

PEBBLES AND SHARDS

by

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ABSTRACT

Pebbles and Shards is a collection of personal essays based on family relationships that focus upon motherhood, responsibility, and the complexity of love and loss. The essays explore how people cope with the inevitability of loss and how they move beyond that loss to find something meaningful, perhaps even beautiful. They reflect upon success and failure in the face of loss and how, either way, life goes on, heedless of people's desires and plans.

The essays in *Pebbles and Shards*, while meant to stand alone, are thematically connected so that, read together, each story resonates with the others. In "Promises," I explore the fear of watching my mother die of Alzheimer's disease. In related essays "Frame by Frame" and "In Darkness," I focus on my mother's efforts to struggle with Alzheimer's and how, as an adopted daughter, I underwent a role-reversal and became the mother figure.

Other essays, such as "Heart of a Deadhead" and "Circus," consider the mothering impulse, especially the guilt and conflict that so often accompany my desire to nurture others. In attempting to support and strengthen those who seem "weak," I have sometimes found that my own actions and thoughts underscore a deeper weakness in myself.

As a collection, *Pebbles and Shards* contemplates the suffering and joy that is a family.

For my Family. Those I grew up with, and those I've found along the way.

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My father, C.D. Kindle, is the genesis of my own need for family storytelling. My voice and style are direct descendants of his low Appalachian drawl and, hopefully, his honesty.

My greatest thanks and deepest debt goes to my mother, Myrtle “Bobbie” Kindle, who throughout her life and in spite of her illness taught me that incredible strength and courage can hold on to a quiet dignity in even the most terrible of circumstances, and who demonstrated that within certain types of people some spark of love is never forgotten.

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BRIDGE OF SILK

Like everything in life, the writing builds on what has come before. Cause and effect. The effect was writing. But, the cause was reading.

I was ten years old, flat on my back on my bedroom floor, wedged into the three feet of space between the bed and the wall. It was my favorite reading spot, and I'd pull my pillow down and lie there for hours devouring page after page of whatever book I happened to have found in the school library. In the beginning, it had been *Alice in Wonderland* and Nancy Drew stories. The standard fare a ten-year-old normally finds.

I could hear my mother calling me, but I just wasn't ready to answer yet. I had a chapter to finish.

"Edie? Edie, where are you? EDITH LENORA KINDLE, you answer me right now!" From the tone of my mom's strident voice, I could tell that she was considering whether or not to be annoyed. She clearly wasn't going away. She came to the door of my room, where she knew I'd be, muttering, "Maybe she's playing with her friends for a change."

"I'm here, Ma." I shouted, but the sound was probably muffled by my position.

Recently, I had stumbled upon the witch scene from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, excerpted in a volume of *The Book Of Knowledge* encyclopedias that my mother had bought for me when I was born, and had tracked down the full version to find out what was going on. I was hammering away at the language of Shakespeare with every ounce of my experience with the King James Version of the *Bible*, our core household book, but it was slow going and took a lot of

concentration. I understood only a part, but if I read it out loud phonetically it seemed to make more sense. I had been whispering to myself and wrestling with letters that just didn't go together, but I liked the way the words looked on the page and was determined to make sense of them.

Losing myself in the story, I didn't have to think about my disabled sister's aberrant behavior or my mother's worry about it. I didn't have to think about my father's absence into the three jobs he was holding down to support the family; the gaping hole he left in our lives. I didn't have to think about anything except finding the story and living in its fresh new world. Although I couldn't conquer enough of the Shakespeare yet to step inside, his work promised to be a wide land that I could wander in for a very long time.

My mother leaned her head around the corner of the bed. "Have you been here all *day*? It's a beautiful day. Go on outside. You don't need to be cooped up in here all the time."

I just looked at her. Couldn't she see what I was thinking? The sun would come up tomorrow. Right now, I was doing THIS.

"Young lady, I'm not gonna talk to you a second time. Git!"

She wasn't going to let it go this time, so I stuck a gum wrapper between the pages to hold my spot and dragged myself up onto the bed. I knew she loved that I was a reader, the only one in my family, and would leave me alone later if I would go outside now. Striking a silent bargain, I put on my shoes to go find out who was hitting baseballs.

The worst part about living in stories, however, was that they ended. No matter how complex, how extensive, how beautiful or heartbreaking, they would eventually end and there

would be no more. *The Lord of the Rings* might take a relatively long time to read, especially if you drew it out by tacking on *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*, but eventually you would have to leave Middle Earth. You couldn't stay in Rivendell and live with the Elves as an archer who carved intricate wooden boxes from mallorn branches and wore long dresses with sleeves that touched the ground and blended in with the soft green of the forest. You just couldn't.

Unless you took up the story from where the author left off. If you did that, you could stay anywhere you wanted. Or, later, go somewhere you'd never been. And thus I began to write fiction.

I didn't write for others. No one read my work. Perhaps, if the Internet had existed in the 1970s and early 1980's like does today, I would have been brave and found others that shared my loves and adventures. I would have found one of the thousands, perhaps millions, of fan fiction groups that populate every facet of the Web.

But it didn't, and I didn't know anyone else that wrote but me, barely anyone else who loved to read like I did. Books seemed like any other commodity that one buys at the store and enjoys, like the glass figurines that my mother collected. They were lovely and delicate, but you didn't make them at home. Books and art were made by artists, far away on a rarified plane of existence where regular working folk, uneducated post office clerks like my father and homemakers like my mother who lived in the real world, were never allowed to go. So I wrote for myself and, aside from a nebulous impossible wish that I could somehow climb up to the writer's plane, it was enough.

There *was* another effect stemming from my constant reading. Despite my spotty school attendance, I scored off the charts in English and vocabulary. My English teachers loved me. Our

high school did not, however, have any creative writing classes and I never made any connection between the writing I did for school, academic persuasive writing for the most part, and the stories I invented—how the Grand Duchess Anastasia escaped from her family’s massacre, stole a Faberge egg, and met Rasputin, who had also escaped through the clever manipulation of a hole in space and time, and who would trap that hole inside the egg so they could both wander the past as Russian personifications of good and evil. Stories were for fun, academic writing was for others.

Once I graduated from high school, I got a job in a finance company and stopped writing creatively, vowing to live in the “real” world like the adults I knew. I even stopped reading for a little while, but that didn’t last beyond a few months. My world felt constricted without books, colorless and boring. And even without a pen in my hand, I couldn’t stop mentally arranging and rearranging the things I experienced into the things that didn’t exist, storylines of what should have happened or what could have happened if one variable or another had been different. Later, I would jot ideas down and toss them in a drawer, forgetting them until I opened the drawer to add another. From time to time I would empty the drawer and throw the scraps away so I could use the space for something practical. Inevitably, I would fill it up again with scribbled napkins and pieces of envelope.

Eventually, I did end up in college as what they called a “nontraditional” student. Which meant, at least in my case, that I was old. Older than the normal student, at least. In my mid-thirties, I felt like I was scurrying to catch up at every turn. However, the time delay worked in my favor in one important way: Sometime in the 1990’s, creative writing programs had become

popular in the U.S. More important, there was one near my home at Apopka, Florida—the University of Central Florida. I could work and go to school at the same time, focusing on fiction at last.

A few years later, I was in the midst of completing my B.A. in Creative writing. As I walked out of my intermediate nonfiction writing class, I was completely in shock. It was a transformative moment that I thought about for a long time, the moment I learned writing nonfiction could bring about personal discovery. I could literally feel my pulse in my fingertips as I tightly clasped my notebook to my chest for the long walk back to the campus parking garage.

It had been a workshop class, and I had just spent the last half hour in silence while twenty-four undergraduates discussed my latest memoir. Sitting in horror, I had listened to one of my classmates, a six-foot tall straight-talking black girl named Daisii describe the events within my work, believing that she was utterly misreading my piece. As she argued with several of my classmates about the meaning of the story, about the most basic question of *what is this story about*, she struck me as being completely off the mark.

I had been in workshops several times before and had long gotten over the standard stage fright involved in offering my writing for dissection. Workshops were for improving the work and, as an older student who had held several previous jobs, it was hardly the first time that I'd been critiqued on a professional level, or even a personal one for that matter. I had enough confidence in my writing to know that it wasn't going to be anywhere near the worst piece anyone would read in the class (although it wouldn't be the best either) and also to know that, if

nothing else, my style and technique were clear enough so that there would be no confusion over the basic premise of the story.

Yet, there I sat, listening to Daisii battle it out with at least three other people.

The guy across the room was having none of her argument. “Look, the whole story is focused on the store. The store is the main character. Her husband is in the store, is part of the story, but it’s not *about* her husband. It’s about the break-in and losing what she worked for.”

Yes! I thought. *Thank you.* That was what I was trying to write about, the story I was telling. The break in had been devastating, and I wanted to capture that on the page. *Why didn’t she get it?* Was it an age thing? She was at the most in her early twenties, about ten years old when my story took place. Was it a cultural thing? She was black, I was white; could that be it? No, my audiences up until this point had been totally diverse. There was no reason to think either one of those things had caused any confusion. My heart sank. Daisii wasn’t the type to just not understand the point of a story. She was usually right on the money. Clearly, it was my writing that had failed.

Slamming her forefinger onto the pages for emphasis, Daisii summed up her argument. “No, look, on page three second paragraph. Where she says that bit about her husband. Look at the words she uses. She’s angry. Totally pissed off. And then at the end, how it ends. I’m telling you, this is about a marriage falling apart. The store stuff is good, I get it, but that’s not what the story is *about.*” Then she listed other examples to bolster her stance, ending with “I’m telling you, this woman and this guy are gonna be divorced a year after this story takes place!”

And she was exactly right. My husband and I had gotten divorced nine months after our store had been broken into. I was chilled to the bone. How did she know that? I hadn’t written it,

hadn't meant to write anything at all about the relationship. Had I? And, I hadn't been angry at my husband. Never. It hadn't been his fault that a thief had ruined our livelihood.

The two combatants agreed to disagree and moved on to other elements of the story, but I didn't hear the rest of the critique. I spent the rest of class analyzing what had just happened. *How true was Daisii's read? Had I been angry? Was I still?* Not consciously, perhaps. But, looking at her examples, it was as clear to me as it was to her. It might have been subtext, but feelings and thoughts that I hadn't even been aware of stared out at me from my own words. I realized I *had* been angry, both at him and at myself. I had allowed myself to be talked into something that I wasn't sure of and trusted his expert judgment. And, because of my acquiescence, I had lost my store and, eventually, my relationship. *How could I not have known?*

This wasn't simply a physical manifestation of what I was thinking about, like a poker tell or the myriad facial expressions and actions that tip someone off when another is lying. In choosing the events that I thought were important and the words to express my thoughts and emotions surrounding those events, I unconsciously or subconsciously built connections that showed me that what I had perceived as my experiences were different from what I had imagined. It was as if tiny invisible spiders built a bridge of silk in front of my eyes. One strand was easily missed, completely transparent. All of the strands together constructed something I could walk across.

On the way back to my car, I resolved two things. The first was that I was going to seek a better friendship with Daisii outside of school. The other, that I was going to take some time away from the fiction I had always written and explore the creative side of nonfiction writing. And so, I did. Daisii and I became friends, and I became fascinated with reading and writing

nonfiction. I also revised essays of my experiences innumerable times, exploring facets of what happened and why until I reached what felt true. The essay in this collection entitled “Pebbles of Glass” is one direct result of the exploration born of that workshop. “Heart of a Deadhead” is another.

At first, it was a struggle for me to find the art in nonfiction. I had spent my entire life believing that fiction was the only form of creative writing. Then, in a class with the woman who would become one of the strongest influences on my writing, Professor Jocelyn Bartkevicius, I read *The Boys of My Youth*, by Jo Ann Beard. The language was lyrical, like the lilting Southern voices at my family gatherings, and each of the essays in the collection overlapped and enriched the others. But it was Beard’s technique that really caught my attention. Through her use of language and the lushness of her detail, she made the common and mundane into warmth and connection. Her essay “Bonanza” on the surface appears to be a simple tale of a young girl who stays at her grandparents’ house until she is taken home, crying, because “Bonanza made [her] sad.” It should have been boring and trite, as the “plot” of the essay consisted of daily things any child would do. But her carefully crafted choice of detail and child’s perspective, profound and naïve at once, made the essay compelling. Alternately, in her essay “The Fourth State of Matter,” Beard tells us the jolting story of the murder of her colleague and friend. What could have strayed very easily into melodrama and pathos was instead tempered beautifully, resulting in deep emotion without a trace of sentimentality. The murder of the people in the work was told directly, with the knowledge that the reader would supply the necessary empathy to carry the level of feeling required but knowing the reader could never comprehend the reality. To connect with that comprehension she used a parallel story of grief for a dying pet, something many

people have experienced, to bring the reader to understanding. Beard's book broke the wall between me and the craft of nonfiction.

However, I found that, for me, writing nonfiction was much more difficult than writing fiction. To reach the "white-hot center" of a story, as my professor Lisa Roney has described it, I had to go to the most difficult of my experiences. The paradoxes, the inconsistencies, the times my emotions and thoughts shied away from. To deconstruct them and find out what they had to say to me, how they connect with what I believed to be true. Where I once used fiction to take me away from my life, I now used nonfiction to help me understand it. As an older adult, now in my forties, I feel that I have more capacity for reflection, acceptance and brutal honesty than I had in my younger self.

But the white-hot center burns, and scabs break and ooze, often for a long time. These stories contain pain, self-doubt, embarrassment, and loss. By pushing through the pain on the page and letting myself become vulnerable, I have attempted to find the truth and art hidden in my experiences. No other piece in this collection exemplifies this more than "In the Darkness." It's the piece that I almost didn't finish. The piece that flayed me to the bone.

Kelle Groom, author of the memoir *I Wore the Ocean in the Shape of a Girl*, once talked about this perspective in an interview with the *Boston Globe* in June 2011. She said, "I was interested in going to those terrible places and re-seeing them as if I were writing a poem. I felt the possibility of something there that was not just darkness, but might have some sort of transformative possibilities. I also felt that if I went back into this story I could try to discover what had really happened instead of what I thought had happened." I saw this quote as I was doing one more revision of the essay that centers on my family's struggle with the combination

of my mother's child abuse and her late-stage Alzheimer's. I was so moved by the accuracy of Groom's words and how much they fit into my concept that I immediately changed the name to "In the Darkness."

I knew I wanted to write this piece because both child abuse and Alzheimer's stories have devolved into a kind of short-hand within American culture. They are cold-cast models that everyone recognizes and dismisses as known. When there is a news article about child abuse or dementia, readers feel they know the story the moment they read the headline, and have created their own narrative before they finish a few paragraphs. Toni Morrison once said that she wrote *The Bluest Eye* because she couldn't find any stories that dealt with her experience as a black little girl in a white-doll world. I created "In the Darkness" because I have never found anything satisfactory written about the harrowing experience of a loved one defenseless against her own memories.

All of the essays in this collection deal with family and loss in some way. I had not originally set out to create a thesis dealing with these issues, but, just as in my workshop with Daisii, what surfaced was truer than my intentions.

MONSTER

My first memory begins with a giddy drop and mounting apprehension. My mother's voice tries to soothe, speaks of sleep and what we will play later. But I know what is to come. As her arms withdraw from the crib, all the air seems withdraw as well. By the time I can draw enough breath to cry, she is gone.

I know she will come back. When the shadow that creeps up my wall touches the hanging picture, she will come. She always does, in time. But that time is not now, and now is the only place in time that I have. I grasp the hard wooden bars, square and ridged, and drag myself up to stand. Leaning my chin against the cool plastic top rail, I wait. Time passes, and she does not come. There is no shadow. An exploratory lick of the white plastic, a tangy bitterness of lotion. The separation is solid, thick with loneliness.

I can hear her voice from another room, belled with laughter. Another voice, too, a woman we like. Easing myself back down into a pool of pink blanket, I listen. Grasping my stuffed rabbit, Bunny, I find the chewing ear. Sounds without words ebb and flow, sing me down and gentle me calm. I hum with them; the purring vibration in my chest and throat is pleasant. We sing together for a time, until my shadow finally appears.

With the darkness comes the thrill of anticipation. I haul myself to my feet, holding tightly to the bars as I stand; my eyes never leave the doorway. I watch my shadow as it grows, getting fatter as it eats the light. Desire for her presence increases, until it is a hot ache.

The door is not closed and I still hear their voices, rising and falling just beyond. Happy tones that don't include me. Betrayal stabs quick and deep. She has forgotten. She will not come.

I will go to her.

With a flutter of possibilities, I stretch both arms up as far as I can reach and hook them over the top rail. I raise myself upward, inch by shivering inch. Trying to lift a foot to scale the impossible height, wing muscles sizzle and twitch. I am not even close to the top. The gate of the crib is too high; I am too short. I rage at my failure, and at the confinement of my cage.

Then I remember that it goes down. My mother does something to the gate, something on the bottom of the top bar, under the plastic part, and it goes down. Hands rummage, fingers fiddle, and then—the gate moves. It slides just a bit, and then a bit more when I push hard, and finally it's down to my chest. It moved, and I made it happen. I laugh at my cleverness. I am invincible.

Until I find myself astraddle the crib's top bar and feel my weight shift and wobble. On my stomach, one leg teetering inside the crib, the other clamped to the outside, both hands holding on. I hope for rescue. It is higher than I had imagined; the floor yawns darkly below. Danger prickles hot. Everything in my life shrinks to a single moment, fighting for control.

Staying in control means staying in the crib. To get out, I will have to lose control, let myself fall. I can't think of falling; it is too terrifying. Too unknown. But, with thoughts of rescue comes the memory of my mother's warmth. My yearning for it.

I can't think, so I act instead. Swinging both legs over the side, I hold on to the top rail until I am dangling outside the crib. Eyes closed, I let go. And I fall.

My feet hit the carpet first, followed quickly by my heavily diapered behind. I sit in a heap, stunned. Far above me, I see the top of the crib and know that I will never sleep there

again, never allow that to happen. I will never be confined, held back from love and comfort and safety.

I feel momentary sorrow that I have lost Bunny forever, but then my mother's voice wafts in through the doorway and all other thoughts are muted. I know she'll be proud when she sees what I can do, and I go to find her.

My mother is in the living room, drinking coffee with the woman we like. Because it's not possible that I'm not in my crib, she stares at me for a few moments before putting her cup down.

"Why, you little stinker, what are you doing out here?" She swoops me up, and the rush of movement mixes with my bubble of pride.

"You must have left the crib down," the other woman says. "Better watch that. That girl could have broken her neck."

The tone of their voices isn't right. They are not elated.

My mother hugs me tighter, and I squirm a little under the pressure. "I know I put that thing up, Shirley. I'm just sure of it. You think it's broken?"

"Let's go find out."

They march back to my room, and I try to cling tightly to my mother's collar, to her sleeve, to her hand as she lays me back in my crib. I reach up as she lifts the gate to lock me in, abandoning me once again.

I'm howling with pure frustration. By the time the women check to verify the gate has clicked into place, I'm back on my feet, shaking the wooden bars. Bunny flies over the side into nothingness, as rejected as I am.

“Got a temper, that one,” Shirley observes.

“You have no idea. Likes her own way, just like her Daddy. Can’t tell her nothin’ but she does the opposite.” She ruffles my hair gently and smiles, and I try to hit her arm with my fist.

“That’s enough little girl. You go on and take your nap, and we’ll all go out and play with Aunt Shirley when you wake up, okay?” She lays me back down in my crib, and they turn to leave.

I’m back on my feet by the time they reach the door.

The lock is easier to find this time. Fear forgotten, I pound on the gate. *How dare she turn her back? Walk away? Not love me back?* Fat fingers jab and pull, punctuated by screams of powerless fury. I know where the lever moves but not quite how to make it do so.

Click

And I’m dangling over the edge before the women have time to rush across the room. I feel the emptiness yawning beneath my feet this time and don’t let go, warned of danger by my mother’s swishing skirt and her involuntary cry. The sound startles me, freezes my fingers to the railing. My mother is afraid, and I know it is my fault. My fierce, demanding rage has hurt my mother. Anger ashes into sorrow as she scoops me up against her body, warm and solid and devastating. I am a monster, and undeserving of her love. I go limp.

“Mommy’s little smarty-pants, what am I going to do with you?” I snuffle into her shirt, too stricken to show my face.

“Looks like it’s time for the big-girl bed,” Shirley says. “I don’t know how you’re gonna keep her in that crib anymore.”

My mother is trying to tilt my face to hers, but I try harder to burrow into her breasts, where her heart beats. “Is that what you want? You want to sleep in the big-girl bed?”

She has shown me the big-girl bed before, the place where I will sleep when I am bigger and wiser and better than I am now. *Someday this will be your room, and you'll sleep in a big-girl bed like Mommy.* I nod my head yes because this is the answer she seems to want, but it's not true. I care nothing for the big-girl bed.

“Okay, then, Baby Girl. We'll put you in the big-girl bed and you go to sleep for Mommy, okay?” I nod my head yes again. Hoping to purge my shame, to win back her love, I'll do whatever she wants.

They take me to another room, where they push the small bed against the wall and build a fort with blankets. I watch them listlessly, utterly drained. Another day it might be exciting, sleeping in the big-girl bed, but not today. There is no window in this room, so my shadow will never come. Bunny is lost. So am I.

“Do you think she'll fall out?” My mother has created an embankment of white pillows across the edge of the bed. It looks odd. Colorless. Lumpy. I don't remember the big-girl bed looking like this.

“Not with that pile of blankets.”

“Maybe we should make a pile under the bed, in case she does?”

She lifts me up, lays me down in the nest she's created. I lie where I'm put, trying not to be comfortable and failing.

“She'll be fine, Bobbie. She just got out of a crib; that kid's got rubber bones. She'll be fine. We'll keep an eye on her until she falls asleep.”

As my eyes close, I feel my mother's lips on my cheek. I can feel Bunny as she slips him into my arms.

“I’m proud of you baby,” she whispers. “You’re getting to be such a big girl. Nite-nite, Punkin.”

I open my eyes and reach for her cheek, and my need is overwhelming. But, as sleep pulls, I can’t stop her from leaving. She goes once again and I am left exhausted and alone.

HEART OF A DEADHEAD

The summer of 1969 was my last time to play before the more serious life of a first-grader began. I didn't need to wait until school started to find out where I belonged in the world. From the moment I saw our neighbor Kipper, at the start of the sultry Japanese-beetle-laden summer, I knew I wanted to be like her. To be liked by her. To be what my mom called "a dirty hippie." And, like all first loves, it ended in heartache and changed me to the core.

Kipper was, at fourteen, a real teenager. The kind of person I admired but had never had the opportunity to interact with. My cousins were teenagers, too, but they ignored me and sent me out of their rooms while they did their teenager things, which seemed to involve a lot of rock records, zippo lighters with pictures of skeletons and peace signs on them, and pieces of dead plants rolled up in paper. Kipper, though, began to spend weekday afternoons in June with my friend Cathy and me at Cathy's house, just down the street from mine at the end of the suburban block that marked the boundary of my neighborhood exploration. Kipper's house was the last house on the block.

At the time, I thought she hung around because she liked us even though we were kindergarteners. By July, I was going down to Cathy's house every day after I'd finished my lunch, wanting to spend every moment possible with my two best friends.

I began trying to find clothes for my Barbie that Kipper might wear, scuffing them up so they didn't look new. She always wore a leather headband with feathers on it in her long, straight brown hair, and blousy woven-fiber shirts with lots of necklaces. These were hard to find for Barbie, but not impossible. Easier were the brightly colored geometric maxi-dresses that dusted

the sidewalk and always seemed to unravel. Kipper also wore beaded leather moccasins, frayed at the seams where the cowhide had worn through, and I was never able to discover anything for Barbie that I could even pretend looked like moccasins. I tried to find clothes like that in the store for myself too, but Mom wouldn't let me buy them. She said they were trashy. Instead, Mom dressed me in stretchy polyester short sets—solid shorts with a print top in exactly matching shades: lavender, blue, avocado.

I never saw Kipper as anything but exotic, her life just what I knew I would someday have. She ate whenever she pleased, and even carried sandwiches around in her hand right out of the kitchen. She sometimes let us kids watch, no parents in sight, as she made herself a peanut butter sandwich in Cathy's kitchen, slapping it together in no time flat and then just walking right out of the kitchen with it, no plate at all. She would pour our ice water into three Dixie cups and allow Cathy and me to take them for ourselves right off the counter and into any room we wanted. Then, when we were done, she'd just throw it all away. Every day. The decadence made me giddy.

That just didn't happen at my house. We had rules about food. I ate breakfast when my mother made us breakfast, lunch when she made us lunch, and always in the kitchen. Mom would set my bowl and silverware on the kitchen table (not the big dining room table...that was for when we had company) in front of my chair, and then set her bowl and silverware in front of her chair just so. We would have hot tomato soup, and she would fill our cups with Kool-aid from a green plastic pitcher. And when we had grilled cheese sandwiches, they would always be on plates. Then we would talk about school, about crayons, about whatever came into our heads. Food took a long time at my house. Plates stayed on the table, and bottoms stayed on the chairs

until the meal was done. When we finished, Mom cleared the dishes, wash them, and put them away. Paper plates and plastic cups were only for the picnics we had outside, or on special days in front of the TV. Certainly not for every day.

Kipper could wear whatever she wanted, too. She told us that her dad had “split” and her mom “believed in freedom,” so she could do whatever she wanted, even wear the same clothes four days in a row. I figured no one in our house “believed in freedom,” because if I got dirty my mother would have a conniption. Mom would have me change out of my school clothes, usually a patterned skirt and cotton blouse, and into the matching polyester jumpers and short sets that made up my play clothes the moment I got home from school. If we went anywhere at all that evening, like to church, I’d have to wash and change into clothes even fancier and more uncomfortable than my school clothes (usually involving lace, which I hated). Mom said she’d spent half her life on her knees picking cotton, and *she* wasn’t about to see *her* daughter running around in “dirty old dungarees, all junky and sloppy looking.” Other people’s children could do what they liked, but *her* little girl would look nice.

Kipper said that my mom felt that way because Mom was a *square*, and not a *hippie* like *we* were. The words *hippie* and *we* soldered themselves together and into my bones. I didn’t know what a *square* was, but I didn’t want to be one. Especially if it involved lace.

All summer, I lived through the mornings to get to the afternoons. As summer passed, I started to wonder at the things Kipper said. Things that seemed have meanings that were just out of my grasp. *We are all one*. What did *that* mean? One what? *All bound together means all are free, if the bond is love*. No one else I knew ever talked like that. Other conversations included *Honey, pull up your socks* or *When the pastor says “Let us pray,” that means you bow your head*

and close your eyes, okay? Directions to follow or observations about my personal self. Words that I didn't need to agree with or think about. Conversations with Kip made me think of things I'd never thought of before. They felt like the day my training wheels came off the bike and I didn't fall. Exciting and scary at the same time.

Sometimes I summoned up enough courage to ask questions.

"Kip, you were saying about world peace. What's that, world peace?" I had only the most vague understanding at this point in my life what *the world* meant—the place that had everything in it. The word *peace* had no meaning to me at all.

Kipper crushed dandelion bits into the porch where we were sitting. "It comes when people stop fighting each other. When people love each other and treat everyone like equals." She leaned over to sweep the flower pieces into the grass with the side of her hand, and then sat directly in front of me, cross-legged. "Look at me," she said. She was telling me something important, something special. I knelt in front of her like an acolyte.

