

GROWING UP VILLAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

Growing Up Village is a collection of essays about life in an Alaskan Native village. Ranging in time from early childhood to late twenties, the stories examine how home and place influence the narrator's identity, what the narrator learns from the people around her, and how events, both minor and major, can impact and change a life. Ultimately, this collection of essays explores themes of home, family, culture, loss, courage, and community.

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THE EASIEST QUESTION ON BUZZFEED QUIZZES IS ALWAYS WHAT I'D RATHER BE DOING ON A FRIDAY NIGHT

It's Friday night – she enters the house without knocking. They already know she's there; her two-year-old nephew saw her truck and he's banging on the window, saying he wants to go. As is their ritual, she'll take baby Jeremy for a quick drive, giving Catherine time to finish the dishes, grab a shower, or make a cup of hot chocolate.

She's dressed in a t-shirt and jeans and it's not a big deal when she picks up her nephew and the mud from his boots transfers to her shirt and then to the backseat of the truck. The bench seat is almost completely clear of junk, except for a whiffle ball, a squishy baby book, and the get-the-snow-off-the-windshield brush. Jeremy is equally interested in all three objects.

When they return, she remembers to grab her Kindle from the truck, hoping she'll have time to read a chapter while Catherine's putting Jeremy to sleep. The popcorn is already made, and she pulls two pops out of her bag, putting a Ruby Red Squirt on Catherine's side of the couch and popping open her Diet Pepsi. While Catherine reads to Jeremy, she texts and checks in with Alexandria, the seventeen-year-old living with her. Alexandria is finishing high school in Everett because her village is too small to have its own.

Once Jeremy's asleep, she and Catherine catch up on the gossip first – people out of town, people in town, teenagers, elders, there's always something interesting going on. Catherine tells her about a pregnant coworker and a couple that broke up for the fourth time. She tells Catherine about two high schoolers who fought during lunch and which teachers didn't sign their contracts and won't be back next year. Then it's time for *Supernatural*. They have three episodes to catch up on – it's a perfect Friday night.

WHAT WE TAKE AWAY

I carry a knife and a lighter in my pocket at all times. They're fairly easy to explain. Pocketknives come in handy. They sold them at the Bible Camp store so we could carve little boats out of driftwood as kids. As an adult, it makes opening the ridiculous plastic packaging on headphones and other items a little bit easier. And you never know when you're going to need to light a cigarette, or when someone else might need a little bit of help in that regard.

The only time the knife and the lighter aren't in my pocket is when I travel. Once, I forgot to put them in my checked luggage, and only realized as I was going through security. Before I threw them away, I called home and made sure my mom had an extra pocketknife. On the way home from the airport, I bought another lighter at the store. My new pocketknife waited for me on the kitchen counter.

*

The MSN Messenger on my computer blinked at me. A message from my mom, "Call me." I checked the clock. A message to call home at 2 AM was never a good thing.

I had eight roommates my sophomore year of college and we all shared the phone in the common room, so I understood why she hadn't called me. Still, it would've been easier to answer the phone, not knowing what she had to tell me than to make myself call her when I knew it wouldn't be good. There would be a lot of moments in my life where I wished I could take the easy way out, avoid what I didn't want to hear, but the ostrich-in-the-sand scenario was never a real option.

The phone was made from see-through blue plastic and the numbers lit up as I dialed, hesitating before I pushed that last 9. Much as I might have wished it would be busy or no one would answer, my mom picked up the phone after the first ring.

“Carlee?”

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“They found Jeremy’s body between here and Shelton.”

On TV, people always tell someone something like, maybe you should sit down for this, or do you want a chair? Now, as I dropped to the floor between the back of the futon and the dining table, I understood why.

“What?”

“He’d been missing since Sunday. They found him tonight.” It was Tuesday. I called home almost every day and she hadn’t said anything yesterday.

Jeremy, my cousin. Catherine’s brother. When we were kids, Catherine had idolized him and I’d wanted an older brother, so I’d pretended he was mine too.

“Carlee?”

I focused breathing. In, out. “Yeah.”

“Are any of your roommates awake? I don’t want you to be alone.”

I shook my head, one of those things you do even though the person on the other end can’t see you. “No, they’re all asleep. I’m um, I’m...I’ll go to Maria’s.” I wasn’t that close to my roommates. I’d been assigned to live with some of them my freshman year and they’d needed a ninth roommate for our sophomore year, so it worked out, and we were friendly, but not friends. I spent the majority of my time across campus in Maria’s room. It wouldn’t matter if she was dead asleep or had an eight o’clock class. I’d go to her.

The floor smelled like beer. We had the largest suite on campus with the largest common room, so our room was the ideal place for my sorority-involved roommates to host parties. It always smelled like beer and I'd find red Solo cups in random places.

I started crying. I've been told not to use the phrase "started" when writing, because it begs the question of when I stopped. But I started crying then and it felt like I'd never stop. I didn't sleep that night, as I lay on the couch in Maria's room, my head on her lap. She was pulling an all-nighter to study for an Orgo exam in the morning. If I talked, she listened. If I spent forty-five minutes staring into the fireplace we weren't allowed to use, she studied.

She held my hand while I called Catherine. It took over an hour before I thought I could talk to her without breaking down. Maria dialed the phone for me when I couldn't stop shaking long enough to dial myself.

I didn't recognize the voice of whoever answered the phone. "Hey, it's Carlee," I said. "Can I talk to Catherine?"

Whoever it was brought the phone to her and then I heard her voice. "Carlee?"

I have no idea what I actually said to her that night. I know my voice must have been wobbly from trying not to cry, from trying to make my voice strong enough to be understood. I know my throat hurt from the effort and my chin looked worse than Claire Danes' when she spent so much time crying on TV. I probably said that my mom had called and told me about Jeremy. She probably asked if I was coming home, and I probably said I was going to try.

I couldn't afford the ticket home, but Maria went with me on Wednesday to the Dean's office. She'd heard there was a fund to help with emergency travel. The school paid for the ticket and I got off the plane in Everett on Friday. My mom picked me up at the airport and drove me straight to Catherine's.

The stairs up to her house were old and rickety and there were at least three steps where half the board was missing. It was the beginning of April, so ice had formed on them as it got warm during the day but dropped back below freezing at night. Rock salt lumps crunched under my feet as I made my way up the stairs. I clutched the railing, partly as a precaution in case I slipped, and partly to make sure I kept moving forward, one foot in front of the other, up the stairs towards Jeremy's mom and dad and sister and baby brother.

Three friends of my aunt and uncle smoked on the porch, and I nodded to them as I opened the front door.

I don't know if Catherine had heard me come up the steps, or if someone had seen my mom's car pull up, but she was right in front of me as soon as I walked in. She hugged me and as would happen a lot that week, it felt more like I was holding her up than hugging her back.

We sat on the floor in her narrow bedroom, our backs on one wall, our knees folded against the bed pushed along the opposite wall. I took comfort in just being there with her. The familiar smells of her house, moose soup being kept warm in a pot on top of the woodstove, fresh bread that Auntie Janet usually made, but someone had brought over that day. It was the distinct smell of the house that I couldn't describe but could always identify.

Catherine flipped through a photo album, the spine resting between us. We needed to find photos for the display that would be at the front of the hall once Jeremy was released from the coroner or the medical examiner or the funeral home or wherever he'd ended up once the clinic or the troopers or whoever had sent him to Fairbanks. Auntie Janet asked us to choose. I think she spent the week alternating between manic periods of trying to manage everything and periods of sitting on a chair in her kitchen or at the hall, unable to do anything. I guess that's not

unexpected when a mom loses her child, her first born. When I watch grief scenes in movies or on TV, it's always the scenes with the mom who's lost a child that hit me the hardest.

Justin came to stand in the room with us as we looked through the photos. When we were little and Auntie Janet and Uncle Michael travelled, Catherine stayed with me and my mom, and Jeremy went to Justin's house. Justin looked a little lost in the corner as he leaned against the desk. Maybe it was weird for him to be in the house, but in Catherine's room instead of Jeremy's. He didn't say much and he didn't stay long. Maybe he just needed a break from all the people that were in the living room and kitchen.

