

# LATCHKEY: A Memoir in Essays

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LATCHKEY: A MEMOIR IN ESSAYS

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  
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Thesis Chair: Laurie Uttich, MFA

## ABSTRACT

“Latchkey: A Memoir in Essays” is an essay collection that follows the narrator through her childhood as it relates to being raised a latchkey kid in the 1980s. The lack of published academic studies that follow children through their experience as latchkey kids and into adulthood leaves personal exploration as the primary means through which a child, specifically a young girl, can seek understanding as to how her view of the world develops. Each of the five essays explores issues of autonomy, self-efficacy, sexuality, addiction, and familial bonds. It is through her reflection of specific events – the loss of a father to his addictions, caring for a mother in the early stages of dementia, recognizing the trauma of sexual abuse – that she gains a precarious understanding of how she perceives herself, the concept of unconditional love, and the world around her.

## DEDICATION

For those who grew up without guidance.  
For those who were taught they were less-than.  
For the girls who believed their bodies were not their own,  
who now struggle to define their self-worth.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1981, at the age of nine, I was tasked with the after-school and evening care of my five-year-old brother, John. As with an increasing number of children, we were considered “latchkey kids,” children who University of Texas Psychologists Deborah Lowe Vandell and Mary Anne Corasaniti define as “children who return home from school to a house without adult supervision” (870). Even with both our parents working, they could not afford daily afterschool care for us. The responsibility fell to me, and me alone.

The majority of my fourth-grade peers were greeted at the bus stop or their front door by an adult. I had to shove my brother through the defunct milk delivery box, and into the front closet to unlock the door. My mother was certain I would lose the key, potentially allowing anyone who found the key access to our home.

Other parents knew not to let our friends accompany us home because we were unsupervised. John and I had access to and watched age-inappropriate film: *History of the World, Part I, Rambo, The Godfather*. We rode mattresses down the stairs into the basement; we gorged ourselves on chips and cookies; we climbed the flagstone wall around the fireplace in the living room.

There are existing academic studies that utilized surveys provided to parents and adolescent children, but without a long-term study of individuals and the contexts of their upbringing, a definitive set of behaviors cannot be correlated to the lack of supervision at those ages. Therefore, in order to explore the connections between my upbringing and my identity today, in addition to several academic studies I turned to the memoirs of women approximately

my age who have experienced this same lack of supervision, as well as events that correspond to the events of my life.

While I experienced a taste of freedom and learned to be self-reliant at an early age, I also missed out on the guidance of my parents, particularly my mother. My thesis will focus on those lessons learned outside of the home and shaped by my own thoughts and unsupervised experiences. By writing a selection of essays designed to provide one vision of possible outcomes of being raised as a latchkey kid, I will provide one concrete example of what may be considered a shared experience by children, girls in particular, from a similar background.

“I try to make sense of how I went from the child in these perfect photographed moments to who I am today. I know, precisely, and yet I do not know. I know, but I think what I really want is to understand the why of the distance between then and now. The why is complicated and slippery. I want to be able to hold the why in my hands, to dissect it or tear it apart or burn it and read the ashes even though I am afraid of what I will do with what I see there.” –Roxane Gay, *Hunger*

I have spent a large percentage of my emotional time and energy trying to distance myself from my own history. Was I trying to escape it or defy it? As I search for meaning in the events of my life, I wonder if those experiences were predestined or if it was a reactionary response – carefully crafted coping mechanisms based on my childhood that stuck through the years. I wanted answers: concrete, scientific, evidence-based outcomes for children with similar upbringings. I found only potential outcomes of children raised as latchkey, “[N]egative effects may be cumulative, with differences not being apparent until the children are older” (Vandell and Corasaniti 874). I turned to the essays and memoirs of authors I hoped could provide some insight into what the events of childhood meant to my adult perspectives toward several key



topics.

## Sexuality

“Girls were not more sexually active than boys, they were just more likely to participate in sexual activity in their own homes. Sexual activity increased proportionally with the amount of time [latchkey] adolescents spent in self-care” (Long and Long 180).

Professor of Education, Thomas J. Long, and Psychologist Lynette Long, who first coined the phrase “latchkey kid,” go on to reveal that data collected from young, parochial school adolescents reveals that

“Engaging in sex at home is a logical and simultaneous response to the latchkey girl’s need for intimacy, her fear of being alone, and the limits that keep her from a wide range of [...] social alternatives allowed latchkey boys” (180).

But this is only a partial explanation for an early attitude toward sex that defines sexuality. Time alone also meant that boys with more nefarious intentions were given easy access to a young girl ill-prepared for her first encounters with sexual behavior. As a parochial school student, I was taught that sex was dirty unless you were married. In her essay “The Ways We Are Taught to Be Girls,” essayist xTx highlights the guilt associated with a girl’s sexuality: “We fear repercussions, albeit lighter than the ones we will administer to ourselves; slut, bad, ugly, weak, whore, trash, shame, hate” (118). It is this fear, this guilt instilled in us at an early age that prevents us from coming forward after a sexual assault. It is this fear that builds an association between sexual behavior and deviance.

In her essay collection *No More Nice Girls*, Ellen Willis articulates this association through which women identify themselves by what she calls their “despised body,” the body

women have been raised to believe is simply a tool through which men seek pleasure, and women themselves are powerless to control. It is this belief in the *badness* of one's body, and the shared belief instilled by a patriarchal society that a woman's body is his to do with as he pleases, that "result(s), for both sexes, [in] an erotic fantasy life that is essentially sadomasochistic" (Willis 14). In my experience, this could not be a higher truth. Therefore, my first question is:

How did my views on sexuality develop?

### Socialization

"[Latchkey] children are those least likely to be involved with peers, most likely to spend hours in front of the television, and most likely to feel some degree of anxiety and boredom while unattended" (Long and Long 176).

For me, socialization and education were unavoidably intertwined with religion. Baptized and raised in the Catholic Church; I attended a private, Catholic school for eight years. During that time, I participated as expected in church services, sacramental ceremonies, and religion class. My only circle of friends was the girls at school. But I never felt as if I was on equal footing with any of them. I was never the May Queen; always middle-of-the-pack when choosing project partners, Kathy Valentine when playing Go-Gos at lunchtime. There was a desperation in craving acceptance, similar to the experience of Sarah Hepola as she writes in her memoir *Blackout*, she was hyper-aware that craving's consequences: "I had to be careful not to look too deliberate. That was the worst sin of all: trying too hard" (67).

It was easier to remain in place in the social order, to retreat to television and movies: inappropriate media for a lonely girl tasked too early with caring for a young boy. Friendships

suffered, social skills atrophied, faith faded.

Other than Long and Long's polling of parochial school adolescents, there is little discussion of faith or regular religious practice among the children studied. The absence of faith in my adult life suggests that it is possible I never had any to begin with. I had no faith in girls who called themselves my friends, I had no faith in those educating me, and no faith in the god I was supposed to be following.

In whom or what do I have faith?

### Family Dynamics

“Divorce is a major stressor in children's lives... whether latchkey arrangements affect children from divorced households more negatively than children from martially intact families” (Vandell and Corasaniti 869).

My family – those people in my life who, for better or worse, share portions of my bloodline – became less and less relevant to me through the years. Was it the lack of parenting I had growing up? Was it because of my first experience with sexual assault at a young age by a member of my extended family? Psychotherapist Brian E. Robinson, et al, noted that because the research relevant to the lives of latchkey kids was performed overwhelmingly through parental affidavits, there is little information that has come from the source, the child themselves (Robinson et al 6).

At the age of 20, I left Chicago and moved to Los Angeles to live with my then boyfriend, eleven years my senior. At the time I never considered the possibility that I simply ran away from my life, but in essence, I did. Roxane Gay, in her memoir *Hunger*, describes her

escape from school, how she ran away from Yale and disconnected from her family. “I disappeared. I told no one where I was going, not my roommate, who was increasingly and justifiably fed up with my erratic behavior, or my acquaintances, or even my parents” (Hunger 26).

Much like Dr. Gay, I was an intelligent girl who knew her life was worth more than the value that had been placed on it by family and society, but rather than address my problems, I simply left. In the memoir *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette Walls takes a different approach. She told her family exactly why she was leaving them to move to New York. Their dysfunction would prevent her from becoming a journalist. Her parents and her family’s reputation in the community would never allow her to succeed, even though that was never her family’s intention. “I was going to get out of Welch. The sooner, the better [...] I had no idea where I would go, but I did know I was going [...] People get stuck in Welch” (221). While Walls’s mother is envious of her daughter’s ability to leave, and Gay’s parents searched for her, my parents, especially my father, did not care. I know the easy answer to my next question, I wanted out of Chicago Heights. But my disconnection from family is ongoing, and the more difficult answer still needs to be discovered:

Why do I maintain emotional and physical distance from my family?

### Alcoholism/addiction

“Numerous environmental factors such as alcoholism, divorce, and child abuse and neglect impose physical and psychological risk to children” (Robinson et al 4).

I was a smoker. I will always be a smoker. I relapse every now-and-then and spend twice

the time trying to wean myself off the nicotine lozenges I use to kick the habit for the umpteenth time. This is my addiction. Well, that and French fries. I found a kindred spirit in Roxane Gay when she described in detail her progression of cigarette brands. We could have been tobacco twins:

“I started with Virginia Slims, or Vagina Slimes as we called them, then moved on to Marlboro Reds, then Marlboro Lights, before finally settling on Camel Lights, hard pack, my cigarette of choice” (*Hunger* 77).

And I know where this addictive behavior comes from – my father. He was a smoker, an alcoholic, and a chronic adulterer. He cheated on my mother and my first step-mother. He gambled without fear of consequence. He smoked until the month before he died. He was an ethically questionable used car salesman.

None of my friends had a father like mine, and his chronic flaws will remain a part of who I am for the rest of my life. His drunken antics ended up as “Police Beat” stories in the local newspaper. My mother vacillates between missing him and hating what he did to her life. She is torn, as I am, about how to incorporate my father into her story without his personality becoming the main character. He was the primary reason my family was so dysfunctional.

In Mary Karr’s *The Liar’s Club*, the decline of her own self-esteem was easily traced to her family life. There was always turmoil surrounded by whiskey, mental illness, and the judgment of her family. She, in the same manner as I did, internalized the upheaval of her family life: “The fact that my house was Not Right metastasized into the notion that I myself was somehow Not Right, or that my survival in the world depended on my constant vigilance against various forms of Not-Rightness” (10).

Somehow, I think my father could read my embarrassment. I think he tried to redirect his sense of responsibility for my family's notoriety in my home town and at my school. He would offer me cigarettes, drinks, and money. He would discuss 'adult' topics with me, like how work was going or how this-one's-wife-cheated-with-that-one's-husband. He would bring home grainy, bootleg VHS tapes of *Star Wars* and *E.T.* and *The Godfather* cut in chronological order. These were meant to manipulate my feelings; meant to win me over while stiffing my mother on child support. Willis writes, "Adults can too easily manipulate children's needs for affection, protection, and approval; children are too inexperienced to understand all the implications of what they're agreeing to (or even, in some cases, initiating)" (Willis 13). I finally understood that my father's forty-year addiction, his inability to control the chemical processes that made him crave immediate relief and adoration, shaped an enormous part of my personality and behavior. I lack empathy where my father is concerned and am turned-off by anyone who exhibits behaviors similar to his. If this is true,

Can I excise the parts of myself that are most like my father?

### Self-efficacy

"Compared to their classmates, latchkey children may be less well accepted by other children. These social and academic experiences, may, in turn, lead latchkey children to be more critical of themselves" (Vandell and Corasaniti 869).

