

GRIDLOCKS AND PADLOCKS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2013

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ABSTRACT

“Gridlocks and Padlocks” is a collection of short fiction and personal essays whose goal is to create characters with depth in both real-world and not-entirely-real-world situations.

The strength of nonfiction is the capacity to observe the writer’s thinking and motivation. “Ashes to Ashes, Trust to Dust” is a personal essay that explores my struggle with the faith I was raised in, with an emphasis on how friendships and relationships have shaped my perceptions. “The List of Unacceptable Faults” is a personal essay about unwanted interactions with the opposite sex; it is an examination of men and boys through the lens of naïve dissatisfaction. “Sing Me Rebecca” is a personal essay that delves into my relationship with my mentally handicapped sister.

While the nonfiction writer focuses on his or her own development and struggles, a fiction writer can investigate the human condition by exploring the depth found in imagined people who face everyday situations and what characteristics and behaviors make them believable and absorbing. “Object of Study” is a short story about a girl named Taylor, who in her formative years stumbles upon a friendship between her sister and a boy she does not trust. This story examines Taylor’s quirky, multi-faceted character through the actions she takes to investigate and ultimately end the friendship between a boy and her younger sister. “Crossing Fault Lines” is a work of short short fiction that focuses on three characters—a mother and her two sons—and their strained relationship.

Whether writing personal essays or fiction, my goal is to create overarching conflicts that reflect people’s struggle with being “stuck” in some situation in life.

DEDICATION

For the beautiful family and friends who have supported and inspired my writing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest thanks to the wonderful faculty of the English Department, so many of whom have made my choice to write one I will never regret. Thank you to Pete Ives, whose constant encouragement gave me so much confidence as a new, uncertain English major. To Dr. Jamie Poissant, who helped fuel my fire for fiction. To Dr. Darlin' Neal and Dr. Martha Marinara for giving their time and input to this project. Thank you to Dr. Jocelyn Bartkevicius for slogging through with me and for her wonderful advice; I'm so appreciative of her expertise and experience. A special thank you to Laurie Uttich, who introduced me to the beauty of creative nonfiction and whose help and encouragement allowed me to take risks and go the extra mile.

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OBJECT OF STUDY

The boy who lived down the road went into the woods every Saturday with a Winn-Dixie paper bag in his hand and a pair of work gloves stuffed into the pocket of his jeans. I told Oakley to stay away from that kook, but her flip-flops sprayed gravel every time he pulled up in our yard on his bike. Mom said they were just kids in middle school, that I should lay off and maybe find some friends of my own, and that by the way it's kind of weird for a fifteen year old to frame dead insects on her walls.

Mom said things like that a lot. More often since she'd caught a few of my escapees in the oatmeal box. It wasn't my fault, though. I had two Japanese beetles, these iridescent green beauties I found when we went to visit cousins up in north Florida, that I kept in a little plastic terrarium on my windowsill. It became clear after a few weeks that they weren't a mating pair, and my hopes for a bunch of them to make a floral pattern for my wall were dashed. I let them crawl around at their leisure, though, waiting for them to die, because it's a lot easier to stick a pin through a still, dry bug than a kicking, juicy one.

I figured they had a couple more days to live when Oakley snuck into my room in the dead of night and freed them. Except she failed, because she couldn't open the screen door of the kitchen without the loud creak, so she left them clinging to the screen. Mr. and Mrs., or I suppose Mr. and Mr. Yukimoto, as I'd named them, were about ten times too big to fit through the screen and wandered into the pantry, where Mom found them the next day. And tennis-shoed them to death. After that I always stabbed the new guys as soon as I got home.

To get me out of the house once Mom gave me ten dollars to ride down to CVS and pick up milk, double A batteries, and dad's kind of deodorant, which was a sort of earthy barbeque smell.

“And don't go near the highway,” she said, pointing a soapy spoon at me for emphasis, “It's spring break time. The college kids are on their way to Key West and half of them are already drunk.”

I blew air at her so my upper lip fluttered and stuffed the ten in my bag. The drunken spring breakers, assuming they were drunk at two in the afternoon, would get pulled over if they went anything over fifty miles an hour on Big Pine Key. The speed limit was strictly enforced to protect the Key deer that wandered all over the island. Big Pine was essentially a fifteen minute-long speed bump on the way to Key West because of the deer. We sometimes made a trail of Cheetos to our door and waited until the deer got close enough to feed by hand. This is illegal, because they lose their fear of humans and get lazy about eating their own food. Dad called it ‘Americanizing’ them. Getting run over was still their biggest problem, though, so we never felt too bad. We thought it was the least we could do—we had seen fewer and fewer around our house, in the last couple of months.

I held my breath biking past the Manchineel tree on 19th street, even though at fifty feet away I was in no danger. A faded red sign with a hand crossed out was nailed to the tree. It read “Do not touch. Do not stand under tree when raining.” Everything about the tree was highly toxic: the wood, the apples, the leaves, the sap, the very smoke of a burning tree. Legend had it the Native American tribes used to tie their enemies to the tree and leave them to die as their skin burned away. A deep breath as I turned onto the next street.

By the time I got to CVS and looked at all the face creams and acne treatments and candy, I needed to use the restroom. Also, I'd put a bag of gummy bears into my bag and planned on eating some in there. I walked back past the pharmacy into the tiled hallway where stray hairs clustered on the floor and a water fountain hummed. The door of the women's bathroom was locked. I waited. I waited five minutes. I crossed my legs over one another and bounced on my toes. I knocked on the door. There was a loud thud from the inside.

"Is everything OK in there?" I asked, clutching my bag to my chest. "Do I need to get some help?"

The door swung open and Oakley stepped out, slamming the door behind her. We stared at each other for a second, unbelieving. My sister's lips and cheeks were red, her hair loose and falling over half her face. One of her earrings, the ones shaped like dolphins, was missing.

I wanted to start the interrogation right there, but I was desperate at this point. A river after spring thaws. All I said was "Move."

"You don't want to go in there," Oakley said. Her back was pressed against the door, her fists clenched down by her sides.

"Trust me, it'll be worse if I stay out here." The strength of my need helped me thrust open the door, knocking Oakley off balance as I crashed in. I had my shorts down to my knees when I saw him. Austin.

#

Once, I found a whole nest of palmetto bugs in an empty lot covered in air potato vines and kudzu, and I saved a few in a plastic bag, thinking I would compare the ones from that end of town to the ones framed on my wall to find genetic differentiation. That night, I went out with

some would-be friends: nice enough girls, but they all felt the need to wear heels to the IHOP. As we waited for our check, I leaned across the table and motioned them in over the syrup basket for a huddle.

“Do you guys want to get this food for free?” I said.

They hesitated. I smiled. This seemed like a win-win situation. How could I have known that boy would be there, somehow always interrupting my life at the exact worst moment? Of course I wouldn't have even thought about it if I'd recognized him earlier. But by the time I did, it was too late.

One asked, “Do you mean you have coupons?”

“Nope.”

I pulled the palmetto bugs out of my bag. Their legs skittered around the inside. The girls leaned way back in swift unison and one said, “Roaches?” This was the one who invited me—we were the only white girls in Spanish club, and there's some bond that forms, however thin, when you try to say donkey and only manage a hole in the ground.

“Palmetto bugs,” I said. “And I'll just let one out onto the table.” I pushed the bag across the table and pointed to one in particular. “I'm keeping this guy for my wall—see the weird stripes on his back?”

A girl named Katie flicked the bag back at me with the end of her knife. She'd gone to the trouble of peppering her eyelids with glitter for the occasion and said things like, “You look like you work out a lot” and “I really like that shirt” every time the waiter passed by. I noted he wore the same striped button-down shirt as every other server. Katie glanced around at the others and scratched her nose, then said, “Yeah, I think that's a great idea, and all...” she paused and

looked down at the bugs. “It’s just that all of us are really squeamish, so it’d probably be better if we went out while you let those things loose.”

I nodded. This seemed wise—we couldn’t have girls in heels screaming and leaping all over the place, someone would probably break a shoe or lose an eye. I figured I could give a good enough performance on my own. They filed out when no one was at the register near the doors, and I pulled my fattest, ugliest guy out of the bag. I held him in my lap, suddenly unsure. My father had once done this same maneuver successfully at a diner in Key West, but he told me it was only because we were flat broke and he’d be a little dishonest before he lost his dignity in line at the soup kitchen. Mom hadn’t been there. I was ten at the time, and it had seemed like a game: Dad huffing and puffing as a trail of ants marched through the leftover fries and the manager making obeisance with a gift card in his outstretched hand. This time, though, I had a twenty in my wallet and a waiter who might not be able to go to college one day without his tips.

I put two dollars on the table along with the roach.

Before the palmetto bug could crawl away from the scene, I jumped up from the table with a loud “Aaack!” so old couples started and families turned. Our waiter loped over.

The boy who lived down road loped over.

This was the first time I really looked at him. I’d kept the menu in front of my face when ordering and didn’t ask for refills because I don’t like making eye contact with strangers. Now his skinny nose and caterpillar eyebrows were two feet in front of my face, and I had to lean on the table because all the blood drained from my head.

“Is everything OK?” said Austin.

I swallowed and looked back at the table. My accomplice snuffled along a piece of uneaten bacon.

“There’s a—it’s a roach,” I said. “On the table.”

The caterpillar eyebrows inched up his forehead. He leaned on one foot to peer past my head. “Crap, that’s a big one.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, and clinging to some hope it could still work, I crossed my arms over my chest. “It’s really unacceptable, and we refuse to pay for contaminated food.”

For a second Austin looked flustered, still staring at the roach, then he blinked back to me. “We?” he said. “Where did the rest of you go?”

“Uh, they had to leave early. They left me the money for everything, but then this disgusting insect crawled onto the table and I practically vomited all the blueberry pancakes I just ate. And, no offense, but they weren’t that good.”

“I know you,” said the waiter.

Any second, I was sure the blue-steepled roof of the International House of Pancakes would cave in. He squinted at me. I wished the roof would hurry up and crumble. “You’re Oakley’s big sister, the one that never comes out of the house—she talks about you.” The way his lips pulled away from his teeth reminded me of a spider lifting up its fangs. “You’re the girl with the bug fetish.”

