked in retroactively—only after three years of being gone and the excitement of living on my own died down did I start to wonder whether I made the right decision. I knew in my heart it was right, but I also knew I loved my family. My grandma aged each time I saw her, walking more slowly and with more difficulty. But I knew that she probably didn’t understand my desire for a career, since she never had that opportunity herself. It would have been selfish for her to ask me to stay. Which is probably why she never did.

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When I was nine, I visited my grandma’s house and showed her a landscape painting of a coastland in Ireland I had done in art class.

“Do one for me,” she said almost immediately. I didn’t know how to respond. I had been playing with my cousins. But my grandma sat me down and pointed to a vase full of wildflowers on her kitchen table. “Paint that.” She gave me a small canvas, a brush, and some oil paint from my grandpa’s collection.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, grandma,” I said.

“Just try,” she said.

“OK. I’ll try.” I sketched a shaky pencil outline on the canvas and dipped the thin brush into the black paint, streaking it lengthwise across the page. I tried to copy the

daisy in front of me with the yellow and green paints. After about 20 minutes, I became impatient.

“I’m tired,” I said. “Can I finish this later?”

“Well, it won’t take you that long,” my grandma said.

“But I don’t feel like it right now.”

“OK, but you better finish it next time you’re here.”

“I will.” I scooted off the chair and went to the living room to watch TV with my cousins.

I never finished that painting, even after she asked me to the next three times I came over. I didn’t feel like it, for whatever reason—boredom, being a child, procrastination, fear of failure. She stopped bringing it up after a while.

My grandma did not put the same pressures on my brother. He didn’t get flack for skipping the weekly family dinners. He was not asked to help her clean houses. When we got older, he was never in trouble for failing to visit her even though he lived five minutes away. She did not yell him because he waited until the last minute to plan a casual family get-together when he came into town for three days (that happened to me). And she never expected him to create a painting for her.

I didn’t think about that canvas until about 12 years later, when my whole family was sitting in my grandparents’ living room, watching my cousin Emily open her birthday presents. I sat on the green plaid couch and, when I looked up, I saw my painting leaning on a small table against the wall. I had completely forgotten about it. Had it been sitting there for all those years? Was my grandma trying to make a point? Or did she forget about it, too?

And then, as I stared at the mostly blank canvas, I came to grasp that my grandmother never forgot anything.

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Last month, I was cleaning out my closet and came across a quilt my grandmother had made for my high school graduation. I hadn't used it since the previous summer. I ran my hand over a lime green square. Originally, I had picked out the fabric colors—I wanted it to be simple, so I asked for with mint green and white—but my grandma considered that boring, so it turned into a more complicated grass green backing and lemon-colored flowers running along the front. I still thought it was beautiful. It had taken her years to finish, but not because of her own fault—the woman she sent the fabric to finish the quilting process told her it would take two weeks and it took almost two years. But she still finished it. My grandmother never seemed to have unfinished projects. She was the hardest worker I knew—she cleaned houses when she was 80, took care of her gigantic front lawn, sewed quilts to sell in her yard sale that she kept running nearly all year. How she raised someone like my dad, who struggled to finish things he started, confounded me. Maybe it was too much to live up to, too much pressure.

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My family maintains the Midwest approach to affection—we avoid it when possible. When I was back home from college for the summer in 2011, I stopped by my grandma's house to help her put away her yard sale supplies. My grandma and I were standing on her black pavement driveway, and had been talking about something, maybe what she had sold that day, when she wrapped her arm around my waist and squeezed. I froze. My grandma didn't give hugs freely.

“You know I love you, don’t you?” she squeaked, as if she was choking the words out. She had tears in her eyes. I had rarely seen my grandmother cry, and I couldn’t remember another time she had said she loved me. I didn’t know what to do, or what had brought this on.

“Yeah, I know, grandma. I love you, too.” It felt awkward to say.

She shook her head, as if to get her composure. “You’re a good kid.” Then she tromped into the garage, and I followed her a few seconds later.