"I want you guys to hear stuff your parents and the establishment aren't ever going to tell you. The lies they tell so The Man keeps control." I nodded wisely. I had no idea who or what an establishment was, or The Man either, but I wasn't going to tell her that. She spoke about how everyone needed to be united, all races and religions. "Like you and me. I'm a grown-up and you're a kid, but we're still sisters, right? That's what being equal means. Hippies know that," Kipper said.

I beamed at her. She was my *sister*. And I knew that she would be my sister forever.

At the end of that August, Mom and I were taking a walk around the neighborhood enjoying the cooler late afternoon. I always loved these walks, since I wasn't supposed to go around the block by myself. When we got near the corner, I saw Kipper sitting across the street in the yard with two friends, a girl and an older boy. He was tall and wore a fringed brown leather vest and high suede boots that came all the way up to the middle of his thighs and tied in front. His jeans had colorful designs painted on them, and were very pretty. Kipper was standing close to him and playing with a long, blue-striped feather that hung out of his even longer slack-brown hair.

I urged Mom to walk faster, planning to run from her side across the street when we got close enough. I wanted to meet this boy. Teenage boys were exciting and rare, and I'd never seen one with Kipper before. As we reached the corner, I started jumping up and down and waving my arm to get Kipper's attention. I started yelling across the street. "Kipper. Kipper! KIP! It's me, it's Edie. HEY KIPPER!!!" She glanced over at us. I was just sure she saw me and prepared myself to fly across the street. But then, Kipper turned her back to us. Confused, I froze... then waved more wildly. "KIPPERRRR!!!" The boy pointed over at us, but Kipper shook her head, nodded toward her door. They went in the house, leaving me. Just like my cousins, she didn't want me around. I never wanted to see Kip's face again.

"What is *wrong* with you?" my mother said. "Do you *know* that girl?" She was looking across the street at the closed door with a frown.

"She plays with us at Cathy's house. She was my friend." *Sister.*

“Oh,” my mother said. “Cathy’s babysitter. Honey, she’s with her friends right now. She can’t come play with you. Big girls and boys have to play by themselves, okay?” She started dragging me around the bend in the corner, down the sidewalk.

I shuffled through the rest of our walk, probing my hurt like a loose, bloody tooth.

Yet, even with my first rejection aching in my memory, my fascination with hippie culture held strong. The passing of the summer and my relationship with Kipper, who more or less evaporated from my life when I never returned to Cathy’s house after her rebuff and she no longer sat for Cathy’s parents once school started, only dulled the ardor for a time.

Maybe it was the strange, psychedelic influences of the Sid and Marty Krofft live-action kids’ shows that I adored. *H.R. Pufnstuf*, its very name a take-off on drug culture, was a frenetic romp amid stoner trees, with music, a wild cackling witch trying to steal a magic flute, and a dragon protecting an adorable English boy (my first crush) at its core. *The Bugaloos*, another live-action show in the Krofft stable, featured four British teenaged insects (although I thought of them as fairies) who had a band and constantly struggled with the evil and jealous Benita Bizarre. Benita wanted to be in the band, but she was untalented and ugly. I felt her pain. I later learned that even Phil Collins, later a member of the art-rock band Genesis, wanted to be part of the Bugaloos band. Sadly for him, they turned him down.

Bands were everywhere on T.V. in my early 1970’s childhood, and I religiously watched them all. *The Monkees. Mission Magic*, with the young Aussie star Rick Springfield, gorgeous dark hair cascading down his shoulders. *The Partridge Family*, my ultra–ultimate bar-none favorite. I thought of them as hippies, since they played rock music, traveled freely, and didn’t

have jobs like those the people I knew of did. As protective as my parents were, they approved of the moral-friendly story of a young family band on the road, and I had every record they ever made. And, of course, every solo album from heartthrob David Cassidy, the teenage boy from the series, and every issue of *Tiger Beat* magazine that feature (or even mentioned) him inside its covers. Other ten-year-old girls might think Bobby Sherman was a fox, but they were chumps. David Cassidy was where it was *AT*.

As a child who knew nothing of Ken Kesey, nothing of protests or drugs or civil rights within my carefully sheltered white suburban life, I still knew I wanted to be “on the bus.” I just thought that meant the Partridge Family bus, where the worst thing that could happen was sometimes being sprayed by a skunk before a gig, or getting your heart broken by a runaway girl from Albuquerque. Mom and Dad didn’t know it, but while I was dreaming of going on the road and singing with a band like my idols did, some gypsy-like musical instinct was becoming hardwired inside me.

Someday, I knew, I would travel the world. And later I would, as often as possible, throwing a bag of clothes into my car and driving off to discover locations unknown and unplanned.

Someday, I thought I would sing in a band. And though I didn’t, due to a resounding case of stage fright, I did sing in my high-school chorus and Madrigal group (which hardly counts, I know, when your idols were quintessential British bands). And I *would* be lucky enough to see literally hundreds of concerts, from popular artist such as David Bowie and Tina Turner to obscure bands like The Legendary Pink Dots and My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult. From Dead

Can Dance to The Cure, from Jesse Cook to Gordon Lightfoot to Silly Wizard, and witness transcendent moments in music that would almost burst my heart with the beauty and joy of it.

And then, finally, at the age of twenty-two I walked into a record store—Armadillo Records. And I would marry the owner, Craig, a man nine years older than myself who owned that record store. Someone who had tried, at the age of fourteen, to hitchhike to Woodstock in the summer of 1969, the year I'd first met Kipper.

For all of my love of the hippie movement, it wasn't until the record store and my husband's stories that I really found out what it was all about. Before the Internet, it was harder to know about the stories and voices of those one didn't naturally hear in their own life. At least, it was for me. Perhaps I was simply oblivious. I was never part of the drug culture in high school, never part of any group at all beyond my church and a few of my friends, "the smart kids," who never were included any anything remotely cool. Things like protests and drugs just didn't come up in our conversation. It seems impossible now that I could have been so passionate about music during the '70s and that naïve about the lyrics of songs at the same time. But I was. The stories in the music were just that—stories. Like the books I voraciously read, they were fiction, and weren't real. For me, they were just thought experiments. I didn't lose my virginity until I was eighteen. Didn't smoke my first joint until I was twenty-one. Throughout high school, I was my mother's good girl.

From the moment I began hanging out with Craig at his record store, he expanded my understanding of the stories within the music that I loved. He told me me of the shootings at Kent State while playing me Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young records. Told of Vietnam while

playing Phil Ochs. Told me of the draft and Arlo Guthrie. It was astounding to me to realize that, while I was watching the Bugaloos and dreaming of British teenagers, many American teenagers were dying or being shot by their own government—my government. It was strange to understand that Kipper’s words, the things she was trying to tell me so many years ago, had meaning and gravity that I had never known (and perhaps that she herself hadn’t quite known). I built a vision in my mind of “the courageous hippie.” The unified counter-culture, fighting for equality and the end of war. A clan rising up against all that was wrong in the world.

So when Mike, one of our regular customers, came into the store a few years later and asked me if I wanted to join his merry band on a road-trip to follow the Grateful Dead in July of 1990, I was ready to go. I wanted to see the counter culture. Finally experience part of that hippie “family” that I’d yearned for as a child. My husband agreed to handle the store while I was gone, and I packed my duffle bag.

Mike was too young to qualify as a *real* hippie—he was probably about twenty-six at the time, the same age as me—but he had the look I recognized. Shoulder-length, sandy-blond curly hair, fuzzy mustache, and a persistent smile. He lived in home-made tie-dye and tour shirts. He’d been coming into the store almost every week for months, and I’d gotten to know him by chatting for hours about the best beers (he was a Bud man, I leaned toward Michelob if I couldn’t get Tucher) or the best bands (he was strictly a Grateful Dead/old hippie fan, and I could never decide—it could be a Cure day, a Metallica day, or a Jefferson Airplane day depending on my mood); and also by trading bootleg live concerts. I’d been trading all kinds of band tapes, from Bob Dylan to Nick Cave, for years with everyone and had some really rare

stuff, but Mike only wanted Dead tapes. I guess he thought I was a Deadhead because I had so many Dead concerts. I wasn't—I just liked listening to the music and building my collection.

Mike *was* a real Deadhead. Lots of people have lots of opinions about what makes a “real” Deadhead, but Mike knew the song list to every show he'd ever been to, and even the song lists for some entire years, and to me that qualified. He'd been following them for at least a month every year for many years, and sold hand-made tie-dye to finance his tours. This year he'd bought an old school bus for the occasion, and took out all the seats but the front four in order to install four sets of bunk beds and a pantry. We had a party before we left to paint it inside from top to bottom in neon colors. We were going to paint the outside too, but Mike said we'd get stopped by the cops constantly if we did, so we didn't. He was right too—all during the tour we passed car after bus after brightly-painted van that was being searched by police. My artistic contribution was a brightly-colored armadillo to symbolize my store, jumping through the air and morphing into a dancing bear, which was—and is—an international symbol of Deadheads. It wasn't very good; I can't paint worth a damn. I painted it in the wall space of my lower bunk so it wouldn't show much, but I still felt a bit guilty at the representation. It seemed to say that I was one of them, and in my heart I knew I was just a tourist.

I felt so guilty that I had to talk to Mike about it before we left. I had learned from the music that honesty and sincerity were vital to the culture, and I didn't want to misrepresent myself. I might be a tourist, but I wasn't a liar.

“Mike, I have to come clean about something. I really want to go with you guys, but, honestly, I'm not a Deadhead. I like the music and all, and I've heard a few shows, but I'm not

sure I'll fit in, ya know?" I frowned pitifully and mentally willed him to be indulgent. He laughed at me. I wasn't quite sure how to take this.

Then he looked at me with an unusually serious expression, and said, "Girl, you know about as much about what it *means* to be a Deadhead as anyone I've ever met. You got the heart. You got the soul. This'll be great for you." He grinned and added, "Besides, I asked some guys I ran into at a party to come, and they're not Deadheads, so it's no big deal. Just have fun." I was relieved. I thought I knew what "the heart of a Deadhead" meant.

The plan was to meet up in Indiana with a childhood friend of Mike's and catch the last five dates on the summer tour, which were two shows at Deer Creek, IN and three more outside Chicago at the World Amphitheatre. Afterward, we would head out to Wisconsin to drop off Mike's friend. We left almost a week before the show, because on the trial run it was discovered that the school bus would just barely squeak its way over 55 m.p.h.

On the way to Indiana, we drove all day, and then at about 6 P.M. each night we would stop at some State Park or other that Mike had plotted and cook food and play with the campfire. It was strange. Looking out the bus window, watching the landscape change as we drove, my mind wandered into creative places I hadn't thought about in years, places that held writing and crafting and all of the things I "used to do" before I'd immersed myself in running the Armadillo. Places that didn't involve replacing store stock, or making rent, or any of the day-to-day details the clog the mental drain. I remembered that I hadn't made anything in ceramic or stained glass in years, never learned the guitar like I'd planned. I wondered why I hadn't seen my mother in months, wondered how my family was doing. Wept quietly to myself as we drove through

Tennessee hills when I realized I didn't know where my Great Aunt Goldie and Great Uncle Luther were buried, the family icons that I had grown up visiting who told stories of the Depression and rural Appalachia.

I recognized that I was out of touch with my own life, my own thoughts, and promised myself that I would pay more attention to what was going on around me, try and connect.

And so, I spent the driving time getting to know my new family. Mike was the daddy—he had the bus, and he ran the show. Mike planned where we went, made sure we had tickets for the shows, checked the grocery supply and herded us as one might herd cats. Mike's wife was in Chicago visiting her sister. We would pick her up before the Chicago concerts. Next in the chain was a couple who were family friends of Mike's—Christy and Mark. She was a vegetarian, and Mark and I bonded over the shared view that vegetarianism was a good theory, but defied practice.

Then there were the group of three guys, Mike's "party friends," who seemed to be slackers who were pretty much there for the drugs. Drugs, aside from an occasional social usage, weren't part of my life, so we had little in common. One of them played guitar, and we would all sing in the bus, or at dusk around the campfire—but that was the extent of his communication skills. Rarely would he speak, never would he hold a conversation. The second was a hulking blond-haired giant of a guy who gave the impression of being a third-string linebacker. He talked, but after a few days I no longer listened, not being a fan of strong opinions about cheap beer. The third was non-descript, a follower in all things. He had a whine to his voice, and fell solidly into the category of omega—last to get tickets, last to eat. The other two didn't seem to like him, but all three hung around each other consistently. I never figured out if the three of

them were burn-outs at a very young age or were just airheads. I called them “The Boys” and left them alone after a few days of trying to find something interesting to talk about. The Boys didn’t do interesting. They did Budweiser bongos.

We rolled into the Deer Creek Music Center early in the afternoon, an open-air stadium with an enormous parking lot. It was already a madhouse. Cars and colors as far as the eye could see. Since we were a bus and would be spending the night in the “camper” section of the parking lot, we were accorded the privilege of a *residents* sticker and were given a special parking area near the front of the arena. As we moved down the row to park, Mike kept stopping to yell out the window to other campers he’d known from other tours. It was a homecoming, and we were the home team. The daytrippers, here for the show and then gone, were the outsiders.

The minute we were settled, Mike grabbed my wrist. When I looked over, he was grinning and bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. “C’mon,” he said, “it’s time to meet The People.” He dropped my wrist and grabbed a long wooden walking staff that had a big blue crystal hand-wired to the top of it and started walking down the lot row.

I scrambled after him. *The People* were exactly who I wanted to meet. Our people. Hippie people.

“Here’s some stuff for you to know, okay?” He stopped and pulled me over between an old white VW Van that had large purple dots painted all over it with the logo “Microdot” scrolled on the side and an open-backed hearse that held a make-shift coffin bearing the likeness of the skeleton from the Dead album cover of “Skull and Roses” holding a stuffed Dancing Bear.

He assumed the voice of a master imparting tradition to the apprentice. “First, when someone says ‘Hey Now,’ say ‘Hey Now’ back. It’s an easy way to tell if a person is really a Deadhead or just a tourist.”

“Is that because of the song ‘Iko Iko’?” I asked. I figured everything would pretty much be based on song lyrics here.

“Right.” He grinned at me. “Now, *kind* means good... like kind bud, kind people, and kind stickers. You know, from the line in *Uncle John’s Band*...” he started to sing, *Wo, oh, what I want to know is, are you kind?* He kept singing as we walked.

All the gypsy vendors were out in full force. There were the usual tie-dyed t-shirts and Guatemalan pants and purses, of course. This show, though, there was everything from tie-dye diapers to life-size stuffed Jerry dolls. It was the end of summer tour, and people were starting to wonder how they were going to have enough money to get home again, so prices were good and all the things people had originally bought for themselves were now on the table. I bought three giant olive-pit beads carved into the likenesses of odd little Asian men’s heads, a blue-patterned change purse I could wear around my neck, and a hand-dyed tapestry of swirling primary colors and a huge Celtic knot painted in the center. As I was checking out some tour shirts in front of a van, the girl behind the table put her hand on mine.

“Hey now, Sister,” she said with a smile. She was wearing a long, colorful peasant skirt and white tank top, with blue feathers and beads woven into the strands of her dark hair. Her whole face was bathed in earnestness as her slightly-out-of-focus eyes took me in.

“Hey now. How goes it?”

“You’re from that big brown school bus, aren’t you, Sister?”

I was surprised at first, but then I'd seen how everyone noticed who was in the camper section and who wasn't, so I shrugged off the strangeness and decided it was nice to be *on the bus*, as Ken Kesey would say. To be a part of the *us*. "Yes, we're finishing out the tour."

"Sister, can I get a favor from you? We're making veggie chili tonight, and we've lost our big spoon. We can't make it without a spoon. Do you have one you can lend me—just for an hour—and I'll bring it right back to you. I know where your bus is." She pointed in the right direction. "I'll bring it right back, I swear."

I had never been part of a tightly-knit community before, part of a group of people who recognized each other as familiar, even if they'd never met. Who shared a timbre of voice, a set of mannerisms, something intangible that identified them to anyone who knew what to look for. A family resemblance not based on looks. Now, it seemed, I was. Finally.

"Sure, I'll go get it for you. Just bring it back, okay? We only have one. Before I go, how much are the shirts?"

She never missed a beat. "Thirteen each, two for twenty." Just like on the sign. No discount? Supposing she must be hard up for money, I smiled and went off to get the spoon.

Finally inside the amphitheater, my face was slick with the July heat. We were lucky to have found an empty scrap of grass far to the back. We were almost late into the show because of the thousands of people trying to get in through the gates (or over the fence) into the gigantic open bowl with the huge stage at the bottom. Lying on our backs on blankets, Christy and I were looking up into clouds that would very soon become stars as the cooler breeze of night set in. The show would start soon, and she was explaining to me how she had woven the string bracelet

on her arm. I wanted to listen but was intent on other sounds. Mike had placed a tiny hallucinogenic paper square on all our tongues just before we went in the gate, and at that moment I was matching the hum of the crowd to the hum in my body, wondering when everything would kick in. My first trip had been three days ago, scary at the beginning but ultimately profoundly lovely. This was my second, and I hoped that the fear I had initially felt the time before wouldn't recur. After all, now I was experienced.

The stars came out and a damp mist rose. A roaring started in my head that scared me, then I realized that the noise was outside my head, surrounding me. The band had come on stage to the crowd's great approval, and I wished I could stand to see them. My legs, however, were fine where they were.

"I can't move my legs," I observed, to no one in particular. Christy was no longer at my side; I didn't know when she'd left. Then, strong arms lifted me up, and Mike kissed me on the forehead, then disappeared. Lights dancing on the stage caught my attention, and as the crowd noise died down I began to hear music, notes mingling and sliding away, beginnings of an improvised tune starting, then weaving into something else entirely, one song tricked into another. I could see the band far in front of me, tiny figures in t-shirts and shorts. Jerry the silver-haired bear, moving in a determined fashion across the stage with his guitar, the two drummers drumming point and counterpoint with each other, Brent bobbing at his keyboard as if playing and dancing were interchangeable. I couldn't see the rest of the band from that angle, and it was confusing because although I saw the band in front of me, the sound was coming in from the sides rolling up and back like the tide.

Everyone surfed the sound waves in their own way. Beside me, sitting on the ground, were two girls in a cross-legged yoga position on fuzzy blue blankets. They swayed and rocked, occasionally reaching down to run fingers over the fur of their blanket. Others were spinning the way children do, eyes closed and joyous. Most, like me, were dancing. Between bouncing shoulders, I caught a glimpse of blue feathers fluttering in dark hair. I waved and tried to reach out to my spoon-girl sister, but the crowd shifted and she faded away. I forgot that I'd seen her, and kept dancing with the music that I could see as well as hear. Silver guitars. Purple drums. When I found the binoculars and remembered how to make them work, I saw Brent's face ecstatic, his arms still pounding on the keyboard as if it were a dance floor. I wondered how the music appeared to him, and when he looked at me I waved so he would know I could see his beatific smile.

By the time the band broke into Space and Drums, the midpoint of the concert when the music liquefies without vocals then suddenly solidifies into snowflake shards, falling and beating down like thunder rain and melting into pools of colored wine, I was exhausted. I lay back on the blanket and looked at the stars, watching the silver music sparkle and twine down with reds and greens. Someone I didn't know dropped beside me on the blanket and held my hand. We watched the stars move together, and I was sure than nothing in my life had ever been this beautiful. I knew everyone was sharing this single experience, and I loved them all.

After the show Mike and I walked among the vendors and listened to the drum circle, a tradition that is almost part of the concert. Anyone can join, but we were content to wander around absorbing the end-of-show ambiance before going back to the bus. When we got back,

Christy was pulling the pantry apart. I walked behind her and heard her chanting under her breath, *I'm so damn hungry, I want some rice, where's the damn spoon...*”

“Didn’t the girl bring it back?” I asked. “She was supposed to bring it back hours ago!”

I recognized the feel of real life creeping back into the dream and pushed it away.

Christy looked at me as if I’d just said I’d walk back to Florida and get her one. “You lent out our only *spoon*?!”

“I’ll go get it.” I hoped I knew where that van was.

I finally found the van, and found my spoon-sister sitting out on a blanket behind it. I put on an apologetic smile. “Hi, we need our spoon back. Got rice to make.” I expected her to jump up and apologize for forgetting.

“Hey, yeah, well, I was gonna make some soup in the morning. Do you need it right now? I can bring it by tomorrow.” Her butt never even shifted on the blanket, and her tone brooked no argument.

I had a moment of blankness. There was a sick twist as the picture of a loving sister rearranged itself into that of a spoon thief. My mind quickly flipped through available retorts. After filing “I was doing you a fucking favor, now hand it over” and “Who the hell do you think you are?” away as too harsh, I settled on “We really need it back, could you go get it please?” My smile was a little tighter this time.

“I really don’t know where it is right now.” she said.

The post-trip dreamy settling feeling vanished entirely. “It’s our spoon, we need it, get up off your ass and go find it. Please. *Sister*.”

I said this last word with a grin full of teeth that didn't reach my eyes and stared at her for a silent second.

Muttering under her breath, she dragged herself up and disappeared into the van. A scant moment later, she reappeared with the spoon. It was mostly clean.

I gave her another toothpaste grin. "Thank you."

I marched back to the bus, thinking about what a pain in the ass family can be. But maybe she was just an anomaly. I wouldn't let it ruin my evening.

The last show of the tour was in Tinley Park, near Chicago. It was the end of July. In the morning we would leave, making it back to Florida just in time for the dog days of summer. I wasn't sure how I felt about it, about going back to the routine of daily living. About selling the music instead of living it. I'd had a taste of being "on the bus," and although it was neither the out of hand joy ride of the Merry Pranksters nor the excitement of actually *being* the band like I'd wished for in my Partridge Family days, there was something about it that I wasn't ready to let go.

Being on the road was so simple, so uncluttered. Everything boiled down to *where do we go*, and *how much money do we have to make to get there*. For us, it hadn't even been that—we had brought our money with us. But I knew that, if I had to, I could sell trinkets and beer as well as anyone. I'd had five years of practice.

As I watched the ones on the road, the eternal travelers, making plans for what they would do until the Fall tour started in September, I envied them. They never had to get off the bus, never went to jobs, always met up again with "the people." The friends I'd made gave me

hugs and told me where to meet them when the next tour started. They always parked *to the right of the green gate, or over by the lake*. Most seemed to be familiar with each stadium, could describe parking lots like I could describe my living room. They had no address, no telephone. They just met on the road, at the shows. But, I wasn't going to be on the road. I had a store and a dog and a sofa with matching loveseat. Rent to pay. I didn't have the heart to tell them I'd never see them again. I wasn't really one of them after all.

The last show had been bittersweet. For everyone, because it was the last of the summer. But especially for me. At the encore, as the Dead and the rest of us sang "The Weight" together—a Band song that I'd always loved—my heart got stuck on the line *Well, I gotta go, but my friend can stick around*. Did I have to go? I didn't. It was a choice like everything else.

I tried to imagine my life as a vagabond, free to do anything. No petty details gumming up my life. No rent, no routine. But imagining the actual days, the things I would do and the people I would know, I realized that I would just end up trying to duplicate what I already had. A husband. A dog. Probably even a successful business. I wanted those things, wanted to feel like my life was moving forward. Here, always moving meant moving in circles. Not really moving at all. Just the same stadiums, the same people. Janis Joplin's version of freedom.

The song continued. "My bag is sinkin' low and I do believe it's time/To get back to Miss Anny, you know she's the only one/Who sent me here with her regards for everyone." And it was the truth. It was time to go home.

While singing with the crowd long after the band had left the stage, all of us reveling in the last few moments of Summer tour, I was glad I was straight for this one. I'd done acid at the show before this with Mike so that he didn't have to drop by himself and would be able to drive

the morning after the last show, so I knew the warm glow I felt wasn't a chemical emotion. It was really mine.

After the show was over, I wandered alone through the lot, listening and watching. Imprinting and making memories, deliberate images that I wouldn't forget. The rhythm of the drums. The feel of moving air on my arms, brushing past my hair. The smell of falafel and roasted corn. The police car slowly making its way through the crowd, followed by a half dozen or more people gazing at the lovely colored lights flashing into the night. Joyous, peaceful, and amusing all at once, without a shred of violence or care.

When I got back to the bus, Mike was drinking his Bud and making plans for the Fall tour with someone I didn't know. The rest were softly coming down in that moment of beauty before everything fades. I moved to the back of the bus, sitting on the bumper with the back door open, trying to find the cooler.

Christy burst into the front of the bus with a skinny little green-haired boy, probably no more than sixteen, in tow.

"Has anyone seen a red bus with blue wheels?" Her voice cracked through the quiet and someone on a bunk groaned. I hadn't seen it, so I went back to hunting for beer, found it, and tossed another one up to Mike who had come around to sit on the lower back bunk. I boosted myself up and sat across from him on the other bunk to talk about the djembe drums we wanted someday.

Suddenly, someone shrieked "NO!" and we both looked up to the front of the bus. The green-haired boy was cowering in a fetal position between the two front seats, and Christy and Mike's wife, who fancied themselves pagans, were chanting over him.

“Mike, make them stop it. They’re freaking him out! I’ll get the boy, you make them shut up.” I knew they wouldn’t listen to a word I said. They only listened to Mike.

Unfortunately, I’d found out on this trip that Mike had a problem with backbone. He didn’t have one. He avoided all conflict, large or small.

“He’ll be okay,” Mike said. He didn’t want to get involved.

I made the best sound I could think of to express my disgust, and strode up the bus aisle. Grabbing a blanket off the driver’s chair, I wrapped it around the boy’s bare shoulders and put my arms around him. He was shaking. I could feel how tiny he was through the thin blanket. He had the kind of body that only long-time vegans or heroin addicts ever have—slim, frail, bird-boned. I could see that his long hair was blond at the roots. He must have dyed it green at the beginning of the tour. He leaned into me like a puppy seeking protection.

“Give him a break for a minute, okay?” I said to the girls. “He’s upset and needs a few minutes of quiet.”

“We were just doing a spell so he can find his friends. He’s lost and they’re going to leave him. Is he okay?” *A spell. Lord.* I wondered if they believed the bullshit they were spewing, or if it was just the acid talking. “You know, envisioning a white aura of protection for him?”

Something evaporated inside me. Pretend. This was all pretend. And if they thought it wasn’t, that would be worse. It was Kipper and my Spoon Sister all over again. Words offered as profound that really had no meaning at all to the hearts of the ones that spoke them. My readiness to go home solidified.

Both girls were still a little out of it, so I tried to focus their attention on something else. They needed distraction. “He’s fine, he just needs some quiet to get it together. You know, I really, really want a beer, and we’re out. Will you guys go get one for me?”

Anything to please. They were gone to look for beer.

I lay my cheek on the head of the shivering puddle in my arms. “Do you want something to drink?” I whispered. He unfolded a little and turned his face to look at me. His eyes were nothing but pupil, and he didn’t blink. He was soaring. I started to worry.

A lost boy on acid at the end of a tour in the middle of thousands of people seemed like a serious problem. Especially one as rattled as this. I tried to figure out what to do.

“We have some water, and some orange juice.” I didn’t want to give him beer.

His shaking slowed down a bit, but didn’t stop. “Can I have some orange juice?”

“Sure. Come with me to the back of the bus, okay?” I coaxed him to his feet and he started to follow, but then stopped and stared into my face, eyes wide.

I could practically smell his fear, salt and blood. “Are all of you witches?” he asked. I tried not to laugh because he was so serious and so very scared.