My favorite photo we chose was from when we were kids. My older sister, Amber, said that with the way Catherine held my hand in the photo, it looked like I was her pet. I didn't actually remember the photo being taken, or what we were doing, but we looked happy. I was maybe three, Catherine four, and Jeremy six. Jeremy and I wore matching slippers with Garfield heads on the toes. Jeremy held a large piece of paper, probably a school project, and his teddy bear, half as big as him, sat on the couch behind us, wearing a pair of overalls, maybe having belonged to Jeremy since he was two or three. That teddy bear was the only thing Auntie Janet put in the casket with Jeremy.

We flipped past a photo that Catherine didn't pull out of the album. Jeremy and I stood on someone's porch and he held up a bottle, a big grin on his face. I remembered that night. Between being at boarding school and then college and everyone knowing that I didn't drink, I didn't hang out with them very often when they partied. Even though both Jeremy and Catherine were known for their partying, I only remember being around Catherine once when she was drinking. There'd been a bunch of us playing Black Jack at Jeremy's house, in front of Auntie Janet's and Uncle Michael's. We called it the Little House, a three room cabin where my dad and

Auntie Janet and their four brothers had grown up. Some people are happy, genial drunks who love everybody. Catherine was not that kind of drunk. That night, she got mad that there were so many people and went back to her house, locked the door and wouldn't open it. I had to wait till morning to get my car keys from inside, and Catherine didn't remember any of it.

Something strange happened to me that week. It was like my brain erased all my good memories of him, like it knew I wasn't ready to handle losing Jeremy, wasn't ready to miss him. Instead, I was left with things like the time he got drunk at the teen center and stood on the pool table, waving a bottle around. Or when he got drunk and overly pushy, grabbing my friend's ass. These were the parts of him I wouldn't miss, but suddenly, it was all I could remember. I remembered that I'd wished he was my big brother, but I couldn't remember why, couldn't remember any of the stories that Catherine had told me that had made me wish we shared him as a protective older brother.

It would be years before I remembered that I'd watched *The Lady and the Tramp* for the first time with him and Catherine. I'd called that I got to be Lady and he called the Tramp, which was fun until Disney had to throw in that disgusting kissing stuff. There was also a Sunday where he got his snowmachine working just so he could come to church and say goodbye to my mom before he went to Fairbanks for a month. He had black grease in his nailbeds and stains on his Carhartts and smelled like gasoline, but he'd wanted to say goodbye. Memories are still coming back to me, even ten years later, like when we'd played hide-and-seek and he climbed on top of the water tank in the upstairs closet and fell asleep.

Catherine talked about him as we looked through the photo album, but I couldn't remember any of the stories she was talking about. It was all blank for me.

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I'd piece it together over the next couple of days that Jeremy had been in Shelton and left on Sunday night, only he'd been drunk and hadn't told anyone he was leaving and hadn't called anyone in Everett to tell them to expect him and he'd been traveling alone, all of which are the opposite of what you're supposed to do when traveling between villages. No one had realized he was missing until Monday night and because he'd been drunk and gone off the trail, they didn't find him until Tuesday.

Five years after we buried Jeremy, we had his Memorial Potlatch, three days of potlatches and Native singing and dancing, a weekend that builds up to the night of the gift-giving. It's a time for the family to say thank you to everyone that was there for Jeremy when he was alive and there for us when he wasn't. One of the things we gave away were little kits that could go in a snowmachine's storage compartment: lighter, matches in a plastic baggie, bright reflectors, an LED light, and a whistle.

*

Our cousin Sandy had been the same class as Jeremy growing up. She and I took the photos to school and I scanned them on my mom's computer. Sandy dealt with the loss of Jeremy by delving into arrangements and paperwork and tasks that had to get done. It worked out for the best. I wasn't confident enough to think that any of my decisions would be the right one and she was confident enough to know that all of hers were.

We printed the photos and laminated them so the originals could go back into the albums. It's a good thing we didn't use the originals – the first set went through the laminator when it was too hot and came out warped, so we had to print them again. Being at the school gave us a

lot of counter space to work with as Sandy and I spread everything out. We wrapped paper around three of those tri-fold boards, the kind used for elementary science fair projects, and Sandy decided what pictures would go where on each board, as decisive as when she ordered the fake flower arrangements that would be placed around the front of the hall with the photos and later on the grave until summer when the metal cover and wooden fence would be put up around it, and as decisive as she would be later when she helped to write the eulogy and put together the funeral program.

Aaron was one of Jeremy's best friends, but he was in Hawaii and missed the funeral. Instead, he sent a letter, the kind of thing he would've given as part of his speech at the potlatch after the funeral, about the kind of friend Jeremy was and a fishing trip they'd taken. Auntie Janet and Sandy included the letter in the funeral program and used part of it with the eulogy that was sent to the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. Catherine clipped it from the paper and it's still on the side of her fridge twelve years later.

*

Uncle William and Auntie Donna brought Jeremy home on Sunday. Everyone was at the airport and Uncle Michael drove out onto the runway and backed his truck up to the plane. They slid the casket into the truck bed and then we started the last drive.

Uncle Michael, Auntie Janet, Catherine, and Russell were first in their orange Dodge Ram. My dad and Uncle William pulled out from the airport behind them. I got into the backseat and Auntie Donna hopped in our SUV and we were third.

We drove down the hill at the end of the dike and came up on the other side of the runway. I looked behind us. The line of cars was still going down the hill. I tried to count the vehicles that followed us, but gave up after fifty.

“How’d the raffle go last night?” Auntie Donna asked. I’d helped with the money while my mom had sold tickets, so she looked back at me.

“A little over \$7,000,” I said.

Auntie Donna whistled and I knew what she meant. It’d been the highest amount I could ever remember. But Jeremy had been like that – even if most of the stories that people shared about him that week had involved his crazy party behavior, pretty much everybody’d liked him. Aside from being a good party buddy, he’d made a habit of stopping by elders’ homes to see if they needed wood chopped or water hauled or something carried or moved or whatever.

Uncle Michael took Jeremy and the rest of us through his last drive downtown and past their house before going uptown. We made a loop past my mom’s house and the Catholic Church before going to the hall. My dad lived down a dead end road so it wasn’t feasible to go that way.

When we got to the hall, Uncle Michael backed up to the stairs and then he, Uncle William, my dad, Justin, and two of Jeremy’s other friends carried Jeremy inside, to the front of the hall. They took off the casket lid and then it was time for the women’s job.

Auntie Donna had made sure he was dressed in the right clothes before leaving Fairbanks, a white button down shirt and black pants, but now that Jeremy was home, a couple of the elderly women, cousins of our grandparents, switched his shoes for beaded mooseskin slippers and put beaded gloves on his hands, folding them together over his stomach. They put a beaver fur hat between his head and the side of the casket. It looked nice against the light blue silk that lined the interior.

The men set up three or four long tables towards the back of the hall, since everyone in town would bring food over the next couple of days, and three or four round tables so people

could play pan and black jack and poker. They set up chairs around the room and put up a few extra tables in case people wanted to sit there to eat, rather than sit on the benches that lined the room and try to balance their plates while they ate.

Catherine and I helped with some of the other needed tasks. We set up the photo boards along the front wall and made sure that along with the guest book, there were a couple of candy dishes filled with gum and cigarettes on the small table at the foot of the casket. As many funerals as I'd been to, I'd never thought about those kinds of things, who was responsible for setting up the hall. Now I knew.

There were a couple of rows of chairs set up next to the casket for anyone who wanted to say goodbye or talk with Jeremy's family and friends. I spent some time sitting next to Jeremy that first day he was home. It wasn't him. Nothing the coroner or funeral home attendant did could have made him look like Jeremy again. His face was so much darker than the shade of Native brown that he should have been, with hints of dark purple and blue, and twice as wide as it was supposed to be. The fact that it didn't look like Jeremy made it easier for me to pretend. I pretended it wasn't him, that they'd made a mistake, because this couldn't be him. This person's mouth was in an unnaturally straight line and Jeremy smiled 90% of the time. This person's eyes were closed, his face unanimated. Jeremy's eyes had crinkles in the corner and he was loud and the center of attention and laughed so we could hear him even if we were outside the house. His voice had the same whiskey-gravel quality as Auntie Janet's. This person in the casket didn't say anything. It wasn't Jeremy.

Going back to school after five days made it even easier for me to pretend – I told myself that he was still at home, just like he'd always been while I was at school. Catherine had to deal

with the reality that he was gone, that he wasn't just out of town for a couple of weeks or months. After the funeral, she went to graveyard every day to sit and talk and drink with him.