## **The Pear**

Last year when I visited Indiana for Christmas, my dad invited me over to my grandma's house for dinner on a Wednesday evening. My dad often ate at my grandparents' house. A person can be 60 and still need the safety of their parents' house. I borrowed my mom's car and drove the six-minute drive along Valley Branch, a country road bordered by tawny fields of dead corn stalks and trailers with backyards full of rust collections, the houses where, as my mom says, "the meth-heads live." A right turn onto Highway 46 led straight to my grandparent's serpentine gravel driveway. Their log cabin towered at the end.

I smelled garlic bread as soon as I walked in the back door. My dad, grandma, and grandpa sat around the large oak table beside the kitchen. The kitchen ceiling vaulted all the way to the 30-foot-high roof. White and tan speckled laminate covered the floor. The walls were exposed ginger wood. My grandfather's still-lives he had painted years before hung on the wall, along with multi-colored plates, a collection of mugs from 50 states,

and wooden cows my grandmother collected over the years. They decorated if the point was to leave as little wall space showing as possible.

“Well, there’s Tiffy,” my grandpa said too loudly. “Are you going to eat with us?”

“Yeah, if there’s any left,” I said while hanging up my coat on the overstuffed rack.

“Well, your dad said you wasn’t eating with us, so we went ahead and ate. We would’ve waited on you if we had known.” My grandpa stood several inches shorter than me.

“No, it’s OK.” I said loud enough for my grandpa to hear. I felt guilty for being vague in my text earlier. “I wasn’t clear.”

“Well, let’s clear a space for you here,” my grandma said. Her short white hair looked like she had just gone to the hairdresser. She wore baggy sweat pants and a large white T-shirt with a painting of a red cardinal on it. I wondered if she was annoyed that I hadn’t officially RSVP’d. We’d gotten in a fight last time I visited home in June because my aunt and I had changed restaurants for dinner without consulting her, so I knew she was touchy about these things. But I saw there was plenty of food when I went over to the kitchen, and I was really hungry, so I figured I would deal with any guilt tripping later if it came. My grandma had prepared a meat-heavy tomato pasta sauce with a vat of spaghetti and the garlic bread that comes in a long frozen loaf. Something about it felt comforting as I ladled it onto my plate. I did notice how watery the sauce was compared the stuff I had in Italy when I studied abroad and felt a small pang of—what was it? Heartache? Pity? A feeling I would never admit out loud to anyone in the room.

I sat next to my dad. He donned a white sweatshirt with a quarter-sized hole in the right side. Joslin men weren't known for keeping their hair, and my dad was nearly as bald as my grandpa. His skin was tanned even in December. We had been texting back and forth about my tumultuous stay at my mom's house. My brother was living there again, and had become an ultra conservative with a lot of grand ideas, all of which he thought were correct. He and my mom stayed up until the middle of the night and slept until early afternoon. They also both smoked, and watched TV more often than either my dad or me.

"So how's things at the house?" he asked with a gleam in his eye.

I squinted at him and said, "How do you think?"

My dad laughed. "That good, huh?"

"I mean," I said, "As good as it can be, I guess. It's not really my scene." My dad and I had an unspoken agreement that we both thought my mom and my brother were nuts. Even when I was little, my mom would agree to something impulsive that my brother wanted to do, like buy a 1960s teal Ford truck without power steering so my brother could have a project. My dad and I both protested that my brother would never touch it. They went ahead and bought it, but my brother never did fix it up, even though the Ford, with its flashy shell, stared from the front yard at everyone who drove for six years.

After we ate, my grandma asked me, "Do you want a pear?"

"A pear?" I said.

"Go out there and get yourself a pear," my grandma said, pointing to the enclosed sunroom added on to the house about a decade before. "They'll rot if you don't."

My dad chimed in. “Those are some of the best pears I’ve eat in a long time,” he said. My dad’s family could have an entire conversation about something as small as a piece of fruit and I loved them for it.

“What are you all talking about?” my grandpa asked, still not wearing his hearing aids. “Oh, the pears? Aren’t them good? Pam sent them over to us for Christmas.” My aunt Pam lived in Oregon and sent everyone edible Harry & David gifts each year.

“You should take one,” my dad said, giving me a side eye. “They’re almost too ripe to eat now.” He looked depressed at the thought.

“Yeah, I’ll take one,” I said. I liked pears well enough, but I was willing to take five if it would clear that sad look from my dad’s face.