A lack of parenting, of adult guidance throughout childhood and adolescence, left me to decipher the meanings of an enormous amount of esoteric emotions and confusing events in life that I now know were beyond my understanding. Events I took responsibility for were not mine

to own. I needed a guide to human behavior that would cut through the fears and desires and wacky hormones of growing up. In Samantha Irby's *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life*, Irby makes two observations about herself that resonate with my experience. Of her social awkwardness and fondness for crafting dinners from her mother's cupboard, she says "I wasn't parented past the age of thirteen, and it shows" (221). As Irby continues to reflect on her experiences as a young adult, again we share a common thought process: "My mind is a never-ending series of shame spirals" (271). I do feel shame on a daily basis. I have a terrible relationship with food – the quicker to prepare, the easier it is to put together, the more likely I will eat it before a healthful meal. These and other shortcomings in my development from a young child into someone who should be intelligent enough to make accurate evaluations in her life led me to believe I would always be less than what was expected of me. Regardless of any academic or social achievement I attained, I would never be *worthy*.

I've never chased perfection; I've never been driven to succeed because I always assumed the quest would be futile. Why work toward a goal you can never attain – and will likely be ridiculed for doing. I don't wear makeup. I don't hide my grays every six weeks. I dress to be absorbed into the background. I feel as though I should apologize to my husband for this lack of femininity the same way I apologize for the day's humidity or his aching knee. None of these things require absolution, so

Why do I apologize for things I shouldn't?

"It's not what you get for being a girl. It's what you get for not having vigilant parents." – xTx, "The Ways We Are Taught to Be a Girl"

Through my research, I found enough information to support my hypothesis that being raised as a latchkey kid did shape the adult I became. Therefore, for my thesis I will create a series of essays, vignettes peering into specific moments of my life that skewed my perception of myself and those around me as I experienced childhood and adolescence. While it is impossible to separate parts of the self from the overarching experience, each piece will have a primary focus. Through the examination of each experience, I will gain insight into how my attitudes toward sexuality, socialization, family dynamics, addiction, and self-efficacy have been influenced through my unavoidable, early independence.



## LATCHKEY

I sat in a forest of gummy seats in a row somewhere mid-bus, stuck in the middle with the rest of my fourth-grade classmates. Not up-front within the driver's sonar range, but somewhat protected from the older kids' spitballs and gleeks by the crusty high-back seats. It was late August, the first day of school, and the bus was an oven of cranky, stir-crazy students in disbelief that summer had the nerve to end. No kid wanted to be in that steel tube, suffocating on lunchroom pizza breath as it coalesced with the youthful lack of understanding of how critical proper deodorant application is in hot, confined spaces.

I stood with one foot on the floor, the opposite knee melting into the seat, fidgeting with the plush Garfield tied to my backpack and pulling a gym-short wedgie out from under my red plaid skirt. With my forehead pressed against the window, I scanned the lines of kids for my brother, John, to be brought from his kindergarten mobile-unit classroom, through the main school building and on to the bus.

Every sweaty seat on the bus was taken when the driver gripped the handle to close the door. Still no little brother. I was terrified; it was the first time I noticed my underarms smelled like onions, sweat saturating the cotton training bra and its tiny pink bow between two flat triangles I wore under an increasingly transparent uniform blouse. I was afraid he would be left behind, and I would have failed miserably on my first day babysitting him.

John and I were latchkey kids: children whose parents had to work and could not afford or did not want to provide supervised after-school care. Mom worked two jobs, bookkeeper by day and cleaning lady by night, and Dad was a used car salesman, but they never seemed to have

enough money for child care. My ability to care for John and myself meant we were free to do as we pleased, but the anxiety of being responsible for him was almost paralyzing. I thought I was cool, telling Mom and Dad I could handle the responsibility. It was better than being stuck at home with one of the high school girls from the neighborhood who only wanted to hang out with boys in our front yard or make us watch stupid after school specials or game shows. The only bonus to having a babysitter was someone who wasn't me retrieved the frozen pizza out of the oven for dinner. Wall ovens were uncommon as far as I knew, and ours were so high I needed a step stool to reach the controls. But there was no one our parents trusted to watch us every day, no one they wanted to pay that much money. And no one in my extended family wanted to care for us after my grandma died.

My mother's mother, my Grandma Bartolomei, taught me how to swear when I was eight. She was a hearty, loving woman who endured a divorce from my Papa Dino and raised her three children by working as a hostess, bookkeeper, cook, and cleaning lady at Savoia's, the restaurant most likely to be frequented by wannabe suburban mobsters in Chicago Heights. At home, she cooked and cleaned and entertained John and me whenever she could.

Any time our parents argued about my father's drinking and carousing, or my mother's frigidity and unwavering need to maintain the family's appearance of affluence, we were sent to Grandma's house to help make dinner. Mom would drop us off in the driveway, pulling away before we reached the front door. If the door was left open with the flimsy screen between her home and the outside, we would be greeted by the smell of Pine-Sol and spaghetti sauce; La Traviata would spin on the record player, hissing and popping from excessive play. We would

run through the house, into the kitchen, and into her massive arms to be crushed by her pillowy bosom. Up close, she smelled like garlic and ivory soap shrouded by a black-and-white Mumu and an apron cinched around her enormous waist. When she finally released us, when we could again breathe, we were sent into the living room to wait for her to finish mopping the kitchen floor.

She never kept toys in her house, so John and I had to make up games: who could make the loudest screech with their bare legs against the plastic-covered sofa; who found the most money in coat pockets in the closet; who could hide best behind the heavy gold polyester curtains. John was smaller and had a better chance of my not finding him in three tries, but I always won. Whenever he pulled the curtain away from the window, dust would float in the sunlight like faeries, dancing with my fingers as I swirled my hands through the beams of light before exposing him in a flourish of stiff fabric.

The floor dry, Grandma would call us into the kitchen to teach us how to make scratch pasta. She'd pour two equally sized volcanoes of flour onto a huge cutting board. She would help us crack eggs, one each, and plop them into the wells of our mountains. We took tiny pinches of salt and black pepper, rubbed them between our fingers and onto the egg as she armed us with forks.

Sometimes, she pushed two chairs in front of the electric stove and stood us up. She'd take one last pinch of pepper and sprinkled it over the hot coils of the range top, setting off tiny sparks that glowed like fireflies. We were admonished never to do this ourselves, and to never, never, ever tell our mother about her magic trick. We never did tell, and I still sprinkle black pepper any time I cook on an electric coil stove. I still haven't told Mom that she used to let us

ride an old mattress down her living room stairs, either.

Scrambling the eggs with a fork was hard to do without collapsing the flour, but eventually, we discovered coordination. We'd scramble, scraping a little flour from the well-wall until the dough formed, and we could knead it with our hands.

"When do we stop?" John asked.

"When it's smooth as a baby's ass," she'd say.

"Grandma," I said, "you said a bad word!"

"I said ass. You can say ass. That's not a bad word. *Fanculo* is a bad word."

We were speechless.

"Go on, say ass." She towered over us, dusty hands on her hips, waiting.

"Ass-th?" John struggled with his lisp.

"Ass!" we shouted together.

John and I exploded. We rolled around on the floor, covering ourselves in the flour dust that fell while we worked, giving rise to more faeries in the sunlight.

We finished working the raw dough and set it under the sink to rise. After an hour the dough was cut into four pieces, and we rolled it out with a two-foot-long, four-inch-thick dowel made into a rolling pin, which I still have. Rich, my husband, cringes every time I make fresh pasta because he thinks I'll give him a good whack on the head with it. Each time I use the rolling pin, Grandma is with me. I'll never roll pasta with anything else.

Grandma died a few months after ass-day. Mom came into my bedroom in the middle of the night, two days before Grandma's birthday party, to tell me she went to heaven. The morning after her funeral I went to each of Grandma's friends and hugged them. I told them how much

she loved me — to let them know how much she loved me most of all.

The bus driver started to pull away, and still no John. I ran to her side, sobbing and screaming for her to stop, begging her to wait a few more minutes. I promised I would quickly go into the school and find my brother and put him in the seat with me if she would just let me out. She was a new driver, and while she told me she had to leave immediately, the doors opened. As I stepped onto the sidewalk, John appeared at the school entrance. Back on the bus, I was teased the entire ride home by several middle-grade kids, not only for crying so obviously, but for sitting next to my kindergartener brother and squeezing his hand until I was sure every ounce of his blood was trapped in his fingers.

I hadn't been an easy crier until I was in first grade. For no reason obvious to my teacher or the school nurse, I frequently got stomach aches and needed to be sent home. Sister Mary Rita, the school principal, called my mother and me to a meeting in her office to discuss my disruptions. As Mom and I walked into Sister's office, I was doubled over in pain, whisper-crying a prayer that she wouldn't make me kneel on a triangle ruler or whack my knuckles with a pointer. I heard horror stories from two of my cousins about what a Catholic school nun would do to kids in trouble. After telling my mother about how my interruptions were interfering with the other students' education, Sister suggested that maybe she should take me to the doctor to see what, if anything, was wrong. I escaped the wrath of the nun, but Mom was so embarrassed, so angry with me, she latched her hand under my shoulder and walked so fast that my feet barely touched the ground on the way to the car.

The doctor ordered stomach x-rays, and I had to drink an enormous jug of chalky-white

paste. The first jug I threw up all over my mother's lap. The second, under threat of a wooden spoon across my backside, I kept it down and after all the tests, the diagnosis was 'nerves.' Mom didn't know what to do about my new condition, so she did nothing. I never complained about my stomach aches again. I still had them, but I stopped complaining and went back to school.

Infant Jesus of Prague — a Catholic grade-school in Flossmoor, IL — catered to a more well-to-do set than the families that lived with us on Marian Way in Chicago Heights. My house was in a quiet neighborhood with beautiful elm trees and old Italian women line-drying their pink sheets and thin brassieres in the front yard. My next-door neighbors grew their own vegetables and grapes in the space between our front yards and made their own wine each year. Kids from Flossmoor were more accustomed to seeing lovely wrought iron fences lined with flowers and neatly manicured hedges that kept their neighbors away from their porch swings and BMWs.

Our house had been built by the old Italian man my parents purchased it from. It was quirky: all the kitchen and bathroom countertops were two inches shorter than standard because his wife, like my mother and all the women on Mom's side of the family, was a short Italian lady. There were odd open spaces like window frames with no glass from the kitchen into the family room, a record player wired into an intercom system, and those weird wall ovens.

There was also a milk delivery box at the side entrance to the house that opened from the outside, and again inside the coat closet in the hallway. It was painted burgundy and rusting around the edges, which made both doors stick. The tiny latch at the bottom of the outer door did little more than keep it from flapping around in a storm. This was where Mom left us the house key: taped just inside the interior door of the milk box, so that I had to force it open into the

closet, reach with my shoulder wedged into the box, move the coats to the side, and retrieve the key. I knocked the key off the wall and onto the floor. I said a tearful rosary in bed that night because I said shit out loud for the first time.

With the key lost somewhere on the floor of the closet, John and I were stuck outside. Mom was expecting a call from me as soon as we got in the house, but even though she would be worried for our safety and come home to help us, I feared the consequences of doing something as stupid as dropping the key. So, I improvised.

John was a skinny five-year-old, a bean-pole after having pyloric stenosis surgery as an infant. He could eat a house and never gain an ounce. He turned thirty and that charm wore off, but back then he was a twig. I took off his backpack, grabbed his knees, and shoved him through the two-foot by two-foot milk box and into the closet. I didn't think far enough ahead to load him in feet first, so when he landed on his head, I was grateful that he fell into a pile of felled coats and furry winter boots. He handed me the key through the milk box and walked into the kitchen for a bag of Doritos. I let myself in.

School-day afternoons were inconsequential except for the occasional entry via the milk box. We weren't allowed to play outside when no one else was home, so we immersed ourselves in cartoons and action figures – I wasn't a big fan of Barbie. For my birthday one year, Mom took me to Sears to pick one out. I wanted Superstar Christie instead of Barbie — her dress and boa were yellow (I hated pink), and her hair was brown like mine, but Mom called her “that black Barbie” and I went home with a white Barbie in her blindingly pink gown and her impossibly blonde hair. She sat in my closet for years: hair chopped into a mohawk and painted in a rainbow of Crayola marker colors, dressed in my Luke Skywalker doll's wrap-shirt, driving

one of my brother's toy dump trucks. I preferred GI Joe and Star Wars action figures. And Legos.