Catherine and I had left together for college in the fall of 2000, she to Fort Lewis and me to Princeton. Auntie Janet threw a going away dinner for us. Catherine took their Suburban and crashed off the side of the dike. The vehicle flipped twice. Once more and she'd have ended up in the river.

She only went to school for one semester. She spent her 19th birthday in the hospital with alcohol poisoning and had partied so much the school said she couldn't go back. So she'd stayed home and partied there. She could roll for days before taking a break.

She drank even more after Jeremy died and traveled alone on the river to make the twenty mile trip to the graveyard every day.

*

Nights are my favorite part of the days before a funeral. Maybe it's weird to have favorite parts of something awful, but when you've been to enough funerals, it gets easier to appreciate the patterns, to appreciate certain traditions. The Rosary gets said each night at seven, which I normally don't go to because I don't know the prayers since I'd grown up going to the Bible Church with my mom while Catherine and her family and most of the rest of Everett went to the Catholic Church, but I went for Jeremy's Rosary and sat with the family. Auntie Donna gave me a necklace but I didn't know what to do with it, so I just held and squeezed the beads in my palm when I needed something to focus on besides Auntie Janet.

She knelt on the floor, next to Jeremy. He held a Rosary in his hands, the beads lying over the fur and beaded flowers on his gloves. She ran her fingers over the gloves, over the beads, and cried. I focused on something else, anything else. The Econ homework I needed to

turn in when I got back to school on Wednesday. The puddle on the floor, melted snow from someone's boot that was soaking into the knee of my jeans.

Obviously, that wasn't my favorite part. No, my favorite part comes after the Rosary. No matter whose funeral it is, no matter if there's only one day between bringing the body home and the burial or five days, there's singing every night. A couple of people get out their guitars and fiddles and set up in the corner. Sometimes there's even a banjo. This is when the majority of the town is at the hall and we sing old country gospel songs, the kinds sung by Loretta Lynn and George Jones and Patsy Cline. For Jeremy, the words in "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" are changed. No one had to say it, it just happened. *I was standing by my window, on one cold and cloudy day. When I saw the hearse come rolling for to carry my brother away.* I guess it changes every time, depending on who we're there for. For older men, it'd be father, for women, mother. Occasionally sister for the younger women or those who hadn't had children. I've gotten used to the brother version.

Laura and Kelly sat with Catherine a lot in those days before Jeremy's funeral. Both of their older brothers had died during our senior year of high school. It's not a club that anyone wants to join, but maybe it's nice to know you're not alone once you do.

I guess that still doesn't explain how this singing is my favorite part. But the whole town is there and some visit and laugh and some sing and some cry, but we're all there and the family knows we're there and most of the time, nothing makes sense about what happened, but for those two or three hours, everything fits and it's good in the middle of the bad.

The last song is always "Amazing Grace" at 11:00 or 11:30, and everyone stands. The night before Jeremy's funeral, Catherine and I sat in the chairs next to the casket. It was warm in the hall with so many people crowded in and neither of us had on our jackets or hoodies.

Catherine wore a white shirt. When it came time for that last song on the night before they buried her brother, she couldn't stand. I grasped her arm, her gauzy sleeves pressed tight under my hand, and helped her up, putting my arm through hers, and she leaned on me. I was reminded of our Uncle Tony's funeral back in 1993, and how two people had to help our grandpa William stand up, one on each side, supporting him, so he could say goodbye before they closed the casket.

*

Because there were only two flights out of Everett each day and because we hadn't known the date of the funeral when the school had made my reservation, I had to leave in the middle of the funeral. If it had been later, I'd have sat in the front row, next to Catherine and my dad. My mom said I was there for the important part, being with Catherine when she needed it, but I think she probably needed me there too when they started shoveling the dirt onto her brother. I wasn't sorry to miss the night of the funeral, after everyone got back from the graveyard and after the potlatch dinner when people would get up and share stories for a couple of hours, when Catherine and all of Jeremy's friends would drink all night, one last party with him.

But knowing that I'd be leaving the next day, Catherine and I stayed at the hall for Jeremy's last night before the funeral and burial.

I've never been to a white person's funeral. For us, we have our customs and traditions and beliefs when someone dies, including not leaving them alone. People are at the hall around the clock with the person until they're buried. The elders are actually some of the regular all-nighters. Once the pan tables are set up, they'll play all night. Some of the younger people know how to play pan and they'll join them, but mostly we play poker and black jack.

Jeremy was the first time I stayed through night. He'd been at the hall for four days, but I'd always left by two or three in the morning. Catherine and I spent that last night before the funeral at the hall with Jeremy and with each other and with his friends and other family members. Catherine and I played black jack for a while and then we'd go sit with her brother or look at the pictures on the front tables. We'd go with one of Jeremy's friends when they grabbed a cigarette from the candy dish and went outside to smoke. Catherine had quit smoking the year before and I hadn't yet started, but we'd go out and talk about Jeremy.

*

I didn't see much of my dad that week. He spent days at the graveyard with the other men, digging Jeremy's grave, at the end of the row that held my dad's parents and his brothers and his sisters. Most people share stories and laugh and cry and mourn. When he was at the hall, he'd sit in a chair off to the side, near the coffee machine, all quiet-like. He'd quit drinking when I was three and I wonder if that's what he thought about every time he took his turn digging his nephew's grave and when he had to carry the casket and when they put the casket in the sled attached to the back of his snow machine after the funeral so he could haul it over the trails that led to the graveyard, twenty miles out of town.

*

I learned to be afraid, to be prepared. Catherine learned what she wanted for her life and how to be strong. Eighteen months after they buried her brother, Catherine quit drinking. They didn't have AA in Everett and there wasn't a different set of supportive, sober friends that she could hang out with. She decided she didn't want to drink anymore and that's what she did. She had a son, Jeremy David Carter II, in 2010, and she's raising him as a single parent. She tells him

stories about his uncle, and like his uncle, baby Jeremy's favorite sport is already baseball.

Sometimes I try to explain why she's the strongest person I know, but it never comes out right.

113 DAYS

I finally stop crying somewhere between Anchorage and Juneau. It only took 600 miles or so. I'd be embarrassed, but I'm not the only one on the plane with swollen red eyes and more than one snotty tissue stuffed into the pocket of a Nike windbreaker. Near as I can figure, about half of the people on this 737 are students heading to Mt. Clarendon High School from villages across the state.

Some of them are returning students and already know each other. When we'd gotten on the plane, a girl had asked to switch with me so she could sit with her friend, which is how I ended up in an uncomfortable middle seat between a woman in her sixties and a middle-aged man.

If I was someone else, I'd have introduced myself to other kids in the airport. Catherine has that ability, that ease when talking with new people. Last month, she'd sat down next to an unfamiliar blonde lady at the clinic in Everett and straight up asked what she was doing here, how long she'd been here, where she was from. It might have come off as brash or rude, except that she genuinely wanted to know what a new person was doing in Everett and the interrogation segued into a chat session about how the woman's husband was the new English teacher and they had two young daughters and they'd moved into the old Meyers' house on the next road over from mine.

But I'm not Catherine, and just the idea of going up and talking to an unfamiliar person makes the back of my neck hot with perceived possible embarrassment. I imagine the coming days. A classroom with twenty unfamiliar students and no assigned seating. The dreaded

cafeteria where I will have to sit at a table and either be the loner who doesn't talk to anyone or introduce myself to my tablemates. What if they ignore me after? What if I try to talk and squeak instead? What if they all get up and leave right when I sit down and then, worse than joining a table full of people I don't know, I'm sitting alone where everyone can see me?

The next week is going to establish my identity at Clarendon in a way I've never experienced. I've never gone to summer camp without other kids who already know me. I've never traveled on a school trip without teammates. Everyone at home knows I won a school-wide award for reading the most books when I was in fifth grade. They already know I had to take classes with the sixth graders when I was nine. At home, they know my dad doesn't live with us and my mom moved to Everett from Pennsylvania. They know who I hang out with and that we don't drink or smoke. They know my birthday. Which is less than a month away. What if I have to be a loser who tells people it's her birthday? What if I don't have any friends by then?

I've never had to "make" friends before. I don't even know how. I've grown up in a village cut off from the rest of the world, no roads in or out. There were few chances to venture forth and learn how to function in a new setting, and I've definitely never done it on my own.