I bolted. I flung the twenty at the register as I flashed past and hurtled over the low shrubs separating the IHOP parking lot and the Joe’s Clothes for Misses lot. My mom was parked under a street light waiting to pick me up—she’d gone shopping while we ate. I slammed the door to the front seat and said, “Gun it, woman, gun it!”

That was my first time apologizing to an entire restaurant. I mowed the lawn eight times to pay back the thirty dollars for the other girls' food. They'd left as soon as they got outside. Katie was sixteen and had a car. The Spanish club girl didn't answer my calls. Every time Austin rode past our house on his bike, which was out of his way because we were second-to-last on a dead-end street, he screamed, "Aaack, a roach!"

#

In the bathroom of CVS, Austin gripped the edge of the sink so hard his knuckles turned white, but then he seemed to realize who I was. His eyebrows looked even bushier somehow, and his lips glistened.

"Austin?" I said. I scrabbled at my shorts.

Collected after watching me clamber and a slow exhale, he hooked his thumbs into his pockets and smirked. A corner of his mouth ticked. A fifteen year old boy was smirking at me with my pants unzipped in the women's bathroom at CVS. I hoped the same thing hadn't happened to my sister.

"Nice granny panties," he said. "That's hot."

And he walked out.

As I sat on the toilet eating my gummy bears, I thought of all the things I knew about Austin and the worst possible scenarios that might've happened in the bathroom. He was two years older than Oakley, which basically made him a cradle-robber. His dad was a fisherman or something—he stayed out on ocean a lot. Mom seemed to approve of Austin. Did he say *sir* and *ma'am* or ask how her day was? Suck up. He went into the woods alone on Saturdays with a paper grocery bag and work gloves. He liked to ride his bike with no hands, to lean his head into

Oakley's back as she sat on his handle bars until she screeched that they were going to crash. Apparently, he saw my interest in insects, or my sister told him about it. I wondered if she'd shown him my room, with the frames and the butterfly mobiles—my ceiling looked like a migration route. The posters of Justin Bieber inside my closet. Oh Lord, what about my one fancy bra? Please not the fancy bra.

I was struck with the thought of my sister, who barely even needed a bra, locked in a bathroom with this boy. I shuddered. I knew Oakley would never say a word about this—they were long gone by the time I came out—so I'd figure it out on my own. Austin became my new object of study.

#

My Google search for Austin Chambers came up empty-handed. I had to take more hands-on measures. Oakley was my baby sister and pronounced the 's' at the end of her plurals like she was a balloon with a tiny hole, and had a dark brown freckle on the tip of her left pinkie finger. And she shouldn't have been hanging around with boys when I didn't hang out with boys. Gripping a pencil and notebook, I ran past the Chambers' carport and up the stairs to the house above. The deck was scattered with debris, a broken ceiling fan, a cardboard box with miscellaneous metal poles sticking out of it, broken patio furniture, tattered beach towels hung from the railing. Sometimes all the homes looked like this just after a hurricane. But the last one here was Hurricane Wilma. Four years earlier. It was Saturday and I'd waited for Austin to leave and figured Mr. Chambers was at work. The doorbell sounded like a mockingbird. Mrs. Chambers opened the faux-cherry wood door with peeling panels and regarded me through a screen door left between us. She wore a bulky t-shirt that added to her ample frame and pajama

shorts that bunched up around her inner thighs. I couldn't help picturing Austin as a fat middle-aged man.

"Can I help you with something?" she said. Her hand was on the knob of the screen door, and I wasn't sure if she was thinking of opening it or just holding it shut.

"Yes, Mrs. Chambers. I'm Taylor from down the road—the orange-ish house? I'm conducting research about how residents interact with the environment here on Big Pine Key. It's for school. You know, going green and all that."

Her hand still clenched the knob. Her eyebrows were thin and a little crooked, as if recently waxed.

I cleared my throat, tried to keep my eyes from shifting. I'd straightened my hair for this. "So, would you maybe be willing to be interviewed? Or maybe another member of your family?"

"I guess," she said, and opened the door an inch. I stepped forward and she pulled it back. "But we have to be quiet. Brian's asleep." She pushed the door wide. "That's Mr. Chambers, I mean."

She asked me to sit on a rocking armchair so large three of me would have shared it comfortably. A large hole in the lining gave way to stained yellow foam. It tilted back at an angle that left my chin on my chest and my feet off the floor. The room was unlit except for a few hopeful strands of light eking through the missing slats of the closed blinds.

"Brian likes it dark," said Mrs. Chambers. She opened herself a Coke and sat on the sofa opposite me. The house smelled like pennies and quarters, and a little bit like coconuts. In her sitting position, Mrs. Chambers' legs seemed inappropriately bare, so I held my notebook in front of my face and launched into the questions, forgetting entirely to write down the answers.

Most of the questions were fluff, camouflage for the real questions. What do you like most about living on Big Pine Key? What's your favorite outdoor activity? Do you have any concerns about our treatment of the environment?

I don't know.

Driving?

Maybe it should rain more.

Toward the end of the interview, I asked if any of her family members enjoyed exploring the wooded areas where we live. She took a sip of Coke.

"No," she said.

"No? No one in your family, none of your children like to go into the woods?"

We both jumped as the bedroom door smacked against the wall of the hallway, which I could see from my perch on the armchair. Mrs. Chambers did not turn around. A drop of Coke dribbled down her fingers. Mr. Chambers lumbered out of the room in a white undershirt tucked into his white boxer shorts. Hairs curled around the collar of his shirt and sprouted out of his armpits as he stretched.

"Honey, could you make us a—" he yawned. Then he saw me. I thought he might excuse himself and go change, but he continued into the living room. "Hello," he said. He laid a hand on Mrs. Chambers' shoulder and the drop of Coke fell onto the rug. "Who's your guest?"

"She's not—this is Taylor who lives down the street. She's doing interviews for school."

He asked interviews for what. "Oh, environmental issues?" he said. "We've got no issues with the environment around here, do we, Mama?" He laughed and snorted one of those snorts that goes back past the nasal cavity and down into the throat. "Just gotta drive slow for our

precious little Key deer. Precious, precious, pre-shee-us.” He wanted to know if I didn’t think they were just the cutest creatures God ever made. “Sure you do,” he said. “Look at you. You’ve got mini-environmentalist written all over your face.” I touched my chin where I knew a zit was.

Mr. Chambers said he hoped I’d gotten what I needed, and he was sorry, but he needed to steal Mrs. Chambers away because he was about to starve. I knew a dismissal bell when I heard one. Mr. Brian Chambers made me think about how my IHOP friends must feel when they see a cockroach. Like flinching and shuddering at the same time.

The whole thing was a waste of time. I sat at the bottom of the stairs for a minute, out of view from the house above. Maybe some stealthy snooping around the property would give me some clues. I squeezed past Mr. Chambers’ fishing boat, *Virginia*, and slid open the door of the utility room that served as part of the house’s foundation. It caught after about half a foot, held by a latch too high for me to reach. Darkness filled the space. With the shady light of the sun behind me, though, I could make out a large locker to the immediate right of the opening. I stuck my hand in and turned the latch. Cold air rushed out and a florescent light clicked on. And four Key deer strung up by their hind legs stared back at me with black eyes.

#

The Key deer are endangered. I see five or six every morning outside my window sniffing around the garbage cans, but they’re still endangered. My great uncle, who goes to a monthly meeting held in the local elementary school cafeteria with all the other old people to see the deer’s status update, always gives me an earful about their progress when he catches me. According to him, they’ve done better in recent years due to close monitoring of select populations and relocation of some deer to islands near Big Pine, so the count is somewhere

between 300 and 800. Up from twenty-five individuals half a century ago. Personally, I prefer smaller creatures, though they only stand about two feet at the shoulder. Their slender build reminds me of my sister, with her stick legs and traipsing grace.

Oakley didn't believe me when I got to her room a minute later with a bloody knee where I'd fallen on my run to our house to tell her what I'd seen. She held her chin in her hands, propped up on her elbows with an old copy of *American Girl* magazine on her pillow. I didn't think she still read those. Her room was littered with craft ideas that had jumped from the pages of the magazine. A pencil cup made from a bedazzled soup can. A rock with googly eyes cross-eyed on her dresser. A wire over her window with pictures of friends attached with painted clothespins. A photo of Austin hung nearest the head of her bed. I didn't see one with me in it.

"I promise," I said. "I swear. I know what I saw."

"Excuse me, I *know* Austin's family, OK?" She sat up. "You're just saying that stuff so I won't hang out with him. You always make up things about him. I think you're jealous, so you lie about people. Because you have no friends."

I started to say, *I have friends*, but I tried to think of present tense friends, and none came to mind. Past tense friends didn't count, I realized, and some lingering contentment I'd stored up in the thought that those friends did count collapsed inside of me. I did have a friend once, a girl who squealed with a mixture of fear and admiration when I picked up bugs, who liked to wear ten clips in her hair at one time, who laughed at my Dad's bad jokes and who held her sandwiches with two hands. Then she moved. Such a mundane and disastrous thing. My eyes burned against my will and I turned around and walked out so she wouldn't see. I'd prove her wrong.

Camera in hand, I wound my way into the dense brush at the end of our street. The foam of my flip flops contoured against the old pockmarked coral reef bed that supported our islands. Wind blew hard and I dodged a poisonwood tree that twisted toward me like something out of Snow White. Its peeling bark and red skin reminded me of a sunburn. In the Keys these trees were everywhere and protected by law. They also caused itchy, painful breakouts a few days after the leaves or bark or sap came in contact with skin. But there were worse trees out here.

Every few minutes, I stopped and looked for movement. The woods thinned the farther out I went, with pines scraping the sky and poisonwood sweeping the rock. Two deer, a doe and her fawn, crept from behind a bunch of palmettos. The image of the dank utility room with four dead bucks swaying and frozen flooded my mind, and I had a ridiculous urge to scream “Gun it, woman, gun it!”

I didn’t scream. I took a picture of mom and baby as they tiptoed away. The rough, mulchy bark of a pine tree kneaded the space between my shoulder blades when I leaned against it. What did I hope to gain by confronting Austin? Even if he was a collaborator in the family deer poaching business, he was just a boy—maybe he didn’t realize what he was doing. He was Oakley’s best friend. Maybe she was his only friend. He never seemed to be with anyone else. A three-inch-legged banana spider sidled along the ground and started to climb my tree. I’d had just one friend and lost her. Could I do that to this boy? Maybe what he did in the woods with his bag and his gloves had nothing to do with the dead deer.