John had an enormous set of Legos. This was before the pieces came pre-shaped: you had to build everything out of the individual blocks — no formed neon wings for spaceships, no molded trees or animals. Just blocks. The set, when built according to the instructions, was a yellow castle with several knights on horses and a princess. I wanted to be a knight, not a princess, so we built a jail for the princess figure to rot in while we knights sought great adventures. John and I would tease and threaten her with Lego-swords and if she should happen to escape, the crafty girl, she was hanged from the top of the castle's bridge, swinging over the moat by a kitchen-twine noose. Our evenings were filled with homework, frozen dinners, and forbidden movies on the new VCR. I became a master chef of all things microwavable. Left-over spaghetti, Chicken Kiev, French bread pizzas on the mirrored cardboard box that was supposed to make the bread crispy — I could press those buttons with total confidence. Thankfully after the first year, Mom left cash on the kitchen counter so I could have pizza delivered. I'm reasonably sure that my brother spent most of his childhood without eating anything green.

Our movie selection was pretty good for a couple of kids in the 80s. My father prided himself on getting bootlegs of *The Godfather* (recut in chronological order), *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. He liked to call them his "black market films" because he thought it made him sound crafty, well-connected with some mysterious underground society of new technology nerds. The VHS copies were so poor, that flesh would glow a snowy fuchsia on the screen, and anything that moved was surrounded by an eerie static-aura. One of our parents' favorite movies was Mel Brooks's *History of the World, Part I*, and it quickly became our



favorite, too. We would sing about the Spanish Inquisition and Madeline Kahn's selection of orgy-goers in a melody of "yes" and "no" on the bus to and from school. We taught those songs to our friends, so much so that my friend Jenny asked her parents to rent the movie for her one weekend. But that backfired. Mom kept Mel Brooks and the rest of my favorite filmmakers in a locked cabinet after Jenny's father called. He chastised my mother about how vulgar I was how I had corrupted his innocent daughter. I also spoiled Santa Claus for Jenny in first grade, the same year that my anxiety stomach aches began.

When I was five, I told my mother that if Santa could get into our house, so could a burglar. She tried to reason with me, to explain that Santa used magic to get into the house, but I never bought the explanation — it seemed ridiculous that a fat guy could squeeze down the chimney and not a skinny, starving criminal who wanted to raid our refrigerator and snatch our VCR. By the time Christmas Eve came, I was inconsolable. Mom fessed up; she told me that she and my father pretended to be Santa. They ate the cookies; they drank the milk. Santa simply did not exist. After school one day, when we were singing Christmas carols on the bus ride home, I remembered the Santa scam and decided Jenny needed to know we were being lied to.

Her father never liked me after that. He said I ruined Christmas and called me a "spaghetti bender" to my face. I didn't know what he meant at the time; I figured it was a compliment because I could cook a decent pot of pasta at eight years old. But Jenny and I somehow remained friends, and we navigated our way through thirteen years of school together: sometimes inseparable, sometimes millions of miles apart, but always together.

When a stranger walked into our house one night, Jenny was the first person I called. I called her during a tornado the year we were in kindergarten, too; she was the only person I trusted enough to tell how afraid I was. That, and hers was the only phone number easy enough to know by heart. John was asleep in his bed, I had no clue where my father was, and Mom was late coming home from cleaning offices. I was watching a particularly spooky *Doctor Who* on the couch when I heard the side door to the house open — the same door we went through every day after school. I ran from the couch and hid behind the stone wall that separated me from the quick path through the kitchen an intruder could make from the fridge to the VCR. I peeked around the corner and saw nothing but the dark outline of a man. In my memory, he was shaped oddly like my childhood swim coach, Ray. I found out years later after Mom and Dad divorced, Ray was her decade-long booty call. I grabbed a telephone off the wall and called Jenny, but she was asleep.

“It’s eleven o’clock at night. Where’s your mother?” her father said.

I hung up without thinking to tell him what was happening.

The wall I hid behind had storage built into the stone. Each cabinet I opened was full of cookware. I had nowhere to hide. I opened a drawer of silverware and pulled out a steak knife. Startled by the door closing behind whomever it was — they must have heard my voice or the rattle of forks and spoons banging around in the drawer as I was not a stealthy child — I dropped the steak knife into my thigh. No more than the tip of it pierced my skin, but the serrated edge ripped down my leg as it fell to the floor. I never told my parents about that night, and neither of them ever noticed the scar that grew with me over the years.

Whether it was because I couldn’t fully grasp when we were in danger, or that there was

truly nothing else to fear, the intruder during my first year of being a latchkey kid was the only time I can remember being afraid for our safety. Power outages, neighbors arguing outside, and much later, the month the FBI watched our house — none of it frightened me. I was good at keeping my brother and myself alive without an adult around.

Yet I missed years of counsel and interaction that would have prepared me for the life in front of me. There was no one to coach me out of the social awkwardness that would help me learn when it was too late in the day to phone a friend, or why the existence of Santa Clause is important to a child. No one to explain why a nine-year-old and five-year-old shouldn't watch movies about orgies no matter how catchy the songs are. Not one person to wrap their arms around me and keep me safe while a shadowed man crept through the front door. I missed the feeling of being loved, the sense that someone else in the world wanted to protect me because I meant something to them. That comfort, that sense of unconditional love has been missing from my life since the moment Grandma Bartolomei and her magical pepper trick disappeared.

I suppose this is why I preferred solitude in my twenties and thirties, before I married. Why I would rather live alone and keep only a close friend or two instead of surrounding myself with family and a wide circle of friends: the more people I included in my life meant more opportunities to feel neglected or discarded. It's why I chose, before it was common practice, to write software from my home and work remotely with other coders who also worked from their own bedrooms as opposed to offices full of co-workers and face-to-face meetings and the frightening spaces in which people network. I communicated in chat rooms at any hour of the day or night. I locked my own doors. I rolled only enough pasta dough for myself.

## CHRISTMAS IN THE BIG HOUSE

The best litmus test for how my family is getting along is who comes to Christmas Eve dinner, and who returns on Christmas Day for round two. On other holidays, a newly wed cousin might go to their spouse's family celebrations. A single one might celebrate Friendsgiving. But Christmas is an all-stop, everyone is expected to attend. If you get along with a majority of the family at any given time of the year, you come to dinner, occasionally go to a tipsy midnight mass, and most likely spent the next day nursing your hangover, draped over a couch with a Bloody Mary in hand, or in an overstuffed La-Z-Boy with a toddler drooling on your shoulder.

My family is divided into three fiefdoms, each lead by its own matriarch. Mary Bartolomei, my grandmother, sat at the head of my mother's third of the family, the largest of the three. Because we are the greatest in number, Christmas was, and still is, our responsibility. My Aunt Tilly Bramanti's family hosted Easter, always with a Roast Chicken and Potatoes and homemade pasta and meat gravy to end anyone's lingering Lenten meat fast. My Aunt Lisa Abromowicz (she married a Pole) hosted Thanksgiving with a traditional meal in her chilly, perfectly staged home with her chilly, perfectly staged children and their equally standoffish families. Those women are all gone, but the family dynamics and holiday responsibilities remain. Easter and Thanksgiving remain for the most part optional, but Christmas — the most expensive family production of the year — is a must. All three factions of the family attend and their spouses bring extended family for the party.

In 1977, Mom snatched hosting duties from Grandma Bartolomei after we had moved from a two-bedroom Park Forest co-op to a large house in Chicago Heights. The Heights was the

town where both my parents grew up; a community built on Italian immigrants who worked in the steel mills in the early part of the century. The neighborhood we moved to was relatively quiet, built behind the Catholic high school and populated with widowed Italian ladies and nearing-middle-aged professionals with their ever-expanding families. Dad was a car salesman. But somehow, he afforded the largest house on the block. The size of my bedroom alone frightened me enough to beg my parents to let me share a room with John.

Mom called it “The Big House” and I later found out that it wasn’t only because of its size. She felt trapped in that house: inescapably tied to my wandering alcoholic father, simultaneously enamored with the status it gave her to her working-class family in which no one else was able to afford such a nice home, bound to two young children she loved, but to whom she showed little affection.

Mom was the middle child of three, her older brother Dennis a housepainter with two sons, her younger sister Dina — the baby of the family — the only sibling to go to college and the only one given a first name indicative of her heritage. My mother, like Dennis, was given an Irish name — Bridget — and she resented it from the moment she understood it made her different from all her Italian friends. Mom also resented the attention Dina received as the cute, youngest child, the one who got my Grandma’s nose as opposed to the schnoz Mom inherited from her father. She also resented the freedom Dennis had as the first born and a boy. She and Dennis were both in what Bloom High School considered “illegal student organizations.” Illegal because they weren’t officially sanctioned with a faculty advisor. Also, because the clubs were in competition with each other for which members accrued more sexual conquests. Uncle Dennis was in the all-boys CPCs (Cherry Pickers Club) and Mom the KKs (KoKettes), yet he was the

one allowed to attend meeting with his friends, which included, I assume, picking cherries. Mom had to sneak away under the cover of sleeping at a friends' houses or studying at the library.

She felt that she was forgotten as a child and into adolescence by her family. Most frustrating to Mom, was that her younger sister was sent to college. Mom was left to make her way with a high school diploma and a job as a shop clerk at the local department store. This attitude followed her into adulthood and made her feel as though she had to prove to someone, everyone, that she was as worthy of attention and respect as her siblings. The lack of attention and affection in her youth led to a frustration that transitioned into bitterness and anger in her adult life, eventually coalescing into a poison in her gut that became cancerous until it was snipped out – along with three inches of her colon – just in time for her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

That first Christmas in Chicago Heights, our kitchen revved up at 7 AM to my diminutive and Great-Grandma Sandina with her gnarled knuckles and head of white steel-wool standing on a step stool at the stove making spaghetti gravy as Mom and Grandma instructed my cousins and me on how to tie our aprons and properly wash our hands so we could help. For eight hours, the kitchen steamed with pasta making, shrimp scampi-ing, clam saucing, and calamari cleaning. The whole, fresh squid were left to the kids to clean before Grandma stuffed and baked them. Our noses level with an open newspaper stacked with slick alien squid, my cousins and I each grabbed one and ran through the kitchen and around the family room with mangled moist bits of calamari innards slipping through our fists. We shot eyeballs at faces, emptied ink sacks onto heads, and shoved rubbery tentacles down pants. Eventually Grandma caught us by pinching the spongy flesh under our biceps, one-by-one, and lined us up at the double sink to peel the skin

away from the bodies quickly losing their guts and clip the tentacles from what was left of the eyeless heads. We were a mess: ink in our hair, the occasional eyeball stuck to our shirts, and we smelled like a rotting ocean of cephalopods.

After dinner, the party ran wild in the basement. It wasn't just family; the after-dinner party included Dad's coworkers and married couples from Friday night dinners. Grandma Mary Ballarini, Dad's mother, came up from Florida to celebrate with us. It was a confusing trip for me, because my two grandmothers had never been in my house at the same time.

I would yell "Grandma," and they would both answer.

"Grandma Mary!" Same thing.

Grandma B. was out as well, so I had to learn quickly to call them each by their last names: Bartolomei and Ballarini. Exhausting for a five-year-old.

It took us three days to decorate the basement: I held the tape dispenser while Mom wrapped the fluorescent panel lights with red and green tissue paper, Dad stocked the wet bar with top-shelf bottles and ran multi-colored lights on the glass shelves behind the bar that held his wild turkey-shaped bottle of bourbon and a wooden box of darts.

During the party, John and I were sequestered upstairs with our gang of cousins to watch whatever Rankin-Bass special was on television. This was not a party for kids: drinking, music, dancing. More food. It drove us crazy, and we made every excuse to venture downstairs: permission to stay up and watch Doctor Who, questions about what to wear to bed, where to leave the oatmeal cookies for Santa. Our parents finally gave in and let us join the party until bedtime, downing kiddie cocktails impossibly stacked with maraschino cherries and dancing in

our PJs to Frank, Dean and Sammy.