My grandma joined me in the cramped sunroom. “Look at them.” She pointed to a cluster of fifteen flowerpots along the windowsill, all holding the same type of plant. “Them’s my Christmas cactuses. Every single one of them was blooming last week.”

“Wow,” I said. “That must have been pretty.” I noticed how many more plants my grandma had added since I was in last there. She and my grandpa had taught my dad—and me—most things he knew about plants. When I was panicked in third grade over a science project due the following week, my grandma and I spent an entire weekend wading through the fields next to her house and gathering up weeds. We glued them into a binder and labeled each one with their local and scientific names.

My grandma pointed to a pot with a full green topiary and said, “That’s the gerbera you got me for Mother’s Day.” When I had given it to her two years before, it was a scant two-blossom daisy. My grandma had grown it into a shrub. Then she pointed to two short trees by the edge of the wall. “And look, guess what them are?” She

chuckled and swatted at my arm with her hand, like I was in on the joke. I hesitated—should I know this answer? My face was blank, so she said, “Them are my citrus trees I planted two years ago.” It didn’t ring a bell. The trees were about two feet tall with trunks half an inch thick. “I was eating an orange or a grapefruit one day and took a seed and just stuck it in with my thumb.” She made the motion with her thumb and laughed again.

“Oh, really?” I remembered what my dad had said about planting my lemon seed. “That worked?”

“Well, yeah, it worked. Can’t you see?” my grandma said. “I don’t have any idea what type of fruit they are. Could be oranges, could be lemons. I have got no idea.” I realized my dad wasn’t wrong—he was right about how to grow a lemon tree.

“We’ll find out what they are when they fruit,” my grandma said, “You better believe it.”

### **My Failed Seduction of Aziz Ansari**

The story I tell people about meeting Aziz Ansari, the comedian and television star, makes me appear levelheaded. In reality, I was the opposite. The fictional anecdote goes like this—I scored backstage passes to an Aziz Ansari comedy show, but when he showed up in the green room, 50 other fans swarmed him. My group was disgusted, so we sat back and played it cool. We chatted with his opener, Moshe Kasher, who then introduced us to Ansari more organically. My friends and I were the only people in the room who didn't become obsessed with celebrity status.

Here is what actually happened.

About three years ago, I stopped by Filter Coffeehouse and Espresso Bar, a specialty shop where I had previously worked for almost two years. My friend Tim stood behind the dark granite bar in the five-tabled basement room.

“You just missed Aziz Ansari,” Tim said. “He was in here two hours ago.”

“What?” I nearly yelled as I grabbed the bar for support.

Tim wore a dense red beard and an autumnally colored beanie. “Yeah, he came in looking for good coffee.”

“Why is he in D.C.?” I asked, regaining my composure.

“He’s doing a show in the city. He offered us backstage passes.”

“No way. No way. How many?”

“His agent was with him and gave us his number. He said to let him know how many we needed.”

“Oh my god can I come?” The sentence came out like one long word. I was excited both by the idea of hanging out with Aziz Ansari and of hanging out with Tim. Tim was a really good friend, but was also on-again-off-again crush.

“Yeah, I was going to text you, actually. I know you’re a huge fan of the show.”

I breathed deeply. I could not believe it. Aziz Ansari had been standing right where I was just two hours earlier. At that time, in 2013, Ansari was becoming a popular celebrity among my age cohort. I kicked myself for taking a shower and putting on socks that morning—if I had leapt out of bed and dashed straight to the shop, I might have run into him. But at least I had another chance. “Count me in,” I said.

Celebrities frequently visited Filter. In the last year, Cate Blanchett, Russell Crowe, and Ellen Page (in a baseball cap and sunglasses, begging us not to notice her) had all come in for a cup of coffee. The shop was positioned right in the heart of the District, in Dupont Circle. When actors performed at the Kennedy Center or other theaters around town, they seemed to want to explore the city, and specialty coffee was all the rage. But I had missed meeting most of them—the best encounter I had was serving Chelsea Clinton the brew of the day during a weekend rush without even

realizing who she was until afterward. The baristas acted professionally around the actors. It was uncool to lose your shit. When Ellen Page came in, my friend Phil didn't out her to the rest of the shop, but instead said to her softly that he was a big fan, and she smiled.