When we land in Juneau for a quick stop before continuing on to Sitka, everyone gets off the plane. The airport waiting area is small and seventy-five teenagers do not make for a quiet crowd.

I sit against the wall and clutch my book, the latest in the *Redwall* series. I pretend to read as I watch everyone over the top of my paperback. There are twenty or so chairs, mostly taken by non-student passengers. The older kids are clustered in groups of five or ten, talking over each other. There are only a handful of students not engaged in conversation. I don't try to talk to them.

Over by the gate, I spot the hottest guy I've ever seen. He's tall, close to six feet, and his hands are in the pockets of his black Carhartt jacket. He's not talking, but he's smiling at something a girl in his group just said, her arms waving around to illustrate her anecdote. Even from across the room, I see that his eyelashes are thick enough that he almost looks like he's wearing eyeliner. Back in May, one of the Everett seniors who'd gone to Clarendon the year before had told his friends that everyone gets boyfriends at Clarendon, even the ugly girls. He said there was hope for me. Wes had told James, who'd told Twila, who'd told me.

I slouch down a little further and wait for the ticket agents to let us back on the plane.

Boarding school is not really my choice. My dad grew up in the era where Alaska Native kids were sent away for school, and if he went to boarding school, I'm going to boarding school. This does not make a whole lot of sense to me. Maybe he means that if he could make it, I can make it. Maybe he wants me to get out of the village and experience something new. Maybe he means to make this a family tradition. I have no idea. My dad's not real keen on using his words and communicating clearly.

My mom would never have agreed to boarding school if it weren't for the fact that I took Algebra II in eighth grade. Everett High School's highest math class is Trig and they haven't offered a foreign language since the '80s. She has dreams of the Ivy League. I just want to stay home with the friends I've grown up with.

I have to make it one year, that's what my mom says. If I hate it, I can stay home for tenth grade. Considering the fact that I was nine before I was able to spend an entire night away from home without calling my mom to pick me up, it's going to be a long year.

Days Till Christmas Break

- 113 days till I go home again
- 113 days till my friends pile into my room for a sleepover where they will pull out the futon mattress and take the cushions off the couches downstairs
- 113 days till I make fun of Bridget for sleeping with the cordless phone because she's afraid she'll miss a call from her boyfriend
- 113 days till Adrienne, Autumn, Amy, and I make stupid music videos to Alanis Morissette songs
- 113 days till I play in the snow, because it turns out, Sitka never gets cold enough
- 113 days till I tease my sister enough that she cries
- 113 days till I don't try to hide my nerd-status because everyone at home already knows
- 113 days till I see the classmates that I've spent every day with for the last eleven years
- 113 days till I lie on the couch and read a book with my cat
- 113 days till I yell at my sister for putting her doll's dress on my cat
- 113 days till the high school basketball Christmas tournament where my mom will keep the official score book and make blank copies for me before the game so I can learn to keep score too
- 113 days till I see my dad do that half head-nod thing he does when he's proud of me
- 113 days till I sing Christmas carols in the library at 8 AM with the rest of the Everett City School students, like I've done every Christmas since pre-k
- 113 days till I hug my mom

The Sitka airport is even smaller than Juneau's, with one glassed-partitioned gate and one baggage carousel. The walls are covered in a timeline of Sitka's history. I read it as I wait for my bag.

My overstuffed green duffel comes off the carousel fairly quickly. I grab it and put it on the ground, unsure of my next move. I try not to look panicked and instead, observe the people around me. There's a steady stream of teenagers grabbing their luggage and carrying it outside. I hoist my bag onto my shoulder and follow them.

When I step out of the Sitka airport, I immediately smell salt and fish, like the scent has soaked into the air. I can taste it when I breathe deeply. It's my first time being anywhere near the ocean. I've seen enough movies to know what the water sounds like as it crashes against the rocks, and I imagine that I can hear it. It's almost midnight and dark and I can't see anything beyond the trees at the edge of the parking lot, but thanks to the airport's informative wallpaper, I know the ocean is there, somewhere close by, that Clarendon and the airport are actually on a separate island from the rest of Sitka. The trees help create that sense of strangeness, that not-in-Kansas-anymore sensation. They grow out of the boulders and rocky hillsides that edge the parking lot, instead of growing from dirt and soil like at home.

The rain hits me in the face as soon as I leave the cover of the airport's overhang. There are two yellow school buses waiting for us and students carry their bags onboard. I wait in line to get on the bus. The rain soaks into my duffel and quickly makes it an even darker green.

I walk down the bus's aisle and try to avoid hitting people in the face with either my bag or my backpack. Once I find an empty seat, I sit next to the window and put my bag on the seat next to me. Maybe I'm supposed to hold it in my lap, but that might invite someone to sit next to

me and I'd have to figure out what to say. Or worse, no one would sit next to me and I'd have moved my bag in an effort to get someone to sit down when no one wants to.

Everyone files off the bus once we reach the school. It's still raining so I pull up the hood of my windbreaker. The boys break away and walk towards a boys' dorm I can't see from the parking lot. There are two buildings in front of me and girls are making their way towards both. I don't know where to go next.

"Hey, Carlee." I turn around and see Amanda. She's a senior and the only other student here from Everett, but I've never actually talked to her before. She's been going to Clarendon since her freshman year. As soon as we got to the Fairbanks airport, she was surrounded by friends.

"Hi, Amanda."

"I told my mom I'd help you find a room." She holds a hand out and I pass her my backpack. It's loaded down with new notebooks for school and paperbacks I hadn't wanted to leave at home and it feels like it's as heavy as my duffel.

"Thank you," I say. Amanda's possibly the nicest person ever. I think she means to sound helpful, and I imagine she'd help me even if her mom hadn't asked her to, but I still feel like a burden. "Um, I'm not assigned a room?"

Amanda shakes her head. "There are two dorms, the main girls' dorm and Heritage Hall. You're going to be in the main dorm. You get to choose your room," she says as she leads me towards the larger, longer building and away from the square, three-story dorm.

"Where's your room?" I ask. I hope I don't sound clingy. I don't want to be that freshman that she has to work to avoid, the one her friends laugh at because I won't leave her alone.

She holds open the front door to the main dorm with one hand and points at the square building with the other. “I’m over in the Heritage Hall. At the end of your sophomore year, if you want, you can choose a room over there for your junior and senior years.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry, I was in the main dorm for my first two years at Clarendon. It’s fun, you’ll get to know people.” Is this her nice way of telling me to find my own friends? Is this her way of hinting that I shouldn’t expect to hang out with her and her group? Is she trying to shake me off?

It’s quiet inside as some girls branch off down a hallway and some head up the stairwell right in front of us.

“It’s better to live upstairs. If you live downstairs, everyone in the boys’ dorm can see in your window, or if you’re on the other side, the girls from Heritage Hall can see in,” she says. We climb the stairs and I wonder where I would have ended up if she hadn’t found me. I picture myself sitting outside in the rain, huddled on the sidewalk, too afraid to ask anyone what to do next. I wonder about other girls who are new and don’t have anyone to help them – how do they figure out where to go? Do they ask people? If I’d had to ask someone, I just know they would’ve sent me to the boys’ dorm as a joke.

At the top of the stairs, there’s an older lady at a desk. Amanda stops in front of her.

“Hey, Ms. Marks.”

The lady smiles at her. “Amanda, you’re back over here this year?”

“No. This is Carlee, I’m going to help her find a room. Ms. Marks is the dorm aide for the second floor,” she explains.

Ms. Marks holds a clipboard and I can almost see the authority flowing from it to her. I smile. At least, I hope I'm smiling. It feels forced and unnatural and I'm not sure if it's a smile or a grimace.

There are two long hallways and I follow Amanda to the right. "You want to live on this side, it's closer to the showers," she says as she points to a door that says Shower Room. Across the hall, a door is propped open, revealing a fluorescent-lit room with about fifteen sinks. There's a row of stalls off to the side. It looks like an airport or movie theater bathroom.

Past the showers, doors line the hallway, each with a paper and pencil taped to it.

The walls have carpet on them, the same kind that's on the floor, the same kind found in classrooms. It goes about halfway up the wall. I don't know why there's carpet on the wall. It scratches my hand when I brush against it as I follow Amanda.

She stops in front of Room 224.