When Mom called John and me for bedtime, Grandma Ballarini had him on her lap at the bar. She had been giving him sips of her vodka gimlet, and by the time Mom found him, he was covered with blistering hives. When Grandma put him down on the floor, he walked into the arm of a couch and landed on the painted concrete floor laughing and squealing and scratching his face. One plump, red welt in Tweety Bird footed pajamas.

The emergency room doctor considered reporting our parents to DCFS for child endangerment until they convinced him that John had found a discarded cup and drunk from it without their knowledge. His bad luck that he was allergic to Rose's lime juice. On Christmas morning, John was two-years-old and hung over.

My parents never had a Christmas Eve party like that again. Mom was so angry about what happened to John that she told my father that not only would there be no more parties in the basement, but that Grandma Ballarini was not to be alone with us in the house at night. That mandate stuck, and even when she spent entire summers with us, living in the in-law quarters of the house, we were never alone with her once she started drinking. Christmas attendance dwindled after that first year, too. We still hosted a two-day feast, but the fun of the holiday was missing. It seemed like too much work and too little play. Adults drank and talked in the living room with the tree and the presents stacked high and the working fireplace blazing, but the kids were confined to the family room behind sliding glass doors so that there was no exchange of noise between the two. We would swim around our fishbowl, playing with Legos and watching television, waiting for the adults to leave so we could get to bed. John and I would wake up in



the morning, sort and open our gifts while Mom and Dad slept, neither wanting to participate in the chaotic unwrapping. After a couple of years, we would have to wake Mom up in the in-law's quarters on the other side of the house. She said there was no reason to try to wake Dad up, he hadn't come home, and that we should go enjoy ourselves under the tree before she pulled the covers over her head and waved us out of the lightless room.

By the Fall of 1981, Dad stopped coming home at night altogether. He was done working by 9 PM and should have been home with John and me while Mom worked her night job cleaning office buildings, but he wasn't. Instead we were left with a babysitter, a family member I had grown up around, who spent holidays with me and who I loved and trusted.

I was nine, too young to think anything of it, so when he promised me a game of backgammon, I hurried John into our bedroom so we could change into our pajamas and he could go to bed. John, already sleepy, put on my nightgown. He loved the picture of the big-eyed puppy holding a tulip, and how the ruffle at the bottom floated on the floor and collected dust bunnies when he walked the perimeter of the bedroom. That was fine with me: I coveted the red-stripped pajamas he got the Christmas before, with a zip up the front and a back hatch to allow for trips to the bathroom without having to undress.

John crawled up into his bed, and I ran back into the living room to play backgammon. The sitter and I spread out, bellies down, on the marble tile in front of the fireplace. After a few rounds, he thought it would be funny to tease me, to make me get up and collect the dice each time either of us rolled. I obeyed because I was eight and I wanted to keep playing. He rolled, I fetched. I reached across the leather board, and I felt his hand grab the back flap of the pajamas.

He pulled me onto my butt and laughed when I winced in pain. He apologized, tickled me until I couldn't breathe, and said he wouldn't do it again. I didn't believe him; he had tricked me into wrestling and tickle fights before.

He rattled the dice in the fake-leather cup and threw them so that they landed outside the game box. I didn't complain. I was happy to play with him, to see him smile because I did as he asked. This boy was family; he was someone I loved and wanted to be near. He was handsome and strong and had always made sure I wasn't alone at holidays and picnics. So, when I felt him grab the pajama flap again, I thought he was trying to keep me from falling over. But when his hand reached inside the flap, under my backside, and between my legs, I froze. I held myself absolutely still, not breathing or speaking, wondering if I had done something wrong, wondering if he knew how much pain he was causing me. I screamed and tried to pull away, but he wrapped his arm around my belly and held me to his chest while I knelt on the cold floor next to the dirty red brick fireplace. I wondered if this was how my brother felt when he cut his right testicle on my banana-seat bicycle's broken reflector after riding full-speed into the garage door. I was afraid I would pee on his hand and make him angry, but I kept struggling. I'm not sure if I wiggled free or if he let me go. I ran, sobbing, into the bedroom and crawled under my blanket. I peeked out from between the folds of wool, staring at the toy-soldier wallpaper and trying to figure out how many of them I would need to protect me from the boy in the living room.

A door slammed; Mom was home, and the boy was gone. I searched my brother's face, looking for any sign he was awake, wishing he would see me. John was so small, a tiny mess of Dutch-boy hair and chubby fingers and our Papa Dino's enormous nose poking through a hole in one of Nonna's crocheted afghans.

The boy babysat us again several times, each time more tormenting than the last. He made up a game called “Torture Nikki.” He closed my whimpering dog in the shower stall and wouldn’t let me near him. He chased me through the house, finding me in closets and under beds, threatening to tell Mom I hit my brother, or I had been bad – that I left the front yard to play in the street or that I ate all the fudge-stripe cookies without sharing. But he never touched me in that way again. Still, I was terrified of what he would say about me if I told anyone what happened, so I never did. I erased it from my memory, quietly forgotten until I was in high school and saw a photograph of John and me.

The Polaroid was taken the Christmas morning Santa left the pajamas. I was wearing a “00” nightshirt, like Janet Wood did on *Three’s Company*, baby-blue with a permanent poop stain from my friend Maddy’s rat. John wore the striped pajamas. We were posed in front of the same dirty red brick fireplace, each holding our favorite Christmas morning toy. I hugged a stuffed Garfield, and John presented an unidentifiable Lego sculpture to the camera with both hands. The nausea came in waves, snaking through me until it shot like lightning through my fingers and toes. I instantly remembered everything. For over 30 years I’ve struggled to justify what happened. I told myself I imagined it. I told myself he was young; he was curious. I thought no one would believe me if I said anything. I would be a jealous little girl trying to get attention, lobbying for sympathy.

I’ve been to Christmas Eve dinner four, maybe five times in the last twenty years. It’s difficult to sit down to dinner with the boy-babysitter who is now a man with a successful business and a spouse he loves. There was a time I thought he knew, that he could tell I remembered. I believe I hid it well, hello with a cheek-kiss, small talk over coffee and biscotti

after dinner. I was careful, watching for only a moment as he showered his young niece with affection, and I wondered if he had touched her the same way he touched me. Flooded with guilt knowing if he had, I might have prevented it. She and her younger brother had spent a lot of time with him too, when their parents were divorcing. Their parents made sure their children were home with a babysitter who was family, who they trusted.

## PRACTICE

We moved into my dead grandmother's house the summer after my parents divorced. My mother, John, and I shared the home with my Aunt Dina and Uncle Dennis, Mom's siblings who still mourned Grandma's passing and couldn't emotionally let go of the home. It was also a place they could live rent free, but once there were kids in the house, my aunt and uncle quickly moved out. They, like my father, didn't want to live with us.

Somehow Mom saved enough money to keep us at Infant Jesus of Prague, the parochial school we attended. But by that time, I was in fifth grade and believed the religion I was raised with was bunk. I was brought up Catholic and went to a Catholic grade school. I went church every Sunday and left the small envelope preprinted with my family account number on it so my two quarters in the donation in the collection basket could be recorded. I confessed my sins, took communion, and tried not to bother God with silly prayers like "let me pass this spelling test" or "make Daddy pass out before he yells anymore." But when I did finally ask God for help, He didn't find a way to give Mom enough money to feed and clothe us. My father certainly wasn't helping.

More than God's unresponsiveness, I found his representatives at my school disappointing and quite ungodly. One teacher smelled like alcohol in the mornings and after lunch. Mr. Sedor, our new principal, had a preference for awarding the boys when it came to subjective accolades such as citizenship awards and hall monitor jobs. The nuns did nothing to prevent kids from being bullied, nor did they intervene when crying girls were teased for being too emotional. Sister Sally told my class that we could not be friends with the Jewish kids who

lived in the neighborhoods around our school simply because they killed Christ. As she spoke, my eyes were glued to Nathan Michaelson, the Jewish kid sitting in the next row.

Perhaps the worst thing about fifth grade was what my teacher (thankfully not a nun that year) called sex education. The boys were sent into another room with a priest while the girls were taught about our shameful bodies. Menstruation was barely addressed. It seemed messy and dirty and as sinful as Eve conspiring with the serpent to make Adam put some extra fruit in his diet. And the act of copulation was described as clinical and without emotion. We were taught sex happened when the man “placed his penis into the vagina.” Never in my life have I felt a man simply placing his penis into my vagina.

By the time the course was finished, I wanted nothing to do with boys. I decided I would never have sex, and if I did ever get my period, I would simply will it away. It all felt dirty and unfair. The girls were left with a lesson on proper behavior that emphasized how not to distract boys. If they teased us, we must have upset them. If they looked up our skirt, we were to blame. The few girls with whom I was friends and I all wore gym shorts under our skirts because we played basketball and did cartwheels. We beat the boys at kickball and caused several nurse-summoning injuries during dodge ball wars at recess. But still, it was our job to keep the boys’ minds right and focused on their math problems. My friend Megan was rebuked because as she developed breasts, a group of boys decided to give her the nickname ‘pecs’. She was told to wear a sweater to conceal them.

At IJP there was one boy, Jamie, I was friends with from the moment we shared a homeroom in first grade. His birthday was two days after mine, so we quickly decided we were meant to be friends. In second grade, we put on a puppet show for the class. In fifth grade, we sat

next to each other during every movie day, from *Superman* to *E.T.* For the sixth-grade talent show, Jamie and I air-guitared our way through “Another Brick In the Wall.” In seventh grade, one spring evening after a boys’ basketball game, we walked with a group of our friends to the firehouse next to the school. Jamie sat on a bench, and I lay down next to him, resting my head in his lap. He pushed my hair from my forehead, dropped his face to mine, and kissed me on the lips. It was a little peck, sweet and quiet: the first time my belly tightened and I felt a tickle between my legs. He wasn’t exceptionally attractive or smart or athletic, but it was as if after seven years of friendship, I knew we had discovered who we should be to each other, more than friends. We walked back to school, hand-in-hand, and said goodnight as our parents picked us up from the gymnasium doors. We didn’t speak again, not even during our eighth-grade year in the same homeroom, until I was nineteen and moving to another state.

I thought I did something wrong. Or I maybe I made him do it against his will, and that because I didn’t resist or tell him to stop, he no longer respected me. What I did was wrong enough, according to what I was taught by Mr. Sedor and the nuns, for him to stop being my friend. Did I trick him into kissing me? Was I interfering with his ability to do his school work as my fifth-grade teacher said girls do? Those seemed like perfectly reasonable explanations as to why he stopped talking to me. I felt guilty for ruining what I believed to be a real friendship with a boy who knew as much about me as my best girlfriend, Jenny. And all the boys knew about the kiss the next day because they were all trying to kiss me on the playground. I was the first girl, the only girl in my grade with a reputation. But I never forgot that feeling. The sensation of a boy’s lips on mine, the closeness I felt when he put his hands on my cheeks, and the gentle firmness of his thighs cradling my head. It didn’t feel wrong. It felt like I was cared for, warm

and gooey like my grandma's embrace with a little something extra.

A month or so into eighth grade, I was in a group of girls called down to the principal's office. There were seven of us sitting in a semicircle around Mr. Sedor as he told us of how he heard rumors that the public-school girls, the Jewish girls who lived in the area around our Catholic school, gave blow jobs to boys, and had we ever done such a thing. We all sat in silence, eyes on our shoes, hands folded in our laps, shaking our heads.

No, we hadn't done those sorts of things. Not on purpose.

I can't recall a single moment in my life during which I was so embarrassed. I remember the prickly heat in tips of my ears and the allium scent of adolescent fear-sweat pooling under my arms. The distinct sensation of immediate guilt, coupled with the oppressive presence of a man who considered the girls in his school a distraction, made clear how powerless I was to object to how the situation was handled and how quickly I devalued my sense of self-worth in that moment. If a woman questioned us, perhaps a teacher with whom I had a good relationship rather than our imposing pipe-smoking principal who shamed me and the other girls into silence, I might have felt safe enough to explain what had happened to me less than a year earlier.