I continued deeper into the forest, just wandering, half-praying I wouldn’t find Austin after all. The wind pulsed and occasionally sand and dirt slid across my bare legs. A line of clouds bubbled over itself close to the trees. One large tree stretched out wide and full next to a

tiny pool in the rock. I nearly walked under it when I saw the green apples; Snow White's step-mother had nothing on these. I picked my way around the perimeter to avoid fallen death apples around the Manchineel tree—one stray squirt and my skin would erupt in blisters. There were usually large red signs tacked onto the trees to warn off people from touching it or picking the fruit, but this one must have been too far away from the beaten path.

Austin dropped from its branches.

I screamed and fell onto my backside. Austin, having landed roughly on his feet, stood as if he'd been slapped. He wore a breathing mask I'd seen on construction workers, a round white cup strapped to his head with rubber bands. His jeans were tucked into work boots and the tips of his gloves hung limp where his fingers couldn't fill them, and he dropped a brown paper bag full of apples to the ground. He pulled off a glove and slid the mask off his face so it covered his neck. He held his bare hand awkwardly away from his body for a moment, then carefully put it in his pocket. We gazed at each other for a while.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

There was no way to lie out of this. Though “This is all a bad dream you're having” crossed my mind. I told him I was looking for him.

“You found me,” he said. He could always compose himself faster than me. His pose was easy, now, he'd shifted his weight to one leg and with the hand in his pocket he looked like the kids who loitered out in the Winn-Dixie parking lot instead of one who'd just cat-fallen from a poisonous tree. I still sat on the ground with my legs splayed in front of me.

“I also found the dead deer in your house.” No going back now.

No more thug, either. Austin took his hand out of his pocket and ran it through his curls and over his forehead. I thought maybe I should hug him or say something like there, there. Or run for the cops. I stood up.

That seemed to trigger him again—he reminded me of that lizard that throws up its clown collar of skin when threatened.

“Stop,” he said. He held up an apple in his gloved hand and I flinched, tensed for impact. “You see this apple? It doesn’t make any holes in the skin and it doesn’t cause any bleeding when you eat it. Any bleeding on the outside, anyway.” He half-smiled and I flinched again. “Better than a gun or a trap, and a lot less obvious. If you cut it into little bites and cover it in peanut butter, a deer will eat it and come back for more.”

“But why?” The wind knifed through the trees. My hair lashed my face.

“We need money.”

I wondered if he’d told Oakley about that. Probably not. That he was telling me in this river of words seemed like he was trying to thrust them away, to put the weight of them onto someone else. He said, “Dad’s boat needs fixing. He can’t fish if he doesn’t have a boat, and there’s no other jobs on Big Pine.” I chewed the inside of my cheek, guilty for having hoped he’d get life when I told the police.

He turned away from me and threw the apple into the pool as hard as he could. Water splashed quite a long way—I felt a drop. “Weirdos like to buy the deer and stuff’em and put them in their houses. I guess it’s cool because they’re rare and miniature and fit in small places.”

“That’s horrible,” I said.

He seemed to be waiting for me to say something like that. He grinned and picked up his bag. “Yeah,” he said. “Imagine somebody *collecting* dead creatures to put in their house.”

Then, without thunder, without lightning, without fanfare, the rain came.

The squall dumped sheets of fat, hard raindrops and drenched me as I stood apart from the trees. I wiped my eyes and called for Austin. Then I heard him. He was screaming.

Austin writhed on the ground, at first crawling away from the tree and then succumbing to the pain. I blinked through the downpour, took a step forward, stopped. I couldn't reach him like that, I'd be worse than he was with my shorts and tank top. His scream caught in his throat, and I knew why. The water had found his eyes. He clawed at them, mouth opening and closing in time to the beating of the rain.

I bolted.

“No.” I said aloud before I'd passed my leaning-pine. My feet listened and stopped. I pulled up my tank top so it hooded my head and neck. My fancy bra clung uncomfortably to my skin. I turned around. Austin would see it after all.

CROSSING FAULT LINES

Darkness crept in from the corners of the living room, held at bay by the solid blue screen of light from the new TV. The new TV was a 1996 Panasonic that sat on top of the old Zenith set from 1978. The DVD player was on top of all that—its disc slot stuck out like the carrot nose of a technological snowman. A layer of dust coated the stack so it matched the gray of the walls. The mother had called the color *platinum* when she painted them, with her roller that sometimes went askew and hit the popcorn ceiling so little seesaws of platinum scarred the white.

The DVD player read ‘insert disc’ in block letters. Ricky waddled his way from the couch to the TV to press the close button. It would be his fifth viewing of *Disney Sing-Along Songs* that day. Cole hunted for *Spiderman 2* in the box of DVDs next to the set—he spotted Ricky with both hands, the crooked bone-one and regular one reaching for the button and pushed him back.

“No, Ricky,” said Cole, the big brother. He did not look up from the box. “No more sing-alongs. We’re watching *Spiderman* now.”

Ricky was special. That’s what the mother said on the days when she opened the curtains and made macaroni with cheese and cut-up hot dogs. She said he had a special brain and needed special attention and to be ‘specially nice to him. On the days when she sat on the porch steps with a cigarette between her lips and her slippers on, she said Ricky was her lot in life, her punishment for all the fool things she’d done when she was younger and didn’t have the two kids to figure out. Cole heard these things because he hid behind the plastic lawn chair to breathe in smoke and hear his mother complain about Ricky to her cell phone.

Ricky gurgled something with a long *oh* sound that Cole knew to mean ‘songs,’ then jerked his legs one over the other to get back to the TV. Cole set down *Spiderman 2* and half-dragged, half-carried Ricky through the house to their room, placed him on a pile of unwashed clothes, and told him to stay.

“I’m the big brother,” said Cole. “I’m eight.” He held up eight fingers in front of his brother’s lean, dark-eyed stare. Ricky repeated the sound for eight. Cole nodded and said, “You’re six. Si-ix.” He folded two of his fingers back into his fist. “So do what I say, Ricky.” Ricky just put his own hand in his mouth and sucked his knuckles. As Cole got up he poked his foot onto Ricky’s belly for good measure and left him.

On the screen Doc Ock had just plucked Aunt May from a crowd of worried onlookers when Ricky stumbled in front of the television—the coarse, upright hairs of his shaved head silhouetted black against the screen. The mother said that his hair would be easier to take care of if it was short. Cole shouted at him to move, but Ricky was absorbed in looking for his sing-alongs. He found them where Cole left them on the top of the old TV and squealed happy noises.

“No!” Cole said. He jumped off the couch and in three steps faced Ricky. “Go away, dummy.”

Ricky sloshed his tongue around in his mouth so it made a squelching sound as he scanned the buttons of the DVD player.

Cole said, “Don’t do it, Ricky. You better not.” But he decided that he wanted Ricky to do it, he wanted him to do it so he could punish him. “Don’t do it, stupid-head.”

Ricky pressed the eject button and Cole pinched him hard on the arm, twisting the skin between his fingers until his brother’s wail turned into a sob. The *Disney Sing-Along Songs* fell

to the carpet where Cole jammed his heel into the disc. It split in two. With tears and spittle smeared across his cheeks, Ricky wrenched free from Cole. He scooped the two pieces from the floor and tried to reach back up to the open DVD player with them.

The mother walked in as Ricky grabbed the disc slot and in his haste pulled the player off the TV. It crashed onto the carpet with a definite crunch. Dust puffed into the air around them.

The mother still wore her green button up shirt and her arms were full of the day old, just-past-the-expiration-date groceries she got for working at Publix. Hair had slipped from her ponytail and lay in stringy rivulets along her sweaty neck. She shoved the groceries onto the end table. With two distinct cracks she slid onto her knees and grabbed Ricky by the shoulders. Cole watched as she turned Ricky around so that he faced away from her, pulled down his pants, and smacked his backside. Her mouth was taut, her lips barely showed. Her dangling earrings shook each time she hit him. Ricky must have used up all his tears because he just breathed in gasps and when the mother was done he sat down in front of the TV and stared silently at the blank blue screen.

The mother climbed onto the couch and lit a cigarette right there in the living room. She never smoked in the house.

Smoke escaped her mouth when looked at Cole and said, "Come here."

Cole shuffled over and stood in front of her. Her eyes looked dull from behind the curtain of smoke. The blue in them blurred the same gray as the walls, the dust.

"Tell me what happened," she said. She put her hand on his shoulder so that her fingers rested on the nape of his neck and squeezed. Cole tugged on his sleeve.

“Ricky was trying to get his movie to play, you know, and he broke it,” Cole nodded, because the story felt plausible. “So he got upset and pulled down the DVD player.”

The mother sighed and put the cigarette to her lips again. Ricky still sat motionless in front of the television. Cole climbed up next to his mother. “I think it was just an accident,” he said. The mother turned her face away to blow smoke, then smiled down at Cole, her small teeth the pale yellow of raw corn on the cob.

“Oh, sweet boy,” she said. “Well, even if he didn’t mean to, he has to learn. Sometimes we have to learn the hard way.” She put her arm around him and pulled him close, placed a kiss on his head. “I’m so glad I have you to help me,” she said. “My good boy.”

Cole nodded into her side, not quite able to obscure his view of Ricky’s shaved head. The good boy.

ASHES TO ASHES, TRUST TO DUST

The fingers in my hair are attached to my hand. Sometimes I forget I put them there. Sometimes the whole universe is just me with my nails skipping along my scalp, waiting and staring and empty. Sometimes hairs fall out, and eon by eon I am diminished.

I pick up the next book or change the channel or flip the pillow over and start again.

#

“It was amazing,” says Caroline, who is my best friend and the only one Mom will let over to our house, because she’s close enough to family to not care that it’s never clean. “Like, one of the best things I’ve ever done in my life.”

We’re on the phone, so my smile is wasted, but I smile anyway. “That’s great,” I say.

“I was holding out, you know, trying not to cry, but when the priest came to me and prayed over me...I don’t know, I just let go of everything and just cried.”

This Catholic retreat sounds really uncomfortable. “Wow,” I say. “That’s so special.” My Catholic friends, the ones like Caroline in Catholic campus ministry, are kind of weird about their priests—the confessing, the deference. I’d never let any of my Baptist preachers see me cry, hear my sins. My cracks aren’t for others to see. Pastors are to be heard and not seen, or at least not seen close up.