"Here, this is a good room," she says. Amanda points to the paper. There are already three names on it. The fourth line is blank. "Sarah and Melissa are in my class. They're nice, you'll like them," she says as she writes my name on the door.

"Okay, thanks," I say.

She starts to walk away almost as soon as she's done writing the final "n" in my name. No doubt she has friends she wants to look for, a roommate that she hasn't seen since May.

"So, I'll see you around," she says, walking backwards.

"Yeah. Thanks for helping me find a room."

She smiles and disappears around the corner.

I look at the door and the three names above mine, Melissa, Sarah, Jen. I pick the pencil back up and erase the last name she'd written for me, "Kauffman," and write "Malemute." It's

been three years since I took my dad's last name and made my mom's last name a second middle name, but everyone at home still called me Carlee Kauffman, no matter how many times I wrote Carlee Malemute at the top of my middle school assignments. But this is a new place. New people. If nobody here knows me, then maybe I get to decide what they learn about me. I get to decide my name.

I open the door to Room 224, my room for the next nine months. It's not like one of the cool dorm room suites on *Saved by the Bell: The College Years*. It's one large rectangular room, maybe twenty-five feet by ten or twelve feet. Enough room for four single beds in a *Madeline*-like row with nightstands between them.

It's dark inside, with only a nightlight to show me that three of the beds have sleeping lumps in them that don't stir as I drop my bag at the end of the empty bed, one of the middle ones. At least they're not bunk beds.

I dig through my duffel bag for my sleep shorts and t-shirt. The top layer of clothes is wet from the rain and I should probably make an attempt to lay them out so they can dry, but that sounds exhausting and all I really want to do is sleep.

The bed is pre-made and I crawl under the institutional yellow blanket. This is not my bed. My bed is soft, with sheets that smell like Downy. Mountain Spring, like the softener my grandma in Pennsylvania uses. These sheets scratch my face and the blanket is heavy, but not warm. This is not my bed. My bed is at home.

I mailed my comforter to Sitka last week. Tomorrow, I'll figure out where to go to see if it's here yet. Maybe that will make this bed feel more like home. Maybe having my own blanket will make this bed more comfortable.

Things I Don't Know Yet

- I will get homesick and cry almost every day of ninth and tenth grade
- I will actually be excited to go back to school and see everyone for my junior and senior years
- I will realize that my parents really did know best
- I will learn that the senior from home was right and I will get a boyfriend that first semester, although it will last only a week because I still struggle with talking to people
- I will experience rain almost every day in Sitka and I will get used to it
- I will learn that one of my roommates, Melissa, is from Shelton, and our dads have been friends since they went to boarding school together
- I will learn that Sarah and I have the same favorite movie, *The Craft*
- I will end up in a freshman block with Jen, where we have the same four core class schedule
- I will be much better friends with Jen when we are not roommates, because it's better not room with good friends and this is a lesson that will hold true every time I live in a dormitory
- I will follow my roommates to the cafeteria because it turns out, they need to eat too
- I will meet my future bestie, Sharon, in my freshman block class on Monday when we're assigned as partners for an ice breaker activity
- I will have to leave everyone and everything I know behind and rebuild my life at a new school three more times over the next twenty years

Tomorrow, I'm going to have to meet my roommates and learn how to talk to people I don't know. Tomorrow, I'll start to figure things out. But not now. Now, I am thirteen years old. Now, I am 891 miles and 113 days from home. The tears that stopped somewhere between Anchorage and Juneau return. They soak into the scratchy pillowcase.

COMMUNICATION ERROR

“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said” ~ Peter Drucker

December 2002

Christmas break and I’m home from college. I spend large chunks of my days huddled under a blanket on my mom’s couch because I’m no longer used to this -40° weather. I see no reason to be on my feet any longer than necessary when the floor’s the coldest part of the house. Frost builds up on the inside bottom edges of the front door and the water in the dog’s dish has formed a thin layer of ice overnight.

Princeton, with what is possibly the vilest semester design ever, schedules first semester finals in January, after Christmas break. Final exams, along with the twenty-five-page Junior Paper I have to turn in on January 15, loom over my head, but I veg out on the couch and watch TNT’s Primetime in the Daytime programming to avoid studying. It’s called Christmas break for a reason and I’m a rule follower.

My mom’s been a teacher my whole life, so I learned early on that teachers appreciated holiday breaks just as much, and maybe even more, than their students. She sets a goal for herself to get one major project accomplished each day, things like cleaning out the medicine cabinet, getting the flat tire of her car fixed, making a batch of drymeat, but otherwise, she too takes advantage of her time off.

The idea of Christmas break downtime, and outright laziness on my part, is not a concept my dad understands. If he’s not at work handling the cargo at Everett’s only airline, he’s running his sled dog team, or chopping wood for his woodstove, or shoveling his driveway. I’m not even

sure if he ever sits down to watch a full game on ESPN – he might just catch SportsCenter and call it good.

When I hear his snowmachine stop in front of the house, I abandon the couch and hurry into the kitchen. I hope I look like I'm about to start making lunch or doing something productive and not like I lounged around all morning. We've been trained over the last eighteen years to listen for that truck door closing, or now that he no longer has a truck, his snowmachine in the winter and his four-wheeler in the summer, so that by the time he comes into the house, I'm filling a saucepan with water to make mac-and-cheese and my mom's minimized her Freecell game. "Hey, Dad," I say, barely sparing him a glance because I'm so busy making an elaborate lunch. The illusion fails when I realize the burner's not lighting. The propane doesn't work when it's colder than -43°. Just knowing that makes my feet feel more frozen and I wish I'd taken the time to throw on my slippers.

He drops a small box on the counter, probably Christmas presents that my mom ordered from JC Penny's. He's been bringing them over all week. My parents haven't been together since I was two, but he stops by every day to drop off the mail and picks up the trash if we have it bagged and ready.

"Natalie, your dad's here!" my mom yells. Natalie and the next door neighbor, Faith, come downstairs, both holding Barbies. His visits last between thirty seconds and two minutes and during that time, everyone's on pause.

My dad throws his cold glove at Natalie and she giggles before throwing it back at him.

"You taking the car out today?" he asks as he leans against the counter.

“We’re going to need to go to the store today or tomorrow to get stuff for dinner,” my mom says. She’s pushed her computer off to the side so she too can look busy, going through the mail.

“You need to put cardboard in the car,” he says.

I don’t need to look at my mom to know she’s just as clueless as me as to what that means. He once called and gave me a string of numbers and it took me asking and him repeating it twice before he finally explained it was a phone number I’d mentioned wanting two days before.

“For what?” I ask, because I know my mom won’t.

“Keep the engine warm. You know how?” he asks.

“Nope,” I say. I’d never thought about it before. I guess I’d seen cars with cardboard in the grill, but it’s not something I pay attention to. Certainly never with my mom’s car. Maybe my dad has been taking care of it all these years and he’s just now decided that it’s time I learn. Maybe he actually does know just how lazy my Christmas break has been.

He grabs one of the cardboard boxes meant for the trash that my mom has waiting by the front door and leaves. The blanket that hangs in front of the door, meant to help keep the cold out, falls closed but he doesn’t shut the door behind him and his footsteps fade as he goes down the stairs.

“He means now,” my mom says helpfully.

“Aw, shit,” I say, but not loud enough for him to hear. I grab my shoes from the living room, glad I can just slip them on. It doesn’t even occur to me to look for my jacket – he’s not the patient sort.

I pull my hands into the sleeves of my sweater so I can shut the front door. It's almost one o'clock so we're right in the middle of our four hours of daylight.

He props open the hood. "Rip up that box."

I tear off one of the flaps and try to hand it to him, but he gestures to the car. "Between the grill and the engine," he says. He takes the rest of the box from me and rips off another flap.

"Christ, not like that," he mutters. I have no idea what I'm doing wrong and my ears already feel like they're about to freeze and fall off and my fingers are touching cold car parts. I wait and watch how he slides his piece of cardboard into the front of the hood on his side of the grill and then I mimic it. He adjusts the two pieces so they overlap. I step back as he slams the hood closed.

He walks back towards his snowmachine and I yell goodbye before I run up the steps and into the house, my hands back inside my sleeves.