In 1985, Cindy was the kind of girl that boys liked best. She had curly, bottle-blond hair, wore tight jeans, and her chest was magnificent. She was only fourteen, but her boobs rivaled what I saw in *Playboy* centerfolds. Cindy was only a friend by association – April was my neighbor and I felt like she was my best friend.

April had something beyond her years. I thought her greatest skill was making herself look and act seventeen. I desperately wanted to be older, prettier, and as popular as April and



Cindy. I was thirteen trying to navigate these new friends who lived in a world of drinking beer, high school boys, and sneaking rides in cars. She and her family moved to Saratoga Farms, our subdivision, in 1984. April went to the public school; she was my first friend outside of IJP. Thin and pretty, she wore super-tight jeans and unlaced Reebok hi-tops. Her hair always curled and sprayed high – her bedroom smelled like Aqua Net burning on her curling iron. She wore her makeup thick and pink, hiding a terrible case of acne. She had feathered earrings and I would watch them float through her hair every time she turned her head. Her half-shirts exposed the top button of her jeans, a hint of belly button peeked out when she did backbends on the grass in the front yard. A strange creature beyond her fourteen years, I wanted to be like her, to be her: free to dress how I pleased, allowed to wear makeup, and attractive to older boys. All the things alien and forbidden at school and by my mother. As an awkward girl with unmanageable hair and bifocals, I looked and acted nothing like April, but there was nothing I wanted more than to be her.

For the seventh-grade Valentine’s Day dance in the school cafeteria, I decided I would dress more like April, like what I thought was cool. She agreed to help me get ready that night, loaning me her denim mini-skirt and black lace tights. She stroked a small amount of eyeliner behind my glasses and dabbed pink gloss on my bottom lip. She held up a tissue to my face.

“Rub your lips together and smooch the tissue,” she said.

I tied an oversized black-and-white shirt in a knot at my waist. I thought I looked pretty, like a girl and not just a nerdy junior high athlete. By the time I walked home, Jenny was there waiting for me.

Jenny and I had been friends since kindergarten, and I loved her like a sister. We talked

on the phone constantly, we had slumber parties, cheered from the stands with blue and white pom-poms at high school basketball games, and watched *The Who* live on ONTV. On opening night of *Return of the Jedi*, we waited in the ticket line for three hours: fangirls, wearing matching red Han Solo t-shirts over our school uniform oxfords. The day our mothers let us ditch school to watch Frisco and Felicia get married on *General Hospital*, we made chicken pot pies and had a food fight in the kitchen so prolific that my mother found dried up peas and carrots rotting in the cabinets when she lost the house five years later. Jenny also made fun of me, encouraged by an older girl, because the penny loafers my mother could afford were from K-Mart; they weren't leather. Our friendship had been fading, but we still went to school functions together. Her mother dropped her off at my house before the dance.

"You look funny," Jenny said. She struggled to be deferential. She didn't want to say what she really thought. "Just different, I guess."

"Do I look bad?" My stomach ached. I didn't know how to dress myself outside of my uniform, and Mom had neither time nor the inclination to show me.

"Yeah Nik, you should really change your clothes. You look like a slut," Mom said.

"But I don't have any other clothes," I said. We had no money for clothes other than for uniforms and sweats.

I tucked in the shirt and changed the tights to sun-tan pantyhose and left the house. I sat out almost every dance and munched on dry cookies while I sat in a cold metal folding chair in the cafeteria, next to the unadorned kitchen counter.

April's influence over me increased after the dance. I felt she accepted me, and at least wanted to help me try to dress better. Jenny didn't know how to express her concern for me and

my new friend. I never thought it was jealousy, but Jenny shared Mom's opinion: neither of them liked April.

It was a week into summer break after seventh grade when April, Cindy, and I made plans for a Saturday night sleepover. Cindy talked her brother into buying us a case of beer and hiding it in the unlocked garage of the abandoned house between April's and mine. The garage was dusty, full of wolf spiders and a horde of mice. But if we wanted beer, this was the way to get it and not get caught. All the houses in the neighborhood were clones: three bedrooms upstairs, finished basement downstairs that flooded with some regularity, laundry rooms and bathrooms on repeat at every address. So, when neighborhood kids were dared to walk through that house on eerie fall evenings, they knew where to go in the dark. The only time I was brave enough to go in, there was a gray cat decomposing on the carpet in the living room.

"You guys just sleep at my house," April said. "Nik, you stuff the beer into your sleeping bag on your way over."

"Are the boys gonna be around?" I said.

There were three Italian boys who rode their Huffy bikes to our neighborhood on the weekends: Pat, Joe, and Joey. I had a crush on the shortest and youngest, Joey. He kissed me one day while we stood face-to-face, the handlebars of his bicycle between us and the front tire between my legs. It was my first open-mouth kiss, not the peck I shared with Jamie, and he rattled his head around so much he cut my lips with his braces. I told April that I wanted to kiss him again, to see if I could find a way to hold his head still.

"They'll be on their bikes so yeah, they'll be here," April said.

"We can totally toss them beers from your room. If I stay over, my mom said I have to be

inside by the time the street lights come on.”

I heard April sigh through the phone and whisper something to Cindy. I hung up, my cheeks burning. They both knew my mom was strict; the street lights were still my curfew, and I obeyed Mom even though she was rarely home from work. She wasn't present in my day-to-day life, but I feared my mother's anger.

Sleepovers became a regular weekend plan with April, but this was our first attempt at smuggling contraband into her room. Once the sun started to fade, I went to the empty garage next door and stuffed twenty-four beer cans into my sleeping bag. We thought eight beers each would be enough if we chose to share with the guys if they came to April's window.

Diane and Glen, April's mom and step-dad watched TV in the living room every night, so we knew I had to make it past them to get to April's room upstairs. The girls on either side of me, I walked in, confident there was no way her parents could see the huge bulge under my pillow and overnight bag. I smiled and said hello as I tripped over the front stoop, sending my sleeping bag out of my arms and into the living room.

“Oh shit.”

I watched the cans roll to Glen's feet. My brain couldn't comprehend what had just happened: exposing the contents of my sleeping bag and at the same time swearing in front of adults.

I looked at Glen, terrified; I was pretty sure I would vomit on his feet. Glen was a big man, a mutton-chop mustachioed hulk in a faded trucker's cap. His face turned red and his eyes watered as I froze, still bent over from trying to catch the beer cans. Glen and Diane fell into each other laughing, no longer able to maintain a façade of anger.

“Not too slick, Nik,” Glen said. “You girls can take three cans each, but you’re not going back outside.” Glen wiped his eyes and kept laughing. We each took our three cans upstairs while Glen gathered up the rest.

Three beers, as it turns out, is the perfect quantity of alcohol for a tween buzz.

“So how do I get Joey to keep still when I kiss him?” I asked.

Cindy tried to explain but couldn’t stop giggling. She couldn’t form a sentence, so April, who was just as giddy, pushed her aside.

“It’s just easier if I show you,” April said.

She held my face in her hands and kissed me, tongue and all. I pulled away from her, surprised that I kissed her back. But I started laughing, so we tried again. After a few minutes, Cindy joined us. I don’t remember any more about that night, but we all woke up the next morning with wicked hickeys on our necks.

A few days after the drunken make-out session, we were back at April’s. The plan was that while her parents were at work, Joey and the boys would come over to listen to *Purple Rain*, and we would make out in the living room – put my practice to good use. When our neighbor, Ernie, knocked on the screen door, I thought nothing of it. Ernie always looked messy: he was sixteen, smelled like onions, and every t-shirt he wore had dirty handprints smeared on the front. When he plopped on the couch next to me, April and Cindy started giggling.

“Let’s go downstairs and play ping-pong,” he said.

All I could think about was kissing Joey again. I thought about showing him how to be gentle, to hold his head still so he didn’t cut my lips again. But I was nervous, so the ping-pong would be a good distraction. Ernie went down first, and I followed him with the girls behind me.

Instead of heading to the ping-pong table, Ernie went into the laundry room. Cindy right behind me, she pushed me into him and pulled my glasses off my face. She slammed the door behind us and ran outside with April.

By the time I saw them outside, looking in through the window well and laughing, Ernie already had me by the wrists; I couldn't wrestle free. He pushed me down to my knees in front of the dryer, wedging my head between the ice-cold appliance and his hips. I don't remember him pushing into my mouth, he was just there. His oniony odor was mixed with the acrid smell of sweat and something sour, musty. I felt dizzy and thought I would pass out; I was unable to move. All I could hear were Ernie's grunts and laughter from behind the thin glass where April and Cindy watched.

I disassociated from what was happening. A milky curtain covered my eyes, and the rest of me was hollow: a ragdoll with her stuffing picked out. There were no thoughts, no impulse to run or fight. Every sense: every smell and sight, every feeling turned gray. When Ernie finally let me go, I ran to the bathroom and threw up.

Cindy and April sat on the couch as I came up the stairs. Ernie was gone. They studied my face and waited for my reaction. I snatched my glasses from Cindy's hands, ran home, and hid in bed under my blanket. When Mom came home that night, I told her I was sick. She left me alone.

The next day, I was still in bed when April called and said Joey finally came over. She mentioned nothing of Ernie.

That wasn't the first time I had been sexually assaulted, and it wouldn't be the last. But stuck between the dryer and Ernie's hips, I lost the part of myself that could relate to any

pleasurable emotion. I lost the part of myself that was protective of my own opinions and thoughts. I lost any sense of pride I had in my school work, in my creative self, and my body. My personality retreated behind a wall of cynicism and mistrust. I could not reattach, re-associate with who I was the day before. I blamed myself for what happened. It's always the girl's fault.

Joey never spoke to me again, just like Jamie. I figured April told him what happened, or maybe she told someone in the neighborhood, and it got around. Neighbors stared at me when I walked by. Adults on the block no longer smiled when I said hello, boys on my block snickered as they played basketball. Other girls on my street looked at me with contempt.

I tried to imagine why April and Cindy would put me in a situation that altered me in such a visceral way. I know I was different, less experienced not just with boys but with experiences outside of IJP. They knew I wanted to be more like them — I had said so in the past. Did they think they were helping me in some twisted way? Schooling me in the art of pleasing a boy? I had never heard of oral sex before the day in the laundry room, let alone think about it. If this was what it was like to be them, I changed my mind.

I still believe I should have done something to stop Ernie, but my ability to evaluate the situation was gone: I was a confused mess of raw and numb at the same time, all the nerve endings in my skin muted. I wish I could have kicked him or run out of the house or told someone what happened, but I figured no one would believe me. I felt I deserved it because that's what I learned in school. I was responsible, and my worth was now defined by how easily I was used, on my knees in a laundry room. I still feel shame, unable to escape the residual guilt of letting them violate me, the good little Catholic school girl who wanted to learn how to kiss.

A few weeks later, while I was sunbathing in the backyard, my neighbor, Mr. Jones,

came by to use the phone. He said his phone wasn't working and I thought nothing of it – his sons and my brother and I were friends, we all knew each other well. I brought him into the basement, past my laundry room to the phone. He made his call, and I could hear the busy signal through the receiver from where I stood. He hung up and asked how my summer was going. It was all very ordinary.

“I'm glad you're enjoying the warm weather and getting a little sun,” he said. I told him I was trying to get a tan back after being sick.

I had a cover-up over my new white bathing suit. I was too modest to wear a bikini, even though that was the bathing suit I coveted. I wanted a white, strapless bikini with a ruffle across the top to better show off my tan. I wanted white Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses and a white Swatch watch, neither of which my mother could afford. So, I settled on a one-piece plain white suit with tiny mesh panels down the sides. I thought they might give me funky tan lines on my sides when the sun poked through each hole in the fabric. I didn't buy the white Wayfarers or the Swatch until 2015.

“Can I see that bathing suit?” he said.

“I'm sorry?”

The shift in his disposition was almost imperceptible, but the weight of the air in the room crushed me. The intensity of his gaze frightened me, and I felt impossibly small: a weak child trained to do as she was told by the adults in her life. My mother and the nuns at school were insistent on obedience.