I picture her beaming, her amber eyes clear and beautiful, maybe watering again. She’s lying on her bed like me, maybe doodling flowers and hearts on a scrap paper.

Over the next several months, pictures of the Virgin Mary pop up on her walls, string rosary bracelets in pink and brown drape her wrists, a plastic crucifix hangs from her rearview mirror. Mass is no longer a Sunday thing, but as often as possible, with adoration and Catholic

campus ministry worship meetings sprinkled in. I'm not sure what to make of this. Caroline was raised Catholic and she typically gave the impression that, like many I've met who identify with that particular brand of Christianity, religion was one more thing to chalk up on the list of after school activities. How did her zeal go from ten to sixty in less than three months? When did she suddenly become a more devout believer than me? My ivory tower of faith seemed to crumble around me as hers rose from the ashes. The God of Abraham didn't seem to reconcile with the perfect, endless love he is said to possess, anymore. He created us to have free will and yet to exercise our free will in the wrong way causes us to die and then be tortured forever in Hell? That perfect plan I had taken for granted since the time I could talk fell short under scrutiny. And this is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing, without even the benefit of sound and fury.

#

Our living room couch used to be white, or at least not grey. My boyfriend, Aaron, and I share the middle cushion. The keys on the old piano across the room are similarly hued and chipped. The songbook on the stand is open to "Mary Did You Know." Christmas was four months earlier. Filtered light trickles in from the tinted windows in the foyer adjacent to the living room, but it's still nearly dark enough to cover what we say. I whisper because Dad, who is head usher at church and sits the family down for daily devotions and doesn't believe in marrying outside the faith, is in the kitchen and Aaron and I couldn't go sit in the car because normal people don't go sit in cars to talk when there are perfectly good houses around. Now that I am twenty-one, in theory I don't have to answer for my actions, because in theory I have established enough rapport to vouch for my good behavior. Those things don't seem to stop my

parents from asking, though. And when living at home at twenty-one when your parents pay for your food and gas money, direct questions you have to answer become your keep. That and babysitting your sisters for free. My dad is a man who might pass for an ancient Hebrew despite his entirely western European ancestry. He is a thin, wiry man of middling height, hairy arms and legs and dark hair that flashes in and out of gray in his beard. He'd be a perfect extra as one of the slaves in *The Ten Commandments*. He never has any doubts about anything: God, the President, who is in the right when he's having an argument. (It's always him.) He would certainly have a definite opinion regarding the conversation I'm about to have. I will never ask him for it.

I take my feet off the coffee table, leaving a dark round mark in the dust. Aaron drapes his arm around my shoulders.

"I guess I've had my thinking influenced by being forced to look through a scientific perspective," he says. I'm rigid, I brace. Aaron, like my dad, has a left-brained logic to his musings my mind of abstractions can't always grasp, and I'm in constant fear that any of my own opinions will sound like the ramblings of a preschooler.

He keeps going. "It's hard for me to blindly accept things—I need to test things, to see them and be able to tell someone else *why* they're true."

"Yeah," I say. But I know there's no way to the Why. If there were, somebody would have figured it out by now. I press up against him, jam my shoulder up under his armpit. I whisper, "I know. I just want to be *shown*...like a thumbprint. Like an all-knowing voice inside my head, one that's obviously outside of my experience..." I trail off. I never did know what I wanted from God.

#

The moment when I thought I had my answer, proof, my Gideon's fleece, I was sixteen and a painful cyst developed in my breast. "Biopsy" meant slashed open, carved out, and I had little enough breast tissue as it was. I lay prostrate on my bed and pleaded with God *please Lord I'm not strong enough, it's more than I can bear, please Jesus take it away.*

Instead I found myself bare on an operating table in a small room where dark reds and browns swam on the ceiling and a nurse wiped away tears running toward my ears. *Lord, I screamed in my head, where are you?* The nurse left to go get the anesthetic, and my mother made everything worse by sitting in a chair a few feet away and murmuring, "It'll be OK, honey, just like any other shot." The surgeon came in and I closed my eyes.

"Rachel?" he said. I peeked at him through pinched lids. He had a long face and curvy chocolate hair, a tie. "Did you have lunch yet?"

"No." I opened my eyes. He smiled.

"Well, looks like you're going to be able to get one earlier than you thought. We can't find the cyst."

It was like a glass had tipped off the table and someone caught it in its midair fall; you were holding your breath but before you realized it you were exhaling again, grinning stupidly, impressed. I say, "What?"

They couldn't find a cyst. There was no cyst there where one had been before. They could not explain it. This sort of thing just doesn't happen. But as I raised my arms through my shirt sleeves, I looked at the ceiling again, praying *O Lord my God, I will never doubt you again.*

God gave me my own personal miracle, and the Israelite tradition of get hurt, cry out, get saved, then forget and repeat would not pass to me.

In the van, my mother placed her pale hand on my shoulder; she rarely touched me. “Praise God, huh, Rach?” she said softly, and somehow stiffly. Maybe she was as taut as I was in there. Mom’s role in injecting God into my life consisted of long talks on the phone with my grandmother complaining about how the church needed better leadership when I was in earshot, guiltting me into going to the church’s children’s club and choir all through elementary school, and making occasional awkward comments like “Praise God,” and “We just have to hope God will take care of it.”

“Mhmm.” I wished she wouldn’t talk about it. We sat in silence the rest of the way home.

#

I told Aaron that story not long after we started dating, and choked on the words. I slapped at mosquitoes as we sat in his driveway, listening to cars pass by in the night. I hesitated before using the word breast in front of him. Him, the boy who wanted to be a doctor. He watched my profile, because I couldn’t look at him as I told it.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” he said, and he stared at the wall of his house, contemplative. Tentative as I was to tell him about it at all, a girl on a stage could not have been more satisfied with his pensiveness, his quiet affectation. See, my words said in secret, see? I am so close to God, he comes to my rescue when I need him. See what a strong and humble Christian I am? It was early on in our relationship and to me he seemed like a perfect Christian; one of those Seven Day Adventists that go to church on Saturdays. His family prayed before every meal and spent at least half an hour singing praise songs and conducting a bible study

every evening. They all seemed to be masters of Bible trivia, as I learned playing their Bible trivia board game. Aaron, unlike me, was never afraid to add to the spiritual discussion with some profound insight. If the measure of faith is found in knowledge and commitment, they seemed to have it in abundance. This story was my attempt to prove I was no novice, either.

The first and only other time I shared the story was on Testimony Day in my college Sunday school class, the day you're supposed to share how you "got saved" and what God has done in your life, and I ended up with my awful raspberry-colored crying face while the four others looked at my shoes or the walls and Mrs. Pam handed me a tissue. Even though I knew that story would break my composure, I told it because it was the only event in my life where God seemed to have played an active role. It was the only thing to prove my connection to the divine.

"Well...thanks for sharing that, Rachel," said Mr. Randy, the teacher, who hadn't heard me say more than thirty words since joining the class. "That was really powerful." His eyes held wide like an animal startled into stillness, and once again, if just for a moment, there was something like contentment for me in this reaction. Afterwards though, the muteness of the listeners made me feel as though I balanced on the head of a pin, that I was a child telling a tale that so excited me I might have added a twist for good measure, and finally the grown-ups would just say, "Wow, that's amazing," after and send me off with a cookie, thinking probably that kid will end up with some sort of disorder one day. Their silence reminded me why Baptists don't share things, don't blubber, don't cry. It makes everyone else too uncomfortable.

I didn't have to talk about that incident at all. I could have simply said that I accepted Jesus as my savior when I was six years old while riding in backseat of a minivan, that I was

baptized at seven and I only did it because my younger cousin was ready to be baptized, too. If I'd have said after that I'd had a few lapses in my walk with God but ultimately still love him and want to be a much better Christian in the future, everyone would have nodded politely and gone home having known exactly what I would say before I said it. But a kindergartener doesn't go to show and tell with a crayon. Everyone has crayons. I had to bring out my pack of sixteen rainbow colored permanent markers to make sure everyone knew I carry my own special relationship with God.

#

Though I'd heard other stories of inexplicable escapes—a bomb is detonated in a church exactly when a large meeting of leaders normally takes place, but all twenty people are delayed or absent, a missionary is accepted by a cannibal tribe—they might as well have been Bible stories themselves for all the impact they made on me. I believed them, because our preacher knew his stuff, but those things were for epic Christians with an epic God. My God was the kind who passed out elated feelings sometimes during my favorite hymns at church. Up in the balcony, where the brass-colored chandeliers obscured the words on the screen, where the stained glass windows glowed in the noonday sun and you see the white powderpuff heads of elderly ladies down below, it's a comforting, homemade thing. But after the miracle healing, I just had my own epic, five-seconds-until-self-destruct moment, my God showed His power to me, and that was all the proof I'd ever need.

The life of the staunch, resolute Rachel of post-cyst days had no music during morning car rides to be able to focus on God. She prayed things like, Lord, let your light shine through me today, help me be kind and loving to everyone I come in contact with. The last thing she did

every night in bed was read a chapter of the Bible. She finally realized God had given her a love of words so she could write to glorify his name. She and her new boyfriend, Aaron the Seventh Day Adventist, sat in his car and held hands.

“Lord,” he said, “Thank you for this day. Please guide us in all we do, and keep us from temptation. Let us honor you in what we say and think.”

“Dear Lord,” she said, feeling her palms sweat against his skin, “Watch over us and lead us in the way you would have us go.” She tried to think of more to say. She always felt squeezed while praying out loud. “Bless our time together. Uh, Amen.”

That was the last time the two of them prayed together.

#

By the time Caroline underwent her metamorphosis from Catholic caterpillar to saintly butterfly, however, my Christian boyfriend was putting on his agnostic corrective lenses and we both had managed to thoroughly muddle ourselves. Friday night Bible study at Pastor Diane’s house trickled off and dried up as she moved out of state, to be replaced by more private meetings for two down by the lakeside after dark. Sometimes we talked about God, like why He wouldn’t just come out and show me what I was supposed to do with my life, how we both wanted to be with someone who believed in Him, but most times we didn’t. As often as not we didn’t talk at all. When I thought back on my old miracle during that time, it brought on a smile, a moment of silence, and then a desire for surer proof. Of course any waiter can deliver a meal made by an excellent cook, but I wanted to see the chef himself prepare the food.