I was still good friends with everyone at the shop, so I didn't feel bad taking a ticket even though I worked at a think tank up the street. I had paid my dues. I dreamed of what VIP meant: red carpet, flashing lights, clinking cocktails with stars, ruby lipstick expertly smoothed across my lips. Even though I didn't own lipstick. Plus, to me, simply hanging out with New Yorkers was a glamorous opportunity.

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As a child, I dreamed of living in New York, of hurrying along its streets with a trench coat swirling around my waist and tall black heels strapped to my feet. In my daydream, I was heading somewhere important. The city seemed like the antithesis of the cornfields, Carhartt overalls, and hick accents of my Indiana hometown. The two things I wanted more than anything—community and opportunity—seemed to be waiting for me in the Big Apple.

Then, when I was 14, my mom won a trip through a sweepstake contest to the New York premiere and after party of *Analyze That* (the awful sequel to *Analyze This*, a decent but forgettable Robert De Niro movie from the late 90s). A free trip to New York was the most exciting thing anyone in my town had experienced in years. At the premiere, I caught only a glimpse of the tops of the heads of Robert De Niro and Billy Crystal, but I wasn't worried. My strategic pursuit would commence at the after party. Robert De Niro was one of my favorite actors, even though he was old. He was like a

fictional father figure. I planned to charm both of the actors with my youth and bravado, thinking they might see potential in me and offer me a movie deal. Or at least a business card to keep in touch. I had no clear idea why or what outcome I hoped for, but I needed to meet them—it felt like my only chance to escape Indiana.

But when we got to the premiere venue, both De Niro and Crystal sat in a roped-off section upstairs. I considered busting through the barrier. My dreams shattered on the black marble floor. I cried so hard in the middle of the party that my mom had to take me to the bathroom to calm me down.

Basically, I could not be trusted around famous men. I believed that these actors who played good men—fathers, brothers, protectors—on television could somehow help me in real life.

And then I was invited to meet Aziz Ansari. Even though D.C. offered me both the community and the opportunity that I desired as a child, the longing to make it to New York hadn't quite disappeared. I came to D.C. because it was small, and the idea of moving to New York alone scared the hell out of me. I felt like I needed someone to help me make it there. When Ansari showed up, that youthful yearning poked its head out again. Maybe this was my chance to spark a connection and finally make an important contact in New York. In other words, I wanted to use him for his network.

Not to mention, I was constantly starving for male attention, and the more famous the man who gave me the attention, the better. Apparently it was a clinical thing—I had recently read about seduction addiction in the *New York Times*, and it described me perfectly. In any setting with men around—a party, a game night, a dinner—I flirted with one male after the other until I could tell as many as possible were interested. It didn't

always work, but it often did. And then, when one of the men tried to proposition me, I switched to being bored and aloof. They were taking my game too seriously.

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My Filter friends and I agreed to meet up at the DAR Constitution Hall around six o'clock that evening. (Leave it to D.C. for its largest concert venue to have an association with the Revolutionary War.) I had been single for over a year, so I dressed to show off. The Siren inside craved attention from anyone, but I mostly hoped Ansari would notice me. My powers came from my Siren stare, rather than song, that I had probably learned from television. I planned to use the stare to lure the comedian into my life. Plus, whatever happened with Ansari, Tim would be there. Tim was an on-again-off-again crush and an ideal flirting buddy—he gazed into my eyes, smiled at me, gave me compliments. He acted the same with every girl, so even though I knew I wasn't special, he made me feel like I was.

As I hopped off the bus in front of the venue, I felt overdressed in a short, flowy purple skirt with chunky tights and high-heeled black suede booties. I had curled my hair, and then dusted it with a thick layer of hairspray. No red lipstick, but I wore a broad stripe of eyeliner. But then I saw a text from Tim on my phone—"I'm not coming tonight. I gave my tickets to Jess's boyfriend."

I wanted to write back, "Which asshole boyfriend?" but restrained myself. I went with, "TIM. You have to go." Which was true, for my ego's sake.

"I have to open the shop tomorrow anyway. Have fun." My Siren heart sank.