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## **September 2005**

I dread telling my dad that I bought a truck. Sure, I'd gone to Fairbanks specifically to shop for a vehicle and put it on the barge so it'd get to Everett before winter really set in, but I have a feeling I was supposed to get a reasonable vehicle, like a Honda CR-V or a Ford Escape or maybe a small truck that I could see over the top of, not one that I have to hop up into. My new-to-me F-150 is only three years old with 20,000 miles and it's such a dark green that it looks black and it has orange tribal patterns running along the sides and a CD player and it's so lovely.

But it's huge. So while it'll be useful during an Alaskan winter, something smaller or with better gas mileage would have been more practical. I imagine my dad's diatribe, something along the lines of me not needing something so big and what the hell am I doing paying \$20,000

and I got no business buying a truck. Spending time with my dad when I was younger had always been a vocabulary lesson – I learned all kinds of phrases I'd never learned from my mom, even if most of them were mumbled under his breath. Some of them became familiar over time, part of everyday conversations, like “Jesus jumped up,” and other phrases, like the fact that Jesus' full name was apparently Jesus Fucking Christ, were reserved for special circumstances.

It doesn't go as expected. When my dad stops at my mom's house once I'm back from Fairbanks, I wait until after he's said hi to Natalie before I say, “So, I bought a truck.” I speed up through the next part, hoping he won't catch all of it. “It's an F-150, V8 engine, extended cab.”

My dad's wearing the aviator sunglasses that he's worn my entire life, with removal only happening at Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners, so I can't see his eyes or judge how quickly he's going to yell at me.

But he doesn't get mad. He says, “Huh,” still leaning casually against the counter. It's his relaxed pose.

“It has four-wheel drive. We tested it out,” I say.

He nods, a single head down-up motion. I take it to mean that whatever storm I'd expected will not come to pass.

My truck, beautiful and big and shiny and village-dust-free for the moment and perfect, arrives two weeks later, the night before my birthday. My mom drives me down to the barge landing and I hop in my truck, his name soon to be Jayne, and take off, enjoying that freedom that comes with your first very-own vehicle.

The next day is my birthday and my sister gives me a key chain and Catherine gives me moon and fairy floormats and my mom gives me a certificate for gas. My dad gives me a boat hitch.

I, of course, do not have a boat. He does. No wonder he's not mad that I bought a truck.

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March 2006

I drive around the bend and the sun glares off the ice that's formed on top of the snow in the road and I hit it going 30 miles per hour. I guess I was lucky the bend had slowed me down and I was no longer going 45.

One second, I'm jamming out to Smashing Pumpkin's "Today" as it plays on the CD player, singing along, which I only ever do when I'm alone in the truck. I hit the ice, cut off in mid-Karaoke moment, and the truck fishtails and slides up the road, the wheels no longer spinning, the truck moving like a hockey puck across the ice. I yank the wheel in an attempt to regain control, but the two-and-a-half ton truck is having none of that.

The truck slams into the snow berm that's built up over the course of the winter from five months of snow plows and tilts off the side, over the edge of the dike. The large amount of snow we've had this winter stops my truck from rolling down the hill, but I'm completely off the road, tilted sideways and facing the opposite direction, back towards school.

I have that moment where I just sit there and stare at the dash, unable to believe that just happened and just as unable to stop replaying it in my head. It takes actual focus to get my hands to release the steering wheel.

If I open the driver's door, I'll fall into five feet of snow and slide down the hill. Instead, I grab the passenger door and use it to haul myself in a diagonally upward direction towards that side. My schoolbag is on the passenger floor and I grab that before hopping out of the truck.

I have a momentary Bambi-on-ice incident before I catch my footing. I'm on the back road, between the boarding school and uptown, but the school bus has already run and it's Spring

Carnival weekend, so I'm not surprised that I walk a mile til the back road meets up with the main road without another vehicle coming by.

It's only -10°, not cold enough to be dangerous, but not warm enough to make this a nice breath of fresh air. I was just supposed to drive in a semi-warm truck from school to home, so I'm not exactly dressed warm. I pull my sweater hood up and tighten the strings, drawing the edges close to my face. It covers my ears but not my cheeks and there aren't any trees on the back road to keep the wind from biting at my face. Wisps of snow ghost across the smooth surface of the road and I keep my head down, watching where I walk. I try to stay in the soft snow on the side of the road and not step on the smooth, shiny ice.

My legs chafe in my jeans and my schoolbag weighs as much as my truck. I make it to the main road and within two minutes, someone stops to offer me a ride.

At my mom's house, I wait for my dad. He'll have his work truck, an F-350 with a box on the back for cargo, and the cables to pull my truck back onto the road. Once he's there, I fight the urge to hide in the bathroom until he's gone.

He drops the mail onto the counter and looks at me. "Where's your truck?"

"I, uh...kind of slid off the road on the back dike. Can you use your work truck to pull me out of the ditch?"

I wait for him to yell at me, but he just laughs and says, "Christ." I smile and think I'm in the clear.

He has a distinctive way of driving, a slow-speed-slow-speed pattern that irritates my mom and Catherine, but reminds me of being a kid in his blue and white F-150 from the 80s that's been broken down in his driveway since I was in high school. The motion lulls me into complacency and we talk about March Madness because sports are one of the few conversation

topics we've developed over the years of stilted phone calls when I was away for boarding school and college.

Everything's fine until we get to my truck, seven minutes of bland, generic conversation. Sometimes, after an easy flow of conversation, quiet lulls can be comfortable. It's not like that with my dad. I itch to fill the silences when I talk to him. He sees my truck, pushed through the snow berm and off the road and realizes there's no way his truck can get enough traction to pull my truck back onto the road.

The drive back to my mom's house is even longer because he has to continue past the site of my accident towards the airport and boarding school before he has a place to turn around, which means he has more time to yell at me. It's everything I thought I would hear seven months ago when I told him I bought the truck – I didn't need to be driving such a big goddamn truck if I couldn't fucking handle it and I drive too fucking fast – only more colorful. If we were on a reality show, every other word would be bleeped out, and you can get away with saying a lot on reality shows before they start bleeping.

I sink a little lower in my seat and stare straight ahead and just stay quiet till we get back to my mom's house. I hate this. We share few enough words that I've spent most of my life being the good kid – the teen that didn't drink, the Everett student that went to Princeton – in an effort to make sure that the words we do share aren't angry ones on his part. Once I'm out of the truck, he's gone almost before I can close the door.

As uncomfortable as that drive was, it's over, and there's a sense of relief that doesn't come just from being out of his presence. I know that, as mad as he is, he'll get it taken care of. The stress of what to do and who to talk to and how to get it back onto the road is off my shoulders and onto his.

The next day at school, I see my dad through the windows and I go out into the hall to talk to him. Mine is the only other classroom in the building, the rest of the space devoted to the automotive class and garage, so I don't have to worry about students or other staff interrupting us.

"Richard used the loader to pull your truck out. I parked it on the side of the building," he says and hands me my keys.

I fiddle with the strings of pony beads on my keychain. "Alright, thank you."

He doesn't leave right away and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say next. I'm mentally running through possibilities when he says, "Sorry I got mad at you yesterday. I was worried. If there hadn't been so much snow, the truck would've rolled."

"No, it's okay," I manage to say. I'm actually surprised I can say anything. It's the only time he's ever apologized for yelling or getting mad and the only time he's ever explained it.

He hugs me and leaves.

"Bye," I say before the door closes behind him. I stand there in the hallway for a moment and then remember I have fifteen freshmen who are probably breaking things or running across the tops of the desks. I wait till lunch to call my mom and tell her. I don't think she believes me. It will be the only time I remember this happening, him apologizing for his anger and his words. It's automatic – I know my dad is supposed to love me and worry about my safety, but he'd never said as much before. As rare as it was, it's nice to have proof. To know for sure.

SOLE-ISH OCCUPANT

I moved into my first house when I was 22. It was my first time being on my own, without my mom or a roommate. The house was small, with an open area for the kitchen/living room/computer desk, a loft overhead, and a bedroom and bathroom that had been added onto the back of the original log cabin structure. It was the perfect house – the bathroom pipes never froze, my feet stayed warm in the winter if I wore socks, and it had running water, something my mom hadn't had since I was nine.