Sometimes I’d go the entire week until Sunday without a single prayer, the concept of communicating with God forgotten until I heard the pastor do it, and then I’d sit in a pew and

feel mildly guilty as my eyes drooped. Next to me, my grandmother's head bobbed up and down, and then I did pray: God, please don't let her snore. Then the boyfriend left me to deal with my own struggles of faith, citing the fact that he didn't think in the long run it would work between a Seventh Day Adventist vegetarian and a Baptist fried chickener, and I stopped caring about the glaze across my eyes altogether. The only time God heard from me was when I lost my wallet or the plane met with turbulence.

In my room one night, after another ill-begotten rendezvous with the then ex-boyfriend, one which left my lips a dry dark pink and my mascara smudged, I lay in bed with my fists pressed into my eyes as if to grind out my own stupidity. There was a blow that came when my faith in the creator of the universe faltered, that after a steady decline of neglect and doubt, I found one evening staring at my ceiling in bed that what faith I thought was tethered to my insides had sifted into nothing. But this realization was softened by my reliance, and perhaps my misplaced devotion, on and to that boy. My new rock. And now I was grasping at his occasional relapses with a vice grip that I never deigned to clamp onto a distant God.

I opened my mouth onto my pillow and screamed a little. I pulled my Bible—the old pink one that has occasional helpful morals for nine year old Bible readers alongside passages, because I can't find my regular one—off the shelf and opened to a random page. Paul's letters to the Romans. The belt cinching my waist dug my back, so I put the Bible on my bed and stripped, closed the Bible with my phone on the page, because somehow being naked in the same room as an open Bible, no matter how far gone my belief in its infallible truth might have been, seemed inappropriate. Then I pulled on shorts and an old Vacation Bible School t-shirt, and re-opened to Romans 13:1: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of

God: the powers that be are ordained of God.” I smiled; the voice in my head intoned deeply “the powers that be.” My fingernails furrowed along my scalp. I frowned. *God, I think, show me your power. I just need to see it, and then I’ll know, and I won’t have to doubt anymore.* Like the Israelites did, I found the pixie dust of my own personal miracle had long ago worn off, and I wanted a burning bush, a parted sea, a talking donkey. *Anything, anything, but please, something.*

I looked at my best friend, who from my place in the valley had become a speck on the mountain, closer to God than I had ever been. I looked at my former boyfriend who, despite his doubts, remained steady because science—his true faith—was a constant. Neither seemed to drift in open space. Meanwhile I portioned off parts of myself into stories, perhaps in the hope that by whittling away my excess, isolating stray emotions to extract meaning from any and all experiences, then setting them aside after they touched paper, I could find my way back to faith by casting the bones. In the stories I reached out my fingers to see how long I could touch the ice before the cold was too much, and it was never long. Despite my efforts to skirt around my God problem, though, I couldn’t seem to keep it out of the stories I was writing that mattered most to me. Rachel questions God about her mentally handicapped sister; Rachel turns red when writing about her education on and implementation of promiscuity; Rachel can’t find her reflection in the faith of her parents and grandparents. Rachel only has fingers in her hair.

#

Most Christians I know detest the word “religion.” We have a *relationship*, they say, not a set of rules we follow, but a personal connection with God. But that doesn’t cut it with outsiders, whose blank faces are like so many nails in the hand, and in the interest of simplicity

and not embarrassing myself with clumsy clarifications, I use the term “faith” to describe my beliefs.

And faith fits. To have trust in something. To believe in something without proof. A belief in God. In Church Land, we have a number of ways to visualize this concept.

You are sitting on a chair. Although you may never have sat in this chair before, or it’s just that you cannot be aware of what happened to the chair in your absence, you trust, you have confidence, you know this chair will support your weight. You have faith in the chair.

That’s not the best of examples.

This is a Sunday school classic: The Fall. “Ok kids, partner up!” says Mrs. Wolf. “Find someone you can *trust*.” This is apparently a difficult concept for us third graders, so she irons the word out to make sure we get it. I pair up with Elizabeth, my friend with a blotchy red birthmark across most of her forehead. I always want to touch it; the skin reminds me of peach fuzz.

“Now,” says Mrs. Wolf, “One partner needs to face away from the other partner. That’s right, turn your back to face them.”

I spin on my heel to face the classroom at large with Elizabeth behind me. It’s one of those rooms that starts out huge and shrinks as you get older. One day I’ll walk in and find the tables crammed together and the closet a far worse hiding place. A boy pushes the red-headed kid in front of him and they both laugh. Mrs. Wolf is practically seventy and I don’t think she hears them. She says, “Ok, ready? Now fall back into your partner’s arms. You have to trust that they’ll catch you. Don’t take a step back, keep your body straight and your arms out. Go!”

The red-headed kid immediately falls back; his partner stands behind with his arms folded, grinning. Too late the red-head realizes no arms are there to stop the pull of gravity. He tries to step back to catch himself but lands on his backside instead. I tug on my hair and wait. Another pair of girls pulls it off successfully, then another. People are starting to switch so the fallers are now the catchers.

“Come on, Rachel, go ahead—Elizabeth will catch you,” says Mrs. Wolf, a little too loudly. People turn to look. Red-haired kid sniggers, maybe hopeful. I give Elizabeth one quick glance over my shoulder and see her nodding. I’m rigid, I brace. I am a tree, I tell myself, I have been cut down in the woods. I will not make a sound. I lean back, then lash out one foot behind me to stop. More giggles. I am a tree. Elizabeth will catch me. My head will not hit the floor.

I roll onto my heels with my back and knees locked and my eyes closed. Little hands scoop under my arms and push me slowly back up to a standing position.

Mrs. Wolf smiles and her wrinkles bunch up. “Good,” she says. “Just like you trusted in your friend to catch you, we can always trust that Jesus is there to help us when we need him. Jesus will always take care of us.”

But there is no glancing over my shoulder to see a nodding Jesus.

#

My once-boyfriend slash best friend, the one I can’t seem to disentangle myself from, will put his arm around me one day a year and a half after our first sticky conversation about faith. We will sit on a bench facing a lake obscured by a line of trees as walkers pass behind us. He will take his glasses off as he always does when he talks to me.

He'll say, "I believe there's people who believe in God, there's people who don't—atheists—and people who admit that you can't know."

I nod even though he's not looking at me.

He'll say, "But there's two kinds of those—the people who don't know. Some who say, I don't know but I'm going to try to believe anyway; they're the ones who want to be comforted, to believe in *something*. Then are those who don't know and can't believe until they have more evidence. Truth."

He turns to me and his eyes are soft, round and blue and green. "The question is, do you want to be comforted, or do you want the truth?"

I will not say anything, because I know he does not expect an answer. I will rub his knee and lean on his shoulder and wonder what I want. What I want is someone with a plan for me, who has me on some sort of track that I can't see. Someone smarter and kinder and stronger than man. I want to know dying isn't the last thing I'll ever do. I want faith to be as real as hope and love. I want someone to make a note of it when a hair falls out of my head.

My fingers will move around his neck and trace his jaw line. They follow it to his hair and twirl along his scalp.

I will tell Him *I just don't know*.

THE LIST OF UNACCEPTABLE FAULTS

1. You're as moody as a woman

Some days it's like the toilet won't stop flushing. No matter what you put in it or how much you toggle the handle, there's an endless vacuum of water. Toward the end of our four month-long friendship, you had days like this.

Your walk is jaunty, your head up, a smile crinkles your features. Well you should smile, for two finals are upon us today, and we have only to turn in our final papers from the English-major-initiation classes we met in. We learned how to write stories and read books with a discerning eye together. We chat about summer plans and stories and work and various other topics that sustained us through the spring semester all those hours between two classes we had together.

I suggest that we sit in the meditation garden, though now past its prime as late as we are in the scorching Florida spring, is still my favorite place on campus. The golden and pink trumpet trees are in the final stages of their blooming, with most branches bare, and blossoms litter the benches. We cut through the Honors College, which is my home base on campus, but to lay folk like you it seems to hold this sense of mystery, so you come in cautiously, like an intruder. We encounter my boyfriend in the lobby. He and I stop to talk and you pace at a respectful distance, though there is no need, wandering back past the grand piano and pretending to admire the trophy case.

Now there's a smile on my face, the kind that if I'm not careful and linger too long will make my cheeks hurt after. But it's a pleasant ache. This is the boy you will never be: motivated to be the best in everything he does, fast friends with everyone he meets, the boy who can take

my nonsense and gawkiness and turn it into my best feature. I tease my boyfriend, telling him he is going to fail even though he is a straight-A pre-med student. I push his arm when he fires back that all my papers were probably written by a monkey and kisses my lips. Then he trots off to class.

You follow me out to the garden and sit across from me after we clear away pink blooms from the bench. I'm in the middle of wondering what I will do besides work this summer when you say that you shouldn't have come here.

My eyebrows go into the pyramid position. "Okay?" I say.

You say you have to go. You get up. You walk five steps. You come back. Nevermind, you say.

"Okay?" I say.

You proceed to carefully watch the brick wall beside us as I try to fill the awkward silence with my mediocre summer plans.

I am very young and you are old—you were already eleven when I was born, and in the past you've often reminded me of this. I would say, "Of course you'll find someone, you're awesome." And I meant it. You told me I only say things like that because I'm still so young.

Now, here in the garden, I assume you're just thinking the same thing as I baby-burble about summer.

Finally it's time to turn in our papers, and as we walk out of the Honors College you ask me why my boyfriend isn't with me right now. You say he should spend less time running around and more time actually with me, if he's a good boyfriend. I sense you are implying he's not a good boyfriend, so I say *he's busy* in a snake-set-to-spring sort of way and pound up the

stairs without waiting for you. But then at the top with my flash-fire anger burned out I do wait, and neither of us speak on the way to drop off our papers.

Afterward I take refuge from you back in the garden with my boyfriend, listing your every mistake to him. You're insane for attacking people you don't even know. You're rude for insulting my choice in men. You stick your nose in places it doesn't belong. My boyfriend annoys me by nodding but not sharing in my righteous fury. Unlike you, unlike me, he always keeps a cool head. His full, dark lips curl up one cheek in a half-smile, because he gets a kick out of when I'm riled. I throw some blossoms at him, but they catch in the air and fall short. He's sure you had some exterior problem that caused you to say those things, and when I get an apologetic text from you that I'm ready to shove back in your face, he pats my leg and tells me to wait a while before I respond.