I slumped to the back of the line forming in front of the towering lighted columns of the hall and stared like an emo kid at the blush lining on the clouds. Five minutes later,

my friends Kelly and Phil showed up. Phil. A single guy. My bad mood lifted—flirting could commence. Seduction gave me what I wanted in life—attention, power, and a sense of purpose

Then another co-worker, Jessica, and her boyfriend—who was not an asshole—showed up. I tried not to glare at him.

“Isn’t it kind of weird that Tim isn’t coming?” I asked the group, trying to verbalize my disappointment. Tim was the one Ansari gave the tickets to, after all. “We will show up and be like, ‘Hey! You didn’t meet any of us but here we are.’” Everyone agreed, and the non-asshole boyfriend said he tried to insist on Tim coming. Even still, knowing that we had an in with the person everyone around us would only see on stage made me feel superior. Gazing at the other sad saps in line amped me up further.

As we filed along the outside sidewalk, I wrestled with my need to flirt with Phil. I tried to handcuff that desire to the banister in an attempt to leave it behind. But I failed. It was too strong. I had released the Flirty Kraken and there was no stifling her now. Phil made a joke, and I laughed a little too loud and gazed into his eyes with a meaningful look. You know the one—the glance that lasts a few seconds too long and is accompanied by a faint grin. I had perfected the Siren stare, even though by my early 20s, I hated myself for doing it. I had hurt too many nice guys by goading them to the edge of the cliff and then chucking their heart into the canyon of disappointment. Plus, it stunk when it happened to me—and Tim was definitely playing the same game with me.

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Five tickets waited for us at the will call, along with backstage passes. The woman at the counter gave directions to the green room after the show. “What will

backstage be like?” one of us asked as we made our way inside the caramel-colored entryway. No one knew, but I told myself it would be a low-lit velvet lounge with only a handful of us.

Inside the monumental theater, we sat in the center, on the ground floor. It was like sitting directly on a stadium’s football field while spectators gathered around in huge rows of bleachers. We had the good seats. I sat next to Phil, even though I tried to avoid it. I did my best to maintain platonic conversation—“I can’t believe we get to see this for free!”—until the lights dimmed for the show to begin.

Ansari’s opener, Moshe Kasher came on stage to a round of applause. I remember him telling a lot of jokes about Judaism. He was very funny. Twenty minutes later, Kasher introduced the star of the show, and the crowd roared. Aziz Ansari appeared on stage, illuminated by a mega screen behind him. I had just watched Ansari’s Netflix special, so I knew he joked a lot about dating. Maybe he had a girlfriend by that point, I thought. But when he started talking about dating, I celebrated. He was single.

While Ansari performed the rest of his set, butterflies grew in my stomach. What was I going to say? What should be my opening line? How would I make him my boyfriend? The trips between D.C. and New York would be hard, but we would manage. I fluffed my hair and pursed my lips, forgetting I still wasn’t wearing lipstick. Maybe Ansari would invite me out for drinks. Comedians are up for partying. And it was Friday, so we could bar hop until sunrise.

The end of the show snapped me out of my daydream. Oh boy, time to meet the future Mr. Joslin! (I wasn’t about to change my name). My guts tumbled around in my

body. I turned to Phil and told him I was nervous. I could tell he felt the same. “How many people do you think will be back there?” I asked him as we squeezed into the aisle.

“I have no idea,” Phil said. “It could be a lot.” I pouted at him.

We followed the signs to the hallway and searched for the waiting area. A woman working at the Hall pointed us to a closed wooden door where 20 other people were already standing outside. Damn, that was already more than my original estimate. I eyed the other girls to gauge how cute they were. I was one of the more attractive ladies. But I also felt out of place, too dressed up. I always felt like that when I went out of my way to look nice for someone else. Dressing up to get attention was a hobby in my early 20s, but that didn’t mean it made me happy. It was like I was serving myself up on a sampler platter. And at the end of the night I was left with just a few pieces that I would spend next few days growing into a full person again.

I didn’t realize there was another way to live. And I didn’t yet understand why I needed to flirt.

Several circles formed around the door to backstage, like a middle school dance. Phil recognized someone in another group and waved. The guy was from Chinatown Coffee. Slowly, I realized that Ansari had visited what seemed like every specialty coffee shop in the city and handed out stacks of VIP passes. The cheater! We would have to wade through a crowd of other people to get a one-on-one chat.