My sister, Natalie, and her friend, Renae, were at my house the first time things got weird. They'd come over to watch the first season of *Supernatural*, which I was too scared to watch by myself. We crowded around my computer. I sat on the blue computer chair that doubled as a scratching post for my cat, Renae pulled up the pink butterfly chair, and Natalie had the black moon chair. I turned off the lights. What was the point of watching a scary show if the lights were on? We were halfway through the second episode when we heard a noise from the arctic entryway. Most houses in Everett are built like that, with a walled-in porch that acts as storage and as a way to keep the house a little warmer, rather than open the front door directly to the cold.

Natalie paused the show. "Sister, what was that?"

"Okay, so I wasn't the only one that heard it?" I asked. We all turned towards the front door. There was another noise, like one of the boxes of stuff I had stored in the entryway had been pushed against the wall.

I stood up and grabbed my little twelve-inch hammer off the kitchen counter, grateful that I'd left it there after we'd put together a bookshelf I'd ordered from Target online. Natalie was quick to follow suit and grabbed a steak knife. Renae grabbed what was left, a fork.

We continued to stare at the front door. Maybe somebody was stopping by for a visit? Maybe Natalie's and my little sister, Sabrina, was coming over to grab something my mom needed? We waited, but no one knocked or came in.

"Go check it out." Renae gestured to the door with her fork.

"Me? Why me?" I asked. Natalie gave me her you're-an-idiot look. Oh, right. I was the adult. This sucked.

"I hate you both," I told them as I crept my way to the front door.

"Love you too, Sister," Natalie said as they retreated into my bedroom and shut the door almost all the way, leaving just enough room for them both to peek out at me. This was why I never watched horror movies. My imagination immediately supplied images of what could be in the porch. A hanging body, its mouth gaping open. A see-through entity who moved in unnaturally fast stop-and-start motions. Strange white noise that turned out to be someone whispering my name if I listened closely enough.

I hesitated before opening the front door. This was definitely the downside to finally having my own place. I no longer had my mom around to check out weird noises and had to kill my own bugs without being able to pass the shoe to my roommate. I had to suck it up, even though I had a half-formed idea that maybe I could call my mom and ask her to send Sabrina over with a bag of popcorn, but that'd be pretty awful to have my five-year-old sister check out a noise I didn't want to.

I opened the door and said, “Hello?” Yes, I’d be the idiot in the horror movie who asks if anyone’s there and expects the killer to say he’s in the kitchen with a knife. No one answered me. No one was in the entryway and the outside, motion-activated light was off.

I closed the door and shook my head. “Nothing. Maybe it’s time to take a break, make a store run.”

Renaë nodded and turned on the living room light. It started to turn on and then began to flicker. We’d watched enough *Supernatural* to know that meant that something-other was around.

“Shotgun,” Natalie said as she threw the knife on her chair and took off out the door. Renaë and I were quick to deposit our weapons and follow.

Was there really something there, or had we let our imaginations get the best of us? In a small town like Everett, I knew everyone who’d lived in that house since it had been built in the 1980s. Nobody had ever died there (at least, not back then). Isn’t that how a ghost or entity was formed? Maybe I watched too much TV, maybe I was too ready to believe. The culture I grew up in believed in the supernatural. Our scary creature was the Woodsman, a supernaturally fast version of Bigfoot that liked to steal women and children. I taught my Alaska History students that all cultures had some kind of scary thing (although I thought the *iniquins* of the coastal people were way more terrifying than the Woodsman – the way my Inupiaq and Yup’ik students had described them, they seemed like small, evil, gnome-like creatures that lived out on the tundra). Once every few years, someone would spot the Woodsman around town and kids had to play inside for a couple of days.

The only time I’ve ever been bitten by a dog was outside a house that belonged to an old medicine woman. Even though she was long gone, Auntie Janet had warned Catherine and me

not to go there, but the house was across the street from the guy Catherine liked, so we ended up in the driveway and the aforementioned dog ruined my favorite pair of jeans. Whether it had to do with the former occupant of the house, or if the dog was just naturally angry, I'm not sure. But after that, we listened to Auntie Janet and avoided the medicine woman's house.

These were the kind of stories we grew up with in Everett. So maybe I was too ready to believe. Maybe I was just scared, being on my own for the first time.

When we got back from the store, we had another problem.

"Your door's locked," Renae said, as we crowded into the entryway. The space was small, maybe four feet by eight feet, and filled with my stuff that I'd never bothered to unpack in the house.

"No, it's not. Try again," I said. I shifted my brown grocery bag with all of our drinks to my other arm. "It's probably just stuck."

Renae rattled the door knob. "Locked."

I handed the drinks off to her and tried it, because I could never just trust that someone was right, I had to see for myself. It was October and the doorknob was cold under my bare hand. Locked.

"Where's the key?" Natalie asked. She put the grocery bag she'd been carrying on a shelf, shoving over a box filled with yarn that I meant to one day crochet into blankets. One day.

I looked at the door, four inches thick, custom built for the cabin some twenty years ago. "In there. I think."

It was your average lockable door with a twist button, no deadbolt, the kind of doorknob that stayed locked even if you opened the door from the inside. You had to either untwist the button or use a key to unlock it. I'd never actually locked the door before. It wasn't like I had

anything worth stealing, and even if someone had broken in, it wasn't like it would have been kept a secret. Catherine knew all the gossip—she'd have known who'd broken in before they'd even left my house. One time, my mom and I were driving down the road and one of my mom's coworkers, Annette, was standing by her bike outside a house whose occupants were away for the summer. We stopped to say hi, and Annette said she'd seen three boys use a ladder to break into an upstairs window. It was pre-cell phone days, so she'd sent the last person who'd stopped to call Everett's one cop and now she was just waiting for him to get there and making sure the boys didn't leave before he did. When we got home, I immediately called Catherine to tell her what had happened. That's how gossip worked in the village.

“Does Pearson have a key?” Natalie asked.

“No. I'm supposed to make a copy the next time I go to Fairbanks.” What the hell? How had this even happened? “Who locked the door?” I shoved at it as if it would magically open. It moved a little within the frame, but it wouldn't be opening without some tools.

They both shook their heads. Their breath misted in front of them as Renae shifted back and forth on her feet. We'd only been running to the store, two or three minutes away, and were dressed in our hoodies, an Alaskan's version of a winter jacket until it hit about twenty below.

“Don't mess around. I didn't lock it.” They had to have locked it before we left for the store. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe one of them had twisted the little button on the doorknob on their way out of the house because they'd been scared of the noise. Even though I'd grown up in a culture that believed in the supernatural, there was still a small corner of my mind that tried to argue facts and logics and plausible explanations.

Renae and Natalie looked at each other before Natalie answered, “It wasn't us. Why would we lock your door?”

Great. Not only was there something-other in my house, but he liked to play tricks.

“Get back in the truck,” I said.

Renae put her grocery bag next to Natalie’s. “Where are we going?”

“To Catherine’s. See if she has a hammer or something to pry the door open.”

Catherine readily accepted the idea that something-other had locked us out of my house.

The last person to live in her house before her had been her brother Jeremy, who’d been dead for three years. She liked the idea that all the creepy noises in her house (and there were a lot, even the opening and closing of doors) was Jeremy stopping to visit. Whenever my Auntie Janet held a birthday/graduation/Mother’s day/Father’s Day dinner, we fed Jeremy first, by burning a tiny portion of all the food that had been prepared. As a culture, we accepted the idea that those who’d died were still around and acknowledged and included them during special occasions.

Catherine and her boyfriend followed us back to my house on her snow-machine and he pried the door open with a crowbar. I waited till he and Catherine left before I grabbed the key from the envelope it shared with my copy of the renter’s agreement, from the desk, next to the computer where we’d been watching *Supernatural*.

I tested the lock and key while the door was open and then again with Natalie and Renae inside the house with the door closed. The key worked.

“Do you have a key for the outside door?” Natalie asked.

“No, Pearson never said anything about that one.”

The outside door had an odd lock, one of those push buttons on the side. Renae opened the door and tried to lock it. She twisted the outside knob and the lock popped open. I went out onto the steps, and Renae closed the door and locked it. I twisted the handle and the door opened,

which meant I didn't need to worry about that door and could hide the inside-door key in my entryway.

Nothing else strange happened that night. We finished the episode without interference, although Renae almost forked my cat when Katie's tail brushed against her leg. They left before nine-thirty.

And then I was on my own. In my own house. Like a grown up.