“No, honey, we’re not witches.” I used the same voice one uses to tame wild animals. “Those girls were just making wishes out loud for you to find your friends, that’s all.” I could tell that he no longer remembered exactly what they had been saying over him, and that he accepted my account. He relaxed a bit more and took my hand. I led him to the back of the bus and found him a bottle of warm orange juice. When he sat on the floor, the blanket slipped off his shoulders. He looked like he hadn’t eaten in a month. “When was the last time you ate?”

He wrinkled his face in confusion. “I don’t know.” He said it simply, like it didn’t really matter.

“Let me find you something.” I could see Mike glaring at me from outside the door, but I didn’t know why and had other things to think about right then, so I ignored him. What could I feed him? You can’t feed rice to someone on acid—it looks too much like maggots. If he hadn’t eaten in a while, an apple would give him diarrhea and he already looked sick. Then I remembered Mike had bought a stash of bananas earlier in the day. I fished one out and peeled it for my new friend.

After eating, he seemed more stable. We talked a little while and I learned that he was fifteen years old, from New York City, and that he had started the tour from the Sacramento shows in June and had hooked up with a busload of people he didn’t really know well. *Well, that means that now that it’s the end of tour, they might just leave you here if you disappear*, I thought. *Chicago is a long way from New York without money.*

I asked him if he wanted to go out to try to find his friends. He agreed, and folded the blanket up and put it on the bunk. He had nothing on but thin woven pants, no shoes or shirt, and it was chilly outside. I took the blanket with us, and folded it around him as we walked down the rows. He kissed my hand.

We walked all over the Amphitheatre grounds; I’m not sure how many times. The parking lot went all the way around, so I never really knew where we were and almost got lost myself. Finally, he just sat down on the grass and started to cry. I was exhausted. It had to be four in the morning, and I had no idea what to do. I couldn’t turn him over to anyone official

because he was still wasted. I couldn't find his friends, even if they hadn't left him. I very much wanted to cry myself.

Then I thought of Mike. He did lots of tours; he had to have seen this situation millions of times. I felt so stupid. So, we made our way back to my bus to find Mike.

I found him packing the last of our gear that had been spread all around the bus.

"Mike, I need help. We can't find this kid's friends anywhere. What do I do?"

Mike had the boy sit in the bus and drew me outside to sit by the wheel. He took both my hands in his and squatted in front of me, face to face. "You have to cut him loose," he said. "We have to get some sleep so we can drive tomorrow. Just take him to the front gate and dump him. His friends will find him there if they look."

"What are you talking about? I can't just *dump* him. He's a person. He's lost, he's sick, he's a long way from home and all alone. He's *helpless*, for chrissakes, Mike! What's going to happen to him?"

"Eddie, you can't pick up every stray that gets himself lost. This is the last day of tour. There's probably hundreds of people out there right now who have no idea where they're going to go tomorrow, or what they're going to do until Fall tour starts. That's just the way it is. You can't take him home with you. Take him to the front and cut him loose."

I knew he was right. There were no other options. But underneath, in the place where my soul decides the right and wrong of the universe, this just felt wrong. So very wrong. I had been a believer. Believed in the trust, in the brotherhood, in the *nation of us*. I'd thought there was something noble in it. The true meaning of family that we would fight for, like Kent State and Woodstock.

But we were dumping family off like an unwanted dog to the pound. And that was the end of the story. The true end, not the narrative end. Idealism and reality collided, and in the aftermath both seemed crushed and broken.

It was too much.

“Hey, don’t cry. Do you want me to do it? I can take him up there. You just go back in and get some sleep, okay?” Mike got up and gave me a hand to pull myself up with. I wanted to fight, but I knew I’d already lost.

“No. I’m going to take him. I want to do at least that much for him.” I was getting angry. At what, I wasn’t sure. At Mike. At life. At myself. At nothing in particular.

“If you’re not back in half an hour, I’m going to come and get you and bring you back here. Even if I have to carry you. I’m not kidding.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll cut the stray loose. Maybe I’ll cut you loose, too.” I glared right into Mike’s face. “And he’s keeping the blanket.”

“But that’s...”

“I said, he’s *keeping* it!”

“Whatever.” Mike turned away and went back to his bunk in the bus.

I took the little green-haired boy to the front gate, and told him that his friends would find him there. He hugged me and told me he loved me and would think of me when he got back to New York. I hugged him back and told him that I loved him, too.

I have no idea whether he ever made it home. I can’t remember if I even knew his name. I have an upwelling of affection every time I think of him. And a profound sense of loss. Perhaps he was just fine. Woke up the next day, called a friend, and hopped a bus home. That’s what I’d

like to think. But the loss is there, anyway. As I walked away from him that night, I realized in the deepest part of myself that when a pure ideal and the complexity of life conflict, purity always fails. Because it must.

Three days later on July 26, 1990, sometime in the afternoon as we were driving through Wisconsin, the DJ on the radio announced that Brent Mydland, the joyful keyboardist who my mind still saw dancing stage right, died. He had been with the band eleven years, and was now dead at the age of thirty-eight.

Mike was driving the bus and I was sitting right behind him, both of us staring into the Medusa radio speaker. Everyone else was jabbering in the back of the bus and didn't hear. Mike slowly pulled the big school bus over onto the shoulder of the highway. Calls of *what's going on? why are we pulling over?* drifted up from somewhere behind us.

I knew what Mike was thinking; I could see it in his eyes. It was the same thing I was thinking. It can't be true. We just saw Brent on stage. We had all watched him dancing behind his keyboard just a few days ago. It wasn't true. What had happened?

When we'd finally rolled to a stop, Mike put on the parking break and stood up. He looked confused. Everyone was quiet, waiting for him to say something. Anything. He just stood there, staring out one of the side windows into the sunny sky.

I slipped my hand into his, squeezed. He squeezed back and let go. "Guys," he said. "Everybody. They just said on the radio that Brent died today." Blank looks all around.

After a beat, one of the guys blurted, “Jesus, what the fuck happened?” Then a chorus of *oh my gods* seemed to erupt. I didn’t pay much attention. I was still trying to wrap my mind around it. We’d just seen him play. Now he was gone. Forever. Just like that.

I didn’t know him. We’d never even spoken. Just one beatific smile and a wave, an acid dream on a misty evening. But it had meant something to me then, meant even more now. That night had felt pure and true. So many things felt compromised now, less than they were. But the memory of that concert was still intact. Feelings of connection, and the oneness of us all. The music was real. The feelings were real. I wasn’t sure what else was.

We needed to get out off the bus. Piling out, we sat in a close cluster in the high grass beside the road. Christy was crying. I envied her. I felt strangely empty, as if it didn’t matter and it did matter at the same time. A floundering paradox.

The radio guy came on again, and when Mike heard the words “Grateful Dead” he scrambled back into the bus for the volume, cranked it up. We all heard it clearly.

Brent Mydland died today of an overdose, apparently a lethal combination of cocaine and morphine.

What? Things were getting less and less possible. Deadheads don’t *do* cocaine and morphine, everyone knew that. Deadheads do *kind* drugs, pot and acid, not hard drugs like morphine. Never. Kind drugs made you happy for a time, then evaporated. Hard drugs ruined your life and were for junkies. No one got addicted to pot and acid. *The People* didn’t do hard drugs. Maybe in the bad old days, but not now. We all knew that. *So what the hell?*

I dragged myself to my feet and slowly climbed the steps into the bus, walked to the back and lay down on one of the lower bunk beds. I’d had enough. Suddenly spoons and lost boys and

junkies and brothers and sisters were all just too much. I rolled over to face the wall and decided to go to sleep.

A weight settled next to me on the bed. An arm went around my shoulder and a head leaned over my ear. "It's going to be all right," Mike said.

"I know. I'm fine. I'm just really, really tired."

CHOSEN CHILD

I learned I was adopted long before I knew what it meant. I had to be less than five years old, because my little sister was not with us yet. The scene is clear in my head, despite the odd double-vision sensation of thinking as an adult while remembering through a child's eyes. The brain is off-kilter, but the heart of it feels true.

I remember my mother calling me into her and Daddy's bedroom one afternoon when I was about four years old. I knew it was a serious issue because I was never allowed into that room. Normally it was off limits to me unless I had a bad nightmare, when Mom would let me heave myself up onto the high bed next to her and sleep beside her, feeling her warmth and trying not to slide into the dip that her body made in the mattress, cramping up from trying to lie still and not wake her, Daddy snoring like traffic on the other side of her. It was a big room with lots of dark furniture covered by crocheted doilies, shiny jewels from Avon, and long tubes of bright red lipstick, and with a bed twice as big as mine. I was in awe of that room, night or day.

She sat down on the side of the bed and drew me to her. Mom was a tiny woman, not quite five feet tall and probably no more than one hundred pounds at the time, but she seemed huge to me. I stood between her knees, which reached close to my chest. She smelled of flowers and the crisp cotton of ironed clothes. Putting her arms around me, she told me she wanted to tell me something important. I was wary. That tone of voice usually meant that I was in trouble.

She reached over to the nightstand and picked up a double frame that had my baby picture on one side and a bunch of writing on the other. She said, "I want to read something to

you.” I instantly felt better; Mom read to me almost every day, and it was never when I was in trouble.

It was a poem called “Chosen Child,” and as she began to read the familiar cadence of nursery rhymes took shape in her low, gentle voice. I listened carefully so that I could remember the story.

I had to tell you Dearest Heart, that you are not my own;
for fear some meddler would impart that knowledge which is known—
that I adopted you to start a home for us alone.

She held the frame down so that I could see the words, and ran her finger under them as she read the way she always did. I could already pick out the words “to,” and “a” as her finger crossed them. Other stories I knew were about ducks inside of eggs and piggies jumping over stiles. Stories my mother and I laughed over in pretty books filled with pictures. I hung on to her words, waiting for an animal. There was always an animal.

I tried to make it plain to you. I hope you understood;
my friends all had one child or two, their lives seemed full and good;
and there was nothing else to do but find you, if I could.

As she read, she didn’t laugh. Her voice stopped and started, stumbling. I didn’t hear anything about animals, so my mind started to wander. I noticed that the drawer pull on her nightstand was upside down. All of the others were turned one way, and one was different. I tried to wiggle

around to see which way the pulls on the chest of drawers were facing, but her knees held me fast.

You see, God did not grant my prayer and let me bear a child;
and so I sought you everywhere until the day you smiled
and snuggled as I stroked your hair, and you became my child.

She stroked my face, and the smell of Jergan's hand lotion wafted around me. Looking up, I saw tears in her eyes so I tried to clamber up onto her lap to make her feel better. My mother cried from time to time, and usually when I asked her why she would simply reply, *Mommies cry sometimes. It's nothing bad. It's just something that happens. You don't worry, okay sweetheart? Mommy's okay.* So, each time I would sit in her lap and nestle my head into her shoulder, and we would be at peace. So that was what I did now, not questioning her tears.

No natural mother has a choice of blondes or deep brunettes.
Therefore, my chosen child, rejoice and have no vain regrets;
remember, that first day you smiled I claimed you for my own.

I hope that you are reconciled to have the secret known;
that you are Mother's chosen child, my child and mine alone.

"That poem is about you," she said. "Daddy and I picked you out of all the little girls in the world. As soon as I saw you, I knew that God had sent me my own wonderful little daughter." I was impressed. Nothing we'd ever read was about me before. She told me about how some other woman gave birth to me, but couldn't take care of me, whatever that meant. That she and Daddy

had seen me and a lot of other babies and they knew right away I was the most special one and that they loved me, and my birth mother give me to them to take care of and be my parents. Mom was trying not to cry, I could tell, but I wasn't sure why.

I tried to imagine this, make up a picture story for it in my mind. I remembered the drawing of Moses as a baby in a basket from my *Children's Illustrated Bible*. His basket was floating in the grass on the edge of a river, and a woman in a long blue robe with a belt made out of rope was bending over to pick up the basket and take him home. I imagined the lady picking me up in the basket and handing me to my mother, since my mother would never wear a robe like that outside. But there was part of the story missing. Moses got put in the river because someone wanted to kill him. I didn't think anybody wanted to kill me, so I was confused.

"Why couldn't she take care of me?" I asked.

"Well, honey, she was very young. She didn't have any money or a job and she didn't know how to take care of you yet. She loved you and wanted you to be happy, so she gave you to us so that we could take care of you. That's what's called being *adopted*. Daddy and I adopted you to be our little girl because we loved you so much."

"Oh. Okay." Her lap was becoming warm, and I felt closed in by her body. I was here and everybody loved everybody, and it was too bad about the birth mother but I wanted to go out to my room and play now. So, Mom let me go.

But, she kept bringing me into her room from time to time over the years to read me the poem until I understood what it meant to be adopted.

And, as the years passed, I became somewhat arrogant about it. I remember telling a boy who was annoying me in first-grade “At least *my* parents *chose* me—yours just got *stuck* with you. I feel sorry for them!” He had no idea what I was talking about.

My mother stands beside the lace-and-plastic-covered dining room table reading a letter. It’s the same dining table my parents had when I was a child, the same lace but thirty years older. Possibly different plastic, but maybe not. This is the formal dining room and, like most formal dining rooms of country people like my parents, it only sees use during Christmas and Thanksgiving. There’s no use wasting perfectly decent plastic.

Mom’s good china, the porcelain she bought from Sears directly after her wedding, sits displayed in the hutch as it always has been, pale against the dark wood. The “silver” chest filled with silver plate (also purchased from Sears after the china was paid off) sits on top of a matching buffet cabinet. Unlike in my early years, however, Mom doesn’t keep this room like a showplace anymore. Paper, pens, and many rolls of stamps litter the table (my father works for the post office, and the one thing my mother always has is stamps). Letters are the only thing my mother writes, being self-conscious about her spelling and grammar, but she’s devoted to her four sisters and brother and keeps the correspondences flying.

She shakes her head while she reads. It’s the latest letter from my Aunt Joan, her slightly younger sister. “Oh lord, that poor girl.”

“What is it this time?” I look across the bar while fixing myself an iced tea in her kitchen. *That poor girl* is about sixty-two years old and has been having a parade of problems since as far back as I can remember.

“Well, you can’t tell anyone, but she’s having surgery again.” My mother lowered her voice into that *hush hush* mode she uses when telling a secret. She loved telling secrets. “Don’t ever tell her I told you.”

“I won’t. Why, is it gross?” I know it has to be some kind of female complaint. Mom can talk about gangrene over baked chicken legs at dinner if the thought occurs to her, but anything to do with a woman’s privates is somehow embarrassing and must be discussed *sotto* voice, if at all.

“She’s having to have her *breast implants* removed.” The words “breast implants” can scarcely be heard.

“Thought she did that already?” I was mildly curious but not too overwhelmed. Trouble with breast implants is common in our family.

“No, that was Betty. Joan’s been having problems for years, but she won’t get it taken care of. Now the doctors say she has to get rid of them.” Ignoring little problems until they became big problems runs in the family too. Along with breast cancer, mastectomies, and implants to hide the hideous shame of breast removal that the older women in my family seem to feel. Four of the five sisters on my mother’s side have had breast cancer, all except my mother. Three of them, including Joan, had to have radical mastectomies, sometimes of both breasts. My grandmother and one Great-aunt also had breast cancer that I know of. I’m sure there are many more in the misty past.

Unbidden, the selfish phrase that always pops into my head at such times waltzed through once again. *Damn. I am SO glad I’m adopted.*

I do not want my family's genes. Mom's had surgery on practically every section of her body—eyes, neck, various internal organs, wrist, hand, knees, ankle, and foot. She's had three knee replacements (on two knees, of course—one had to be done twice) and has crippling arthritis in her hands, shoulders, hips, and back. She spends entire weeks in bed, and she's been in the hospital about every two years since I was little. One of my clearest memories is of tasting homemade bread for the first time, brought by one of the church contingents that marched in and out of our kitchen with casseroles and sweets to feed us each time Mom was in the hospital. I'd never eaten anything so good as that bread—white bread warm and soft on the inside with a crunchy crust, the heady smell of yeast enveloping it. I hated casseroles, so the bread was even better.

Dad's family has galloping heart disease, obesity, and really terrifying teeth.

I, in my forty-odd years on the other hand, have had no real brushes with the medical profession. Not even braces. I don't count two episodes—major stitches on my left thumb and a temporary inner ear problem that made me fall down unexpectedly for almost two months after I fell and hit my head, unless I held my head very still and straight. Luckily for me, clumsiness isn't often life-threatening, and that I would have gotten genetically from them as well anyway, I'm sure.

Nevertheless, it's kind of embarrassing to have to cross out the “family history” section of your paperwork every single time you go to the doctor, and write *adopted* in block capitals at the top of the form, which doesn't matter anyway because either the doctor or nurse always asks “are you *sure* you don't know anything about your family medical history?” *Yes, I'm sure.*

Do they imagine that I've crossed out an entire section of my past because I've forgotten? Are they preparing to triage an amnesia victim or call in a psychologist for a severely repressed woman? Perhaps I am just too otherworldly, too free or freakish, wandering through life with neither parents nor children. No ancestors, no descendants, just me and my unconnected blood. I had never realized how strange I was until I began filling out medical documents.

Recently, I've started filling in "heart disease, diabetes, and colon cancer" on my forms because those are the most dangerous things I can think of and maybe the doctors will be careful to check for those things if they think I have a history. It seems to make them happier, and I don't get the question so much that way. Luckily, they never look from form to form because I can never remember which disease I've attributed to my mother's side and which to my father's. I'm sure the forms don't match.

I do sometimes worry that what I don't know might kill me, and I've become a bit hyper-aware of my body just in case. I know how much sleep I need (less than seven hours and I'm grumpy all day. More than nine hours and I'm groggy). I know what my body feels like when I eat my veggies, and I know what it feels like when I eat nothing in a day besides chocolate-covered peanuts and bacon. Not together, of course. Bacon is for breakfast; peanuts are for lunch. Dinner could be either one, really.

If I want to make myself go to sleep, I tense my body section by section while holding my breath, and then relax each as I exhale. If I have a headache, I take a hot bath and/or down aspirin. If I want to stop my nausea I eat ginger or drink peppermint tea (sometimes necessary after a lunch of chocolate peanuts). I know what I look like "down there" (*sotto* voice, please), and I know which of the remarkably numerous moles on my back are suspicious and need to be

watched like a store-owner watches a teenager—alert for wrongdoing but not really expecting any. I know myself, and it often surprising me that so many people don't. I sometimes imagine that they already know what will eventually do them in, so they pay no attention to anything else.

Even with the incredulity of the medical profession, I wouldn't trade my "unknown" adopted status for the family genes. Not for any amount of money. Walking as if I were a charm school graduate with books on my head so that I don't fall down for two months because of an inner ear problem seems a lot better than having my breasts cut off. Definitely.

I am eleven, and my father and I are sitting at the kitchen dinette on a Saturday morning. It's brand new, the pleather chair seats and backs still shiny and unscratched. Mom likes it because she says it will be easy to clean. I don't know why Dad likes it, but he must because he picked it out. He picks out all of our house stuff—the sofa, the drapes, this dinette. He likes green, so everything we own is in shades of avocado. I like the dinette because there's a small groove between the laminate top and the metal rim that frames the table, and I can dig my fingernail in between the two. It gives me something to do with my hands while I ignore my breakfast.

Mom is washing dishes in her standard yellow rubber gloves with the soft lining inside. She gently polishes a glass and holds it to the light to check for spots, then polishes it again before putting it away in a cabinet. I know she is waiting for my plate, but I don't like eggs and can't figure out how to get rid of them, so I'm cutting the skin-like whites into tiny pieces and pushing them around my plate artistically.

My father, his paunch resting tight against the table rim, is reading the newspaper and has just remarked on an article involving how many Americans are of Irish decent. He has a tiny bit of Kleenex on the left side of his chin where he has cut himself shaving, and this bothers me. I imagine the blood seeping bit by bit into the paper, and my stomach roils. The smell of egg yolk doesn't help. Trying to distract myself, I make conversation.

"Do you think I'm Irish?" I ask to no one in particular. "My hair is kind of red and I have green eyes. It's kind of red, right?" I like the idea of being Irish; it sounds exotic and homey at the same time.

"Maybe your daddy was," my father replies. "You're momma sure wasn't. She had dark hair, brown eyes; purty little thing. And short. Shorter'n you. Yeah, I'd say you probably take after your daddy."

"*You're* her daddy, and she's an *American* just like we are," my mother announces. She does not look at us.

I'm shocked at my mother's tone, harsh and tight. *Where did that come from?*

"I know, Bobbie. The girl's just curious is all."

She sighs and lightly tosses the drying towel on the counter, comes over gives me a quick hug and kisses me on the top of the head. "I know, honey. I'm sorry."

When she leaves the kitchen, she doesn't come back. I wait, thinking she's gone to the bathroom. *There is no way she would leave before sees that I've eaten my food and washes my plate.* But she doesn't return.

I ask if I'd said something wrong, wondering how I'd hurt her feelings.

“Naw, Edie, it’s just that—you gonna eat them eggs or just play with them? Here, hand ‘em over.” I pass my plate to him gratefully, and he mops up my mess with the last piece of toast. “She’s just nervy about the subject. Spent half your life worried that someone was gonna show up at the door and take you away from her.”

“Why?” The very idea is foreign and unfathomable.

“Well, it was in the adoption papers that your birthmother could have come and got you any time that first year, and I guess the feeling just kind of stuck with your mom. She wouldn’t even come to the door for that first year. Friends had to call first before they’d visit.”

When I become an adult, it will still be incomprehensible. Being a mother was Mom’s greatest hope for her life. Having daughters she could love fearlessly and purely was her aspiration since she herself was a girl. She tried from the time she married at eighteen until she was thirty to conceive. I can only imagine how the shards of disappointment must have cut her very soul when she realized it wasn’t to be. Adopting me at the age of thirty-one, knowing that the child she was investing all of her love and hopes in could be whisked away by a stranger, was incredibly brave. An act of faith. I imagine myself in her shoes, and I can see myself holding back that first year, keeping my love at arm’s length to protect myself from possible devastation. But if my mother ever did that, I was never aware of it.

My father looks across the table at me, and something in his gaze rivets my attention. “She loves you more’n anything, you know that? Me too. Did you know I went AWOL from the military just to pick you up? Could have got court-martialed.”

I imagine him in his uniform, skinny and young like in the black and white picture I’ve seen of him from World War II, sitting in a field with other men smoking cigarettes and holding

guns. The inscription on the back of the photo that says *Down to 98 lbs. Scared to death? You bet!* But I knew he was far beyond the war when I was born. In 1964, he was stationed in Pease Air Force Base in New Hampshire.

“What does that mean, going AWOL?”

“Means I left the base without permission. When you’re in the military, you can’t leave the base without permission and you can get into all kinds a trouble if you do. Weren’t for Charlie Twitchell I’d a been caught, but he covered for me while I was gone.”

He explained that his cousin was a preacher in Maryland, and one of the girls in his congregation became pregnant by an older man. “Some military man,” he said. “Friend of her father was the one what got her pregnant.” It wouldn’t strike me until much later what that detail might mean. *Friend of her father? Who was this man? Did he hurt her, or did he just lie to her to bring me into the world? Did I ever want to know?*

Daddy shook his head, eyes sad. “She was fifteen years old, and no one knew about it—her bein’ pregnant I mean—except her momma. The girl took walks at night so no one would know. Maybe that’s why you’re such a night-owl.”

This is the first detail of my birth parents that has ever connected either of them directly to me, and I latch onto it. That *is* why I’m up all night, I’m sure of it.

“Anyways, I don’t know how they kept it a secret, but the girl’s momma went to James, that’s my cousin, and told him about it and that they wanted to give the baby up to be adopted. James and his wife were gonna adopt you, but he knew we were wishing for a baby so he called us and we said yes right away.”

He reached over to pat my arm. Pulling out the ever-available white cotton handkerchief from his pants pocket, he wiped at his nose. “Wouldn’t a mattered if you were a boy or girl, blond or black-headed...we wanted you.”

He described setting the adoption up with the lawyer. When his cousin called the night I was born, he went over the wall of the base, got my mother and drove from New Hampshire to Baltimore to pick me up, then drove all the way back home right after.

“I was AWOL for three days,” Daddy said, “and Charlie—he was my boss then—he hid it from everyone all them days. He knew what was going on, and he wanted me to get my baby. That’s some kind of friend, right there.”

I pictured the entire scene as he spoke, Daddy clambering over an Air Force base wall and whisking my mother away to come get me. *Did they slowly drive their car away with the headlights off, sneaking past Air Force guards? What did they think about on that long drive from New Hampshire to Maryland?* It was a potent feeling to have a glimpse into what my parents were willing to do for me. But it also worried me. It all seemed so extravagant. *What if I wasn’t worth all of the sacrifice? What if they found out the things I had done, like copying off my friend’s vocabulary homework and mouthing off to other adults, and regretted their decision?* I resolved to be a better person.

“Did you meet my birthmother, then?” It had never occurred to me before that my parents had ever met her. I didn’t think often about my birth mother, and about my birth father even less. Adoption was a word that could hold a thousand different stories. Somehow, imagining my father climbing over that wall and stealing away with my mother into the night made it my story.

The story of our family, and no one else's. But it still startled me to know my father had met this nebulous birth mother who up until now had seemed a fictional character.

“I did, but not your mother. She just couldn't do it. She couldn't take that baby outta that little girl's arms, couldn't even see her. She stayed outside in the car while I went in to get you.” His eyes have a far off look, like he's watching the scene unfold on the kitchen wall.

“Did she cry?”

“Honey, I don't remember. That was a long, long time ago. Now how about you finish them dishes while I go see what your momma's doing?”

When he leaves the room, I sit at the table for a few minutes examining the bits of egg left on my plate. I fervently hoped I could be worth it all.

My little sister's Darlene's adoption was different from mine. It was a public adoption, and I remember it clearly although I was only five years old at the time. She was adopted despite my very clear childhood instructions to my parents to order me a *big* sister, *not* a little one, and the requirement came out after long debate. The discussion started—at the kitchen table, of course, where all deep discussion took place—when my father first asked if I might like a sister or brother someday, and my mother immediately countered that a brother was off the table...so would I like a sister?

I was dubious. I liked being with adults much more than being around the children I knew. But I thought of the teenage girl down the street, Kipper, who I idolized. It would be fun to play with someone who had lipsticks and necklaces, and who wore fringy moccasin boots. I loved boots. “Can we have a *big* sister?”

Mom and Dad looked at each other. I wonder now if there was ever talk of adopting an older child. I think my father would have been open to the idea, but my mother was drawn to nurturing the helplessness of a baby, so perhaps not.

“I don’t think we can do that, sweetheart. What about a *little* sister?” Mom was encouraging. She clearly wanted my answer to be an enthusiastic yes.

But I was hardly enthusiastic. *What would happen if there was another person, someone I didn’t even know, living in our house?* “Where would she sleep?” I asked.

“Well,” Mom answered, “I guess first she would sleep in Mommy and Daddy’s room.” Then, when she was bigger, she could sleep in your room with you. You could take care of her like you do Jenny.” Jenny was my doll, and I doted on her in much the same way my mother doted on me (and spanked her for the same kinds of infractions). It would be fun to take care of a baby.

There was, though, a big concern. “But, I don’t know how to do the diaper pins yet.” When I tried to pin Jenny’s cloth diapers, the pin part would never go into the plastic duck part right, and I inevitably stabbed my finger.

“That’s all right,” my father soothed. “We got your momma to do the pinnin’”

This was not good enough. A baby was too much trouble. “I think I’d just like a big sister. I could play with her, and she wouldn’t poop all over everything.”

They laughed, and said they could see what they could do. But I got a little sister anyway.

Since I was too young to stay by myself, much to my indignant chagrin my parents made me stay a couple of evenings with neighbors who I didn’t like while they went to adoption meetings. The neighbors’ house smelled weird. I had never been baby-sat by non-family, ever.