But then the door opened, and my heart fluttered. Oh shit, were we about to meet him? A blonde woman in ripped jeans with a headset quieted the room and made an announcement. “These doors lead into the green room,” she said in a flat tone that suggested she had done this too many times in the past. “There are snacks and beer. Aziz

won't be joining for another 30 minutes or so, so just relax and enjoy yourselves in the meantime. And when he comes in, no photography and no autographs are allowed." She emphasized this last point—Ansari just wanted to chill out after the show.

We scurried into the room and fought through a line of people to grab a beer. "Heineken?" I said in a whining voice. Coffee snobs preferred craft beer. But we headed to a group of floppy couches in the back of the room and sat down.

"Why do you think we can't take pictures?" Kelly asked.

"Probably because he doesn't want everyone posting on Facebook and Twitter," Phil said. "I don't blame him."

"That's true," I said. "It's probably a pain to have that much exposure. What did you guys think of the show?"

"I thought it was great," Phil said. "Aziz wasn't quite as good as his Netflix tour, but it was funny."

"To be honest," I said, "I thought his opener was better. Moshe Kasher, is that his name?"

Phil said, "Yeah, he was amazing."

"But it was epic when Aziz went off on that bro who heckled him," Kelly said, and quoted Ansari yelling from the stage: "'You're ruining it for everyone else. Just stop. If you can't handle that, go home and watch football.'"

"That was hilarious," I said and sipped my Heineken.

Half an hour later, we heard the doors open again. In walked the woman who had given us instructions about how to behave ourselves. A small entourage, including Moshe Kasher, followed her. Then Ansari walked in. The room went from silent anticipation to

full hubbub as almost every one of the more than 50 people in the room crowded toward the door. My group was far enough back that we saw it from a distance, what was really happening—it was like Ansari had worn a sparkling diamond watch into a tank full of piranhas. Had my group been closer, we probably would have joined the herd. But having this distant perspective gave us a sense of superiority. “You wanna just hang out here?” Kelly asked. “Yeah. It’s a little too intense,” I agreed, even though I was dying to chat with Ansari. From up on our high horses, it felt like the right thing to do.

Then Kasher came over to us and started chatting. I didn’t feel a need to flirt with him, which was a relief.

“You live in New York?” Phil asked.

“Yeah, I live in Brooklyn,” Kasher said.

“Brooklyn, the land of the flannel,” I said.

Kasher laughed. I made a comedian laugh. My chest swelled with pride. “I actually don’t have any flannel, believe it or not,” he said. “Have you all had a chance to talk with Aziz yet?” We shook our heads. “I’ll make sure that happens.” I beamed.

Eventually, after we gravitated toward the bar and closer to the comedian we were there to talk with, I caught Ansari’s eye from across the room. He looked at me, one of those few-seconds-too-long looks that I was so accustomed to doling out. Or maybe he was looking at the clock on the wall behind me. But in my head, he thought I was cute. I returned his gaze, but then looked away confidently, as if I was indifferent. But inside, I was screaming, Way to go, eyeliner, work your magic. The plan was in action. What hadn’t worked on De Niro would work on Ansari.

Five minutes later, Ansari came over. He had been going from group to group, talking with each for a few minutes. He wore a red down vest and dark jeans and was slightly shorter than me in heels. Other groups had already talked to him, so the vibe in the room was calmer. Several people still looked over their shoulder at him, but in general, the piranhas were satiated.

When Ansari joined our group, Kasher introduced us to him. It felt natural to be introduced by someone Ansari was already friends with, even though Kasher forgot my name during the introduction. An awkward silence settled over the group while everyone wracked their brain for what the hell to say. Finally, Phil asked Ansari how he liked the city.

“I like it, but it’s small,” Ansari said. “You know, we heard a lot about H Street. Everyone told us, ‘You gotta go to H Street.’ But we went and, to be honest, there wasn’t much happening.” He mentioned they had gone earlier that day.

“You went during the day?” I asked, speaking to him for the first time. “Yeah, you have to go at night. It’s fun at night.” I was attempting to convince him that D.C. is a viable option to come visit me as his future girlfriend.