You find me after our next final and pull me aside. You take off the sunglasses you religiously put on outdoors and look me in the face. I look at the sparse black hairs on your arms. You say you're sorry for what you said earlier. That I must know that you're crazy about me.

But I didn't know that. I am nineteen and believe boys and girls can just be friends and that if you have a boyfriend people will know well enough not to like you. You seem to be waiting for me to say something so I say that we can always be good friends.

You let out a laugh that's made mostly of air and frustration. The 'F' word, you say. You say you knew it. And you walk away.

2. Your interests include you, increasing muscle mass, and trying to get me interested in those things, too.

I walk down the aisle of the bus, eyeing empty seats and trying not to look too desperate, because I know you're staring at me, fingers to your head, Jedi-mind tricking, willing me to come back farther to where you sit. You're an old high school semi-acquaintance and now that we're in the same college and on the same bus bound for the same elementary school where we volunteer, we're somehow obligated to be friends. In high school you were that kid who sat in the back of our advanced placement literature class so everyone would hear you when you made pithy remarks about *Hamlet* or *Jane Eyre* (which is my favorite book in the world). I am too shy and too worried about making you feel bad and you comment on how fancy my jacket is as I sit down on your right. Yeah, well, I say, defeated, thanks.

You prattle (but isn't that an old lady thing to do?) about how you went rock climbing for like three hours yesterday and I try to avoid watching the ostentatious flexing of your rather pretentious biceps that spill over to my side of the armrest. I need to study the second grade lesson plan I'll be teaching in thirty minutes, anyway. I realize you're asking if I want to go rock climbing sometime.

"Uh, don't know when I'll have time... 'd have to bring workout clothes... live kind of far from campus... so what are you teaching today?"

You tell me how you're going to read a storybook about being a grocer to your kindergarteners and how one time one of them ran up to give you a hug and his face was right in, well, I know the area. You and the person in front of us laugh loud enough so I can get away with a half-smile, one chuckle. That offends me but strikes some cord and I really do think it's funny. But I don't approve. Still, you are a boy and it is my freshman year of college and I know

nothing of boys and what wild humors whip in and out of their heads, so I guess you can't help yourself. And the wheels on the bus go round and round.

It is not many days after that when you finally ebb all the sand from my shore with your dull roaring and I cave in and go somewhere with you. You squeeze into the passenger's seat of my '96 Geo Prism and your knees reach up to the windows. Your head brushes the roof, but you've got a good two inches of unwieldy Einstein hair that I'm sure would be improved by a weedwacker. I've got a coupon for Planet Smoothie for buy one get one free and I want to pay for half of the total but you wave me away and you're a whole head and shoulders above me and I haven't been short—a baby, a kid—since eighth grade. So you pay, and I grimace far beneath you. Paying is something boys with intentions do, or that's what reading Janette Oke frontier-women romance novels has led me to believe, and though the notion of having a boyfriend is intriguing, you're not how I envisioned my first love. He would be someone who might take a breath every now and then to ask me what I thought.

Once again you are master of the conversation situation. I suck on my Plain Jane (that's really the name) strawberry smoothie and cover the zit on my chin when you deign to request a response.

You tell me you run a lot. You're in marathons. You can bench—what was it?—500 pounds? I'm more focused on wishing I'd found some time in between the bus and here to put on more concealer, and then I'm annoyed that I feel the need for concealer at all when I'm with *you*. You have your back to the windows and with the sunlight fairly blasting in. You're partly in shadow and I know my face—my acne—has to be in stark relief. My finger taps that spot on my chin and I will realize later how that must be like asking people to look at it: Can't find my zit?

Here it is, friend! Of course, you don't notice at all, because I am a warm body with ears that nods, and that is all you will ever need. One arm hangs over the back of your chair and you take a sip of smoothie in repose, uninhibited. There in that ease is what I find I do truly admire you for. If you had zits, I wouldn't even catch them.

Sometimes, now, when the mandatory volunteering and busing has been over and I haven't seen you in a year, you text me to ask if I can go to a concert. Tonight. But now I am generally zitless and it is much easier to lie to my phone about how I have so much homework than it is to tell it to your arm muscles.

3. You're even more awkward than I am

I'm still trying to dab stray eyeliner back into place when Dad says you and the other guy are here to pick up Caroline and me for the dance. It's only the second time I've used eyeliner and it looks like I'm still on the preschool level, working on staying inside the lines, even if there's only one line to work with. The thirty dollar gown I got from a Dillard's clearance sale five months ago barely zipped up—all those fruit roll-ups snaking down my throat all those lunchtimes? Or maybe it was just that one bowl of leftover fettuccini I was microwaving when you caught me. Caroline told me she heard from the other guy that you were probably going to ask me to prom. She and I both knew you, the only boy who worked as a consultant in the high school's writing center with the rest of us girls, the only boy with a backpack large enough to hold a baby elephant, you would be my only offer.

It was an expected surprise, then, when you skulked up to me in the storage room between Ms. Hilley's Lit class and the Writing Center where we kept the microwave and toaster

and life-size cutout of Orlando Bloom as Legolas. It was only the second time you'd talked to me all year. I wanted the guy in Spanish class to ask me, the one I talked to everyday after class even though he had a habit of walking out without me. He wasn't going to prom, though. It's our senior prom and even people like me and you who have never danced nor will have any desire to dance feel obligated to go out of the instinct that one day our (respective) children will need to have proof that their parents went out and did things.

So as each other's only resort, you asked during the forty-five seconds it took for my fettuccini to heat up. Your hair was maybe an inch too long and fell limp about your ears and forehead. Looking you square in the face for perhaps the first time, I saw how large your lips were, how round your glasses, how bulbous your nose. Everything about you was too much, which somehow meant you were not enough. Of course I said yes. I wished I could have smacked the red off my cheeks. The room reeked of garlic. You'd been tensed for impact and you visibly exhaled when I said it, shoulders slumping, weight shifting to one leg, and then a light tap of your knuckles on the counter before you said "Ok then," and walked out.

Blinking in the light of the springtime setting sun, Caroline and I stand next to you and the other guy in front of my house for pictures. None of us are cool enough to have a friend who lives on a lake with a deck and/or gazebo, so it's the faded red brick and overgrown holly bushes of our walkway for the backdrop. We stand like birds on a wire, not even our shoulders touching. A dark crescent of pudge ruins my silhouette and I suck it in as you slip the purple orchid corsage on my wrist. I wish you hadn't done such a perfect job of matching it to my dress.

Caroline's gown leaves the backseat of your car sparkling with fallen glitter. You say: is this Sand Lake Road question mark exclamation point and I say: yes this is Sand Lake, turn right

and I think: you've lived in Orlando your whole life and you don't know Sand Lake Road question mark question mark. Then we cross Orange Blossom Trail or The Point of No Return and nothing is familiar, to you or me or Caroline or the other guy.

The volunteer moms and teachers hand out star-shaped pillows embroidered with *Prom 2009* and candles as we enter the ballroom of the hotel. We four exchange glances.

A makeshift bridge surrounded by several tall potted plants forms the gateway to *Shangri-La*, or rather a room full of tables covered with fourteen different utensils and cherry tree blossoms and an "intimate" dance floor with two large screens on either side. "Intimate" we will come to find means you might have a radius of two feet to yourself *if* you are on the outskirts of the floor.

You and I walk our feet from side to side when they play "I've Had the Time of My Life" with Baby and what's-his-name flinging each other around on the screens above our heads. You hold my waist and sweat into my palm at arm's length as I watch my bare feet, wary of dagger heels or teenage-boy Hulk shoes. I ditched my own three-inch heels after the first song, and your Mom agreed to watch them. Because your parents are here. Chaperoning. I half-wonder why we didn't all just pile into the minivan together to save gas.

Then Lady Gaga's "Poker Face" stutters from the speakers, and we stand there to watch our peers press their hind quarters and pelvic regions together. An honors student I know is bent double with her backside in her boyfriend's crotch and a no-nonsense expression on her face. We retreat to our table.

The night is then completely overshadowed when Caroline drags me into the bathroom to whisper over the whispers of all the other girls holed up in there. Things like "It's gorgeous" and

“Just dab it with a wet paper towel,” and “She did what?” float amongst the sounds of dripping and drying. A very long wall is set with a very long mirror where ladies in bright pinks and blues and zebra stripes (which were in that season) re-pin their hair or apply more mascara. I didn’t even get a good look at my face before we rushed out the door two hours ago, and I will find back at home that at some point I must’ve rubbed my eye and smudged the eyeliner so it creeps down the side of my nose.

Caroline’s eyes are too wide. Did the other guy threaten her? Get too frisky? Smell bad? The two of them had walked through a park once before prom and Caroline said it wasn’t a date but the other guy acted like it was. He had wanted to *hold hands*.

“He asked me to be his girlfriend,” she whisper-shouts.

My “what” lasts five seconds and if an octave higher might shatter the wall-length mirror. Caroline and I have spent many an hour laying side by side on her sheetless bed, staring up at a popcorn ceiling and picking through the meager repertoire of “Guys We Know” and wondering if any of them would ask us to be his girlfriend. It was a process that would have been in the same realm of possibility if we’d been discussing what kind of Nobel prize we might win, or which cure for cancer we’d like to discover. The other guy, however, never came up on the list. “What did you say?”

Her wide eyes plead with me to understand. I know because I’ve seen that look before a few times since fourth grade. “Well, I couldn’t say no.”

“You said yes?” My voice creeps higher with each word.

“What else was I supposed to say, Rachel?” She leans in closer. I bend so my ear, half a foot above her head, is down next to her mouth. “He said I look beautiful and he’s having a really nice time and he really likes me and he wanted to know if I would be his girlfriend.”

Around us, the rumble of conversation from the girls around us rises and falls like a snore as some leave and more trickle in. A bare shoulder brushes me from behind but I ignore it. Somewhere in the distance, a toilet flushes. This is Caroline’s first offer of a relationship ever, meaning she’s the first one between us to have even a potential boyfriend. She and the other guy, who is short and pale and a year younger than us but in our grade, have talked some but don’t really hang out outside of school. Except the time at the park.