The only time at least one of my parents weren't with me was the few weekends that I stayed with my Uncle Dallas and Aunt Betty across town. As a result, I usually gave them the silent treatment when they came home, turning my face away as my mother tried to kiss me goodnight.

Several weeks—maybe months—later, they took me to a big, ugly building downtown. It was flat, concrete and a beige color that was meant to be warm but utterly failed to please the eye. Punctuated only by the dead eyes of windows, there was no other detail. My father opened the glass front door and held it for my mother and me, but I didn't want to go into the long, empty hall. All of the doors leading to the hall were closed, and the travertine floor echoed and we walked. The place smelled like an old library.

Daddy found the door to the office he wanted, and we sat down to wait in chairs backed with hard orange plastic. I found gum under mine, and distracted myself by peeling it off until Mom caught me and gave me a wet nap from her purse to wash off my hands. This suited me fine. I loved the tangy soap smell of the wet naps.

A strange woman took us into an office to talk about official things that I soon stopped listening to. On one wall of the tiny room were tall filing cabinets, and I was fascinated with them. I had never seen filing cabinets before in my life, and couldn't imagine what they were for. I saw that they had letters on them and abruptly announced "I know my alphabet. Wanna hear? A...B..." The lady smiled at me, then looked away and my mother shushed me. Their discussion went on.

About the time I couldn't stand sitting any more, the lady made my parents leave the room. She said she wanted to ask me some questions, but my mommy and daddy were just outside the door. *Were my parents nice to me?* Yes, they were pretty nice. *What do you think of*

getting a little sister? It would be okay, I guess, but I really want a big sister. I started to explain about the boots, but she gently cut me off. *I'm afraid we don't have any big sisters here, only little babies. Would you rather have a baby brother?* NO!

She talked for a while, as I got more and more bored. Now, I wonder—had she been probing for examples of child abuse? Trying to decide how stable the household was? See if I was somehow unstable? It seems likely. But, since I had no attention span to speak of at that time, I really don't know what the gamut of questions implies. However, after a time I began to “get snappy,” as my mother called my bouts of snide sarcasm. “Don't you get snappy with me, young lady” was a popular phrase at our house, often followed by my having tour of duty alone in my bedroom. The lady brought my parents back into the office.

She told them that for them to get the new little sister, I would have to sign my name on a paper. That they couldn't get any babies unless I wanted it. She said it in the condescending tone that adults use to share a private joke about the kids around them. *Could I sign my name?* Yes, I could. Proudly, I chicken-scratched my name, Edith, at the bottom of a form while my parents grinned at the lady. I felt powerful and important, and took ownership of my sister from that moment. I had signed for her, so she was partly mine. I felt better about her, even though she was going to be a little sister. To this day, I don't know what would have happened had I refused to sign. Probably nothing. Of what worth could the scrawled first name of a five-year-old be in a legal transaction. But, it meant something to me. It was the first bond between myself and Darlene, my first feeling of responsibility for her.

Then Mom left the office with the woman while I stayed with Dad in the room, and when they came back Mom had a baby in a basket-thing in her arms.

I bounced around the back seat of the car on the way home trying to see the new baby over my mother's shoulder. They told me that my little sister's name was Verbina Darlene, and we were going to call her Darlene. I was enthralled. How did they know that? She didn't talk yet. The lady must have told them. Darlene was just like a real, live, baby-doll. She would be my new Susie. Mom said she'd let me help feed her and wash her and I'd even get to help pick out her clothes. It was okay.

And that's how I learned where babies come from. I never asked again, and I didn't listen to other kids' stupid ideas. I knew where babies came from because I had been there. You go to a big, ugly building downtown, talk to a strange but nice lady, sign your name, and she brings you what you want, brother or sister. End of story.

After my parents pass away, I will find that they kept every bit of minutia involved with my babydom. My sister's as well, but mine are the things that irresistibly attract me, demand exploration. A tiny yellow smocked dress sewn by my mother that I've seen in literally hundreds of slides and photos. A broken baby tooth placed under a pillow forty years gone, carefully wrapped in a square of blue velvet. A lock of pale blond hair. A baby book that notes that I had a stuffed rabbit whose ears I loved to chew on and that I hated peas. I know it was my mother who kept all of this, because my father wasn't the sentimental type. It is awe inspiring to know that I was this precious to someone.

And shattering to realize that, with her passing, I will never be again. By now, having been through a divorce and the dissolution of another long-term relationship, I sometimes

imagine that I no longer have confidence in love, that real love doesn't exist. But clearly, at least once, I've been wrong.

I also find a tiny plastic bracelet that has a slip of paper inside, dated on my birthday, which says *Baby Girl Hendricks*. I've never seen this name before. I also find a formula card that advises that *BG Hendricks should have Carnation evaporated milk six times a day*. I can't believe she kept these, with that so-feared name of my birth mother. Did she value them? Or did she think I would someday?

I test the name on my tongue. "Baby Girl Hendricks," I say out loud. "Hendricks." What kind of people are named *Hendricks*? I've never met anyone with that name. Jimi Hendricks? No, that's Jimi Hendrix, with an "x," and I'm not black.

"I am Baby Girl Hendricks."

I look at two halves of a baby's molar, unwrapped from a little velvet square.

No. I'm not. I am Edith Lenore Kindle.

Although I have more details about my adoption than Darlene would ever have about hers, they were vague, amounting to not much more than momentary memories from people who wanted to forget. The one thing I know for a fact is that my birth mother has never wanted to contact me. My dad's cousin still has contact with her family, and obviously with mine. He said that if I ever wanted to know about her, I could call. By the same token, I figure, if she ever wanted to know about me, she could call. But she never has. I've never felt too bad about that. Only she knows what she needs her life to be; I can't judge what I know nothing about. I understand, though, from family gossip with the cousins, that she has a few children of her own

and married into a few more. So, anyone I meet could be my half-brother or half-sister. There's a certain connection to that, being related to everyone in the world. There are no real outsiders.

Yet, I often read magazine article about people driven to find their birth parents, stumble on Internet blogs of desperate children, now adults leaving no genealogical stone un-downloaded in the quest to fill out their family trees. The world seems full of searching. Full of unfulfilled home.

Inspired by them, or perhaps merely influenced, I search my own heart looking for that piece that isn't there, trying to define it by its absence. Why do I not yearn to pick up the phone, ask for an email address, and connect however briefly to the woman that bore me? *How can you know who you are if you don't know where you came from? What if you're from a long line of great thinkers and doers—wouldn't you want know you're a part of that? What if everyone in your family has died at fifty-five? Shouldn't you know?* I know there should be a hole; that's what common knowledge, what the public text, consistently seems to tell me.

But I can't find a hole. I find curiosity, even fantasy at times. I play with the idea as I do ideas of becoming a nomad and living in a foreign country. I imagine what it might be like. As my family dwindles, passing away and drifting apart, the idea becomes more and more tangible.

But they won't love me. They won't even know me. They are not the ones that taped a bit of my hair into a book for eternal safekeeping. They are not the ones that risked court-martial to bring me home. They risked nothing, cared nothing, perhaps for very good reasons. Whatever those reasons, I am not driven to seek them out. For now, I am content in knowing that I was a chosen child.

CIRCUS

I always knew that the time would come when I would have to decide my sister's future. Darlene has been dependent all of her life, first on my parents, then on me. It is both a fact, like breathing, and a story that I do not believe in, like descriptions of the Christmas story or eternal damnation. I never had children because I never felt sure that my life would be stable enough, that I would be stable enough, to give them a strong foundation to weather the storms inherent in life, to give them the sense of adventure and discovery that would make them happy and the security to keep them safe until they could grow to shore up their own foundations and become independent. I was afraid that eighteen years was too much to commit.

Now, in my mentally challenged and schizophrenic little sister, I have a child who can never manage more than the most temporary of foundations, one that will never grow up and never find her own happiness. Now, at the age of forty-seven, I am the first-time parent of a changeling who I don't understand. And I have no idea what to do for her, or for myself.

She wasn't always a complete stranger to me. When she was first adopted, as I had been five years before, I was thrilled with what I had perceived as my own new pet. Because I had signed for her during the adoption process, presumably because the social worker wanted me to feel a part of the decision, I felt she was mine as much as anyone's. It took three months to bring her home from the hospital, since she was a preemie and, at three and a half pounds at birth, needed to be kept in an incubator until she was strong enough to come home. When she finally did, I immediately became obsessed with my duties as caretaker, much to my mother's amusement. After a few months more, I felt that I knew everything a new mother should.

“But, why can’t I bring her in my room?” I asked one afternoon. This was not my bedroom, where I merely slept, but the basement downstairs where all the important things were. The television where I watched Speed Racer, Kimba the White Lion, and Batman with full dedication. The gigantic wooden console stereo that had a turntable that played Country and Western 45’s, 33’s, *and* 78’s, although we didn’t have any 78’s anymore. Recently, it had also begun to play my Partridge Family records as well and make new-fangled recordings of my voice on what was called a cassette. It held my games, my Barbies, and the Avon perfumes that came in little bottles shaped like girls in costumes from all over the world that were sprayed all over the Barbies and myself to make us overwhelmingly attractive. Most importantly, however, the basement held my padded red leather rocking chair and my doll cradle. Clearly, Darlene should be down there with me and my cradle.

“Honey, the basement is too cold for her. See how tiny she is? She’ll be nice and warm up here. Why don’t we feed her instead?” It was my mother’s clever distraction; I loved to hold the bottle just so and watch the milk drain down. I knew not to let any air get in because the baby might suck up too much air and explode—my father had explained this to me—so I was very careful to keep the bottle tipped up so that only the milk was at the bottom where the nipple was. Still, this time just holding the bottle wasn’t enough.

“Okay, but can I hold her? I know how.” I was already getting the cloth diapers out of the baby dresser for Darlene to throw up on when she burped.

My mother shook her head as she lifted Darlene from the crib to take her downstairs into the kitchen. She wouldn’t leave the baby alone for a second in any room of the house. Even the

crib was placed in their upstairs bedroom so that the tiniest sound could be assessed and attended to. “No, Edie. She’s too big for you. You both would fall right out of that chair.”

“Then bring me *my* chair. Please? I’d do a good job. Please? She’s my baby too.”

I’m not sure if my mother saw this as the watershed moment when forever after I was going to pester her if I didn’t get my way, which happened often, or if she just wanted her two daughters to bond, but she went down to the basement and lugged the heavy child’s rocker up a flight of stairs and put it in the living room next to the chair where we always fed Darlene. Then she went to the kitchen to make the bottle for us.

Nestling into the cool leather, I pulled the baby blanket over myself. Mom laid Darlene on my lap on the blanket, head in the crook of my left arm as I’d seen her do so many times, and gently folded the blanket over her. Sitting in front of the low rocker to steady us, Mom handed the bottle to me. I tapped it with my finger to get the air out of the nipple, then held it to my sister’s lips. She began to suck, and I watched the milk move in the bottle, lower and lower. Sometimes, she spit out the nipple and smiled at me while burbling milk between her lips for a moment. We stared at each other. She took in the bottle again and looked away.

I warmed the leather and Darlene warmed me, as my mother’s hand supported us both. It was too complicated to feed her and rock at the same time, so I leaned my head down to hers. Dark, silky curls mingled with my blond straight hair, and I breathed in Johnson’s baby shampoo, Woolite, and the intangible smell of baby. I smelled my perfume on her skin, and it smelled like me and yet not like me. I felt different, from what I didn’t know. She was more my sister than she’d been before, perhaps. And so I began to sing as I’d seen my mother do, softly and without words. Just a breath above silence. Just enough for her alone to hear.

When I am ten, and she is five, I am our Entertainment Coordinator.

“Do you want to play Circus or Fashion Show?” I ask.

Darlene hesitates, thinking through her options. “Circus,” she decides.

Fashion Show is easier. All we have to do is go in Mom’s closet and get a dress and shoes, then go into her bathroom and get “make-up,” which means lipstick since that’s all that Mom wears. Darlene loves Fashion Show. She can imagine nothing more glamorous than the pink lipstick and faux diamond clip-on earrings that I help her put on, and she revels in my mother’s laughter as she parades into the room in too-big black pumps, holding up the hem of a dress that is gigantic on her tiny pixie frame as I sing the “Miss America” song. *Here she coomes...Miss Amerrrrica...*

My sister is very small for her age and speaks a lispy form of English that only Mom and I can fully understand. She is always either joyously happy with eyes a-sparkle, or ferociously angry and liable to lash out with her fists. Today I feel like entertaining her and listening to her laughter. Tomorrow I might amuse myself by pushing her buttons to watch her explode in impotent rage, too small to do much damage but very dramatic. On the occasions that I push her too far and she bloodies my nose, I make sure that I show Mom at the moment when the blood is pouring fastest, pinching it to start it up again if it slows before I can show her. Darlene is punished, and I win. Because I have to win. Always.

But, today I am benevolent.

“Okay, then. You’ll have to wait until I get it set up. Go into your bedroom, and I’ll call you when I’m done.” I’m ten, so I can boss her around. She does as she’s told, excited by the anticipation. I go to assemble my props in the kitchen.

“Okay, we’re ready!” I shout, and she comes bounding out of her room. By this point she’s positively giddy.

I point to the back of the kitchen to the table. “Welcome to the circus, young lady! Our first game is called Throw. Are you ready to play?”

“Oh, yes! I know how to do it.” We’ve played Throw before, and she recognizes the ten Dixie cups stacked into a pyramid. Handing her a crumpled paper ball, she walks to the end of the table grinning.

I stand behind the pyramid, ready. “Okay, young lady. *Throw!*”

In her excitement, she sends the ball ricocheting off of the curtains behind me, two feet higher than her target. Her eyes widen in dismay.

“That’s okay,” I say. “That always happens the first time. Try again.” I toss the ball back to her.

This time her aim is closer to the mark, and I secretly tap the middle cup to make the pyramid crumble. We both cheer and dance around the table.

Then we move to Toss, with bowls on the floor and a beanbag to toss into them, and Magic Show, where I make things “disappear” by putting a washcloth over them and pinching my fingers so that when I lift the cloth they seem to vanish. Darlene completely believes in magic, and I am a mystical figure in her eyes.

After whatever other games I have concocted from whatever I've found in the house, we have the Grand Finale Acrobat Team. Darlene and I are the acrobats, performing to an imaginary audience, and our greatest trick is when I am lying on my back on the floor and Darlene is "flying" up in the air facing me, my feet on her hip bones and my hands in hers, keeping her steady.

After Darlene started second grade, I often heard my parents arguing about her at night after they thought I was asleep. In the still house, their voices echoed tight and fierce, words clear but meanings opaque.

"We need to do what the school is saying. They have a therapist that..." from my mother, who was home with us and dealt with all of our school issues, from fixing us lunch to attending our school plays.

My father interrupts her. "She don't need any therapist. What that girl needs is some discipline. You let her run you ragged, and I ain't going to pay no good money for some psychiatrist when all you gotta do is set your foot down." This from my father, who was the sole breadwinner and therefore had the last word on all things in the household that he cared to have an opinion on, from the poor-man's-formal style of our gold furniture to the green of our walls. He didn't usually concern himself with the day-to-day issues of us kids then, although that would soon change.

I thought they were talking about Darlene's speech therapist, whom she'd been seeing for about a year. Darlene still talked like a very young child, but was making progress. I didn't really know what psychiatry was, as that was not a subject talked about in our household or in any

other that I knew of at the time. I knew that Darlene was volatile, that she could loose her temper and rampage through the house for reasons that seemed to be either obscure or minor. I also knew she would burst out laughing for no reason, especially in tense or stressful moments. The laughter had no quality of joy whatsoever, and the sound of it tended to freeze the air around everyone for a few seconds before they told her to shut up. When she didn't, and she never did, everyone mostly walked away. My dad threatened to beat the laugh right out of her once or twice, but my mother stepped in and took Darlene to her room until she was quiet.

I just saw those things, the laughter, the anger, as the personality quirks that people had, my family more than most. They were irritating and stressful, but so were my father's. At twelve, I was too busy getting ready to step into my teens to spend much time on things I couldn't readily understand or change. I had moved beyond my family as my focus and into my group of friends. I figured it would all work itself out in the end. Unfortunately for all of us, it just got worse.

Decades later, I finally read what was in the psychiatric reports.

In 1977 she is seven years old. Teachers have noticed *blinking spells* where she is *unresponsive for seconds*. She is diagnosed with *petit mal epilepsy*, and it is noted that she is of *grossly normal intelligence* but was placed in a *slow learner* classroom. She was referred for psychiatric testing because of *her inability to maintain self-control in the classroom. Verbal and physical responses were inappropriate; receives gratification from annoying others; goes into uncontrollable laughter; has fears and cries out.*

Mom begins driving her across town to a different school because they have a special needs classroom. We get up at 5 a.m. to get ready, then Mom drops her at her school and, on the

way home, me at mine. I am winning awards, one for being the top student in my seventh grade class of three hundred. I tied for the award with my best friend Chu Chu, and they gave us both awards instead of making a decision. I'm somewhat proud of myself, yet it doesn't seem to really matter.

1978: Problems adapting to change; dreads new situations and new people; elaborates stories; inadequate mythical situation, giggles, over reacts to most situations including insects and noises. IQ 77.

Darlene still has a few girls from church that she is friends with, mostly because my mother is friends with their family. They sometimes come over to play but things generally end badly, usually involving my sister in tears. My mother is desperately trying to get my father to join her at the Baptist church. She feels it will help. I hate that church, as I'm in my ugly duckling phase of long, flat hair, glasses, and an epic clumsiness that has labeled me outsider to all the other church youth. I miss a lot of school due to illness, which my mother dutifully calls in for me. I no longer remember if I'm faking it yet, but I definitely find that I prefer the world of books at home to the world of people at school. If I'm not faking illness yet, I will be soon.

Then, 1979 hits, and everything normal in our lives slides away.

Dr. Peisner, M.D. There is an underlying thought disorder, which is separated from a full schizophrenic illness only by Darlene's ability to continue relating that process to the real world. [It] is primarily seen in the intrusion of unwanted and unpleasant thoughts, the loose associations, and the rapid shifts from the Darlene-who-is-good-and-tries-to-behave to the Darlene-who-is evil-and-delights-in-forbidden-sensations-and-thoughts. Idolizes older sister,

ambivalent to mother. Her perception of the world is like her fantasies, hostile and fearful. There is a strong tendency toward projection as a defense with the consequent paranoid ideation. Darlene appears to have the belief that she is a witch, this being consistent with her feelings that she has the power of life and death over others, and that the supernatural world is very alive. Her relationship to her family is...disrupted, with her perceiving a strong alliance between mother and sister, while father is a passive and uninvolved figure. Vigorous and frequent treatment is imperative, and the frequent involvement of family is also important, since part of what Darlene acts out is a representation of the family dynamics.

When I wake for school, there is yelling outside my door. I roll over in bed, not quite ready to meet the daily drama. I figure that Darlene is not wanting to get dressed for school again, has thrown something at my mother, or some other version of the white noise of my life.

“What have you done? *What have you done?*” The quality of my mother’s voice is broken, almost hysterical. She needs help. I bolt out of bed to the rescue and try to run out of the room and find out what’s going on.

The door, which opens outward, slams into something heavy about two inches away. I can’t get out of my room. There is a large dresser boxing me in. I can’t even believe that a dresser could fit into the thin hallway that links my room and my sister’s.

“Mom? What’s going on? Are you okay? I can’t get out. What’s going on?” I hear sobbing, but no response.

Sitting on the floor, I push the door outward with my legs until there’s a few more inches of clearance. Finally, I’m able to wedge my body over the top of the dresser and get free. All I

can see is more furniture, clothes, stuffed animals. The deluge blocks the hall and spills out into the adjacent living room. In the living room is my mother, sobbing disconsolately into the couch. She is completely unaware of me, chanting *I don't know what to do. I just don't know what to do.* My father, who hasn't yet left for work, is furious. Darlene's door is shut and locked, and I can hear her muttering to herself inside.

Apparently, Darlene had decided in the middle of the night that everything in her bedroom needed to be *out* of her bedroom, including the dresser, a large chest of drawers, mirror, chair, and every stitch of clothing she owned. Even her socks lay piled up in a corner. I had somehow slept through the whole experience of a ten-year-old girl moving furniture through a tiny doorway. It seemed impossible. So much so that it would eventually become the cornerstone for my father's belief that my sister was demon possessed. Who but a demon would have the strength to move an entire full chest of drawers by herself?

I tried to comfort my mother, but she wouldn't be comforted. She was sure that Darlene had done something to herself in the room, that when we got the door open there would be blood, due to the latest phase in my sister's ongoing obsession with drawing. She had drawn pictures obsessively for years, but this year the themes had taken dark turns. Depictions of herself being cut open and demons and witches eating her entrails was the latest in an ongoing series.

"Darlene, it's Edie. Can you open the door?" I kept my voice conversational, and Mom's sobs quieted somewhat. Dad had just stormed out on his way to work.

"No."

"Why not?"

"You don't want what?"

“I don’t want those things in my room.”

“Okay. Can I come in?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to see you.”

“Okay.” She opened the door a crack, then walked back to her bed and sat. When I entered her room, that’s all I saw. A bed, a blanket, and Darlene sitting serene but wary. No blood, no violence...just a complete subtraction, clean and austere. “Momma is crying.”

“Yes. She’s worried about you. You scared her.” I was still conversational, and her tension seemed to lessen.

Suddenly, she was mournful. “She hates me now. She thinks I might kill her.”

“No, Mom doesn’t hate you. She’s just worried about you. We have to go to school now, okay?”

“Do you hate me?”

“No, I don’t talk to people I hate, know what I mean?”

“Yeah. I’m not going to school. I hate it.”

“Yeah, I hate school too. We have to do it, though, so we can get it over with. Otherwise, we’ll be stuck going forever. You don’t want to go to school forever, do you?”

“No.” Her disgust for the thought was obvious.

“Well then, let’s get it over with so we can graduate. I’ll get my clothes on, you get your clothes on, and I’ll meet you at the front door. Okay?” I notice the shadow of my mother standing by the door and will her not to come in.

“You hate school too?”

“Yep.” Actually, I had met my first real boyfriend, had made a circle of friends in my first year of high school, and was feeling more myself at school than anywhere else.

Next year, he and I would break up and I would decide that lying in bed reading was all that I really wanted to do with my life. Shunning the friends that persistently called, I told my mother that she could call me in sick to school or not as she chose, but she couldn't force me to do anything. Afraid I wouldn't graduate high school, she called me in but my absenteeism caused me to be brought before the Dean, who told me I would not be graduating. I told her that was fine with me.

Directly after that meeting, it was learned that I had become a National Merit Semi-finalist due to my SAT scores. Back in the Dean's office, a deal was struck where I would work at Walt Disney World and receive work-study credit if I would take one class. I did, and graduated. A month after graduation, I moved out.

In 1992, my parents were finally advised to put my sister in a treatment facility. I had met and married my first husband by then, and although I took my mother to plays and shopping from time to time and we were close, I didn't often visit the house. Mom seemed happier than she had been in some time, yet it was clear that she missed Darlene and was lonely. After a year, Darlene had made improvements and Mom took her home.

The counselors warned my parents that, along with medication, a strict regimen and rewards system had to be followed, or all of the advancement that Darlene had made in her behavior could evaporate. My mother found that strictness wasn't in her, and Darlene reverted to what had become the norm—abusive, lazy, and antagonistic. My husband and I took my sister in

for a month to try and duplicate the rewards and structure that she had lived with in the facility. After she pushed me through a screen door, Craig told me she needed to leave, and I was in full agreement. When I dropped her off at my parent's house, I had no intention of ever again becoming involved in her life.

I pretended that she was my parents' problem. They would live forever and never again would I have to walk the knife of anger, frustration, and guilt for that anger and frustration on one side, and on the other a profound sympathy and pity for a pain that I couldn't soothe and no one could control.

And yet.

Now that Mom and Dad have passed, I have a child-woman that lives in a world far away from mine, in a room downstairs. She is friends with only me, and wants to endlessly talk about her current obsession—models, theme parks, the cost of diamonds. She loves me in her way, which means she needs me. Needs me to take care of her, to keep the loneliness away and to make sure she remembers to wash and eat something other than sweets.

The years and medications have mellowed her, as has the realization that if she angers me I could throw her out of the house and she has nowhere else to go. She sometimes remembers this on her own. She sometimes, in the past, was reminded of this when she went too far and I was in such a cold fury that it's only action I could take that doesn't involve hitting. We've moved beyond that now. For the most part.

She's peaceful now, doing what she wants to do, which is fantasize. Thankfully, her fantasies are more along the lines of what a girl-child often imagines—being beautiful, having

dresses, wearing jewelry. Being Miss America. Instead of drawing pictures of demons, she fills tens or hundreds of notebooks with notes describing how she doesn't like makeup and how much lipstick and a Disney ticket costs. When she's depressed, she writes about how she will never have her own apartment or drive a car. She writes day and night, always the same lines: *I don't want. This costs that. If I had \$100 I wouldn't buy eyeshadow.*

I no longer ask her what she's thinking about. I'm not sure I care anymore. It doesn't seem to cause her pain, and I know by now that there's nothing I can do to change or help. I worry that she should be in a facility, with more people around, with stimulation. All I can do is try to make her feel safe, pretend that I want her here with me forever. I don't. I want my life back.

Which is true, but also isn't. She's the last of my family. The only person that remembers how it was, who we were. She can tell me exactly what I gave her for Christmas in any given year, and she's always right. She is inordinately happy when I take fifteen minutes at the end of a day and just talk to her in her room before going to bed. She still wants us to be acrobats, to fly with hands held together. And I don't know how to let go.

PROMISES

None of us slept much at the nursing home, no one ate much, no one cried anymore. Much. After five days, we were too tired. Too weary with the soul-heavy effort of trying to keep some kind of strange balance between grief, relief, guilt and boredom. Mostly calm, but every once in a while someone would grab the box of Kleenex and go out into the hall outside the room. Grandma's Alzheimer Purgatory was almost over, and we'd all been called away from our lives nearby or across the country to this little speck in Texas, some miles outside of Dallas in the cooler days of 1984, to wait for my mother's mother to die. And so we sat on five crowded chairs around one spotless white bed and waited with Grandma, and with each other, in the tiny room.

The room was much like the others on the hall, spare, with a feeling of emptiness. It was medical without being curative, no IVs, no heart monitors or forgotten cups of half-eaten Jello. Just clean cotton and metal, linens and bed guards. Sounds and voices sharpened off white painted cement walls, punctuating the constant hum. This was not a Hospice, with gentle colors and warm comforts for the family as they traveled with their loved ones through the valley of the shadow of Death. This was a nursing home, and here Death was no shadow. It was solid, in all its stark coldness and unwavering constancy.

My uncle and aunts came and went. Uncle Jerry, Aunts Julie and Betty. They lived close by. Another aunt was on her way, had been on her way for some time. We would find out later that she'd never left her North Carolina home due to some unspecified illness, probably trivial.

There was usually enough chairs, as only my mother and I had nowhere else to go. We were from out of town with nothing here to distract or buffer us.

At the center of her shifting family Grandma lay waxy and unknowing in the cool sheets, gasping into the room as if she were drowning. Nurses had assured us that this was normal, that the moans and sucking air were unconscious and devoid of pain. This was how people died.