I felt an urge to ask Ansari whether he was an introvert—he seemed like one. He looked uncomfortable being the center of attention. I considered myself an introvert, and wanted reassurance that an introvert could handle being rich and famous.

“So where’s your tall friend, the guy with the red beard?” Ansari asked when he found out we worked at Filter. We shifted awkwardly on our feet. “No one I originally invited showed up. They just gave their tickets away to other people.” Crap. I was one of

those ticket stealers. “Well,” I said, trying to save the moment, “Tim wanted to come but he has to open tomorrow morning. At like 6:00 a.m.” Ansari shrugged.

I was surprised that he remembered Tim. I’m not sure why I was surprised, but I was. Maybe I forgot that he’s just a person, looking to meet cool people and make new friends.

That’s when I tried to lay on the charm. Ansari was standing opposite of me in the circle, and I started my I’m Obviously Interested In You routine. Step one: Maintain eye contact for two seconds too long. Step two: Laugh too loudly. Step three: Look indifferent to avoid looking desperate. Step four: Hit them lightly on the arm while laughing. If done without any class thrown in, this act comes off as desperate. But I was desperate. So I locked in on his gaze, forcing him to notice me above all the other people in my group. Usually, as unbelievable as it was, that worked for me.

It worked on Ansari for about five seconds. He was interested, I could tell. He leaned toward me and smiled at me. But then I overdid it. In a split second, I went from interesting to needy. Ansari was no fool. He had probably seen it hundreds of times before, women flirting with him because he was famous. The horrible truth is that I doubt I would have been interested in him if he wasn’t a celebrity. And he saw through it.

Something in his posture changed. He seemed to deflate slightly. Most likely he was thinking, Here’s another girl, trying to make moves on me because I’m on TV. In dehumanizing him, I had dehumanized myself.

Ansari leaned over to Kasher and said, “I’m tired, man.” And he looked it. By that point, he was avoiding my gaze. I wanted to make it up to him, but the damage was done.

Dating was already a huge challenge, and Ansari had an added layer of complication. I found myself wondering whether he used his real photos on Tinder.

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It was 1998, when I was almost 10, and my dad and I sat in the front living room of my childhood home on the yellow velvet couch. We were watching the championship game of the Chicago Bulls versus the Utah Jazz, the finale to what had become a habit of ours. My brother sat next to us on the chair. My dad had built emotional walls, but I knew I was his favorite child and his little girl. I thought our relationship was different than the anger-filled one with my brother. I hesitated for a second, but as I curled up next to him, I wrapped my hand through his arm and laid my head on his shoulder, ready to smack-talk the Jazz. But my dad was in a bad mood.

“Get off me,” he snarled and shrugged my head off his shoulder. In that instance, I retreated into myself, became as small as a gnat, withdrawing deep inside my baggy Tasmanian Devil T-shirt and huddling there, holding onto the seams for balance. I’m not sure I ever emerged.

Freud would most likely say this instance was the trigger for my need for male attention. I didn’t get the affection I needed from my father, so I looked for it everywhere else. It took many years to realize that I agree with him.

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Ansari left shortly after, and I felt a mixture of deep emptiness and release. The Siren vibrated with frustration, but soon chilled out. I had gotten better at convincing her to not cry in the middle of the party. Maybe it was easier to not have to flirt with anyone for the night. I could try to be content being alone.

The fresh March air swirled around us when we exited onto the darkened street. Our adrenaline was fading. It had happened. We had met Aziz Ansari. We looked at each other, everyone silently comparing their individual expectations for the night with reality. I would never know what the others had hoped for—maybe Phil wished for Ansari to find him funny because he had a secret desire to perform stand-up; Kelly may have hoped for Ansari to notice how unique she was compared to other D.C. policy wonks. But no matter what, I was sure I wasn't alone in my longing.

As my bus passed the National Monument on my way home, it glowed in front of the alabaster moon. The moon had been full two days before, so only a sliver was missing, and seeing it reminded me of standing on the pitcher's mound at a softball game when I was nine, panicked, aware with every follicle that my dad was watching. Before I was able to throw a pitch, I looked up at the moon. Something about its constancy, its watchful eye, its cosmic power gave me a reason to believe that I could sling the ball across home plate. That I could be a pitcher. That night, while staring from the bus window, the moon reminded me that I already was somebody.

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