I don’t know what else to say other than “That’s really sweet, isn’t it?” When I probably should say “Don’t give in yet, say you’re not ready and he’ll understand.” And thus save Caroline the next three months of figuring out how to break up with him.

But I am not the best Best Friend.

It is dark as your suit outside on the drive home. I watch as lights blur into lines of yellow and white as we wind our way back. Caroline has a boyfriend now. I have braces that won’t come off until college. I turn and glance at you and then afraid you’ll see me looking I drop my gaze to your hands, knobby white knuckles at a precise two and ten. You are my only option. It’s because my legs cross in an awkward way because I don’t have the calf muscle to rest them on. It’s because I never have anything worthwhile to say, like how about that global warming or my fantastic trip to Mexico, or even *The Hangover*, because my parents would hate me going to an R rated movie. It’s because I don’t even own a straightener. It’s you or nothing.

A few weeks later, when you have stopped sitting across the room and take to eating lunch in the desk in front of me, you will turn around to face me. I look up from my string cheese. You say “Hey, would you want to hang out sometime this week?”

I can’t keep myself from a desperate look at Caroline, whose eyes are the same wide from prom. I will grab the hem of my jean shorts for some kind of anchor. I will say I don’t think I can.

And you will turn around.

4. You’re flirting from your car

You are always with a group of others. And the others are always boys. Sometimes you are all of them together, a collective, and sometimes you are just you, with the others egging you on. You always seem to strike when I have my window rolled down. I’m sitting at a red light, listening to NPR’s “All Things Considered” or Maroon 5 and checking my phone for texts that aren’t there.

You pull up on my left. This time you are a sandy haired guy in the passenger’s seat with your elbow leaning on the car door. You yell hey. And I glance. Then I look. And then my mouth turns up even though I’m thinking to me, myself, keep your pants on, Idiot, they’re just idiots.

And you love it.

You wave as the light turns green and make me nervous by keeping pace with me down University Boulevard. “Hey Cutie,” you say, “hey where you going?” I just shake my head, like maybe you’ll think I can’t hear you even though my window is down and you are barely four

feet away. You ask me to come with you guys, and I just laugh and toss my head, maybe the wind will catch my hair, and I merge onto the highway.

Then I tell everybody how ridiculous you guys were. With my mouth turned up.

Now you, the one with the hipster sunglasses and the neon green t-shirt, are in the backseat and all I see is a sweeping motion in my periphery. You're making a heart with your hands. I put my hand over my own heart as if it's the sweetest gesture I've ever seen and hope your turn lane light will turn green.

Now you have a mane too long for any boy outside of high school topped with a shabby baseball cap, yet somehow you're in a silver convertible with your sparky-haired friend and a few fishing poles between you. It's also a school day, so maybe you're not still in grade school. I only notice you because you sit in front of me at the red light and intently eye your rearview mirror. I look in my rearview mirror to see what you're looking at.

You must catch me squinting back at you because you twist back in your seat, lean out over your door and wave. To be polite, I wave back. You tap your buddy. He turns around and his cool-guy shades flash in the sun and he waves, too. Now you're both waving. I'm back to my high school theory.

The light turns green. You're both grinning at me now, and I return a bemused smile as I creep forward, inches from your bumper. Your foot is still on the brakes; you want to see what I'll do. What I do is smile bigger and flip my hand at you as if brushing eraser stubble from a paper. You keep me and the line of cars behind me a little longer and then step on the gas. Beside

you, sunglasses-guy reaches up over his head with his hands in the shape of a heart. Is this some growing trend you boys have with car-flirting—that perhaps we’ll follow you if you form hearts at us?

I don’t follow you. But you are a very fun story to tell.

5. You’re too young, too short, too complimentary

I like you a lot. Platonically. As coworkers at the UCF bookstore we banter the menial-labor-minimum-wage-blues away. At work we all are relegated nicknames that luckily don’t last long: you and I are Bronte and Tweedle-Dee. I know I am Bronte, and no one has told you your nickname. You know I hate talking on the phone, so when given the option you opt for the computer next to the telephone from the eighties—corded, with a real hand-hold in between the speaker and the voice piece. We say things to each other like “coolio” and “hey kid,” and “listen to what this idiot customer just said to me.”

But then you ask about my boyfriend, and I am obligated to tell you, though I feel this part of my life, really the only part of my life just for me, is none of your business, even though I like you a lot and probably my relationship status shouldn’t matter.

“Oh, we broke up about a month ago,” I say, smiling. Though I should really say that he dumped me and went to Costa Rica and now he’s back and I kissed him and I’m not sure what to do about it.

It’s just you and me in front of the computers in the back office /warehouse space of the bookstore, and for once the phones aren’t ringing. You ask what happened. And I have to remind

myself that if you were a girl that might be an OK question to ask, and this is platonic, so it's basically the same. Not overstepping at all.

I finger a paperclip sitting on the desk. "He's always been really busy, and he just doesn't have time to commit to the relationship anymore." Except last week on his birthday when I took him out to dinner.

You look me in the eyes and say you're sorry, and I'm uncomfortable because you are too direct but the tone of your voice is too light, too easy, like a quick sigh over a cookie dropped on the floor. Yours is not the girl's 'sorry' full of sympathy that I expected. Yours is a sorry with possibilities. But I've ruled you out long before this moment.

Strike One: You're a baby. Or practically a baby. Or a year younger than me. Which in college years, factoring in the girl over boy numerator, is equal to an infant. Of course we know that the reciprocal works differently—older guy with younger girl is a positive slope, until you hit a difference of more than five years. After that it's wrong again.

I sit in front of the computer screen at the counter of the bookstore café. It's that time of year—call it rush, call it the seventh circle, call it karma for all the times I've complained about a retail employee—where the online department commandeers the seating area of the café to make our box forts and hide from the freshman who neither know how to wait nor use Amazon.com to get their textbooks instead of us. The stools are about three feet off the ground and I twist and stretch my back as far as it will go to reach the empty box on the floor and still remain seated. I can't reach. You say you like my sweater—it's the blue striped one with the partially open back. "Thanks," I say, "We're twins today." Your signature beige sweater with the horizontal stripes sort of adds to your bulk, but I think it's endearing.

Strike Two: Even perched on the other stool, you are shorter than me as I stand. The horizon beyond your wheat-blond top is walls of boxes stacked ten high filled with ten pound books and student employees unstacking them to get to the one at the bottom only to restack them in their original order. None of them smile—the “WOW” customer service we learned in orientation disappears behind the black curtains.

You peck away at your keys as I load up my box. There’s a film history textbook and a large, square paperback titled Film Noir. Being college educated, I use my Spanish skills to decipher the pronunciation of the clearly foreign word “noir.”

As I hold the book up for your inspection, I say, “Film No-er,” in my best vaguely European accent.

You grin at me and your chin folds into itself. No, you say, It’s pronounced No-R. I grin back, because even though I hate being corrected I like you like the kid brother I never got in lieu of the three sisters.

We go out to Subway one day in-between classes and talk about brothers and sisters and churches and food. Somehow we always come back to food. Later you text me to tell me I am beautiful. Strike Three.

SING ME REBECCA

The first time Rebecca had serious dental work done, she refused to be sedated. When the dentist's assistant tried to inject her with novocaine, my sister reared up out of her seat and took out her oral frustrations on the first object she could sink her teeth into—my mom's upper thigh.

“Want to see?” Mom asked. She propped her foot on a kitchen chair and rolled up her pant-leg. The bite mark was the size and color of a plum. My dad offered his arm, dented with the imprints of Rebecca's nails, as further proof of her rampage. They had attempted to restrain her while she got the shot, but she overpowered them both.

Now Rebecca has to go to the hospital and be anesthetized whenever she needs a filling.

She is my parents' firstborn child, and two and a half years older than me. She was my age, twenty, when they took her on that dentist trip. She has straight brown hair, stands about a foot shorter than me, and was born with tuberous sclerosis. I usually just tell people “a severe form of autism.” That's easier to understand.

It covers the mental retardation and seizures. But autism doesn't include the bright red, boil-like bumps that cover her nose and cheeks, or the gray-white patches of skin that dot her legs and arms, or the little bubbly scabs that grow around her fingernails. If there was ever a disease to affect every part of a person, inside and out, it's TSC.

#

“Wheel of Fortune” is Rebecca's favorite show. No one knows why, but my mom supposes it has something to do with the fun sounds and flashing colors. She might identify with the sound the wheel makes as it spins; Rebecca makes a noise universally dubbed “cricketing.”

It's not unlike the sound you hear when a person attaches a playing card to a bicycle, so that every time the wheel turns, the spokes *flip flip flip* the card. It must be the sounds, because I know Rebecca can't have any attachment to Pat Sajak. They recorded VHS tapes for her, with three or four episodes, and played them on an endless loop, then started a new collection when DVDs were introduced. I know the one-minute background histories of each of those contestants, and I could win every single bonus round just by looking at what dress Vanna wears on that particular occasion.

Sometimes I feel like an old peach, the kind that looks like it might still be ok to eat, but when you pick it up the rotten flesh inside is crushed beneath your fingers. Rebecca's life is wasted on these episodes of "Wheel of Fortune," with breaks of food or catnaps taken on any person's bed she deems most comfortable. I in turn rebuke myself as I sit in front of the TV in a stupor because I have the capacity to be productive, to contribute. That's when the feeling surfaces. If someone were to put a little pressure on my exterior—the girl who appears to make up for what her sister is not—I'd cave in because my core is all spoiled opportunity. I watch to avoid everything I could be doing. She watches because there is nothing else for her to do.

Rebecca sits on her couch—*her* couch because it smells from where she's had accidents on it and sports a gaping hole in one of the cushions where she always jams her foot under herself. It's hard to tell if she's actually watching the television, because she swings her head back and forth with that loose, smooth way a bird has, never focusing on anything in particular, or she stares into space while pulling the lever on her See n' Say, never waiting until the cow finishes his moo before she pulls again. Still, she always leaves when I change the channel.

#

Unless I'm alone with her when she has her seizures, I simply hover nearby as moral support, or backup, if things turn ugly as my parents hold her or hush her. She's only in danger if she's in the kitchen, and could fall on the hard tile, or in a public place where she might hit the concrete when she goes down. We all went to JCPenney's a few months ago, and Mom had to take Rebecca to the bathroom. As she was getting out of the wheel chair—Rebecca hates walking—she had a spell and threw up and leaked herself, right in the doorway of the bathroom. People bunched around and asked if they could help, but crowds only agitate her. Mom's naturally pink face seethed red. We didn't buy anything that day.