I was usually the only child, here for my mother to soften the blow if I could or simply bear witness to the passing of someone I'd only met a scant handful of times if I couldn't. My grandma and I had written letters back and forth when I was eight or nine years old, but our family rarely traveled from Florida to Texas and, for whatever reason, the letter writing didn't last. My aunts and uncle had children, but either they were older and had moved far away or were deemed too young to handle the gravity or the boredom. At sixteen, I was old enough to be there but young enough to be essentially invisible to the other adults. And I *was* invisible. I didn't know my aunts or uncles any better than I knew Grandma, and their love for me was merely the second-hand love they had for my mother.

I knew my mother needed me though, so I hovered within reach at all times, ready for a hand squeeze or to pass a tissue. She and I were close, as sometimes only a mother and oldest daughter can be, and she was also the oldest daughter. I knew that my mother felt very close to Grandma, and they talked on the phone frequently. I didn't, however, really know much about their relationship. I hadn't asked, and my mother hadn't told me. To feel connected, I sometimes imagined what my own sense of loss might someday feel like and tried to turn that into empathy for the woman I didn't know. I was an alchemist trying to turn lead into gold, and having about as much success.

The first few days had been the hardest. Grandma's dying coma was not what my mother and I were prepared for. We had always thought of a coma as a quiet, peaceful thing. Like sleep. This was closer to a nightmare. Grandma had been gasping for breath and crying out suddenly around the clock for days. Animal noises came from low in her throat. She was too busy dying for sleep. The air was thick with Betadine and bleach.

It was hard to remember my usual days of fretting over homework, meeting my friends at Dutch East India Ice Cream on weekends, or lying on my bed listening to endless Queen and Pink Floyd albums. Sitting for hours in the nursing home had become sitting for days, and by the third day we had adjusted almost completely. On the fourth, it was hard to remember what had existed as daily life before the routine of waking early in my Aunt Julie's guest room with the fear that the end had come in the night without us, rushing the few miles to the nursing home, and then waiting and filling in the time. Now, on the fifth, we decided to just stay and sleep on the couches in the lobby. A bed no longer mattered. We were numb.

I was staring into the snack machine in the corridor, trying to decide what I wasn't already sick of eating. There was no cafeteria like hospitals had, but during the day the nurses sometimes brought us cookies or we drove to a Whataburger nearby. Now, it was quiet—long past visiting hours. Ellen, the morning nurse whose shift was just starting, walked past and I said hello.

She smiled gently. "It won't be long now, honey, be brave." She'd been saying that for three days. I wondered if she realized that she had begun using the same words. A nursing home litany.

“I know”

I hoped she was right, as terrible as that was. I didn't express it, of course. I knew I was betraying something to have hopes like that. You can't wish for someone to die, no matter what. I knew this. Death was a terrible thing, and we always prayed for the sick to be healed, never to die. It was probably in the Bible somewhere, although I couldn't remember anything that mentioned this sort of thing. Still, I knew to keep silent.

I got my Kit Kat out of the machine, walked back to the room, and sat in a chair outside the door. It was crowded inside, and I wanted some quiet with my chocolate without the inevitable banter that a group of adults trying to feel normal bring to a difficult situation. Pulling out my Lip Smacker, Dr. Pepper flavor, I dabbed my lips with gloss no one would notice and wished again that I'd brought a book with me. Especially *Through the Looking Glass*, which I tended to read whenever under stress, such as during a family fight. Something to take me somewhere that unexpected things could happen to relieve the ordeal of the real world. But really, any book would do. I started to read my lip balm instead, and wondered if *Polyester-3* was the same stuff they made clothes out of.

Mom came out of the room. She looked strained and tired. And something else. I reached over and took her hand.

“Let's go for a walk,” she said. We walked down the corridor and took a right turn, where there was an empty waiting room. We sat. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She stared at me intently, and I knew I didn't want to hear what she was going to say. My mother's normally glowing skin was waxy and slack, her usually laughing brown eyes dull and

puffy from lack of sleep and secret crying. She seemed ready to break into pieces onto the floor. I'm sure she saw the exhaustion on my face as well, although I imagined that I was a better than average actress and that she wouldn't be able to tell that I could barely keep a train of thought on its tracks.

She reached out to place her hand on my arm. "I don't ever want to go through this. Make my family go through this. I want you to promise me that if it comes this way, you'll end it. They put dogs to sleep. No one should have to go through this."

I couldn't meet her gaze, and no words came. I knew what she wanted. She wanted me to tell her that I'd take care of it, to reassure her that this horrible death wouldn't be hers. To promise her that she'd never get Alzheimer's. That if she did, I'd make sure she died cleanly. Give her the dignity she didn't feel she was giving to her mother. I wondered for a moment if, had we all been elsewhere, my gentle mother would have placed a pillow over my gasping grandmother's face. Had she thought about it?

No. I knew she never could have done it. My mother's Christian faith would never have allowed it. But could I?

I wanted to. I wanted to be able to say, "Yes, I'm strong enough. I'll somehow find a way to let you sleep." I knew that I had to, that my mother needed to hear me say it. But I knew I wasn't that strong, if strength was the word. I knew I would try to hold on to her, no matter what, when the time came. Even if I were right, even if "for the best," even if it was the right choice welling up from need and mercy and love, I could not. I could guard a sputtering flame, but I could never put it out.

She took my chin and led my face back to hers. Her need was a blanket.

“Promise me that you’ll help me die.”

I looked straight into her eyes.

“I promise,” I heard myself say.

She hugged me. I wondered if she sensed my lie.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” My chest was too tight to hold air.

When my mother went back to my grandmother’s room I stayed behind in the waiting room, somehow even emptier and uglier than it had been, pristinely clean and soulless. There are times when I don’t, when I can’t, think about things that have happened. I can’t hold what I can’t grasp. And so, I simply feel them. Let them overwhelm, and prod the feelings with mental fingers until I recognize their shape. Heft the weight, push to see what gives, find where the cracks are and what is too hard to break.

I had just made a promise to do the unthinkable in the event of the seemingly impossible. My vibrant mother seemed unchanging in my lifetime. Worse, I knew this wasn’t drama; this was exactly what my mother would want if the impossible came true. Curling into the Naugahyde arm of a waiting room couch I sorted and replayed, putting thoughts together by feel and by shape, going over words and what they meant, what they could mean, what they must not mean, until I could find something to comprehend. Eventually, I thought I saw the shadow my heart was reflecting. My own mother, the woman who watched over me and always thought well of me even when I felt I didn’t deserve it, the one person whom I knew genuinely loved me, reduced to heaving and groaning in an antiseptic jail of her own skin. Was that even possible?

Only acknowledging the shadow of grief, because the thing itself was too much to look directly into.

I was not grieving for Grandma.

The shape of my grief was different, jagged and raw. As I thought, I saw my own mother trying to comfort hers. Her hand caressing my grandmother's face, her arm, her hair. My mother's wish for the quiet sleep that we both had imagined for her, the unacceptable wish for her death. The guilt that said she should be doing something to protect, something that she believed I might be strong enough to do but she knew she could not because she believed in me more than she did in herself. My promise was the mirror of her grief, and both the image and reflection were distorted.

We were both distorted by fear, by the horror that we were witnessing. Not only had Alzheimer's disease stripped my grandmother of her ability to interact with our world, it had also stripped us of our own beliefs. *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, the most unquestioned of the Ten Commandments of the Bible. The commandment directing following *Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother*. I would realize in years to come that, like an iceberg, my thoughts at that time were only the tip that was visible above the surface. There was grief for the pain that my mother was feeling, and for the loss of my grandmother. Of course there was grief. But underlying that grief was a fear so profound that reality itself was denied, and that too was probably reflected in my mother's thoughts. I was sixteen; my mother was forty-seven. To me, she could never be old. She would never have Alzheimer's. Despite promises asked for or made, I couldn't believe that life was that cruel. Real life didn't have that sort of symmetry.

Burying my thoughts, putting aside what I could not bear to think about, I decided go back and comfort my family as much as I could.

When I came back into the room, Julie was gone.

“Give me some of that gum,” Betty said to Jerry, who sat beside her.

“Say please,” said Jerry, and smiled. I had watched my uncle hovering over his sisters, trying to make little jokes with them when things got bad, and bringing in candy and gum from the vending machines.

“Better give it to her. You know how tough she is,” I told him, and grinned. As I hid my fragility, I sounded absurdly fake to my own ears.

“Better give it to her, or she might hit you in the head with a hammer,” my mom said with a smile of her own. Jerry laughed, and Betty looked sheepish.

I couldn’t remember the last time any of them had laughed. “A hammer?” I asked.

“When we were kids, your Aunt Betty cracked your Uncle Jerry in the head with a ball peen hammer,” Mom said.

“No way!”

Mom looked across the bed at Jerry. “Oh, yeah. It was before Daddy went off to the war. I must have been around nine, so that makes Jerry, what? Five? So, Betty must have been around four years old. She had a stuffed cat she hauled around everywhere with her, and Jerry took it and wouldn’t give it back. She got mad as a hornet and picked up that hammer Daddy left by the stove and clonked Jerry a good one right on the top of his head!” She patted Betty’s perm affectionately, trying not to ruffle it.

My mother's voice was almost cheerful. My own vocal camouflage forgotten, I started getting angry. *How could she be telling stories after what we'd just been through?* I would not know until much later in my life that the stories, the memories, are eventually all one has left. Telling them, sharing them, is the only true way to make a life eternal.

"Knocked me right out, she did!" Jerry said.

"Mother thought she'd killed him! And Betty just grabbed her cat and stomped off. He came around after a minute or so an' said he had a headache," Mom said, laughing. "And then Mother yelled at him for startin' the whole thing!" She laughed again, and looked down fondly at Grandma. Mom had a far away look, and seemed to be hearing the past in her mind's ear, instead of the rattling breath echoing in the room.

"Served him right!" Betty wrinkled her nose at Jerry and reached over to hold Grandma's still hand.

Julie came back in the room, put the Kleenex box on the side table, and sat back in her chair, slipping her hand on top of Grandma's arm.

"Julie, you remember Betty hitting Jerry on the head with a hammer?" Mom asked. "You were just a baby, but I think you were at the table."

Julie thought about it. "No, but I remember when you slammed his tongue in the door." She dabbed at her nose with a tissue.

I started imaging my aunts and uncle as the children from the family stories my mother loved to tell me. Five kids chopping cotton in nowhere Texas, sharecropper father getting ready to leave for World War II, mother chopping cotton right beside them and hoping to make enough money to buy cornmeal to make the beans and cornbread meals they'd lived off of for most of

my mother's childhood. Girls picking on the only brother. Boy hiding frogs in calico print dresses, putting worms in curly brown hair. Mother teaching them all to sew, to cook, to milk cows, to make sacrifices for love.

These were the kids from those stories. And this wasn't just an exercise in storytelling. They were assuring each other that the stories existed, that the memory continued. When Grandma died, each one of them would lose all of the stories that they and their mother shared unless they could staunch that loss by verifying that reality, that memory, by talking about it. By making it concrete. A memory relegated to the mind of one alone is too close to a dream, and the line between them is fine. My mother was coping through her stories. Doing what she could; maybe hoping Grandma would hear and know that she would live forever. Someday, although I didn't know it then, I would do the same. Write the history of my experiences to make the memories stay. To keep the people I loved alive in the only way I could.

Betty picked up on Julie's tale, and she turned to me. "Your momma had a temper when she was younger. I bet you didn't know that. When she was a little kid, she didn't put up with one thing."

I looked over to my embarrassed mother. She was not denying it, but shaking her head as if she knew I was about to get an earful. But I already knew about my mother's temper. It was something we shared, especially now in my teenage years. Our fights, although short, were spectacular. They only erupted at home, however. We were, as my mother sometimes described us, "a private people."

"Jerry was sassin' your momma through a door, sticking his tongue out at her. And that girl slammed that door right in his face. Nearly cut his tongue right out of his head. He run

through that house screaming *Mudder, Mudder*, blood just a flyin', and she lit on outta sight til sundown."

Mom cut her eyes at Jerry, trying to hide the smile she knew adults weren't supposed to have over bloody children. "He deserved it. That boy was meaner than a striped snake. Anyways, I'd be out there still if I wouldn't have been scared of the dark."

I was amused at how my mother's accent, only a delicate Southern at home, had blossomed among her siblings into full-blown Texan.

Jerry raised his hands in surrender. "See, Edie, this is what happens when a man has too many sisters. It's a faint wonder I survived at all."

I listened as they bickered, saw them enjoy it and take strength from it. The dull ache of days spent waiting for death seemed to recede while they talked. Then, eventually, Grandma would undergo some moment of struggle, her breath stopping for a few seconds and all sound ceasing in the room until her wet gasps rolled back into the void like the broken tide. I watched them reorder their thoughts, moving haltingly from *she is dying* back to *she is not yet ready*, each of them sorting through emotions scattered like so many dry leaves in the wind of my grandmother's breath. After five minutes, ten minutes, they would begin again.

"Well, I remember when you tried to sneak..."

"...and she took that branch and coal-cocked that boy right upside the head, and he..."

"...and the red-haired boy you had that crush on, you know, the one that worked at Hull's Drugstore on the corner..."

And...do you remember...? And, when...?

The stories continued for hours. Adventures and disappointments and places long lost to the erosion of time. Conversations that ultimately locked onto places and people they had loved, now out of reach. They replayed scenes of childhood wars and bloody battles with friends they now missed, all the while stroking my Grandmother's hand, her arm, her cheek. I even wove in some of my own stories, ones that paralleled theirs, of the boy I bit when he was picking on my younger friend and the time I dumped paste into the coat pocket of a girl that had picked on me in class, and they laughed and said I was my mother's girl, all right. I finally fell asleep on the floor with a pillow that someone had gotten from the nurse, licking the sweet taste of Dr. Pepper from my lips.

After another two days full of family, I had to fly home by myself to take my final exams at school. Grandma was still holding on when I left, and two more days would pass before she finally saw fit to let go of the storytellers and find some peace for herself. My mother brought me back a flower from the funeral folded into the memorial card. She said it was a nice service. I got an "A" on my exam. I offered her my "A" to show that my leaving before the funeral had been somehow worthwhile, but I still felt as if I had abandoned her.

As time passed there were many phone calls, then fewer, and then almost none. We didn't see much of her sisters or brother after that. A few letters. Then, life just settled back, and only the stories remained.

PEBBLES OF GLASS

I sat behind the store counter on a floor pebbled with shards of safety glass. The sun was finally coming up through what had been the front window, and color sparkled everywhere. It was beautiful. I ran my palm back and forth over the bumpy texture, numb. My husband Craig was talking to the policeman behind me on the other side of the counter. I wasn't listening.

I found a chunk of window that had yellow paint on it, picked it up to look at it. Must have been part of the logo. *Armadillo Records*. I had argued with Craig that we should change it when we'd stopped carrying vinyl. "What? Call it Armadillo Tapes, CDs, and Posters? That sounds like shit," he had said. He was right. It stayed Armadillo Records, and when we opened our second store in the new shopping plaza across from the University of Central Florida, the first thing we did was to paint our logo on the window, a large robotic armadillo. This window, or a piece of it, anyway. I tossed the painted shard back onto the floor. If we had known I'd be sitting on the window three months later, maybe we wouldn't have bothered.

I picked up another small, glittery window shard and slipped it into the coin pocket of my jeans. I could put it with the other stones I'd picked up in my travels. Ever since I could remember, I'd wanted to save concrete pieces of the memories of my life. A bead from the necklace of a girl I had idolized in my childhood. A stone caught in the tread of my very first car. A rock from the mountainside where the grandmother I was named after but never knew was buried. Sometimes, just the action of slipping something into my pocket was enough—recognizing the value of a fixed point in time, acknowledging it with an object. If I didn't forget the item and find it later in the washing machine, it went into a box I kept in my underwear

drawer. A box of artifacts. *November 16, 1988, the day a nameless stranger destroyed your store, a place you loved, your second home. Remember it.* I took a moment to crystallize the moment, this absurd feeling of invasion and helplessness. To imprint it in my memory. Even pain has value. Without pain, compassion is a foreign place. But then I just stopped thinking, refused to feel. It was all too much. I'd think about it later. Right now, I just wanted sleep, and wake again somewhere else.

Almost a year before, and we were gearing up for the Christmas season in the store in Fern Park, a suburban town half an hour north of Orlando, Florida. I had spent the morning precariously climbing onto record and CD display bins to string garland around the clothesline we used to hang the T-shirts and import posters along the walls. Craig was coming along behind me hanging ornaments on the garland. Little cheap glass balls, Loony Toons and McDonald's HappyMeal characters, various 45s, and ceramic snowflakes I'd made for the occasion covered in sparkly opalescent glitter that got everywhere. I was humming carols under my breath.

Craig had to use a ladder and lean way over the bins because he was too heavy to stand on them, and I kept laughing at him and tight-roping from one to another. He was a big guy, about 6'2" and 210 lbs., and he used to move twenty crates of records back and forth between the store and our booth at a flea market every weekend. He had arms like a meat packer. He could wrap his bearish arms around me at 5'6" and 120 lbs. easily and practically make me disappear. He also had glasses and a shy smile. I'd been wearing his ring and working behind the counter for about two years.

From my perch on the bin, I looked at the Ronald McDonald doll hanging from a noose in the center of the ceiling. “Do you think we should take that down? I mean, for Christmas and all?”

He looked at it in feigned concentration. “Nah, I don’t think so. It matches the ornaments. And besides, Bob would be heartbroken.” Bob worked at the McDonalds next door to the store. The day he came in and saw poor old Ronald hanging there, he went back and brought us both free hot-fudge sundaes with extra nuts to celebrate our genius. He still brought us every new HappyMeal toy every week or so.

“How about that dead armadillo? Can’t we at least put that in the back room for a while?” I was constantly lobbying to get rid of the nasty thing that Craig proudly had up on the shelf behind the counter. It was by far the most disgusting present any of our regulars had ever given us—a badly done real armadillo that had been hollowed out and lacquered in Mexico. It even had thick stitching up the belly. Craig thought it was hysterical.

“No, no no, wait. I wanted to show you; this is great!” He climbed down from the ladder and went to rummage in a box behind the counter. He pulled out a little Santa cap and worked it onto the armadillo’s head. He had even made ear slits so it would fit. He draped the long puffball end down around its feet. “There, now Arnie’s in the Christmas spirit.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Ho ho ho.”

The cowbell on the door rang as a tiny eleventh-grade girl pushed through with her baby daughter.

“Hey, Kim,” I called from the top of a bin across the room, hanging onto a nail in the wall for balance. “Wassup?”

“Frank sent me to get *Master of Puppets* on cassette. You got it?” She shifted Baby Crystal to the other arm, wiping dribble off her Harley Davidson shirt with a bike chain-braceleted hand. Frank was her high-school-senior boyfriend who built Harleys, and they were trying to make a go of being a family.

I was proud of them, but it was hard to imagine how they were going to make it. “Umm, can I get you a paper towel or something?” I jumped down from the bin and stood poised to fetch it from the bathroom. Craig put Arnie back on the shelf and was moving over the cassette counter to find Kim’s Metallica tape.

“Yeah, please?” She looked in disgust at her hand. “I left her bag at my mom’s. Ya know, every time I think I’ve got this baby thing all worked out...”

I stepped into the bathroom to get it, and when I stepped back Tall Tim was in the store. He always somehow managed to open the door and slip in without the bell ringing. Seeing them together was a study in contrast. Her, with her solid stance, her direct stare, her tough-girl attitude radiating and daring you to comment on her lack of girlish makeup or adornment. Him, with his black-lacquered fingernails, thick eyeliner, lip and eyebrow piercings, and Cure t-shirt that underscored his love of the darkly romantic. Tiny biker chick and six-foot-four Goth boy gazed at each other uncertainly. Since they both lived outside the mainstream world, they were used to the rejection they often experienced outside the Armadillo door. They had that automatic self-consciousness that is learned from years of not fitting in.

As I walked up to Kim with the towel, I told Craig that the Fields of the Nephilim tape Tim had on hold was in the bin behind the counter waiting for him. Craig searched the bin and I chatted with them. They were both long-time customers, and had become long-time friends of

ours. Eventually, Craig joined in and the separate conversations became one. It was fun to watch the two, Goth and biker, realize that the other belonged here in the store and almost magically thaw out. To watch the body language relax: shoulders unclenching and lips losing their tightness. Slowly, we were all one big happy family as Craig began to clean used records. Timmy bent way down and touched little Crystal on the nose. She smiled and tried to grab the ring on his finger. Kim laughed.

Then she noticed the sign on the record bin. “Are these really a dollar?”

“Yeah,” Craig said. This was the saddest thing to happen in his lifetime, or so he kept saying. “We’re changing over to CDs now; no one wants the records anymore. It’s the death of music sleeve art.” The morose look on his face told me he was going to mope for the rest of the day if I didn’t do something quick.

“Hey you guys,” I said, “don’t forget the Beggar’s Banquet on Christmas night. We’ll open the doors at eight. Let me know whether you’re bringing food or drink, okay?”

Craig’s face perked up. “And bring instruments if you’ve got ’em. Guitars, kazoos, whatever. Bring two tin plates to bang together if you want, just bring something. We’re gonna have a band in the parking lot. It’ll be horrible.” He grinned. I knew this was going to be his favorite part of the evening... organizing a bunch of drunken ne’re-do-wells with pots and sticks to make music with, and making us sing Christmas carols at the top of our lungs.

“What’s a *Beggar’s Banquet*?” Tim asked.

Kim turned to him and grinned. “Big party, all night long.” She looked over to Craig. “Hey, is that Kathy Kahlua girl coming again? That drink she made was fucked *up*. I want Frank to try it this year.”

This year. The Beggar's Banquet had become a tradition, something to look forward to. I had always wanted to belong to a group, to feel I had a place in something. Until the store, I never had. Now, I was seen as a leader, one of the "cool kids." It was a thrill. It was who I had longed to be. I felt like I was finally myself, that the outside me finally matched the inside me. The Armadillo was my place.

"Hey!" I said, "You weren't supposed to be drinking that night. You were pregnant and you *promised* me." I frowned down at her and tried to make my face look as serious as possible.

She shook her head. "I didn't *drink* it, I only *tasted* it. *Mooooooom.*" Then she burst out laughing.

I blew a raspberry at her. "You behave yourself, or I'll throw your ass out of my store!"

I caught Craig mimicking me behind my back and shaking his finger at Kim. I stuck my tongue out at him and kissed him on the nose. The version of the song "Dancing in the Streets" by David Bowie and Mick Jagger was playing in my head, and I danced back behind the counter to take Kim's four dollars.

Kathy Kahlua was indeed at the Beggar's Banquet on Christmas night, along with about forty-five other people. And yes, she brought with her the beverage she was named for—homemade Kahlua. We had it sitting on the beverage table, which was actually just a board set over one of the cassette display cases with a sheet flung over it, much like the food tables were.

This was our second annual party that we hoped would cement a long tradition. Craig got the idea from the Rolling Stones album (called Beggar's Banquet, surprisingly enough) and the gatefold sleeve of the LP with the band, dressed as beggars who were slumped sprawled over a

table full of food, was always placed prominently by the door. Christmas night was the perfect choice. It was a time when everyone was in town, no one had anything to do, and it made the holidays last a little bit longer. It was a huge potluck supper that tended to spill out of the store and into the parking lot, with music and silliness galore. We only invited the regulars that had truly become friends, and the Beggar's Banquet felt like a family gathering without all of the tensions that actual family gatherings inevitably had during holidays. This was family by choice.

We had so many dishes that we had to send someone out for a card table. I had liberally dusted the tables with fake plastic snow to heighten the festive mood, and a snow fight ensued mid-meal that had everyone picking little flakes out of their food.

The band idea never quite got off the ground because Craig could never get everyone to pay attention at the same time, but by three a.m. he had a better idea. It started with an innocent comment made by one of the remaining seven or so of us draped over the store floor.

“Hey,” Tall Tim said, “Did you know you could melt records into bowls and stuff. What are we gonna do without vinyl, man?”

“You know what else records do?” asked Craig to the room at large. “They fly better than Frisbees. It takes talent though.” Craig and I had been devising new games to play with “dog” records for years—those junk records like K-Tel compilations that inevitably came in with large collections. We played “Spinner,” a drinking game where you spun the record like a top and bet on which side it would eventually land. We had speculated about how far a record could travel using a Frisbee toss, but so far had not concrete idea.

One of the other guys rose to the challenge. “And I suppose you could fling one the furthest?”

“Of course,” Craig replied. “I AM the professional among you.”

“I BEG your pardon,” I said. “*The* professional?”

“More professional than *you*, my lady, because I’m older than anyone here and I can out-fling you any day of the week.” He tossed his napkin in front of me in mock challenge and raised an eyebrow. Everyone went “ooooooo,” so what was I to do?

I hauled myself to my feet, and so did Craig. He chose a record from the 25cent sale bin that held the dregs of the few remaining ones in the store, and opened the front door facing the street. I took a record, and followed him, and the rest of the store piled out behind. The highway in front of our small parking lot, three lanes heading south and three lanes heading north, separated by a grassy strip, was deserted at this time on an after-Christmas morning.

“Ladies first. I bet you can’t make it across all the lanes and into the K-Mart parking lot.”

I took my Captain and Tennille record out of its sleeve, eyed the distance thinking *no way*, and let fly. It landed in the grass between the lanes.

“My turn.” Craig picked up his Barry Gibb solo album and flung it hard. It made it to the second northbound lane, across the grassy strip.

I turned to him, indignant. Then all of us rushed back into the store to get more ammunition, and the Great Record Frisbee Championship was in full swing. I’m not sure who won. I fell asleep behind the counter before it was over, thinking *leave it to Craig to come up with something like this*. He was the nucleus, the life of the party. The lifeblood of the store. And he and the store were the center of me.

My very last thought before I slept was *God, I hope he remembers to clean it all up*. He didn't, of course. He may have been the spirit of the store, but more often than not I was the hands and legs. So I went out the next morning with a hangover, dodging cars and gathering vinyl shards. I kept a shard for my box.

At thirty-two, Craig was nine years older than me, although he never really acted his age. He was smart and funny, though, and I had liked him from the first day I'd wandered into his store. I'd been picking out ZZ Top, Adam Ant, and Simon and Garfunkel records in my fancy high-heeled black boots, and he'd put on a music-box-like harp piece by Patrick Ball that struck me as the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard. I waltzed up to the counter and said, "Who do I have to kill to get a copy of this?"

Looking quizzically at the odd selection I already held, he wordlessly took the Patrick Ball album off the player, slipped it back into its sleeve and put it on the counter. "It'll be waiting here for you when you're done."

I put on my ice bitch princess mask, since I'd never been in this store before and here was this strange guy being really nice. It was threatening. "So, how much?"

"Don't worry about it, it's yours. It's a wonderful record. I think you'll like it."

"You'll get in trouble, giving away stuff like that."

"It's okay. I own the place."

"Oh." He didn't look like how I imagined a record-store owner would look. Any business owner seemed like he would be somehow more professional in my young head. Not sit on the floor cleaning records, as he had been when I walked in the door. Not wearing a threadbare

Ramones concert shirt and shorts that were frayed in a way that suggested use instead of fashion. But it was a *used* record store, so who knows? My judgmental, highly protected upbringing placed him immediately in the “trashy” category. I could practically hear my mother whisper the word.

I ended up with \$120.00 worth of \$4.00 records. He gave me a \$35.00 discount, put my new Patrick Ball album on top, and carried my new wealth out to the car for me, since no other customers were in the store. What service.

At my door, he said, “Why don’t you come back by sometime and we can listen to music, maybe go catch a movie or something.” He tapped my record pile. “You’ve got interesting taste, but it’s all radio stuff. I’ll bet I’ve got a bunch of stuff you’ve never heard. Come by. Just bang on the door, I live in the back.”