“Take off your cover-up; I want to see that suit.” He took a step toward me as he spoke.

I felt nauseous. I pulled the cover up, just above my belly.



“There,” I said. I started to cry.

“Good girl. I’ll see you later,” Mr. Jones said. He winked at me and walked up the stairs and out of my house.

I lived in that house for six more years, and I never spoke to him or his wife or his sons again. I cut my new bathing suit into pieces with my brother’s butterfly knife, and I stayed inside the rest of the summer.

The summer after freshman year, I was dating a boy some people would call a stoner. He had shaggy hair, smoked cigarettes, wore a dirty jean jacket, and listened to metal. Jim packed his skinny butt into tight acid-washed jeans, and he tasted like Big Red gum and tobacco when we kissed. I was introduced to Jim by two girls on my street, Laura and Julie. He hung around with their boyfriends, and they thought I might like him. I didn’t know the girls too well, one of them had been Ernie’s girlfriend when he assaulted me in the laundry room at April’s house, but I assumed she forgave me. That, or she somehow found out what really happened.

We spent the summer together, the six of us in one car or another, listening to music with the windows down, drinking in the woods or sitting in the Burger King parking lot with other kids from school. One Friday, we were invited to a big house party. Hundreds of kids were expected to come from the nearby high schools, so we planned a sleepover. My mother was at her boyfriend’s house with John, so I was allowed to sleep over at Laura’s because her mother would be there. Laura, Julie and I got ready in Laura’s bedroom: make-up scattered across the bed, three different curling irons burning long brown stains into her whitewashed dresser, discarded outfits littering the lime-green shag.

The guys were drinking when they picked us up. I sat on Jim's lap in the backseat and we made out the whole way to the party. Within moments of arriving, he handed me a solo cup full of brown punch, and never let it empty. I blacked out fast and woke up in a bedroom upstairs with Jim trying to push himself inside me. I was a virgin and he was drunk, so he was having a difficult time.

As I realized what was happening, I asked him to stop, but he didn't. I grabbed his shoulders and tried to close my legs, but he only pushed harder. The pain was like nothing I had ever felt. The blood from my tearing skin only helped him penetrate me, but I felt like I was being ripped open from the inside. I remember wondering if this was what it would feel like to have a baby pushed back up inside me. I had no idea what sex was supposed to feel like. I started to scream, crying for help and begging him to stop. He covered my mouth with his hand while he held my wrists above my head. He told me to shut up, that people would bother us if I didn't. When several kids appeared at the door, he stopped.

"Are you okay?" Julie asked. I couldn't answer.

"We're fine, right?" Jim said.

This is the precise moment where I believe I am responsible.

"I'm fine. I'm sorry."

That was all I said. And as they closed the door, Jim finished. I laid there numb to the pain, numb to Jim. I was bleeding and falling back into a stupor as I fell down the stairs and was carried to the car and taken home.

Laura's mother was in the kitchen as I was helped into the house. She looked at me, makeup smeared, hair a mess, smelling like whatever brown liquor was in that punch and the Big

Red gum I was choking on.

“Take her upstairs and get her to bed. In the morning, send her home,” she said. “And get her a sanitary pad or she’ll bleed on your rug.”

After the incidents with Ernie and Jim, I thought that the way to get attention from boys was by pleasing them sexually. I cheated on every steady boyfriend without exception. At parties, I found myself in various stages of undress, trying to piece together what happened and with whom, each time remembering that I had brought these situations on myself. All the while, I kept my grades up and took care of my brother.

My mother came home one day after work and told me that her boss’s wife told her I had been sneaking out at night and having sex with boys “all over town.” She didn’t give me a chance to respond before she walked up to her bedroom, shut the door, and turned on the television, never mentioning it again.

## RAT

In 1997, in a nicotine-stained hotel room in Las Vegas, I undressed my father and put him into the shower. I sat on the toilet seat and smoked, inspecting the plastic-wrapped individual servings of soap and mouthwash, an acrylic tumbler and a flimsy toothbrush, all set neatly on a rusty water-stained tray. Dad groaned, his forehead on the shower wall as he washed his back with a frayed hand cloth.

“I need a coffee,” he said, his voice distorted from the water pouring over his lips. “And a cigarette. One of mine, not those hippy cigarettes you smoke. I can’t get a good draw on those things.” He cracked open the glass door to the shower. *Thank you, God and Jesus and baby Jesus*, I thought. *Thank you for frosted glass*. He took the coffee and the cigarette into the shower with him: mug in one hand, the other supported his weight against the wall, cigarette already damp between his fingers.

“Carol is waiting to hear from me; she’s already at the chapel. I gotta tell her you’re getting ready.” I wanted to escape, leave that hotel room and Las Vegas and disappear into the desert.

Thirty minutes earlier, Carol had called me in a panic.

“I can’t find your Dad,” she’d said.

“He’s probably playing poker. I told you he was still drinking.” I chastised her, and I shouldn’t have. I knew he was drinking, but she thought he was sober. “Why the hell did you guys decide to get married in Vegas?”

“I don’t know. I thought he was done with drinking.” I think Carol believed my father

had money. He had a little stock in Apple, but it wasn't worth much at the time. The questionable retirement fund of an ex-used car salesman. She was older than him, although they never told me her age. Invited to their home, her house, I'd find them sitting in matching Lay-z-boys watching "Wheel of Fortune" or the evening news, Carol's gout foot propped up on a pillow.

"And gambling?" I said. I was irritated by her tunnel vision, her inability to see the man he was: broke, broken, and painfully lonely. I felt sorry for her because she loved him. I hated her because she saw him as someone worthy of love.

I've fallen for men just like my father all my life: broken and in need of a savior. I've also convinced men I was someone else, someone different – their savior. How dissimilar was I from my father if I also played a role someone needed filling?

"I'll get him. Go to the chapel and see if they can give us a little extra time." I hung up and headed down to the casino floor. I found him at a poker table, gripping the edge of the green felt to keep himself upright.

"Let's go, Dad. Carol is pissed."

He was hammered – his eyes narrow slits, smile too wide, exposing stubby teeth pocked from years of neglect and nicotine.

"Scorch!" he said. "I'm coming in a minute. Just gotta finish this hand."

I hated that nickname. It was always "scorch" or "scorch *a mingia*," whatever that meant. I think Dad was trying to Italian-ize it somehow. Once in a while, in a rare sober moment, he would almost say my name. "Nik grab me a beer. Nik light me a cigarette. Nik, I stepped in the pile of shit your dog left next to my bed, you need to take her home." *Good*, I thought, *I've stepped in*

*your shit for years.*

He lost his hand at poker, begged me to stay for one more. The dealer winked at me and said that if my father stayed at the table, I either had to sit and play or leave. I've never loved a Vegas dealer more, and I saved him from having to call security to pick my father up from where his left ass cheek was headed. I got him to his room and into the shower.

Dad was half-way to sober by the time we got to the chapel, still wobbly and smelling like aftershave on top of his smoky-sour breath. We had a polite buffet dinner after the drive-thru ceremony, and at 1:00 AM as they walked to the casino floor, I drove west into the silence of the desert.

On a warm July night in 1977, my father took me to my first baseball game. I was five, and I sat next to him at Comiskey Park in a splintered wooden chair painted green, captivated by the enormous harvest moon rising above the scoreboard. It felt special to be away from home after dark: the sherbet-colored moon lighting the faces of the fans in front of me, my first hot dog with mustard. I asked for catsup, but the vendor laughed and handed me the wax-paper-wrapped wiener and told me that if I was going to be a baseball fan in Chicago, I had better forget about catsup. Then there was the ice cream sundae Dad bought me in a small plastic batter's helmet, and my first box of Cracker Jacks with a tattoo as the prize. I licked my arm and held the inky blue owl to my skin. So many treats in one night! I wished my mother had been there, by my side, enjoying the excitement of the game surrounded by the smells of old wood and popcorn and cigars.

Mom stayed home that night to take care of my brother John. He wasn't quite two-years-

old, and she didn't think the environment was right for a small child. It wasn't the rowdy fans or cigarette smoke; Dad smoked in the house and around us kids — it was a different time — she didn't want to have to change a fussy baby boy in a filthy stadium bathroom. Comisky at the time was less than sparkling clean, I was lucky she allowed me to go.

When the game was over my father stood me up on my seat, and we cheered until we were hoarse. The fireworks shot above the Dan Ryan Expressway and roared into the sky after the White Sox victory. It was magic.

After the game, my father brought me to a vendor to buy a hat. There were no kid-sized Sox hats, so I had to settle for one in Kansas City Royals blue. I was disappointed, crying because my only hat option was a from a place I'd never heard of. But I wanted a baseball hat more than anything in that moment. Before it was paid for, Dad helped me stuff my ponytail through the hole in the back. It was mine; I was a real baseball fan. Dad picked me up and carried me to the car – hat on my head, sleepy in his arms. That was the first and last time I felt protected by my father.

I found out years later he drove from 35th Street all the way to the South Suburbs, forty-five minutes of shattering the speed limit to our co-op in Park Forest, drunk from Comisky-sized cups of Old Style.

Not many nights later, in my bed with my baseball hat on and my brother fidgeting in his crib next to my bed, I saw my parents in the hallway outside my door. My mother stood next to my father in her baby-blue peignoir as he argued with someone on the crusty rotary phone as tornado sirens screamed outside. I knew what the sirens meant: every spring and summer on the first Tuesday of each month at precisely 11:00 AM, it was the warning-system test, but it was the

middle of the night and Dad was watching TV, in bed with Mom and a beer. The noise was interrupting Benny Hill.

“You sure?” Dad said. “Ok we’ll go – but turn those goddamned sirens off.” It was the first time an adult cursed in my presence.

Mom pulled me out of bed, grabbed my brother from his crib, and we headed to the basement. By the time we reached safety, the sirens stopped.

“Tornado my ass,” Dad said. Second swear word and the first memory of the scent of my father. In the dark hall of the damp basement, he smelled like an ashtray doused with beer. It made me sick to my stomach, nauseous after the anxiety of the storm.

I went back to my bedroom and climbed into bed. While Mom put John back into his crib, I put on my hat and wove my fingers through the holes of my white eyelet comforter.

Mom switched on the nightlight and closed the door without a word. The shadow of John wrestling with his blanket twisted through the eyelets on the canopy above me. Tiny pink rosebuds on my wallpaper came to life in the dark like animated spirits, as if a sorcerer commanded their petals to rot and fall away, the thorns and vines to grow into beastly claws and wicked hair. I watched an ocean churn; sea monsters rage across the walls. Lightning flickered through the window as if the sky was joining the battle: a war dance set to “Yakety Sax” seeping under my bedroom door.

Dad’s friends called him Rat. I’ve always assumed it was because when he was drunk, he squinted his eyes and he sucked his teeth, which made his nose crinkle. But I’m not sure that’s the real story. He fancied himself much like Al Pacino but grossly misunderstood: trapped in the



South Suburbs of Chicago wearing a car salesman's disguise of a short-sleeved dress shirt, shiny wide tie, and polyester pants. He wore a pinky ring and a thick, gold herringbone necklace and smelled like Polo cologne. He was a South Side Italian cliché. Being in a car with him was like being trapped in a burgundy velour upholstered gas chamber: windows rolled up, cigarette burning in the ashtray, noxious clouds of beer belches scraping at the inside of my nose.

When he decided to leave sales and enter into a partnership in a restaurant, we moved into a house in Chicago Heights where the more well-to-do Italian families lived.

I was immediately terrified of my room. John and I had shared a bedroom in the tiny Park Forest Co-Op since the day he came home from the hospital, but here we were on our own. Mine was cold, a pale green space with double closets and none of the warmth of our tiny nest in Park Forest. It wasn't long before John and I shared a room again.