#

I could not take Rebecca in a fight. I cannot even pull Rebecca off the couch if I want to. She is about sixty pounds heavier than I am, and she knows how to make herself a dead weight, or a wrecking ball. Her anger, as far as I can tell, comes from the inability to express pain or fear. The warning signs of impending wrath: she bites the part of her hand between her wrist and the base of her thumb, with her palm face up (there is a brown, leathery callus there because of this); she lets out a warbling squeal, the kind you hear in westerns from the Indian war party; she gains an unusual focus, and will stare you directly in the eyes.

It's an evening three years ago. Mom and Dad and Rylee, the nine year old sister who came after me, are out. I babysit Rebecca and my littlest sister, Reagan, who is two years old, barely over two feet tall, and skinny, like our dad. Rebecca often roams about the house leisurely, snooping for open pantries or stray socks, something to put in her mouth. This night,

though, she stalks relentlessly, restless, and I hear discontented wails from her now and again, but not enough to concern me. Reagan sleeps on my parents' bed.

I am watching TV in the kitchen when I hear a scream of panic and pain, high and wet, that only a toddler can make. It lances through my chest as I spin around. Rebecca kneels in the hallway with her back to me, one hand gripped by her teeth and the other on her victim. I don't know if I run or fly or teleport, but in a moment I'm behind her, and I grab her by the shoulders and thrust her onto her back to uncover tiny Reagan screeching and red with a tiny patch of blood on her head where the skin had peeled away with her hair.

In that strange acuteness that comes with being the person in charge in bad situations, I see Rebecca, still thrashing on the floor, clutching a lock of Reagan's thin-baby hair in her fist, and know what happened. Reagan must have woken up, started to walk to the kitchen for me, and been ambushed by Rebecca, who saw an easy target for her aggression. I scoop Reagan up and retreat to my parents' room, clean her head and let her cry into my chest while my tears bounce off the little bald spot she would have for another year to come. I'm the one who gets in trouble that night, as Mom and Dad are appalled at my neglect and poor judgment. This doesn't happen to other babysitters.

The scientific information will only tell you that "children with severe retardation or uncontrollable seizures usually do poorly." It doesn't mean anything. Bums and drug addicts and high school dropouts do poorly. But they know what life is, what *living* is. My sisters shrink back from Rebecca when she gets mad; they see her coming and turn the other direction. She has dug her nails so hard with that alligator-jaw grip that she breaks the skin, my skin, Dad's, Mom's,

Grandma's, Grandpa's, her teachers'. Who could blame her? I have no concept of the level of frustration she must endure, in not only the inability to communicate what's wrong, but that the problem is incomprehensible to her. I trip and fall, I see the thing that trips me, know why my knees and hands are bruised and stinging, know that the people who help me up are there to comfort me. Rebecca trips and falls, there is terrible and confusing surprise at the burst of gravity, pain that forms of its own accord, and nothing to expend this sudden anger on except the people around. What is life then, but the dull and inert interim between one bout of pain to the next?

#

Sometimes Rebecca laughs. Or makes a noise that sounds like laughing. In these cases, we all laugh with her, or at her, because her laughter is rare and sporadic. It comes when people are in conversation. We were all riding in the van, probably to go shopping or to church, which are the only things we all do together at the same time, and we teased each other.

Dad never looks at a person when he talks, unless he's serious or mad. He stared out the window of the passenger's seat. "Rachel's all dressed up. She's fancy today, huh?"

"I'm wearing a skirt, Dad. People can wear skirts in casual society."

"Yeah!" Reagan giggled, eager to take any side but Dad's, who sometimes mistook her toes for jellybeans. "And don't get my toes, either!"

"Looks to me like you're going on a hot date!" He reached for Reagan's toes.

"Remember when we used to have those, dear?" My parents always call each other 'dear.'

"No," Mom said. "I don't."

“Aw, come on, don’t you remember when I took you to that one restaurant, what was it called...Checkers! That’s the one. We split a milkshake.” He tousled her hair.

“Rob, you are so weird.”

And Rebecca let out her cackle, wheezy and incessant. Everyone cracked up, because she had no idea what we were saying, yet her timing was perfect.

“She agrees with me!” Mom declared, and we laughed some more.

#

I was raised to believe God has a plan for everyone. That everyone has a reason to be on this earth. Sometimes when my mom wants to run into a store for a quick errand, I stay in the car with Rebecca, just the two of us. Sometimes I take her hand, which is small and plump, and clap it against my own. She likes to push back against my palm.

I ask God why He made my sister a walking vegetable. What could be His plan for this person with the brain of a one year old, who wets herself and must be spoon-fed, whose wart-filled face is the envy of no woman, who attracts the stares of adults and children alike? She will never know the pleasure of a new discovery, a good joke, a hug from someone who loves her. She knows only boredom, frustration, and pain. But when I ask Him, He is silent. Just allow her to comprehend. Just allow her to speak. Just let her restart this life as someone else. When I beg for a miracle, a healing, a cure, nothing appears.

#

One does not leave food out in the open in the Chapman household. We have a wraith that haunts the rooms, a specter that is called to the other half of your sandwich or freshly baked cookies by some unseen magnetic force of the universe. She is Rebecca, and she can make

herself invisible to the point of stealing food laid right next to you. Not only does she steal it, she deftly carries her quarry throughout the house and destroys it little by little, leaving a fine trail of crumbs or sauce behind her.

More than once I have caught Rebecca when she looks like she's chewing gum, when in reality she found a Hershey kiss, or some other hapless tin-foil covered treat, and stuffed it in her mouth, wrapping and all, until the candy dissolves and she doesn't feel like spitting out the leftovers. Before Halloween one year, we had a box of half a dozen cupcakes with jet black frosting on them. While my mom was in the garage doing laundry, Rebecca pilfered the entire box and brought the cupcakes to her room. She was later found sprawled out on her bed atop smooshed cupcakes, her face and hands as black as if she wore gloves and had a beard. The picture we have from that day shows her with a look of utter contempt on her face. Too easy.

This is why we don't take Rebecca to restaurants—she expects food on demand, and refuses to sit and wait quietly while it's being prepared. If it takes too long, she simply stands up and starts to wander, or wails and draws attention to the fact that she is hungry and bored.

We used to go to dinner in the church gymnasium when Rebecca and I were a third the size we are now. Back when she was taller than me. My parents always took forever talking to people, and Rebecca had much more energy then, and they let her wander, with me following behind in case she got herself in trouble. The thing became a great source of entertainment for me, and I would count how many rolls she grabbed. Her method was to meander in no set pattern amongst the long rows of tables, always along the ends where nobody sat, and let her hand hang out over the plates, like playing a claw machine game, and swipe whatever happened to be nearest the edge. She'd take an enormous bite, and if it didn't suit her fancy, she dropped it on

the floor, or put it on the next plate she passed, and moved on. Most people did not notice until they reached for their hot dog to find it gone, and many who did see knew Rebecca, and let her do as she pleased if she wasn't making too much of a mess. I coveted her freedom.

Growing up, I was often jealous of her. She never had homework, she never had to do the dishes, or clean her room, or help with yard work. She got to watch TV all day long. If I left my cookie out and she crushed it all over the carpet, I was the one who got yelled at.

#

I am nine, before Reagan is born and when my other sister Rylee is about to turn three, and I approach my parents, climb in between them on their bed.

“I do not get enough attention.”

Mantra of the middle child.

A smile curls on Mom's face, and employing the word “babe,” she justifies giving time to Rylee because she's still a baby and she needs lots of supervision. She smooths my hair, her fingernails weaving their way along my scalp. Their waiting hand and foot on Rebecca, Dad says, is because she can't do anything for herself, and never will. He tries to snatch my toes, but I hide them under my mother's legs until she says get your freezing feet off me. They let me lie with them a while, until I am assured I do indeed get attention, then put me to bed.

That night I prayed and prayed and prayed for God to make Rebecca better, so she could be like me and stop sucking up so much attention. If Jesus healed lepers, I was sure He could heal her. If I could just believe hard enough. All the lepers and blind men had to do was believe He could do miracles to prove themselves worthy of His help. I still haven't believed hard enough, yet.

#

My father is a pessimist, lightened with a sense of cynical humor, and not only does he find some distorted satisfaction in reminding us he will die soon, he reminds me of what will happen after he dies. Except there is no humor when it comes to Rebecca.

“Learn her medicines,” he tells me, so I can give them to her when he and my mother are gone.

“You’ll have to start taking her to the bathroom yourself, eventually.”

“She’s getting social security checks now, but you won’t be able to depend on that for long.”

“Then again, she may not even outlive me.”

Tuberous sclerosis causes tumors on the brain, kidneys, and heart. Most of them are benign. They can become cancerous. Females are generally more at risk than males.

Maybe, in the future, I’ll be packaged with Rebecca. Maybe I’ll have to warn my future husband, if he takes me, he gets Rebecca too. I know what will happen. He’ll come into my parents’ house on the first meeting. Everybody will shake hands, smiles for good impressions. Rebecca will mosey in, and he turns to her, but I’ve warned him, so he’ll just say hello as she pushes past him and shoves her empty sippy cup in my mother’s face. Then we will not speak of her again. Until it gets serious, and he wants to give me a ring, and I’ll have to give him the stipulation. Maybe Rebecca.

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Rebecca's eyes are beautiful. They are amber, with thick, round lashes and perfectly shaped eyebrows. They always cut to one corner or the other like she knows something I will never know. Her feet are small, but wide and flat, from constantly walking on her tiptoes for twenty-three years. She walks like she's trying to stretch beyond herself, to step out of her skin. When I sing to her, she leans her head in so her ear almost touches my mouth, and then she swings away, then comes back again to listen. She, a grown woman, sits on my grandmother's lap until Grandma sings her favorite song, and she kneels down and puts her hands on my mother's belly until Mom sings it. Her question mark, her request, sounds like, "Aeh?"

And so it goes:

"Aeh?"

"Sing me, sing me, sing me Rebecca's name."

"Aeh?"

"Rebecca, Rebecca, that is Rebecca's name."

That's the whole song.

Rebecca usually outlasts whoever is singing, until all you hear is Aeh? More? Aeh? Is there more?

Aeh?

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