“I have a boyfriend,” I said without thinking. It was the truth, but barely since we were on the skids. I was still trying to digest that *I live in the back* remark. I was standing in front of an old, four-store strip mall on a main suburban highway. Where the heck could he live? There was only an alcove in the back with no door; I’d glimpsed it as I was scanning through record bins.

He smiled down at me. “It doesn’t have to be a *date*. It’s just really hard to meet people that honestly like music outside of some kind of lifestyle thing, ya know? I want to play you some imports, maybe some German electronica, is all. Well,” he tipped up my front seat and laid the stack in the back, “drop by if you’re ever bored.”

A few weeks later, I did and, true to his word, he played all kinds of weird and wonderful music for me. We started hanging out together, then dating a few months later.

It was then that I found out that the Patrick Ball album had been a sort of test. We were sitting on the floor of the store in our accustomed spot on the rug behind the counter, listening to Tom Waits's lugubrious growling on the *Rain Dogs* album and drinking white wine.

"Do you know what a rain dog is?" he asked.

"Nope. Do you?"

"Yeah. Dogs can always find their way home by the smell when they wander off. Unless it rains and washes the smells away. A rain dog is a dog that's gotten lost in the rain and can't find his way home." He was silent a moment.

"You know," I said, "this remind me of that first day I came over and listened to music with you." I took a sip and sunk into the memory. I'd picked up a stone that night just outside the door, unknown to Craig, and had it in my box under the bed.

He ruffled my hair. "I sure am glad you liked that Patrick Ball album. I probably never would have talked to you if you hadn't."

"What do you mean?"

"You picked up practically every record in the store that I really liked," he said. "I figured the only thing you didn't like that I loved was the classical and Irish folk kind of stuff, so I put on the Ball to find out your reaction. When you came up to the counter and demanded it, I figured I'd be an idiot if I didn't at least ask you out."

"But you didn't ask me out... you just asked me over to listen to music."

"Riiiiight." He smiled.

I gently punched him in the chest. "You're a sneaky bastard."

"I do what I need to do to get the job done."

“How did you know I’d come back?” I was looking over my glass into his face.

He was looking at the floor. “I knew you wouldn’t if I pressured you, so I just let it hang. I figured you’d come back for records eventually anyway, so if you didn’t I’d try something else.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I had to be patient and not mess it up. When you have something perfect in your grasp and you lose it... well, you wish you’d never had it.”

I sighed. Craig’s melancholy streak always came out when he drank. It was poetic. Sort of.

“Hello, Armadillo Records.” It was my phone voice, best there is. I have had wrong numbers call back to talk to this voice. Unfortunately, I can’t sustain the tone in person.

“Hi. Do you have Prince Albert in a can?” Tall Tim always started phone conversations in the most bizarre way possible. I learned to recognize his style before I had learned to recognize his phone voice.

“Hey, Tim. Is this gonna be an old joke or a piercing joke?”

“Got the newest Sisters of Mercy? Forget the name.”

“*Floodland*. It’s not new though. Came out last year. Got it on tape.” It was months after the Beggar’s Banquet, and almost all of our vinyl records were gone now.

“Last year was three weeks ago, god. Save me one. Need any Traffic or...I think I’ve got some Dead tapes left?” Timmy had gone through a musical metamorphosis last year, from old hippie to cutting edge. Mostly Goth and Waxtrax stuff. Massive lifestyle change. I loved when customers did that. We got tons of new stuff that way. We had almost traded out his whole music collection by now.

“Always. Bring ‘em on,” I said. “Two bucks each in trade, unless they’re double albums. It’s \$7.99. You need four. How’s the new year treating you?”

“Not bad. Got a new girlfriend. I’ll bring her in.”

“Cool, I wanna meet her. Got to approve, ya know.”

“You will. Later, girl.” The phone went dead. I hung up the receiver and moved one of the Sisters tapes to the hold bin and put a sticky on it with “Tall Tim” written in red ink.

Craig walked in, hands full of papers and brochures. He was practically jumping up and down in his skin. I was expecting him to hand me a new CD to put on the player, since he usually only got this excited when he’d found some new and wonderful band that I needed to hear right now, this instant.

“What’d ya bring me?” I asked. He looked to make sure the store was empty, put up the *Hang out a few minutes, we’ll be right back* sign, and locked the door. Then we sat on the floor behind the counter, and he spread out his papers. There was a drawing of a shopping mall on the brochure.

“I went to check some stuff out, and before I say anything, don’t freak out and don’t say no. Just let it simmer a little, and we can really talk about it next week. Okay? Can you do this for me?” Under stress he tended to talk to me like I was a feral child who might do something unexpectedly explosive at any moment. This time, however, he was right. Red alarm bells had instantly gone off in my head the moment he started speaking, and the emergency NO window had slammed shut right after them. My mouth opened to protest, but I was curious. He might not tell me if I just instantly blew him off.

“Okay,” I said and tried to pry it back open to MAYBE. I faced him intently, Indian-style on the floor with papers fanned across in rows, trying to keep my mind open.

“Remember, don’t say anything. Just listen. Say lots of stuff later.” He took a breath and launched. “No used record store in this town has ever had more than one store.” He saw my eyes get big and gave me a warning glance. I had promised. “The reason being, no other store owner has someone good enough to run a store for him.” He put his hand under my chin and lifted my face up slightly.

He knew I was a sucker for this gesture, but I knew that he knew it, so it had the opposite effect. I was still on high alert. He began again. “I have you. You’ve been running this place without me four days a week, and you’re great at it. You know just what to take in trade, you know the music, and people like you. So, you can run this store, and I’ll run the other one.” He spread out the brochure and pointed to the building on it. “Here. There’s a new shopping plaza opening up right across the street from the University. It’s perfect.” He was grinning, and his eyes shone. All this flattery had done nothing for my inner calm (or lack thereof). I knew I could run the store. I also knew that we were just now beginning to live in a more than hand-to-mouth manner, and it had taken years of hard work to get here. I knew that our borrowing power was limited, and that it took sometimes years for a new store to break even. And, I knew that, were anything to happen, insurance doesn’t cover used merchandise. At least, no insurance we could afford. This would be impossible.

A week later I told him so.

“Sweetheart, this just isn’t gonna work. You were living in the back of the store when I met you and barely making it, for crissakes. It takes forever to get a store up and running. We’ve

just now moved from that crappy place into a nice apartment, and I finally have my credit cards to a point where they might be paid off someday. We have *savings* now, ya know? I don't want to go through that all again. No."

"But it's so much easier to open a second store than it is a first. We'll get discounts for buying merchandise in bulk; we can funnel people over there; we'll have a college right outside our door. Come on. At least think about it. The first year will be rough, yes, but imagine how it will be after we get it going. Twice the profit from this place, maybe more since it's bigger."

He had charts. He had graphs. He had estimated expenses and projected earnings. He used all of his considerable mathematical and graphic design skills to persuade me. He wanted this more than I had ever seen him want anything. Moreover, he honestly believed it would work. I felt it would be totally unfair to just say no, so I said I'd think about it.

And I did. I had to be honest with myself and admit that I wasn't really a major risk taker, so maybe I was being too cautious. No business ever got started without someone just putting it all on the table and giving it a shot, which was true. And Craig had gotten the first one to work, and now there were the two of us and I could keep a better eye on the practical side of things. With double the profits that we were getting now, we could buy a house, a new car, maybe even have a vacation. Someday, maybe. It was worth a try. I was persuaded.

So we tried. We worked all summer to get it ready for the beginning of college classes in August. There were additional expenses. Many of them. Like the medical expense when he came within a quarter inch of cutting his thumb off with the table saw while building CD fixtures. Like the shiny electric sign that we found was required by the shopping plaza which cost over \$4,000.00. Like the stock expense when he bought all the esoteric imports in anticipation of a

more eclectic clientele from the college that never materialized. I could never persuade him that college students buy the same stuff as everyone else, that it was only a handful of extremist nutjobs like himself that bought things like *The Residents Live*. Everyone else bought Madonna, Led Zeppelin, Slayer, or The Cure. But that was the core difference between us. I was a pragmatist. If people liked Slayer, sell them Slayer because it made them happy. Who cared if I thought it sounded like pretentious fakery disguised as white noise? If they enjoyed the sound of cats drowning in a guitar He imagined that

But we broke even on monthly expenses in September at the UCF store, which is almost unheard of for a new business one month old, and in October we made a teeny tiny profit. I was happy, because I was running the old store I loved, and he was happy because he was pioneering new territory and showing me that he knew what he was doing.

Then the morning of November 16th came, and the phone call.

“Wake up!”

I opened my eyes blearily to see Craig pushing me with one hand and trying to get his jeans on with the other. It was dark. Really dark. I looked at the clock. 4:30A.M. I was fully awake, and sat up. He stopped pushing on me and pulled on his pants. He didn’t look at me.

I got up and instinctively started to dress. “What’s happened?” My voice was calm; I was in emergency mode. I had that stillness that comes of pre-shock, the fear of something unknown that is coming and can’t be avoided.

“Someone broke into the store. Cops just called. We gotta go.” His voice was strained and clenched. I could see the veins in his arms as he wrestled with his belt.

“Which one?” I wasn’t sure that it mattered, but it seemed logical to ask.

“New one.”

“Okay.” Nothing else was said from the time we left our apartment in Fern Park to the moment we got to the door of the store, eight miles later. I think I held my breath the whole trip, but I’m not sure. Later, I wouldn’t remember anything, nothing at all, not how long it took or what I’d been thinking. I don’t remember getting out of the truck in front of the store. This is what black holes in space are made of.

The first thing I did remember was Craig flinging the glassless metal front door of the store open. He flung it so hard that the handle on the other side made a hole in the drywall, and the remaining glasslets tinkled down. When I walked in after him, all the air left the world.

They had not broken into the store. They had trashed the place. The police had notified us because the alarm had gone off in the store next to ours when our stereo had been thrown against the wall. Our own alarm was to be installed in about a month, when we had the final \$750.00 to pay for it.

The store was a miracle of destruction. Glass from the plate front window and the door was everywhere, covering the rug that in turn covered the bloodstain on the floor where Craig had sawed off his thumb. It looked impossible that there could have been this much glass in one store. I started picking up CDs that were left, strewn everywhere, and making a neat pile on the counter. Two policemen came out from the back room. “We wanted to ask you if you wanted to bother with us taking fingerprints?” they asked. I thought Craig was going to throttle one or both of them. They were unperturbed. *Happens every day*, they seemed to say. *No big deal*. I think of this moment every time I get a traffic ticket. I stopped listening and went back to collecting CDs.

I noticed what was missing...what was still there. The expensive imports were still there, albeit crushed. The stupid buttons, headbands, tapestries, and cheap CDs were gone.

We had been robbed by morons.

I went and sat behind the counter, and played with the glass.

Craig knew my quirks well. My life has a soundtrack, but sometimes I don't know it's playing. It seems that I tend to hum or quietly sing a piece of a song that directly or mosaicly pertains to what I'm thinking about. Sometimes the song doesn't, but the particular line I'm singing does. I do it unconsciously. It's like a poker tell in cards, only so much worse because it usually describes complex feelings I'm having that I have no intention of sharing.

As I sat in the midst of the sparkle of glass pebbles, he moved behind me across the counter and heard me humming. He leaned over and tapped me gently on the top of my head. I looked up. Both policemen were gone.

"What are you singing?" he asked me. I didn't know. I tried to remember what I was humming, and sifted through all the songs I know, trying to place it. The silence stretched. Then it came to me. It was Nirvana's "Rape Me."

"I don't know," I said.

I can tell he's terrified that I think this all somehow might be his fault. That if he hadn't pushed so hard we wouldn't be forty thousand dollars in debt right now with nothing to show for it but a few bins and a handful of CDs. I can tell he feels like it might be.

It would be so unfair for me to feel that way—of course it isn't true. This isn't his fault. And yet...

I figured I would take my pebble out of my pocket later and think about it.

FRAME BY FRAME

1

I am five, and my parents hold my hands as we walk down the ugly, empty corridor with blank doors to either side. Daddy holds my left hand, Mom holds my right as always, but I'm still nervous. I could be nervous because the corridor is ugly, or it could be ugly because I'm nervous; it's hard to tell. Mom is nervous too, because she holds my hand tightly and her Sunday heels make a *tack tack tack* sound sharp on the hard floor. It echoes in the empty hall, and my heart beats with the echo. We're here to get a sister, and I'm hoping I don't make a mistake.

My mother had explained to me the night before what was going to happen. I was going to meet the lady that was going to let us have the sister, the caseworker who was in charge of the adoption, and she was going to ask me questions. She will ask if I had good parents.

"But you *are* good parents." I do not like this place, and I will not like this woman.

My father laughs, and with his shy Tennessee voice drawls, "Now you just tell that to the lady, and we'll be all good." My father's voice cheers me up, makes me brave. I'm ready to go in.

The waiting room we enter is small and as dreary as the hallway, empty save for a few chairs that are backed in hard orange plastic. I fidget until a woman comes out of an adjacent office to shake my parents' hands. Then she bends over with a smile to shake mine. I have never before had an adult shake my hand, and the woman wins me over immediately.

We enter her office. Adult chatter commences that I'm not listening to because my new store-bought dress doesn't feel right and the hem is itching my leg, I'm alarmed to realize that my parents are leaving the room, leaving me alone.

My mother tries to reassure me, *Honey, we'll just be right outside the door*, but I don't want to be reassured.

The woman smiles at me again. "I just need to ask you some questions, sweetie, so we can get you that little sister. Did your parents tell you why you're here?"

My parents slip out the door. I'm too proud to cry in front of this strange woman, so I let them go, answer the question, and sit meekly in the chair awaiting my fate. She hands me some paper and crayons and tells me I can draw my house and my family if I want to while. She asks me about my family, what we do, what games we play, what the worst thing that has ever happened was, if my parents nice to me. I tell her about EZ Bake ovens and making pictures of elves out of colored gravel and the Green Pea War, when I had to sit at the dinner table for two hours because I wouldn't eat disgusting food until my mother fell asleep and I snuck off to bed. The woman seems very happy with my answers, and I think I am doing well.

Then she asks, "So, do you want a little sister?" and I am so comfortable by this time that I tell the truth. No, I do *not* want a little sister. I had explained this many times to my mother, but she hadn't listened. I want a *big* sister. A sister like the teenager that lived up the street, the girl who wore Indian beads and babysat my best friend and played *Red Light Green Light* with us. Not a little sister.

The woman laughs, much like my mother had, and tells me they don't have any big sisters, but they did have a wonderful baby girl that would love to be my sister. That I could help

dress her up, and someday we could play together and be best friends. I tell her that I suppose it will be all right if that's all they had. I would make do. Then, I proudly scrawl my name at the bottom of a form that will allow us to adopt my new sister, Verbina Darlene, named after a flower that my mother likes and my aunt's baby who died.

2

When I am fifteen, my father and I traveled to Tennessee to visit his family. My mother and sister went to Texas to visit hers. I was excited that he had chosen me, his preferred daughter, because the mountains are much more beautiful and homey to me than the dry Texas prairie, and I liked the stories that I was sure to hear around the dinner table or sitting around the living room in the evenings. My mother and I were close and I missed her, but Tennessee trumped Texas in all ways.

I believed that the reason that we split up our family visit was because both of my parents wanted to visit relatives and we couldn't afford two vacations. I didn't realize that it could have been because of the tensions developing between them over treatment for my sister.

The problem had started simply enough, when she began school somewhere around first grade in 1975. Her teachers noticed that Darlene occasionally appeared to "zone out," staring into space for seconds or minutes, and when she was seven years old a doctor pronounced the verdict of *petit mal seizures* caused by epilepsy and began treatment with phenobarbital. She was also placed in speech therapy, as she spoke with the exaggerated pronunciation and mush-mouthed consonants of a child much younger than herself, a habit she would never quite grow

out of, and the school felt this could be corrected. A year or so later, parental meetings were called for that only my mother attended. Darlene's test scores indicated mental retardation, and she was recommended for special classes for the learning disabled. She was also very disruptive, "receiving gratification from annoying others, going into uncontrollable laughter, has fears, and cries out inappropriately," according to reports from teachers and the school psychologist. Her responses, at eight, were those of a four- to five-year-old child. Her outer life had slid out of control.

By now, at the age of ten, her inner life appeared to be out of control as well. Despite ongoing psychiatric care, her fears had become overwhelming, and she had both aural and visual hallucinations of spectral people and crawling bugs. She had become violent as well, hitting, biting, and throwing whatever came to hand and drawing pictures of herself being mutilated and eaten. We would awaken in the morning to find her bedroom furniture—a dresser, nightstands, chest of drawers—out in the adjacent living room with no idea how she could have moved them or why she felt the need. Yet, once the violence passed, once her inner constricts loosened, she was a needy dove desperate for affection and comfort. Almost suffocating in her pleas, she incessantly begged for hugs and validation.

My mother was devastated. Although a verdict of schizophrenia had been pronounced, no two doctors seemed to have quite the same description of its symptoms or treatment. My mother's fourth-grade education was not up to the task of deciphering a path through the medical jargon, so she simply tried to do whatever anyone asked, suggested, or had read in a magazine to help "cure" my sister.

My father, on the other hand, was disgusted. He was sure that the problem was, at its core, a discipline issue. If my mother didn't baby Darlene, she wouldn't be acting out as she was. He filled out the paperwork and petitioned the Veteran's Administration for monetary help for the treatments, but he did not participate and grew angrier at each new direction the "professionals" took, each new magazine article magnetized to our refrigerator. *Spare the rod and spoil the child*...it was the philosophy of my father and my grandfather before him. My father had mended bones to attest to its family history.

I first learned of this stance of my father during our Tennessee vacation. True to form, my father, Aunt Nadine, and Uncle Grady sat reminiscing after dinner in the living room. I sat quietly, as I always did, on ancient upholstered chairs hung with crochet done by some past family member, scuffing my feet on the rag-woven rug that was brown flecked with beige in concentric ovals and covered a hardwood floor that did not shine. I waited for the inevitable Depression-era stories, stories of how my Uncle Luther worked in the coal mines to feed fourteen people, how this one or that one succumbed to black lung or moonshine, how hand-made lye soap, fat and ashes boiled together, could get a shirt whiter than any of that store-bought trash.

But the tide of the stories turned in an unexpected direction.

"So, how's that little rosebud of yours doing? Bobbie's been sendin' me letters, and it don't sound so good." My Aunt Nadine, a few years my father's junior, was a tough, wiry woman that I'd heard used to beat up the boys that bothered her three younger brothers in school. As a pastor's wife—my Uncle Grady was a Methodist minister—she had developed a certain amount of compassion and tact, but she didn't feel that was necessarily needed in the bosom of

family. My mother sent her letters because that's what family was supposed to do, but she always felt threatened by Nadine's brashness and her place as my father's favorite sibling.

My father shook his head. "I don't know what we're gonna do with that one. She don't listen, she don't mind, she's hittin' out at everything. Even hit some girl in school. Bobbie's got some *doctors* involved every which-a-ways, but she don't seem to get better." The way he said "doctors" sounded like the word "witch" should have been preceding it.

"Sounds ta me like that girl needs a razor strap more'n anything. Snap her out of it and put some sense in her." Grady nodded his assent.

I waited for my father's defense, his assertion that my mother was doing everything humanly possible to help my sister and making herself sick over it.

"I know it. That's girl's got Bobbie wrapped around her little finger, though."

"You the man of the house or ain't cha? You can't let her go and spoil that little girl until she's just another juvenile delinquent."

"Nadine, I surely know that, but Bobbie's so caught up with those fool doctors that..."

I was livid, and when I stood and broke into the conversation it was like a small bomb hurling shrapnel in all directions.

"Ya'll don't talk about my mom like that. Darlene's *mentally ill*, and those doctors know a hell of a lot more about it than *you* do. Mom's doing everything, *everything* she can and you don't talk about her like that." I have always hated the fact that I cry when I'm angry. Instead of standing tall and threatening, as I wanted, I dissolved like a weak child instead.

Nadine stood as well, a Marine sergeant to my recruit. "You don't *talk* to your Daddy that way in this house, little girl, I'll tear you *up*."

I didn't hear the rest because I turned and ran. My father didn't forgive me for causing him to lose face in front of his sister. She took my outburst as a clear sign of the lack of discipline in our household, and it showed from then on. I didn't forgive him for not standing up for my mother, and the rest of the vacation was a blur.

Except for the night about a week later when Daddy was saved at a snake-handling Holiness church out in the Virginia mountains that he had attended with my Great Aunt Goldie and Great Uncle Luther. That night my father found something to take back home that would change all of our lives. My mother, in her quieter upscale Baptist way, had been praying for him to be saved for years. Little did she know that she was praying for our damnation. *Spare the rod and spoil the child* was now more than a saying. It was a religious mandate.

3

I am sixteen and trying to flirt with a boy a few pews over at the back of the Sanford Church of God, the church my father demanded that we attend because it was more clearly aligned with his believe structure than the Baptist ones preferred by my mother. Despite my hatred of him, despite our fights and our threats to kill each other that happen weekly, I come to this church every Wednesday night and twice on Sunday with my whole family to keep my mother happy. So that she won't have to go without support. I am very protective of my mother these days.

This Wednesday night service is more sparsely attended than on Sundays, and there are maybe fifty or sixty people standing, singing and clapping to the raucous electric guitar and

shouting out *Amen, Hallelujah, Praise Jesus* at every pause the preacher makes. Hands are raised to channel the Spirit, and the shouting has begun. Older women with no makeup or jewelry are jogging in the Spirit near the front, jumping up and down with impossible energy and chattering nonsense. The preacher takes his small bottle of olive oil and a small cloth and taps the oil to an elderly man's forehead, making him swoon to the floor and writhe there. The preacher is calling on Jesus to heal the sick, *in the name of the father, Praise Jesus, Glory to God*.

It used to bother me, this clear descent into mass hysteria, but I have become somewhat used to it and no longer pay attention. I simply keep a low profile with my mother and sister and sing with the others. We do not shout; we do not raise our hands to the Lord. I try to see if Jimmy, the boy across the aisle, is really glancing my way or if it's just my imagination.

Suddenly there is screaming to my left. Not Jesus screaming, but real screaming full of horror and fear. My father has grabbed my sister by the upper arm and is dragging her to the front to be prayed for, to have the demon cast out of her. I know I have to do something, but I am paralyzed with ramifications. When I look to my mother, she is clutching the pew in front of her to keep herself standing, and her face is drained and wild-eyed. We do not leave our pew, but cling to each other until my father loses his grip and my sister flees down the aisle and out the back door.

My mother flees after her, and I'm left standing alone.

4

My husband agreed to allow Darlene to come and stay with us for a while. It was after she had gotten out of the yearlong residential care facility in the mid-Eighties, paid for by my college tuition fund, but before the suicide attempt she would make in 1991 by overdosing on Narvane.

Residential care had worked well for her, and after an adjustment period her outbursts were controlled and she seemed more stable. The key, they said, was to have a clear reward/punishment scheme that was discussed beforehand and maintained objectively and exactly. If she wanted to watch TV, she had to perform a specific chore to earn the right to exactly one hour of television privileges. They called it behavioral adjustment. They said it was critical to maintain the routine after she left the facility, and her behavior should stay stable.

Unfortunately, my mother's will wasn't remotely strong enough to compete with her daughter's. She didn't have the heart to fight with her poor, broken child who couldn't help how she'd been born. My mother remembered that three-and-a-half-month-old preemie, as tiny as a china doll, and identified with her alienation and pain too much to punish, too much to force.

Soon after Darlene's release back to my parent's house she was doing as she pleased, when she pleased, stealing money from my mother's purse for sodas and doing nothing but watching television. Darlene had begun becoming belligerent, and I was worried about my mother own stability caught between my father and sister.

I'd persuaded Craig, my husband of little over a year, that we could provide the rules my sister needed until I could teach my mother how to cope. We planned out schedules, stable

routines to follow, and rewards that corresponded with each punishment. We thought we were ready to be the stable, supportive environment she apparently needed. It lasted two weeks.

It was toward the middle of the second week that the newness of being in her big sister's house wore off.

"You're not my mother, and I don't have to do anything you say," she announced. I had asked her to finish bringing in the laundry from the attached laundry room outside our condo. We were standing face to face in front of the open sliding glass door to the patio, my husband in the kitchen beyond, and her body language told me she was finally ready for a showdown.

I tried to keep my tone even. "If you want to watch TV, you'll need to go get that laundry.

"I can do whatever I want." She was daring me, and I knew it.

"Not in my house, you can't. You have to follow the rules, just like at West Lake."

The next thing I knew I was sprawled on the crumpled screen door. Fast as thought, she had shoved me through the door and onto the concrete patio.

"Are you okay, baby?" my husband shouted.

"Yeah, I'm fine." My hand stung and I was disoriented, so it took me a moment to drag myself back up and into the room. What I saw when I got there was my six-foot-plus husband, usually gentle as a summer breeze, holding my sister pinned nose-to-nose against the wall, her feet dangling, shouting into her face something about never touching me again.

Our experiment was over. Craig said she couldn't stay, and there was nowhere to go for her but home. Which she had known all along.

After my mother continued to ignore my advice, warnings and pleas regarding Darlene, I stopped going to visit. It was easier to walk forward into another life, one that made sense to me, than to continue vague battles against what I didn't understand for obscure results. The guilt in abandoning my mother slowly eroded, and I found myself never wanting to return. Despite occasional visits to my mother throughout the next decade, I never again became involved in the push and pull of their lives.

Until my father died, and there was no one left to step in to care for them.

5

In the past, my sense of time has not been very good. I have gotten lost for hours in whatever interesting distraction captured my focus, but now that I am a caregiver for my elderly mother my awareness of time has vastly improved. Mom's Alzheimer's disease requires a certain schedule, a certain repetition, which has warped my normal rather bohemian lifestyle into another shape, one both rigid and alien that I would never have imagined a decade before.

After five years of caregiving, after moving my mother into my home when she could no longer manage the simpler details of living that slip below the surface of awareness only to resurface as awareness fragments, I am more responsible than I have ever been. Having spent my life childless, at forty-five I now have a child to care for. Two children, actually, because becoming the caregiver for my mother means, through a domino-like effect, also becoming my sister's caregiver as well.

Now, with my acquired gift of mental hourglass sand, I notice that two hours have passed. Putting aside my work, I hear a voice downstairs calling me.

“Eddie? It’s time to change Mom.” Darlene’s current obsessive-compulsive traits do not extend to hygiene in any form, but I have lectured her so often and so sternly for the past few years about the dangers of letting our mother sit in wetness, about how Mom’s skin will break down and the likelihood of infection, that she feels the need to prove that she’s remembered to do it. Or to throw it in my face, if I’ve forgotten it myself. Impossible to know which this time.

The ensuing years and stronger medications have mellowed my sister since the screen door incident. She no longer has hormones raging, no longer has peers to reject her. She knows that this is the end of the line, that there is no one now except me and my husband Franklin to care for her. Her protector and target no longer reliably knows her name, and she believes me when I tell her she needs to toe the line or I’ll throw her out of my house. She has become a sycophant, albeit one who’s always ready to passively stick in a barb if given the opportunity.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, Darlene repeats herself. “It’s time to change mom.”

“I know.” I keep my voice flat, without modulation of any kind. It does not catch my mother’s attention, in whom angry voices signal the need to fear and happy voices signal either love or the need to watch for tricks of some kind. Franklin, who is upstairs searching for a job, would recognize this tone as a rebuke, as anger controlled. I don’t know what Darlene recognizes in it, or whether she even thinks of these simple social cues.