The restaurant was fun for John and me. I watched the man I was told to call Uncle Augie make sausage from scratch; he had a golf-ball-shaped tumor on his elbow and would giggle any time I touched it. I followed his wife, Connie, into the cavernous refrigerator and carried out bushels of fresh green peppers for her to clean. Every woman working in the kitchen or at the counter was in love with my brother. There's a photograph of him, no more than four-years-old, dressed in a Hulk t-shirt and green shorts flexing his muscles on the shoulder of one of the workers. Her smile so full, so enormous her eyes disappeared into her cheeks. We begged my dad to start selling ice cream, so he bought a soft-serve machine that pumped out vanilla, chocolate, and swirl cones.

One month after the ice cream machine arrived, the restaurant burned down. By the time it was rebuilt, my father was no longer a partner.

When I was 31 and living in Connecticut, I was told that a magic shop I managed in my early twenties burned down on Halloween night. Business had declined: Halloween, the “Christmas” of the industry, was hijacked by big-box stores offering cheaper costumes. While counting the day’s receipts and preparing the cash deposit for the morning, the owner decided to walk across the street to get a coffee. When he returned, the building was on fire. I’m not the only former employee who thinks the fire was suspicious. The official cause was ruled “inconclusive.” So was the fire at Dad’s restaurant.

After the fire, Dad bought a dive bar in Crete a few miles away. He kept the Elvira pinball machine and jukebox the previous owner left behind so John and I had something to do when we were there. We played pinball constantly. When a specific bumper was hit, Elvira would purr: “Ooo! Nice organ.” We played so often the patrons of the bar would complain when the game made noise, interrupting their jukebox selection of Hank Williams, Jr. and Mac Davis and The Oakridge Boys’ own “Elvira.” The sound on the pinball machine was eventually turned off. Our Elvira had been silenced.

I can’t remember seeing my father while he owned the bar other than when we were there on the occasional Sunday when Mom needed a quiet house. Dad was never home.

The bar wasn’t making enough money to support our family, so Mom had to work for the first time in seventeen years. At first, we had the occasional babysitter, but as money grew tight, and I headed into fourth grade, I was the one in charge after school and into the evening. Mom would get us to school, but it was my responsibility to make sure my brother got on the bus, and we got in the house safely. I had to shove my brother through the old milk delivery box which

opened into a coat closet. At nine, I was responsible enough to keep my five-year-old brother safe, but not enough to have my own house key. We dropped our school-bags at the door and plowed through bags of Doritos and Fudge-Stripe Cookies until dinner time, when I microwaved whatever was in the freezer for dinner. No vegetables, ever. If I had to be in charge, we weren't eating anything green.

A year later the bar was sold, and Dad got his job back at the car dealership. Mom was still working because while he had a job, he was only selling used cars. He was angry about the demotion and the reduction in pay. He drank more than ever.

One day, Mom pulled us out of school early and told us Dad drove himself to the hospital as he was having a heart attack. She wanted to tell us herself, to be home with us as people called the house. She didn't want me to deal with calls and guests while trying to microwave my brother a Chicken Kiev.

After he was released from the hospital, Dad was home all day. There when we came home from school, there to send us to our rooms to do our homework, there to cook dinner. Dad's idea of dinner before his trip to the hospital was dumping raw garlic, olive oil, and a can of minced clams over a pound of linguini. Shit-on-a-shingle, Ritz crackers with sardines and pub cheese, a head of iceberg lettuce hidden under a thick blanket of Roquefort dressing – those were his delicacies. But the menu had to change, so we ate overcooked, over-battered fish quietly at the kitchen table. For dessert, he told me to make him a drink.

I've known how to make a "Bob Martini" since I was five: vodka, ice, and anchovy stuffed olives. I loved those olives, still do. Once in a while, I'll buy a jar, dump the brine, and replace it with vodka. Those suckers still make me feel like no matter where I am, I'm home.

My parents didn't argue often, they didn't bicker or disagree so that I heard them. But when they fought, especially at night when Dad was drunk, it spread through the house like the smell of garlic frying in olive oil on Christmas Eve. Their voices carried into every room. Their words pungent, absorbed by permeable surfaces from the carpet to the pillows on my bed. Their whisper-shouts louder than their speaking voices.

"I saw your car at her house, Bob," Mom said. "The least you could do is keep it out of the neighborhood where the kids could see you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Dad's default defense was gaslighting. "I was at work."

"But it was your car. Your car was in her driveway at lunch."

"Oh, right. Yeah, Petey borrowed my car to go to lunch," Dad said. "I was in the middle of a sale and couldn't leave."

"Don't do that, Bob. Don't make a fool of me twice. I know you're lying," Mom said.

"If you don't believe me, you don't love me. Do you really think I would do that to the kids?"

Mom didn't answer. They stood in the kitchen, Dad sipping his vodka and Mom red-faced and ready to explode. Neither realized I fell asleep on the couch. Steps away from their battle, I was awake and peeking through the holes in the afghan I was under.

"God damnit Bridget, you're a real bitch," Dad said, rattling the ice in his glass. He set his glass down and stumbled down the hall toward their bedroom. The next morning, Mom's clothes and all her belongings were spread out in the in-law's quarters where my grandparents

stayed when they visited from Florida.

John was more upset than me by the fights, and he thought Mom didn't want to be near us anymore after she moved to the other side of the house. To him, proximity was a gauge of love and she was as far from us as the ocean half way across the country. The bedwetting started a few days after her departure from the main house and for seven years, I helped him hide it as best I could.

The last fight they had was long after bedtime when John and I sat in his room, listening. A door slammed. Mom said, "Fuck you." Dad called her a spoiled bitch.

I folded John's six-year-old fist into mine. He was shaking. "I promise it'll be okay," I said. He nodded, and we searched the walls for a distraction.

We stared at his bedroom wallpaper filled with toy soldiers. We tried to count them but lost our tally each time Mom screamed, or a drawer crashed against the dresser. Through the muffled argument, the word *divorce* burst through their bedroom door and down the hallway.

We stared at each other waiting for the argument to re-engage, but all we heard was Mom's voice.

"Get out."

Dad shuffled down the hallway and out of our daily lives.

The visitation agreement said Dad would see us every other Sunday and would give my mother \$100 a week for child support. Sundays with Dad were sporadic, the money even more elusive.

When Dad occasionally found himself available for Sunday lunch, he brought us to his

favorite tavern. He would sit at the bar and watch whatever sporting event was on the television while John and I played pinball or inhaled burnt cheeseburgers. No fries, only chips. And the cheese was mozzarella, not American or cheddar. It was like eating dusty hockey pucks. We were left to entertain ourselves while Budweiser poured into Dad's glass. We were there so often my dad's drinking buddies started calling John "Little Rat." John hated that nickname. It made him cry.

When Dad met his second wife, Sue, we stopped going to the tavern. I quickly grew to love Sue. She was a soft-spoken, easy woman from Texas who moved to Illinois to be closer to her sister. I met her one Sunday with my father at his sparse apartment on the south side of Lincoln Highway in a complex inhabited mostly by single, divorced men who were currently between wives. I found out years later they were together long before I met her. Dad paid for her gastric bypass, helped her eat properly during her weight loss, and funded for the installation of her new breasts. Like the used cars he sold and the first house they bought together, she was a fixer-upper. Her sister, while working for my father at the restaurant before it burned down, introduced them.

We became a weekend warrior family. We went to White Sox games and the zoo and San Rocco Fest. The Fest was on church grounds on the Hill, the working-class Italian neighborhood in Chicago Heights. Dad would sit in the beer tent while the rest of us rode the Tilt-a-Whirl and ate pizza frites.

One year, Dad gave me a ten-dollar bill to play bingo, and I won the \$100 grand prize that night. As I repaid the ten dollars, he demanded my entire prize.

"I paid for this whole night, that's my money," he said, loud enough for a crowd of

people to turn and stare at me.

“But I gave you back the ten.” Thirteen-years-old and surrounded by friends congratulating me on my windfall, I sobbed in the middle of the church parking lot for every time he let me down or embarrassed me. He held his hand out, and I gave him the rest of the money. Sue put her arm around him and steered to the car; whatever she whispered in his ear made him stop yelling at me. That was our last family outing.

Dad and Sue were married three years later on Valentine’s Day. Between the ceremony and the reception, I was taken to a bar with the rest of the wedding party. I ordered a Michelob in the bottle – it seemed like an adult beer and it was what Dad always drank in the nicer restaurants in the Heights. I was a month shy of sixteen and was served without question. It could be because I was in a low-cut red satin dress, like the other women in the bridal party, on Valentine’s Day. I was drunk by the time I got to the reception. I was so drunk, I hit on the groomsman I was partnered with. I put my hand on his leg under the table during dinner. After he flirted with me at the bar and as we sat down to dinner, I thought that was what I was supposed to do. Dad told me once, drunk and over a game of nine ball, never to tease a man. If I did, and he got angry, it was my fault. Sue found out and I was sent home an hour later.

Somewhere between their wedding and their divorce, I sat at their kitchen table, sobbing to my father that he either needed to stop drinking or I wouldn’t see him anymore. He came to a swim meet drunk. He hustled me at pool in dive bars that should never have let me in. He went to my brother’s grade-school football games on Sunday mornings with liquor in his coffee. He cried poor each time my mother asked him for help.

We sat in those kitchen chairs more times than I can count. Me making the same threat

over and over. Him promising he'd stop drinking. Then he would hand me a beer and a cigarette, and we would repeat the scene six months later.

When I got my license, Dad told me that because I had a job, he would help buy me a car. One Sunday, he took me to see a red 1968 convertible Firebird. It was loud and beautiful; I wanted that car more than I wanted anything in the world. We talked about it on the way home and said that he would teach me how to work its manual transmission and how to wax it so that it always looked ready for a drag race or a car show. He promised to teach me how to take care of it myself: change the oil, change the tires and all the filters. I couldn't believe he was doing this for me. We finally found common ground, a reason to spend time together outside of a bar. That night as I fell asleep, I imagined Dad and I in his driveway working together: hood open, hands greasy, beers resting against the house. A father teaching his daughter how to care for a beautiful machine they both appreciated.

The following Sunday, he pulled into my driveway with a 1981 Pontiac Phoenix. It was a nondescript blue box, an old man's car, but undoubtedly reliable.

I was heartbroken. Why would he promise me not just the car, but the education that came with it if he didn't intend to buy it? Dad was a car salesman, he sold Pontiacs. This was a Pontiac and perhaps the most beautiful one I'd ever seen. It was cruel of him, I thought at the time, to take it away from me. We wouldn't be spending that time together.

"But my grades, Dad. I'm fifth in my class and I have a job," I said, whining then crying. "I go wherever you want on Sundays without complaining. I sit in smelly bars and play stupid video games with John and watch you watch football."



He looked at me, glasses smudged and breath smelling like a boozy ashtray. He was unmoved and silent.

“We were going to do this together.” I took the keys to the Phoenix from his hand.

“Scorch, that car wasn’t for you. You can’t handle it. Maybe John when he’s older.”

And there it was. Whether he meant to or not, whether the morning beer loosened his tongue, or he didn’t care if I knew. He told me exactly why I couldn’t have the car. I was his daughter, not his son.

I was lucky to have a car at all, I knew that. But had he not encouraged me to get excited about the Firebird, I would have been grateful. Maybe I should have been appreciative regardless, but I never felt so let down in my life.

One morning in 1995, my boss called me into her office to tell me that the local newspaper had an incident in the “Police Beat” section about my father and she thought I should be aware of it before I started to get phone calls. My father had been playing golf and drinking the day before. This wasn’t in the paper. What was in the paper was the fact that he drove his car onto the tenth green. The joke I heard every time someone brought it up to me was that “Rat could drive a car onto that green, but never a golf ball.”

Two years after driving the green, he bragged to me about how he escaped a DUI on his way home from his favorite bar. It was snowing, and his car skidded on a patch of ice into a tree after hitting several parked cars on the street. His house was nearby, so he thought it was smart to walk home and pour himself a vodka before the police arrived. There would be no way they’d get him for a DUI if he were already drinking. Sue told the police that he was sober when he got

home, but he was shaken up and started drinking after he walked through the door.