Our mother is sitting on the downstairs couch, and her pastel printed housedress against the burnt umber of the upholstery makes her look like a tiny flower in bas-relief. She sits on a special cushion, called Roho, that will help heal and prevent the sores and blisters she has on her

tailbone where bone grinds against skin without the buffering muscle that long ago wasted away because she will not eat. As I fully enter the room, I wave and smile as broadly as possible to show how glad I am to see her. She does not know that I saw her two hours ago, will see her two hours from now. She does not know that she has ever seen me, or will ever see me again.

I see her mind swimming up from her lake of dementia, and when she breaks the surface she smiles and raises her hand to wave back. There is a muted flavor of recognition in her eyes. She does not know exactly who I am, but she knows it is a good thing that I have come. In a way, she seems to know the unconscious concept of “daughter” without having any conscious connection to it. She knows that when a person smiles at you and waves, it is a good thing and you should do the same. For now, she knows this. At least, this is the way it seems to me. I do not understand her mind any more than I understand my sister’s mind. I never did.

“Darlene, did you bring everything?” It’s my sister’s job to collect the things we use for our routine, the adult diaper, the cream for sores, the wound cleanser, the gauze, the box of baby wipes, the rubber gloves, the clean clothes to be used if necessary. It is her only job, helping to care for our mother, as she is on Social Security because her schizophrenic mind has so far defied the requirements of a normal life despite the strength of her medication. “I don’t see the wipes here.”

“Oh, I forgot.” She runs to Mom’s bedroom to get them.

“Bring some clean socks, too.” Exasperation creeps into my voice as I kneel and remove the damp socks from Mom’s feet. *I wonder how long Mom’s feet have been wet? How did they get that way?* I have found that I can’t teach empathy, can’t threaten, cajole, or bribe enough to make my sister notice if my mother is shivering, if she’s wet, if she’s hungry. Darlene can tell

me how much the diamond and sapphire ring sold on the television marketing show costs; she can tell me the names of every type of plastic surgery and which theme parks have the most rollercoasters. She cannot tell me when the last time my mother ate was, nor whether her clothes were changed that morning. She doesn't know.

“No no no no no.” My mother doesn't want her socks removed. Her feet are damp and chill quickly in the cool air. I remove them anyway.

“We have to change them, sweetheart. We need to get you some clean ones. These ones are dirty.” I hear the difference in my voice. It is pitched to sooth, to blanket with love and keep out the dangers of life. It is not a tone that my sister often hears directed at her. Not from me. Not from anyone, now that my mother has faded.

“Hurry...” I begin to shout *hurry up*, but Darlene finally appears with the necessary items and the sentence dangles off into the air. “Okay, just put them down on the floor. No, there. Beside her feet.” We have done this before, what seems like thousands of times before.

I stand in front of my mother and hold her hands. She reflexively holds mine back. “Mom. Mom!” I get her attention, get her to look into my face. “We're going to stand up now and change your underwear. Okay? You ready?”

She's in a good mood today, and aware enough to be helpful. I feel a small tug on my hands, a weak attempt to pull herself up.

“Okay, ready? One...two...*three*.” On three I pull, she pulls, and with her feet as a fulcrum she locks her knees and we lever her into a more-or-less standing position. I have been conditioning her to respond to “one-two-three” for years, and so far it continues to work, to get her moving.

However, she doesn't remember how to place her feet to balance. "Darlene, get her." Darlene comes to the front, hooks her arms under our mother's and clasps her in a bear hug. "You got her?"

"I got her." My sister's voice is declarative and her words are spoken loosely, still like a child's, without an adult's confidence or precision. She has no faith in her words, and awaits someone to challenge them.

I let go and wait a moment, a crouched catcher poised to make sure the ball doesn't hit the ground. Then I kneel behind my mother, and lift the back of her dress. My sister deftly catches the edges of the dress in her fingers to hold it up for me. We are beginning to work like a team, she and I, on the only project we've ever worked on together. Mom grasps Darlene's waist like a life preserver.

I slide the back of Mom's panties down and reach around to the front to ease them over the jutting pain pump that was implanted under her skin years ago. When it was implanted, it lay smooth under fat and tissue, only a tactile hardness to show it was there. Now it protrudes like a cement doughnut, and the doctor assures me every time I ask him that it won't wear through her tissue skin. Mom mumbles a bit as she feels air on her skin, but she doesn't squirm and she doesn't fight. This time, it will be easy.

After the panties are down, I detach the side tape of the diaper. It is exactly like the one my mother taught me to use when I was five and wanted to play with the new baby. My sister, the one that I had signed for and who would be my best friend. As I ease the diaper down but not off, Mom begins to urinate. In the beginning, when two women without children were exploring the nuances of diapers, we did not realize that the clean one should be placed over the dirty one

to catch the impromptu releases that so often occur, and a great deal of carpet cleaning took place. Now we know these things, and there is no more showering, no more changing of our clothes necessary. We are professionals.

I inspect the area on Mom's tailbone. There is a small blister, an open wound the size of a dime, and redness. It hasn't gotten worse. After using baby wipes, I spray wound cleanser and slather on a creamy mix of antibiotic, diaper cream, and a Vaseline-like substance used on cow udders called Bag Balm to keep the area dry and clean like the Hospice nurse requested. My sister's feet begin shifting; holding Mom, probably one hundred pounds of dead weight, is becoming a problem. I rush to place the diaper, attach the tabs, pull up the panties. When I tap her fingers, Darlene drops the back of the dress.

I quickly stand and bring the wheelchair behind, and my sister lowers mom down gently as I maneuver it to compensate for arms and legs. My mother is smiling.

"Does that feel better?" She isn't aware that I've spoken. I kneel down in front of her and catch her eye. "Do you feel better now?"

"Oh yes. Yes. Beautiful." She reaches out and pats my cheek. I lean in and place my face against her shoulder, inhaling the scent of Pond's cold cream and warmth. She probably doesn't hear my whispered *I love you*.

As I move aside, Darlene bends to her and kisses her forehead with a loud *smack*. "I love you, Mama," she says, and she means it. Our mother has been her companion, her mother, her only friend for decades.

"I love all of you. All of you. Wonderful. Wonderful." She is never so present as when she says these words. I hug my sister tightly and, startled, she hugs me back.

“I love you too, Edie,” Darlene says. I continue to hold her in my arms and wonder what is going to happen to her after Mom dies. I never wanted children.

“Wonderful. Wonderful. Wonderful...”

I let Darlene go and return upstairs to get back to my writing, leaving them both behind, wondering if I should have gotten more coffee while I was downstairs.

WOUNDED #1

When I was four or five my friend Catherine, who was six, showed me how beautiful rocks were. I found out that if you hit the round ones with both hands very hard with a hammer they break and inside there is sparkly magic. Shiny, glass-like white and orange edges that glitter in the sun. It only works with the round ones; the gray square ones are just muddy gray inside.

And so, we spent the afternoon after church hunting the front yard for the round ones and smashing them with hammers in the driveway of her house. It was very exciting. You never knew just what they would look like until they'd break open and let you see. It was much too exciting to tell her mother. Her mother might have made us stop doing it. My mother was at my house, so we didn't have to worry about her.

I finally broke open the very best one. It was bright orange with a white streak in it, and the edge was so thin that you could see through it. I held it up to the sun and squealed. It was the very best one, ever.

Let me see shouted Catherine as she snatched it out of my left hand. I was mad. People shouldn't snatch things out of your hand. It's very rude. My mother had taught me about rude, and it was a very bad thing. When I hit her, blood went everywhere. That was a very bad thing, too. Now, Catherine might die.

She didn't fall on the ground or anything, but her eyes got big and she started pointing at me. I looked from her finger to my hand, and saw the blood dripping onto the ground. It seemed like a lot. When I held it up to look at my thumb, I saw the ugly red jelly inside. I started to feel funny, and then looked at my church dress. There was blood all over it. My mother was going to

kill me. Still, Catherine wasn't going to die now, so it was better. My mother had killed me many times before.

We went to her mom because you always have to go to someone's mom when there's blood. She was very nice about it, not at all mad like I'd thought she'd be. It was kind of bad when she asked what in the world we were doing and I said breaking rocks and she said why on Earth were you doing that and I said because they were pretty and she still didn't understand. It wasn't a lie. That's what we were doing. But, she still couldn't understand and I thought she'd get mad then, but she didn't. She just wrapped up my thumb in white bandages and tape and put ice on it and called my mother to come get me. My thumb didn't hurt, but it felt like someone was bumping it. She said I probably needed stitches and did I know what *stitches* were. I said yes, because I didn't want to look stupid.

When my mom came, she asked my friend's mom what happened and she told her that I should go to the doctor and have stitches. My mom thanked her for wrapping my thumb up because she couldn't stand the sight of blood, and her mom said no problem. Then, my mom hugged me and started to cry. She asked me if it hurt really badly, and then I realized it did and started to cry too.

We had to drive a long way to the Navy base because that's where my doctor was. They put me in a room with a big soft chair and took my bandage off and stuck my thumb in a bowl of water. It turned pink, and my mom had to leave the room. She seemed really upset. I thought I should get scared then, but the nurse said I was being very brave and she didn't seem upset about it so I didn't. Much.

The doctor came and I had to lay on a bed by the wall with my arm stuck out on a board. He told me that it wouldn't hurt too much, but it would pull some. He said I should look at the wall, and I did. But then, I looked over where he was and he had a big round needle with black thread and he was *sewing* on my hand, which was very, very scary. Then I knew what stitches were. I looked back at the wall and tried to think about what I would do when I got home so I wouldn't cry, and I only did a little, and then it was over. Then my mom came back and on the way home we had chocolate ice cream in a cone and I had to eat it with my right hand, which was hard because I'm left-handed.

CARAMEL EXPLOSION

The walk had been a mistake. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, taking advantage of the gentle cool of an autumn afternoon. A perfect mix of sparkling light and low humidity was a rarity in Florida that begged to be experienced. We'd all been housebound for far longer than was good for us, and I knew I needed the feel of sun on my skin to burn away the cobwebs beginning to shroud me.

It had begun well. As my husband unfolded my mother's wheelchair at the door, I knelt on the floor in the living room beside the lounge chair where she spent most of her time these days. In a yellow bright voice that held all of the promise of a birthday party, I'd asked her if she wanted to go for a walk.

"Eyeteeth," she'd replied with a wide smile, mimicking my tone.

"Let's put your shoes on then." She obediently held her tiny foot out, toes pointed downward for socks and sneakers.

Slowly, I slid the sock up over her foot, taking care not to squeeze joints knotted with arthritis.

She cried out anyway, and slapped my arm. "Don't DO that!"

"Did I hurt you?"

"No!" she said. "Stop it." She seemed more insulted than hurt.

"I'm sorry." I slid the other sock up.

“Well, okay then,” she said, mollified as if I had been properly chastened and had learned my lesson. I unlaced the right shoe, slid it over her foot. Began to tighten the laces—more, more, more, ow!, loosen, no, loosen, no, completely loosen, good. Then the left shoe. The lacing ritual.

As we finished the shoes, Franklin rolled the wheelchair in. “Ready to go for a walk now, Bobbie?”

She pointed at the wheelchair in disgust. “Awww, not that thing again. I don’t need that thing.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “And who’re you?”

“That’s Franklin, Momma. He’s going on a walk with us, okay? It’ll be fun.”

“No. No, I don’t think so.” It was happening again. I could see it in her eyes. The name rang a bell; she knew that she should know who he was. That she should know what was happening, why I was putting on her shoes. That her world should make sense. But it didn’t. Her effects had no causes. And she was afraid.

I looked up at Franklin, feeling something collapse inside. “I don’t think this is going to work.” He thought I meant the walk.

I couldn’t do it anymore. Everything we did took an eternity. Washing hands. Brushing teeth. Putting on clothes. Eating. Standing up. Sitting down. Every automatic movement of life was now broken down into each component part, as if it were a watch with manual gears. Moment by moment fractioned, scrutinized, queried, fought against. Feared. I gave myself up to the cobwebs; I was too exhausted for anything beyond inertia, heart and soul.

“Come on, baby. You haven’t been out of this house in over a week,” he said.

To please him I got myself up, got my mother up, and finally we all went out into the glowing mid-afternoon.

We had walked slowly around the block, Franklin and I pointing out flowers to each other as we went just to hear my mother's gasp of delight each time she saw a new cluster of color. She made us stop to watch some toddlers chasing each other. *Aren't they just precious? Precious, precious. Look at that head of curly hair.* She still had the same adoration of children that she'd always had. I was beginning to relax. It felt good to breathe in the smell of grass, to hear layers of sound.

I walked beside her wheelchair; Franklin pushed. Was she having fun? *Oh yes.* Wasn't it a nice day? *Beautiful, beautiful.* She pronounced it in three distinct syllables. *Beu-tee-full, beu-tee-full.*

There was nothing to foreshadow her terror that erupted the moment we returned home. Nothing at all.

As we came to the front door, my mother recoiled in her seat.

"We shouldn't be here." she said in a whisper, and shooed the door away with her hands.

"Mom, we live here."

"I've never seen this place in my life!" She tried to twist around in the wheelchair to look at each of us in turn. "I have not been to this house. Who lives here? They're gonna be mad, us coming in like this."

I unlocked the door, and Franklin gently lifted the chair over the threshold, ignoring my mother's protests, her pleas to leave this strange house. I tried to explain. It was our house; we had lived there for six years. All of us: her, Franklin...even my sister. The more I explained, the

more horrified she became. Nothing was familiar; nothing was connected. Nothing made sense, and what were we trying to do to her?

Here was her room. These were her things.

How did we get these things here? Why did we take them out of her house?

“Take me home. Please, please, dear God, please...take me home.” She begged me with her whole heart. Pleaded. Cried forlornly, inconsolably.

I asked Franklin to stay with her, and then went upstairs to vomit.

Sitting on the cool tile of the bathroom floor, waiting to see how my stomach felt about the immediate future, I knew I couldn't bear this any longer. Maybe it was time to find “a place” for her. My mind shied away from the words “nursing home.”

When I got back downstairs, it was quiet. Franklin was drying her tears.

“We have to go for ice cream,” he said.

My stomach roiled. “What? I don't want any ice cream.”

He pulled me to the side. “I promised her we'd go for ice cream, then we'd 'take her home.' Maybe she'll snap out of it. You know how much she loves ice cream. It'll give her something else to think about. Get your sister, and let's go.”

Bruster's Ice Cream was at that time my mother's favorite place on the planet. Any time we'd happen to drive by, she would point and ask to stop. Day or night. Anytime was a good time for ice cream, according to my mother.

And so, all four of us piled into my Honda, and we set off for Bruster's.

It was one of those places that sold only ice cream. It had a few chairs sitting around a bare outdoor porch area, with a little ordering window and a sign that displayed that day's flavor extravaganza. The day's special flavors were Mint Mocha (which to me sounded all kinds of wrong), Bubble Gum, and Caramel Explosion. Then they had the list of their regular flavors as well. My mother always ordered the turtle sundae: vanilla ice cream topped with caramel, chocolate, and pecans. With whipped cream and a cherry, of course. She didn't eat the cherry, but she couldn't have her sundae without one.

I got a Caramel Explosion, mainly to find out what the "explosion" might be. Apparently, it was whatever they happened to have lying around—a few almonds, some chocolate chips, a few Red Hots, and a single marshmallow. It didn't seem to have any organization, but it was delicious nonetheless. Franklin got his usual sugar-free vanilla due to the maladies of both diabetes and not liking chocolate (which must be some type of illness).

As Franklin and I bantered back and forth between spoonsful, a truck backfired and we all jumped. My spoon went flying, and my mother was flabbergasted. Franklin went to fetch me another spoon, and I took an opportunity to steal my mother's maraschino before she deposited it in her napkin. As we finished, Mom said goodbye with sorrow to her last bite and mentioned that we should come back soon.

In the car going home, she reminded us of that idea from the back seat.

"Mom, when we go back, what kind of ice cream will you get?" I asked.

"What kind did I have this time?"

"Turtle sundae, same as always."

"I think I'll get that. What did you have?"

“A Caramel Explosion”

She was silent for a moment.

“THAT’S IT!” She shrieked. “That’s what that was.” Clapping her hands, she added, “I knew I’d figure it out.”

“What’d you figure out? I don’t get it?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

“The caramel explosion,” she explained. “That’s what that was. That big bang! I wondered what it was, and now I know.” She had found a cause for her effect, and there was a genuine joy in her voice.

Franklin began to laugh. “When the truck backfired,” he said.

“Was that the caramel explosion?” I asked her. “When that bang happened and we all jumped?”

“Yes, the explosion!”

After the laughter had passed, I realized that Mom had solved the puzzle of the Caramel Explosion, and that I could have missed it. That she created narrative all on her own to explain the world around her. She was wrong of course, but did that matter? For one shining moment, a string of meaningless details coalesced into a story that meant something to her.

Perhaps that is the core craving of the human soul: the need for individual details to weave themselves together to form the layers of our narrative, one we truly understand and find meaning in. I saw my mother’s frustration at her own confusion. But in her Caramel Explosion, I could see she was still fighting. Despite the Alzheimer’s, despite her fears of a world that was fast becoming a vast unknown, she was still trying to find the story with all of her strength. And if I weren’t with her, if I wasn’t paying attention, I would miss her victories.

WOUNDED #2

I had watched the surgeon do the biopsy on my mother's hip. I hadn't intended to be in the room, but since my mother's Alzheimer's had progressed she had become easily confused and panicky. She lived with my husband and me, and we took care of her to keep her out of a nursing home for as long as possible. She and I had always been close and, although now our parent/child roles had reversed, we still were. Even on the days that she couldn't remember my name, she usually remembered that she could trust me.

So, it was decided that I should be there to keep her calm. Just south of the left buttock, the doctor had cut a half-inch sample to see if a hardened lump was benign. It was. Unfortunately, the biopsy wasn't.

Seven months later, the wound still had not healed. The reverse was true; it had tunneled deeper and deeper until it was a little over two inches deep after the dead tissue had been removed. Deep and thin, it was about the diameter of a pencil and dog-legged up in a curve, so it was difficult at best to treat. It couldn't simply be sewn up—that was what had happened before, and it had become a pressure ulcer where the tissue just died underneath the scab. Special bandages, such as the ones soaked in salt call Mesalt, were tried. Ointments, unguents, lotions and potions. Nothing. We had been seeing a wound specialist with the reputation as the best in town, and he was baffled.

Was she eating a balanced diet? Yes, we fed her Ensure to make sure she was eating enough and were giving her extra protein as requested.

Was she getting any exercise? As much as an elderly woman who's had three knee replacements, a hip replacement, a back fusion, and severe crippling arthritis might be expected to get. She walked around a little.

Was she keeping her weight off of it? Well, we had her sleeping on her side, which caused her joints to ache and swell, and we had gotten the special mattress and cushion that he had prescribed. We spent much of the day reminding her to lean to the right, explaining each time why because she didn't remember what had happened.

And yet, the wound didn't heal.

They made it larger so that it would heal from the bottom up, as it should.

It didn't.

The doctor finally suggested a Wound Vac. He'd avoided this last alternative due to the loud noise it made that might frighten her and the constant danger that she would simply pull it out continually, which would just make things worse. We would have to watch her continually.

The Vac was made up of a suction device. Special foam padding that was anti-bacterial and wouldn't adhere to raw tissue was pushed inside the wound to the bottom as a wick, tailing out of it. A larger pad was placed over the wick, airtight specialized tape sealed the area, and a suction machine the size of a small women's handbag was attached via plastic tubing. The concept was that the suction would stimulate blood flow and draw the bottom of the wound upward, promoting healing. Fluids would drain out the plastic tubing to a special container in the Vac. If this didn't work, we had nothing left to try.

Mona, a home health nurse, came to our home three times a week to change the Vac. A short, solid woman with iron-gray hair pulled back, she reminded me of a tough but kind gnome.

The two of us would help Mom roll onto her side, and I would kneel by the bed and hold her hand. Then Mona would begin to peel off the adhesive, talking in a chatty voice all the while. As my mother felt the pull, she would begin to cling tightly to my hands and beg. She knew what was to come. Somehow, this she remembered.

“Please don’t do this to me. Please. Oh no. No no no.” She cried and begged, as a prisoner begs for mercy through their torture. “Please. Please don’t do this to me. Please. It hurts. Please don’t. It hurts.”

I would bargain, using the voice that tames wolves. Inside, I was trying not to vomit. My hands shook, and I struggled to crush any whisper of empathy that might cause me to run out of the room in tears. I knew that if I stayed calm, my mother would fear less. So, I appeared calm as a cloudless sky.

“Sweetheart, hold on to my hand. This will just take a second. Okay? I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. We have to do this; we don’t want to but we have to. You have a hurt place, and we have to change the bandage. Just hold on; just one minute more. Almost done.” Sometimes I would try and distract her, talking about what we would eat after or the television program she had just watched.

As I talked and soothed, Mona pulled out the old wick and wrapped the end of the new one onto the end of a thin stick that looked like a single-ended Q-tip. Then she deftly jammed it down into the wound, twisting to make sure it continued into the doglegged section, and drew out the Q-tip leaving the wick behind. As she did, my mother would begin screaming. Mona had told me we couldn’t use a topical anesthetic in such a deep wound.

We had been doing this for a month, and I had closely watched the process. When Mona told me she was leaving for vacation on Thursday for a few days, she said none of the other nurses knew how to use the Vac, and asked me if I could do it on Friday and Monday. I told her I'd rather not, but she reminded me that my mother wasn't comfortable seeing new faces, and I let her talk me into it. I did know how it was done, had even helped on occasion, and I knew I could handle blood. I'd done it before. I didn't like it, but I could do it.

In the end, I said I'd take care of it.

On Friday I asked my husband to help me change the Vac. He normally stayed out of the room for the sake of my mother's modesty, but I knew I'd need the help. I laid my head on her shoulder. She patted my face. I went around to the other side of the bed and let Franklin take his station. As he held her hand and tried to keep her attention, I pulled off the adhesive with gloved hands. She began to whimper. I stopped, waited for her to calm. Cut the foam for the wick. Wrapped it around the stick. And sat.

"Honey, you need me to help you?" Franklin hadn't thought I could do this. I had shown him the scars on my thumb, but he had still been skeptical.

"I got it." Looking at it, there was very little blood. Not even scabs. Just a hole of raw meat. I couldn't help but imagine what this would feel like.

"You sure?"

"I *got* it." There was no one else to do this, and it had to be done. I knew I could do it—I'd seen it done over and over. There was no reason I couldn't, I just had to do it fast and it would be over.

I rewrapped the foam over the stick more carefully. Went through every step in my mind to clearly see it happen so it would be automatic. Push, twist upward, push again gently, draw out the stick, done. I measured the distance on the stick with the Vac measuring tape so that I'd know that I had it deep enough—it had to touch the bottom of the wound so fluid wouldn't build up—and scratched a line with my fingernail. 3.4 cm.

I glanced at Franklin, and then plunged the stick downward. She immediately began to scream.

“No no, please don't, please stop, please. I'll never do it again, please stop, it hurts so bad.”

The phrase *I'll never do it again* tore at my soul. Like a child beaten for no reason, she assumed it was her fault, begged for forgiveness and an end to punishment. But, I was the one that needed forgiveness. I was the monster inflicting pain on the helpless. I bit into the inside of my cheek until I could taste blood. Did I do that in fairness, pain for pain? Or did I just need a distraction from the nightmare scene I in which I was caught? I don't know, but my own pain steadied me.

I tried to twist the stick to move the foam into place, but I couldn't find the right direction to twist into. The hole just seemed to stop, but according to my measure I was only halfway in. I began tasting bile in the back of my throat.

Franklin was doing his best to focus her.

“Bobbie. Bobbie, look at me. It'll be okay, just hold on for just a minute, okay? We're trying to help you get better. Hold onto my hand. Squeeze it. Harder. Good girl. You're going to be fine.”

I couldn't find it. I had to draw out the wick so I could try and see in which direction the tunnel led. As I lifted the flashlight, my hands were shaking. It seemed to go off to the upper right, but I couldn't really tell. There was now blood seeping, distorting my view. A thin trail snaked down her thigh.

I was smeared with my mother's blood. I had blood on my hands. I felt that if I looked over to the dresser, I would see Mengele's face staring back at me from the mirror. This had to be the essence of torture—to drive a stick into an open wound without anesthetic. My mind kept throwing up images. The waterboarding I'd once seen on the news. Flashes of a trip to Dachau I had made a decade ago.

I mentally clamped down. *This is not that.* My mind agreed. My body did not.

I tried again. With the same result.

My mother was caterwauling, and any minute I was going to join her.

Did Franklin sense it, see it, or just know?

“Stop. Now.” His command shook me out of my thoughts.

He laid his head against my mother's, gently rubbing her shoulder.

“Bobbie, it's okay. It's stopped now. You're okay. Will you just lie there for just a second? I'll be right back, okay?”

She clung to him. “Don't.” She meant to say *Don't leave me*, but all she could manage was *don't*.

“I'm just going to step right over here, just for a second. I'll be right back.”

She let him go.

I was huddled on my knees, head on the bed. He lifted me up, drew me to the other side of the small room, and whispered.

“Let me do this.”

“I can’t. I know how.”

“So tell me how. I can do this. Really. It’s no problem. Okay?”

“I have to.”

“No you don’t. I can do this, and if it’s not perfect then someone will come out on Monday and fix it. It’s just a few days; it won’t matter.”

“No they won’t. I told Mona I’d do it on Monday too.”

“Well, you just call the office and tell them you won’t. Tell them they have to send someone. That’s what they get paid for.”

The idea of having to go through this again on Monday made my stomach roil.

“Just tell me what I need to do and go on out to the living room. I’ll take care of it.”

I went through the process, step by step, telling him that I’d come back to put the pad on.

“I can handle it. Go sit down.”

As I sat on the couch in the living room, I was mortified. I’d failed. I couldn’t take care of my mother...I wasn’t strong enough. I’d run away instead of getting it done. I removed my bloody gloves.

Franklin walked in.

“Do you need me?”

“It’s done. You’re mom’s asleep.” He sat and put his arms around me. “You okay?”

“Yes,” I lied. I would never be able to see blood in the same way again. Just the thought of an open wound brought bile.

When I called the nursing office to beg them to send someone on Monday, the head nurse was horrified. I explained that Mona had said there was no one else, but I just couldn’t do it. I tried, and I just couldn’t.

“Mam, we absolutely will have someone out there on Monday. We have other nurses. I don’t know why Mona told you that. A caregiver should never inflict pain. She needs to see you as safety. I’m so sorry; you should never have had to do that. We’ll get someone right out. I do apologize. We’ll get you another nurse and transfer Mona elsewhere. Again, I’m so sorry.”

I thanked her profoundly, wondering whether I should be letting my relief or my anger respond.

IN THE DARKNESS

This is a story that I'm not allowed to tell. The act itself, of setting smoky history within concrete words, is a betrayal of one I've sought to protect for most of my life. A betrayal that would never be forgiven, neither by my mother nor by her family. We are a private people. I accept this and tell it anyway. It is my story, too, and not telling is also a betrayal of sorts. It really doesn't matter, as no one clearly remembers anymore. Soon it will matter even less.

In the late eighties I was in my late twenties and had just hung up the kitchen phone. It was late, which for my mother meant after 9 p.m. When I walked into the living room and announced to my then-husband Craig that I had to book a flight to Texas, that my mother's birth father was on life-support and expected to die soon, his response was merely a prompt for more.

"Okay. Why?" His eyes studied my face, trying to find a clue as to what I could possibly say next. He knew there were all sorts of things wrong with my announcement. No reasons he could think of for me to go to Texas.

"I need to tell him what I think of him. Let him look me in the eye as I put a curse on his soul, and then I'll pull the plug. Let that be the last thing he ever hears. If I can get away with it. I think I can." My voice was both flint and chipped, passionately dispassionate. What the man had done to my mother deserved nothing less than eternal damnation. I wished in that moment that I were religious. That I knew a person would receive in death what they deserved in life.

"You don't believe in curses."

“I believe in some curses. Anyway, that doesn’t matter. He’ll believe it, I think, which is the point. I want him to die afraid.”

On March 26, 2009, listening to National Public Radio as I drove to grad school, I heard an interview with Dr. Michael Grodin on the show “Fresh Air.” He is a university professor in Boston and a director for the Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights and a psychiatrist, and the show focused on his work treating Buddhist Tibetan monks with post traumatic stress disorder after being imprisoned and tortured in China for political reasons. The monks were having flashbacks of torture during their meditations and so, as meditation is a foundational element of Buddhism, were deprived of an essential part of their lives.

He and others were seeing a serious problem in survivors of the Holocaust as well, especially in Israel. These people were very old now, and many of them were suffering from dementia. Dementia, of course, isn’t just the slow loss of memory and physical ability. That’s the easy part. The hard part is when control over those memories and the lines between fiction and fantasy, the possible and the impossible, erode and disappear.

In such cases, flashbacks can be triggered by some sensory detail, such as the smell of urine or the way the light glints off of a window, and will suddenly be reliving an event in their past. Not remembering it. Reliving it. In high-definition Technicolor. People, places, events. Sounds, touch, emotions. And all that that implies. Not only is it terrible for the survivors, it is also profoundly painful for their families.

Dr. Grodin explained some mechanisms that he used as a psychiatrist to try and bring his patients back into their current reality. He admitted that sometimes that wasn’t possible, and

there wasn't much that could be done. He described how easy it was to recognize when it was happening to someone by their physical transformation, the look in their eyes. I thought about the awful truth of his description, and my hands grew slick on the steering wheel. In caring for my mother, now approaching the later stage of Alzheimer's disease, I had come to know that look well. I knew exactly when she was flashing back to the abuse she had endured at the hands of her father.

The interviewer, Terry Gross, expressed her horror that these people—after surviving the terror and spending decades learning to cope with the memories—were cruelly re-subjected to what should never have happened to them. She sounded so aghast, so appalled. It was as if this were a totally new concept that had never before crossed her mind. Such innocence.

I arrived at school seething. Once I believed that if a person was somehow able to cope with tragedy, if they could outweigh the negatives in their lives with positives, that they could move beyond their pain. As the saying goes, *time heals all wounds*. Now, I envied those who still could believe that, because I knew better. It doesn't.

That phone call with my mother was short. She told me her father's condition, and that her sisters and brother would expect her to go to the hospital, to the funeral.

"I'm not going." Her tone was defiant, too much so. I could tell she had doubts. "They'll expect me to go, but I'm not going."

I believed at the time that only one of her five siblings knew of her abuse at his hands. Only the sister she so needed to protect from her father when he started making advances, and

her mother when she told what was happening. My mother believed that none of the others knew, just those three of my mother's family, my father, and myself. I was her secret-keeper.

It was her unknowing brother who had called from Texas to tell her the news. Apparently, some of her siblings still kept in touch with their father, visited the man who still lived close to where they grew up. Howe, Texas: A dry spit in nowhere.

"Good. You shouldn't go." I was already making plans to go with her just in case, and wondering what would happen if I did.

"Do you think I should go?" She sounded tiny, fragile. I thought I knew what she was thinking. *A good person would go. A good person would forgive. He was my father, after all....*

"Hell no! Definitely not." I wasn't sure if being adopted somehow made my perspective different than hers, but in my eyes a father was someone that nurtured his child. A man that raped his child was less than an animal. A rabid dog might be put down, but at least the dog was blameless.

For once, she didn't protest my cursing.

"I won't go."

"Good. I think that's best. Really." I hesitated, but had to ask. "Mom, what would you do if I went? Just to tell him what a bastard he is, tell him I hate him?"

This would be my last opportunity, and it needed saying. Ever since I was a little girl, I had been awakened by my mother's nightmares of a dark monstrous shape coming to smother her, do terrible things to her. In her sleep, she would try to scare it away with low guttural cries that terrified me as a child and would make me run to her bed to wake her. As I grew up, after knowing her history, I realized that Enos Buckner was that monster.

He taught her to believe she was stupid. That she was worthless. That she was a slut that deserved what she got. She was none of those things, not even close. But, through a lifetime of mother-daughter conversations, I had realized that she had believed him. And that, even now, her self-doubt persisted.

And, yet, no one to my knowledge had ever stood up to him to tell him what he was. Not even her mother. I wanted to blaze at him, to tell him everything he was and everything he deserved that all of those people in my mother's life should have told him, but didn't. I wanted to break his illusion of power. I had never met the man, never even seen his picture to my knowledge. I didn't need to visualize him in order to hate him.

"Oh honey, no. No. I don't want you to even see him. I don't want you to even know what he looks like. Promise me you won't. It would just cause trouble. Please? Promise me, okay? Promise?"

"Okay, I won't" She didn't need to know I was thinking of going anyway. Better that she didn't. She wanted this man nowhere near her daughter, not even to have the sight of him stain my life. I knew that, deep in her psyche, she feared him as an overwhelming presence of destruction. I didn't. He was just an evil man that preyed on the weak. And now the tables were turned.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"I love you so much."

"I love you too, Mom. You okay? You need me to come up?"

“No, honey. I’m alright.” She sounded shaken and tired, but basically all right. I didn’t make the half-hour drive. I knew from experience that she’d just force herself to sleep and forget about it, and me being there would only accentuate the emotional impact. My mother coped by denial, simply refusing to think about pain and fear until it lost its edge. When my parents had fought when I was a child, my mother had simply walked out of the room to come back in twenty minutes or so acting like nothing had happened. When raising a stubborn teenaged daughter was more than she could bear, she had taken naps. I had learned by her example, sleeping profoundly when life got too difficult. Sometimes, survival is all that matters. Waiting until time or forgetfulness smears the harsh colors into a more peaceful gray.

I had always tried to never lie to those I care about. Although I’ve never really believed in morals per se, I have an essential belief in honesty and integrity. Even when Mom asked me direct questions that I couldn’t answer truthfully without losing her respect, such as *Edie, are you having sex with that man?* I couldn’t outright lie. I had learned the art of sidestepping. *Mom, it’s really none of your business so I’m not going to answer that question.* In my eyes, it was better to be rude than to be dishonest.

So, this direct lie to my mother felt more wrong than the murder of her father that I was considering. She deserved my best, but he deserved nothing. Whether he was a rabid dog or a vicious one, he needed to be put down. But despite the guilt of my lie, the truth was that I was going to Texas.

My mother once told me that her father, her “daddy” (and I cringed every time she used that endearing little-girl word for father), changed after coming home from World War II. Perhaps some traumatic event experienced in that war changed him forever.

From bits and pieces gleaned from casual conversations with various people, such as the stories about World War II I that my father told from time to time, and from Internet research, I constructed what I could of a backstory. I sewed together a patchwork quilt of details that, to me, seemed to form a pattern. Whether the narrative that those details make to me is true or not is lost to history.

Just a collection of details. Enos Buckner, born in 1911, was part of a rural Texas family of sharecroppers. He and his brother Thomas were feared in their little town. His brother was known for drowning animals in the lake. That same brother “tried to teach my mother to swim” by throwing her in the lake. She would not have survived if a neighbor hadn’t swum in to save her.

Enos entered the Army during World War II in 1944, and went overseas in November of that year. He served as part of the 307 Infantry 77th Division in the Philippines and Okinawa. The 307th was part of one of the bloodiest battle of the entire war during Operation Iceberg. During a six day battle for Ie-Shima Americans killed 4,706 Japanese, about 1500 of whom were civilian, and the famous U.S. War Correspondent Ernie Pyle was killed during this battle. Buckner was injured in May and returned home. I found this description on the Internet of the May battle that occurred at the same time he was sent home:

Living conditions of front-line troops were indescribably bad. Foxholes dug into the clay slopes caved in from the constant soaking, and, even when the sides held, the holes had to be bailed out repeatedly. Clothes and equipment and the men's bodies were wet for days. The bodies of Japanese killed at night lay outside the foxholes, decomposing under swarms of

flies. Sanitation measures broke down. The troops were often hungry. Sleep was almost impossible. The strain began to take a mounting toll of men.... Ammunition, water, and food had to be hand carried up from the rear for distances as great as a mile. Casualties had to be carried back, eight men struggling and slipping in mud up to their knees with each litter. Weapons were dirty and wet. In a second or two, mortar shells could be expended that had taken a man a half-day to bring to the weapon from the nearest vehicle or dump. Under these conditions there could be no attack. The men had all they could do to live.

It is very likely that every soldier who experienced this terrible battle, including Enos, was severely traumatized. I realize this. I accept the possibility that outside forces helped mold the evil that was Enos Buckner. I don't care. Men come home with trauma from every war. The horrors of life impact people every day. Policemen and detectives see the worst of human nature. Fear, sorrow and death are part of many men's experience. But others don't come home to brutalize their daughters.

I also learned in my research that the women of Okinawa were among the war's casualties as well. In the book *The U.S. Military Occupation of Okinawa: Politicizing and Contesting Okinawan Identity 1945-1955* by David John Obermiller, it is noted that "as many as 10,000 Okinawan women may have been raped in only several months, from April 1 to August of 1945." Many of those women committed suicide.

Although my mother never told me specifically how old she was when the abuse started, she did say it started soon after her father came home from the war. Enos Buckner came home in May of 1945. My mother would have been twelve years old.

I learned of my mother's abuse when I was in the sixth grade. She was driving me to school, as she often did. I was chattering at my usual breakneck pace when I apparently used some loaded word, some phrase that resonated with something dark inside my beloved mother. I

think I was telling about how Dad saw a paper I got a good grade on and hugged me. But, I didn't use the word *hug*.

It might have been some new piece of vocabulary that I was fond of at the moment, like *caress*, or *fondle*. I don't actually remember what I said. I do remember that I didn't yet take the ramifications of words into account in sixth grade. I just used whatever I currently liked the sound of.

She immediately pulled off the road into the dirt just before the school parking lot. "What did you say?"

I don't remember much of my end of the conversation. I remember her end clearly. Her hands clenched the steering wheel, and she wasn't looking at me. Then she was. Intently.

I repeated myself.

"Tell me exactly what happened."

I was almost thirteen but very, very sheltered. Even though it was the mid seventies and sex was everywhere, I was aware of very little. Having grown up forbidden to watch shows like "All in the Family" or "Love, American Style" because they were "trashy," I could best be described as a Brady Bunch type of girl. Even "The Addams Family" was off limits due to Gomez's "disgusting" habit of kissing up his wife's arm. I could not comprehend what my mother was driving at. So, I very slowly and distinctly repeated myself for a third time.

"Did your father touch you?" She was about to cry, and I was getting upset.

"Yes." He did. He hugged me. It was flaming obvious—you have to touch someone to hug them.

“Oh, dear God. Dear God, no.” She bent her head to the steering wheel and shuddered.

“What is *wrong* with you, Mom?” Now I was angry. This was making no sense, and something very, very bad was going on just out of my reach. “Daddy always hugs me. Goll.”

She raised her head, and her eyes were red. She was still shaken by some invisible hand and distracted. I think she finally saw in my face, though. That I might truly have no idea what she was talking about.

“Did he touch you somewhere he shouldn’t? Your breasts? Where your panties are?” She couldn’t bring herself to get any more specific than that.

“Gross! Eww, Mom, why would you ask me that? That’s disgusting!” That didn’t happen to people. It seems so absurd now that I didn’t know. It doesn’t seem possible that I was so naive. Five-year-olds know now what I didn’t then. I wonder sometimes if it makes them more afraid growing up. If they, like I did, began to be wary of the friendly smiles of strangers. To be always aware of how my physical space buffers their bodies from the touch of other people. If they learn to be sensitive to the secret thoughts of others revealed through unconscious body language.

My mother told me that it happened to her. It began around my age and continued until she left home to marry my father. The judge in her hometown knew of the reputation of her father and his family and so agreed to hold my mother’s wedding one day shy of her 18th birthday. It was illegal without parental permission, but she said the judge “felt sorry for her.” I would later reflect that he didn’t feel sorry enough to investigate my mother’s abuse, to protect her family. It seems that in rural Texas in the 1940’s, everyone minded his own business and the rights of fathers over their families were sacrosanct.

My mother had a courthouse wedding. I still have the snapshot of their wedding that is the only wedding picture they owned. My mother, a tiny ninety-eight pounds in her short white store-bought dress, dark curly hair just to her neck, black cat's-eye glasses—a 1950s beauty. My father grinning in his military uniform, the same uniform he wore as he left for the Korean War a month after their wedding. They stood beside a late-1940s model car that had running boards and enormous fenders. A tilled field in the background, probably plowed narrow for cotton.

Mom said that she only told her mother because her father was beginning to make advances on her younger sister. She said that no one else knew about it in the family except her sister, her mother, and my father, and I was never, ever, ever to talk about it. I swore I would not, and loyally kept that promise for thirty years.

My mother reached for my hands, both of them, and made me look her in the eye. It was almost impossible. Something inside me was in a fetal position, and I couldn't raise my head. I was afraid of her pain, afraid of the purity of my outrage. She insisted.

Very solemnly, she told me that if anything ever like that ever, ever happened to me, I was to come straight to her. That she would stop any abuse, never let it happen again. That she would protect me no matter what.

She made me repeat over and over again and swear that my father was not abusing me. I finally made her believe me. Then she calmed down. I didn't. I began pressing her for details, trying to comprehend this thing that had happened to my mother. She told me a few, then told me she didn't want to talk about it anymore, that it hurt too much.

She asked me if I were okay to go to school, and I told her yes. I didn't want to go home, yearned for the normalcy of algebra and Mark Twain. So, she went into the front office with me to get an excuse pass for my being late, and then drove away.

Aspects of my mother's parenting that I had just thought of as quirky began from that day to develop layers and patterns. How no one had taught me about sex, but she had simply given me a book at age nine and told me to ask her if I had any questions. How, when I'd had nightmares as a young child, I was allowed to crawl into my parents' bed—but never on his side, only hers, her body shielding me from him. How I was never allowed into a public restroom by myself, discouraged from walking by myself, forbidden to wear makeup until I was sixteen, never allowed to watch certain television shows, see certain movies. Unconnected details connected. My childhood was over, deflowered by knowledge.

I never asked her directly about it again, and she only rarely revealed fragments throughout the years. Details emerged, such as how her father took her out of school before high school so she could pick cotton and he could "keep an eye on her." How he called her a slut and said she would never marry because no one would want her. She did, however, begin to talk to me about other things. Her depression. Thoughts of suicide. All of the fragility contained within various fears.

By the time I was fifteen years old, I had learned how to be the stable voice of reason to calm the essential unreason of her life. How to listen instead of talk. To sit quietly and hold hands. To respond to grief with even tones and rational words, because her emotions were

already at a fevered pitch and didn't need feeding. How that, sometimes, a person needs to speak without the burden of another's response.

As my grandfather lay dying and I sat plotting how to help him on his way, my then-husband Craig began to ask me useful, rational, practical questions. If I needed to leave right away. If I wanted him to come with me. Although time seemed of the essence, I knew I didn't want him to go, to bear witness to what might occur. I didn't want him involved if there was trouble.

Finally, he asked the question that he'd probably wanted to ask from the start.

"Why, exactly, do you want to do this? What difference, at this point, will it really make? Five minutes of suffering? Will it make your mom feel better?"

I considered that it might. She'd never admit it, though.

"It will make *me* feel better."

"Do you need to do this?" It was a measure of Craig's acceptance of and devotion to me at that point in our relationship that he asked this simply and gently, without sarcasm or judgment or irony.

"I think so."

Common knowledge seems to imply that we both should have been horrified at the conversation we were having, appalled at the very idea of murdering someone neither of us had ever met. I, at least, was not and if Craig was uncomfortable with the idea it didn't show. Perhaps there is a visceral desire in the human heart for fairness, even when we know that the action that leads to that balance is wrong. There is something cathartic when evil reaps evil, something

disturbing when the wicked go free. Pain for pain. Suffering for suffering. And eye for an eye. It was a biblical mandate.

I think that if the Internet was then as it is today, this story might have a different ending. If airline tickets were a few clicks away instead of several phone calls, I'd likely have been in Texas the next day. I'm not sure what would have happened after that.

I didn't end up going, and Enos Buckner died a few days later, presumably in his sleep. We never met. My curse went unbestowed.

It is now 2009, and my mother is seventy-six years old. She has middle-to-late stage Alzheimer's, and I with my now-husband Franklin take care of her and my forty-year-old mentally and emotionally disabled sister in my home. He knew what he was getting into when he became part of my life a handful of years ago. He knew because I told him, advised him to run far, far away from this future haven of the deranged. By the time we fell in love, I knew that my mother was going to have dementia, although she hadn't been diagnosed yet. Too many moments of undefined vagueness, heartbeats of delay where there hadn't been any before. Subtle changes in mood and habit that only someone close would notice. Anger and discontent appeared and vanished without context.

I knew I'd be taking care of her, although I was then living on my own. I knew that, in taking care of her, I eventually would also have to take care of my co-dependent, schizophrenic, problematic little sister. Since my father died in 2003, they had no one else they could depend on. I knew, in short, that loving me was probably better from a distance.

Franklin decided it wasn't, and for that I'm profoundly thankful. It's hard, though, not to regret the loss of "a normal life." One that didn't include constant care for two broken children who would never grow up. Musings about our future are bittersweet. Someday we will be able to walk the Great Wall of China, move out of Florida, watch snow fall in Seattle. Someday. After my mother dies.

Until then, he must never enter my mother's bedroom unless I am there and call for him. He must be wary of accusation. My mother once accused our neighbor of coming through her window in the night and trying to rape her. She described how she saw him sneak out of his garage and smash through her window. A white man with blue eyes. Our neighbor is black. The window was fine. Our house alarm was on and only Franklin and I can disable it. Late that night I found her staring out of the living-room window. She was watching workmen that didn't exist tearing down a house across the street that was still intact. She described the events as she saw them happen, and I sat looking out the window into the dark night along with her, building the scene in my mind's eye as she spoke. Holding her hand.

Franklin must never hug my mother unless she hugs him first. Which she does, often, to my amazement. I was afraid that it was too late for her to remember him as anything but a stranger. Yet she remembers his name in a moment when she's forgotten mine. She calls him son when she recognizes him.

He must try to endure my sister's constant obsessions over theme parks, models, cosmetic surgery, jewelry, and the fear du jour. Her constant chatter and walking egotism. Her essential lack of empathy, sympathy, or identification of wants or needs outside her own. He must remember that she has a serious chemical imbalance and slight retardation and it's not her

fault, so he must not strangle her no matter how much he, or I, want to, and that it's a good thing that we have an extra set of eyes to sound the alert when something happens. My sister may be self-centered, but she knows enough to dial 911 when she should.

We bought a two-story house so that he and I could retreat upstairs to have some privacy and a refuge away from the demands and sorrows downstairs. We take turns on the bad days, one of us staying downstairs until heart and mind are worn out, then tag-teaming with the other to escape into a quiet bedroom painted soothing in sages and creams and hung with gauze that sways peacefully in the breeze. There are days at a time when he doesn't come downstairs at all. I can't blame him. I can't imagine what I'd do if our situations were reversed.

There is one story that came out in one of my mother's more recent lucid moments that I believe to be true. I'd never heard the story before, but it seems telling to me. It happened because our cat jumped out of Franklin's arms and my mother cried out, and then apologized. She explained that she watched her father as he once grabbed their cat by the tail and swung it against the barn door, smashing its skull. She'd mentioned before that he didn't like cats.

I'm not sure good and evil can possibly exist. What happened to him in my grandfather's war? Why doesn't that matter to me in the slightest? If he were evil, he would need no motivation to have done what he did. If I were good, his motivations would matter. Do I believe either of these things? Sometimes. I have a lot of theories, but relatively few facts.

I may not condone, may tell people that I think certain things they do are bad ideas, but I don't make intrinsic value judgments of other people. I can't. How judgmental can a girl be who

has honestly and with knowledge aforethought plotted the suffering and death of another person? Even if he was a vile one? The fact remains, however, that I do continually pass judgments on two. He is one. I am the other. I judge him because I know the consequences of his legacy. I judge myself because I know my motivations. I am harsh on us both.

My mother has spent her life pretending that bad things don't exist, haven't happened. It is how she's coped all these years. How she managed to not pass on her broken ideas of men and sex and fear of life to me. How she managed to love even though sometimes she did it badly, confusing nurture with suffocation. I respect that, but I can't emulate it.

I can't pretend. I look my issues full in the face and consider my options. Sometimes I feel I'm a cold, calculating bitch. Or I'm a strong woman. Or I'm a little broken. Depends on how you look at it, I guess. I've never known quite how to look at it. On my good days I'm strong; On my bad days I'm broken. But that's true of everyone I suppose.

My crutches are few. I can't drink to excess often. It just makes me sick and hung over. Apparently, I can't get addicted to drugs either, as my flirtation with cocaine in the eighties ended in boredom, acid in the nineties the same, and nothing else ever seemed interesting. I have no religion—I can't make myself believe in things that are patently absurd to me, that seem like a child's "invisible friend." My only crutches are sleeping and reading. Reading if it's not too bad, sleeping if it's really bad. I slept through practically an entire year of high school, but no one sends you to rehab for sleeping. It's not as easy to sleep these days.

The experiences of now include screams in the night. They are of three different kinds. Two of them make me pelt down the stairs, the other makes me lie in bed and wait to see if it stops.

The first I hear through the baby monitor, and it is the most serious. It means that my mother has fallen and potentially injured herself or needs help. It is occasionally more like a yell or a groan, but there is usually a screaming bit as she's going down if she falls. Mom isn't at the stage where she might need to be restrained, which I can't stomach anyway, and she gets up in the night to use the bathroom at least three times. Sometimes she makes it to the toilet, sometimes she yells instead. If it's just a yell and has real words in it, I wait to see if my sister, who sleeps downstairs in a room near her, will take care of it before I pelt down. Occasionally, she does, and I can fall back asleep.

The second kind of scream comes from somewhere else in the house, outside of the room with the monitor. This scream indicates that mom is wandering around the darkened house not knowing where she is and is terrified. It is a wailing type of scream, the call of the forlorn. With this one, I need to pelt down and try and get her calm and back into bed so she doesn't hurt herself. She may or may not recognize who I am, so it may or may not be difficult. My sister will not respond to screams without words. She knows I'll come down so she doesn't have to get up. I get mom back in bed and then go back to sleep myself.

The third scream sounds the worst but signals the least physical danger. It is the loud sound of what is usually meant by "blood-curdling" and is an all-out expression of visceral fear. If she screams once and stops, it is a passing dream like so many others. I can stay in bed and fall back asleep immediately.

If she continues to scream, it is one of two things. Either she is dreaming and is stuck in the scenario, or she is “awake” but reliving some event of her past. These events always seem to be the bad ones. I guess bad ones make more of a psychological impact. It is much the same as what Dr. Michael Grodin of the Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights described concerning his Holocaust survivors. You can tell by the eyes, the body language, that she is back in prison.

I try to re-orient her. See, this is your afghan. You crocheted this. There are your ceramic angels. See the pictures on the mirror? Do you know those people? Here are your sisters. There’s Franklin and you eating ice cream. You’re putting a big spoon into his mouth. You remember that? Ice cream went all down his chin. Remember how much we laughed? That’s me. I’m your daughter. Here’s one of you and your other daughter, see?

I will ask her what she dreamed because when I tell people my dreams they become much less scary and less real. That doesn’t quite seem true for her, but I can show her how the events in her dream can’t be real because we are in her room with her things. It’s eerily like when I used to do acid with friends for a few years in the nineties. Patterns on a white wall—I watched them move, spin slowly and beautifully. My mother does that now sometimes. Gold and silver, sometimes blue. The realistic feeling of non-realities. Watching things that couldn’t possibly be happening, walls shifting and faces unrecognizable. I remember techniques for dealing with friends on bad trips. Walking them through their fear until I could mold their perceptions into something they could tolerate. Bringing their mind back home. I am the only one who can consistently calm my mother, even when she doesn’t know who I am. I know it won’t last, that eventually things will deteriorate beyond my reach, but it works for now.

Inevitably, many of her dreams involve men outside the house trying to get in, men in her room, dying animals, people hurting children, some vague thing that's going to get her. And always, I make my silent assumptions and feel like I know who's to blame.

Sometimes I don't need to make assumptions. She tells me her father's going to get us all. I remind her that her father is dead, has been dead for years. Sometimes she just says "good." She no longer wonders if she's a good person for wishing him dead. Sometimes she doesn't believe me. Someone that powerful and dangerous can never die. I know what she means. Either way, I then get her talking about something else until she forgets her fear. It's a mercy sometimes that her short-term memory is now gone.

Sometimes she gets angry and suddenly lashes out. Once, she hit me in the face with a shoe and laughed at the blood. It happens. Let it go.

As a last resort, we get up and eat. Food is the ultimate distraction. It takes a long, long time, though. Eating is complicated.

Eventually calm is restored and we can all sleep again.

I do wonder sometimes how other people would respond if they knew that I now hear screaming as nothing more than whistle blasts that signal necessary actions. *The baby's crying, get up and feed it.* I don't fear the blasts; I rarely get upset anymore. I simply weigh them and decide which actions are necessary. I wonder how normal that is—screams with effect but no affect. I think about these things a lot in my blacker moments. There aren't as many of those as one might imagine, no more than there always have been anyway. I accept what I can't change, and I can't change much of this. It is what it is. What it has been. Except when I don't. It goes in

cycles. For now, her nurses have just begun to prescribe Risperdal, a strong anti-psychotic. It seems to be helping.

Soon it will matter less. I don't think she'll live more than another few years, if that. In this alone, I am like my mother. I don't think about it. It will come, whether I think on it or not, so I'll deal with it when I have to.

I honestly don't know how bad things were between my mother and her father. Now, I will never know, because I don't know how much of what my mother divulges at this point is memory and how much is an amalgam of something she once saw on T.V.

Her father, my grandmother, and my father are all dead. I could approach my aunt, but there is something intrinsically wrong with her, with my mother's entire family actually, that I don't want to mire myself in. Does something still exist when no one but you remembers it, and you don't know what you're talking about? What is it that exists? The memory of your impression of someone else's memories. How real is that?

It feels pretty real, sometimes. Not always.

The fierceness of my emotions have tempered over the years, like iron in constant fire. There is nothing I can do to change what happened. There is nothing more than I've already done to make anything easier for my mother. I can only protect her, comfort her, try and make her feel safe. She has refused to talk to a professional, refused to even think about it. She will carry what she knows out of life with her, wrapped and hidden, and when she goes it will be over.

In a way. When she goes the loose ties that bind me to her family will unravel entirely. I have no blood relatives that I know, so my family is my choice. I have chosen my mother. I do

not choose them. So, soon, there will be no one left but me. The secret keeper can finally lay the secret to rest.

But in a way, no. Perhaps it will be over, but the effects are more or less eternal. I am, in part, what my mother taught me. She was, in part, what her father taught her. What happens to children reverberates through time.

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