In January of 2001, my father was in the hospital, his fourth trip for congestive heart failure. He stayed in Cardiac ICU for a week, then moved into a rehab facility until he could find a place to live on his own. Carol, his Las Vegas bride, had filed for divorce. The night he was having chest pains, she called an ambulance, sent a suitcase of clothes with him, and took his dog to a shelter. She called me not long after to let me know about the money he stole from her, and it was my responsibility to pay her back.

“I don’t have any money, and I’m sure not going to run over to the hospital to tell Dad he needs to pay you back right now.” I hung up and never heard from her again. I went to the shelter the next morning and adopted his dog.

While he was in rehab, Mom arranged for Dad to live in one of the apartments in her building. She pitied him when no one else would. It was a cheap one-bedroom garden space, more than he deserved. Rat had used up everyone else’s give-a-shit, and he was utterly alone. Without a wife, and without any family or friends.

I brought his dog to visit him in rehab, but she shook in my arms and bared her teeth at any attempt he made to touch her. Even his dog didn’t want him.

“I finally have my family back,” he said as he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

“You’re loopy, all drugged up,” I said. I hoped he heard me.

After he was discharged, Dad moved into his new apartment. He switched to near beer and quit smoking, but the change was too late. On a cold Friday morning in February, I asked Mom how he was doing.

“When’s the last time you heard from Dad?”

She thought for a moment. “Wednesday, I think.”

“How often does he call you?” My face caught fire.

“Every day.”

She called him; no answer. I knocked on his door; no response.

There was an odd odor in the hallway. I couldn’t place it, but I was hoping it was just a sick-man-who-pooped-in-his-pants smell. Mom called the police and asked Santos, the building manager, to open the door. The security chain was on the door, but the window over Dad’s kitchen sink was unlatched. Santos covered his face with a bandana and squeezed through the window above a sink full of dishes. He opened the door, ran up the steps and over to the field behind the building’s parking lot without a saying a word. Santos sat down, shivering on the frozen grass.

I pulled my sweater up to my eyes and went into the apartment. The smell was rotten, decay amplified by the radiant heat set to ninety degrees. I stepped through the living room, calling my father’s name, hoping for a response. I saw his foot outside the bathroom door, pasty and purple, swollen from the heated floor he fell on. Dad missed his fifty-eighth birthday by one week.

Police officers gathered on the sidewalk. Mom wept quietly, comforted in the arms of her neighbors as I called my brother. Santos was still in the field, bent over and vomiting into the weeds. I cursed at my father from outside his open kitchen window, stomped on the ground like a spoiled child. All those years of trying to help my father to quit drinking, to understand the pain he was causing me, my brother, my mother. I relieved every moment he embarrassed me in front

of my friends, bragged about me while all I could think of was how he used me as an ego boost when it suited him, how he never said he was sorry for any of it. I stomped; I crushed every blade of decayed grass until I heard a crack of thunder.

Snow fell through the trees above us. We stood silent on the sidewalk and looked up, marveling at the cold, gray flurry of February thundersnow.

After the funeral, Sue, my mother, and I had breakfast.

“You know, Bridget, he never stopped loving you,” Sue said to my mother. Mom reached across the table and put her hand on top of Sue’s.

“I know,” Mom said. “I’m so sorry.”

In August of 2018, while visiting family in Chicago, I attended the wake of a man my mother worked for after my parents divorced. The line for viewing was long, an hour and twenty-minute wait. I stood quietly, not making eye contact with anyone else fearing I would be recognized somehow after escaping the South Suburbs two decades earlier. The man behind me seemed to recognize me.

“You look familiar. Are you the pastor’s daughter?” he said.

“No. I’m Nicole Pendleton. I was a Ballarini before I got married.”

“You’re Bobby’s daughter! Oh my God, I used to play golf with your dad.” He turned to the group of men behind him. “Hey look. This is Rat’s daughter.” They smiled and waved. The man behind me slapped my shoulders and squeezed too tight.

“Bridget’s daughter, too,” I said. “Mom is still with me.”

“That’s good to hear. Hey, remember the time Rat drove the tenth green at Lincolnshire?”

That was a riot. Your dad, he was a good guy.”

The men in line behind him nodded and laughed. They all agreed. Rat was a good guy.

## DODGING THE CAMERA

I flip through memories of my mother like I rummage through the old cardboard box full family photos collecting dust in the closet. I search for moments in my life in which my mother is more than a shadow in the corner, hiding her face or ducking behind another body. Those photographs were passed from my great-grandmother to my grandmother to my mother, in the same box. Unorganized and mistreated, stacks of them show relatives or family friends, quaffed and posed, long dead and unknown to the living. My mother's face is visible in only a handful; for seventy-two years she skillfully dodged the camera. She hates to have her picture taken. And now the box now belongs to me, the fourth woman in my family who will try to find order in the celluloid chaos of gritty negatives and cracked Polaroids. There's a particular stack of Polaroids, wrapped in a Ben Franklin bag, that were taken the day after a fire destroyed the restaurant my father owned. Forty years later, when I unwrap the photos, the smell of melted plastic and charred linoleum fills the room.

In one envelope, an oversized shipping packet, the annual Olan Mills Studios family portraits of my mother, John, and me are protected in torn cardboard frames. Every summer, Mom would dress us in our holiday clothes, and we would sweat our way to the studio to have professional pictures taken. The image of my little brother resting his chin on his fist and facing the camera, with my second-exposure profile somewhere in the clouds behind him staring into the unknown, was repeated seven times. Seven years of fall foliage draped over farm fences behind us on a painted backdrop. Seven years of proof that we were an incomplete family, Dad conspicuously absent.

Mom was hurt that dad would never join us for the portraits. She tried to hide her sadness and anger by taking us to McDonald's once the pictures were taken and we changed into summer clothes. But I knew she felt the same way she had through much of her childhood, irrelevant and unloved. John and I weren't enough to fill her need to be loved, and I understand that. The love of your children does not make up for the betrayal of a husband or dismissal by family members. Children cannot make up for a lifetime of feeling like the forgotten middle child.

There are plenty of photographs of my mother's siblings: her older brother, Dennis, and her younger sister, Dina. Dennis is always surrounded by groups of high school friends or his two sons. There are images of both his weddings, several of his oil paintings of clowns, and an occasional shot playing the violin. Dina, ten years my mother's junior, is always placed in the front of a group, or alone with any number of toys, always perfectly groomed. She was sent to Marian Catholic High School, and then to college. Mom went to the public high school and left to find work. If she wanted to attend college, she was told she had to fund it herself. I felt bad for her: not as talented as her older brother, not as attractive as her younger sister. At nineteen, she saw marriage to my father as her escape from her home life, her escape from an oblivious family into the arms of the man who she thought would give her a new life. Instead, she got an alcoholic wanderer who fathered her children and left her alone whenever a tee time was available.

When I was eight, not long after my grandma passed, our extended family was gathered for Easter brunch. As was the custom, each part of the family brought their cardboard boxes of photographs to sort through and trade. A photograph long believed to be of my mother was passed around. The picture of the little girl, in a white eyelet dress and white Mary Janes, was handed to me for the first time.

“Is this you, Mom?” I asked.

“It is. I was three in that picture I think,” Mom said. “The date might be on the back.”

I turned the picture over and saw the date, March 1950, written in faded pencil. Under the date was the name Gloria.

“Who’s Gloria?” I said.

Mom said she didn’t know. My Aunt Lisa asked me for the photo, and I handed it to her. She looked at the date and the name and gave it back to my mother.

“That’s Gloria,” Lisa said. “You know. Gloria, your half-sister.”

Mom shrugged.

“Oh.” Lisa thought for a moment before turning to Mom. “Well, Bridget, Gloria is Dino’s first daughter. Your father’s daughter, by his first wife.”

“His what?” Mom was shocked. “What do you mean, first wife?” If my grandma knew about her husband’s first marriage, she didn’t tell my mother. No one did, and there was a little girl out in the world who looked exactly like Mom, a sister she met in a photograph at thirty-four.

The picture boxes stopped appearing at holiday gatherings. The annual trip to the photographer stopped, too, the same year I became a latchkey kid.

In 2016, my mother had a heart attack while checking in for a colonoscopy. I’m not sure if it was the fear of finding colon cancer again, or her anxiety over having a camera snaked up her backside that caused it. The nurses told me her blood pressure was too high to perform the procedure. They wrote down her BP readings and sent us away. Instead of home, I drove her to



the Emergency Room. Had I not, she would have died.

The heart attack was mild, but what the doctors discovered over the course of the two weeks it took to get her blood pressure down, was that her right carotid artery was completely blocked. Blood flow to one side of her brain had been restricted, and the severity of the resulting vascular dementia would not be fully understood for several months.

The day after her surgery, successful according to her surgeon, I had my first panic attack. My husband and I were eating breakfast at an IHOP in Tampa, now known in my family as the International House of Panic. I've taken three of my own trips to the ER, two in ambulances, each time certain I was having my own heart attack. An expensive way, I suppose, to learn how to recognize the signs of my anxiety and control my mental and physical reactions to it. But I can now find links from my childhood, through my adolescence and adulthood, that point to my anxiety disorder. Stomach aches in first grade, diagnosed as nerves and ignored by my mother, were indicators that my brain handled stress differently than my friends. The intensity with which I feared harm would come to my brother when I cared for him as a child, the same intensity I now feel when I think of my mother's condition, a behavioral pattern resulting from elevated levels of anxiety for forty years. I occasionally feel like I'm a walking stroke, an aneurism waiting to happen. They make life difficult, those moments when all I can see in my head is my mother dying alone in her home. But a CBD gummy and a nap breaks that thought pattern and I can function for a few more days before the cycle begins again.

I've thought about moving my mother into my home, to live surrounded by me and my family so that I know she's okay, and so I won't worry as much. But we've tried living together as adults, and we end up arguing over who did the dishes last, or whose turn it is to clean a

litterbox. In 2001, when my apartment building in Chicago burned down, I stayed with my mother for several months. She told me I had to leave because she got her period again, and my hormones in her home were wrecking her happy journey into menopause.

“We’re two Pisces,” she said. “It didn’t work for me and your father, and it doesn’t work for us. I love you, but I can’t live with you.”

I look back and see that my stomach aches began the year my parents could no longer hide their animosity toward each other. Much in the same way my brother’s bedwetting started when he understood what their fights meant, that we lost our mother to her anger and our father to his vodka. The more our parents fought and the longer we all lived in the same house together, the worse our symptoms of anxiety became. Mom shut down emotionally and moved to the other end of the house, Dad simply stopped coming home.

Mom’s personality changed drastically since her surgery. The selfish, angry woman I knew all my life quickly transformed into a loving and grateful septuagenarian. Perhaps when Dr. Almond scraped and straightened out her carotid artery, he cleaned away her bitterness and aversion to showing me affection. The fresh rush of blood to her brain filling her veins with a sense of security in her new life of limited responsibility. She says she misses my father and wishes things were different between them. My brother, whom she traditionally favored as the masculine child in our Italian family of three, has all but disappeared from her daily thoughts.

I suppose I’m a good daughter now, at least Mom says I am. I take her to doctor’s appointments; help pay her rent and buy her food. I make sure she spends time with my granddaughter, Xali. Mom showers Xali with the kind of affection she never showed me, and I

am grateful. My mother's wellbeing is my responsibility. Yet I don't feel this because of any deep, daughterly love. I want to love her deeply. I wish we were close and had a strong bond. I find myself angry with her whenever she says thank you for taking care of her, or when she tells me she loves me and puts her hand my arm. I bristle at her touch, pull away as I tell her I love her, too. I mean it; I do love my mother. But years of raising myself hardened me to genuine affection, especially from her. I am numb in her presence, at the same time terrified that she might suffer and die alone.

There's a sense of obligation to provide the same measured care and comfort to my mother as she provided for me when I was a child. It's my job, my duty as her daughter. I am as emotionally distant and tolerant of her idiosyncrasies as she was of mine. But now I am the shadow in the corner, absent from her idyllic family portrait, always dodging the camera.

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