I slept with the mini-hammer on my nightstand, which became its permanent location for the next seven years. I'm not sure how useful a hammer would be against a ghost, but I felt better knowing it was there. I might not have really been prepared for further incidents, but I felt prepared and that was the reassurance I needed to sleep at night knowing that I shared my house with something-other.

A week later, I came home and the outside door was locked. It was a lot freakier without Renae or Natalie or Catherine there. I jumped back into my truck and drove around for a few minutes. Now what was I supposed to do? It was a normal sized metal door that I doubted a crowbar would work on and it was November, so none of my windows would be open.

Maybe I was just freaking myself out. Maybe I'd been watching too many episodes of *Supernatural* and it was making me paranoid. Maybe I hadn't twisted the doorknob hard enough. Maybe we'd been wrong when we'd figured that the outside door couldn't lock. Maybe I'd accidentally hit the lock when I was leaving, or maybe my jacket had snagged on the doorknob and pushed the side button. What if I went and got help, again, and the door opened just fine, like when your car makes a noise whenever you start it, except when you take it to a mechanic and then everything works perfectly?

Looking back, there's still that little kernel of doubt, that little part of me that wonders. Maybe it was all happening in my head, an attempt to make the small town life more exciting as I adjusted to living in Everett again after four years at college an hour away from New York City. Maybe it was all the stories I'd grown up with, things like the medicine woman and the Woodsman and the time Catherine swore she got locked in her bathroom while playing Bloody Mary as an eight-year-old. Maybe it was all a manifestation of my fear of living alone for the first time, of being an adult and being the one to deal with everything.

I made myself go back to the house and retry the door. It opened.

"You think you're so funny," I told my unwanted visitor as I walked inside and flipped the light switch. The bulbs overhead flickered on.

.oOo.

Nothing happened over the next few weeks. I didn't suddenly see the ghost fade in and out. None of my furniture mysteriously stacked itself on top of my dining room table (not that I had a dining room table, but still).

Natalie and I had watched *Angel* over the summer and on that show, there was a ghost named Dennis. I tried that name out on my houseguest. He needed a name, other than That Thing. That's how I figured out his name was Stanley. He didn't start talking to me or write his name in the mist on the bathroom mirror (although that'd be much easier to explain and make me seem less like an insane person). But when I called him Dennis out loud, I just knew it was wrong and that his name was Stanley, like a voice in my head, but not an actual voice. It was like how I'd known my cat's name was Katie. I'd always wanted a black cat and I was going to name her Vegas, so she'd fit in with our place-named dog, Dakota. But after I picked up the smallest

kitten from the pound and pet her little paws, I knew her name was Katie. I didn't talk to the cat, I just knew.

That, or I was going crazy.

Christmas break started and I finally had time to read. That first Saturday, as I sprawled across my bed with my Meg Cabot book and Katie napped on my back, my iPod started playing at its loudest volume in the living room.

I almost had a heart attack and Katie's claws gouged my skin as she launched herself off of my back and skidded across the hardwood floors into my closet. I half wanted to join her, but instead went out into the living room and turned off the iPod and the speakers I'd had it plugged into. NSYNC's "It's Gonna Be Me" cut off in mid-chorus.

"Really? Now you want to be a DJ?"

Two days later, Stanley played Hinder's "Better Than Me" and I learned to never leave my iPod attached to the speakers. And, just to be safe, never left my iTunes open on my computer. I don't know what message Stanley was trying to send with those two songs and I figured it was better if I didn't examine the lyrics too closely.

.oOo.

Christmas Eve, I heard a strange noise on my porch. Again. I doubted it was Santa.

I stood with my ear pressed against the door, mini-hammer in hand. So far, Stanley had been harmless, aside from a few tricks and playing with the lights, but you never knew.

I opened the door, far enough to see into the entryway and out the front window. The outside light wasn't on, but it had burnt out at the beginning of the month and so far, it hadn't been worth it to stand outside at forty below zero, without gloves on, long enough to change a light bulb.

And then someone stepped in front of the window, tapped on it, and said, “Merry Christmas, Carlee.” I knew that voice, a mix of gravel, a pack-a-day, and too much whiskey. Jones.

I shut and locked the door. In terms of internal fear versus external threat, Stanley was infinitely preferable to the town creepster. I’d rather be locked inside the house with something other than be outside with Jones. Stanley wasn’t so bad.

I accepted that he lived there too and over the next seven years, Stanley didn’t try anything truly malicious. Mischievous, yes. There was the night he locked me out at three in the morning when it was thirty below, but my mom lived two houses down, so it wasn’t like I had to wait outside for him to let me back in. He continued to play with the lights, but I adjusted to the point that I rarely noticed. He once turned on the oscillating standing fan in the corner of my room, but it was June and seventy degrees out and the sun was streaming through the window and roasting my legs while I was trying to read, so it was actually an act of kindness. The tiny logical corner of my brain never stopped trying to explain the strange occurrences, but at the same time, I accepted the fact that I shared a house with a ghost.

WHAT I REMEMBER

Fall 2001

We don't have MTV in Everett. The only music television we get is Country Musical Television. So when I go to college, I am obsessed. I love music videos. I love how they can be put together, that some of them are artistic and some are trashy and some are ridiculous. I love that they can sometimes be four-minute movies with a plot and characters and everything. I love that I finally know which songs are current and popular.

I tape the videos that I like. And, because I know what it is like without MTV, I send tapes back home for my sisters, so they'll know what's current and popular.

I've been back at school for a week when "Wobble Wobble" comes on MTV. I push record automatically before I remember. I start to record the video because Erin likes this song and she'll want to see the video, but then I remember that Erin won't be watching this tape, that I don't need to record any more hip hop videos to send home, that I only need to record bouncy pop videos for Natalie.

This is my breakdown moment. None of my eight roommates are here, so it doesn't matter if I cry, I won't have to explain it, which is always the worst thing about crying, because articulating the reason just makes it all worse, more real. And we're 3,000 miles away from Everett, in our huge nine-person suite, the only bi-level suite on campus, and none of them knew Erin, so it won't mean anything to them, that her favorite song came on MTV and I no longer need to record it for her. And it won't matter to them that her favorite song is never going to change. It's always going to be this ridiculous hip hop song that I can't stand but I still listen to,

and if she'd been around, no doubt her favorite song would've already changed three times by now.

And this is the moment I realize that.

Summer 2001

Being out in the middle of the river is the best feeling. The current carries our canoe downriver and we can just relax and go with the flow. Even though we're the ones technically moving, it causes an illusion, like we're staying in one place and the world is passing us by. It's the second day of the Junior Camp – the youngest kids – so Alexandria, Bianca, and Gabrielle are only seven, eight, and nine. The current moves at about six miles per hour, so we have to get at least a mile upriver if we want the float back to be worth the effort and to last longer than a minute or two. They're too young to help much with the paddling it took to get upriver, but they enjoy being out in the middle once it's time to float back. Gabrielle and Bianca were in my cabin last year, along with Alexandria's older sister, but this is my first time meeting Alexandria.

Everything's perfect out in the middle of the river, the water calm and still except for us, far enough from the banks that the mosquitos and the horseflies haven't followed us, and everything is quiet, not sound-wise, because we're talking, but deep down inside, everything is quiet. We talk and I ask them questions like which superpower would they have and where would they go if they could go anywhere right at this moment, and if they could be anyone in the world, who they would be.

When we've drifted far enough that we're almost back at camp, I take the paddle from where it'd been on break in the bottom of the canoe and steer us in. We crash ashore and the bottom scrapes along the pebbles and gravel on the bank, and Gabrielle hops out and holds the

front of the canoe steady while the rest of us climb forward and out. The girls can't wait to remove their bulky, brightly colored life jackets, so as soon as we've pulled the canoe out of the water and tilted it upside down so it won't catch any rain overnight, they're off and running up the hill, to the life jacket shed and the rest of the camp. When I look up the bank, I see my mom at the top of the hill. Waiting.

I know it can't be good – it's 11:30, so she should be in the kitchen, doing the dishes Judith's used to prepare lunch. And she'd have no reason to be out by the bank, unless she's waiting for me.

The canoe landing is separated from the rest of the camp by a shallow creek that runs along the bottom of a gulch six feet deep. My mom has retreated from the top of the bank and is waiting for me on the wooden bridge that crosses the gap. Bianca, Gabrielle, and Alexandria run past her, not paying her any attention. I envy them in that moment, their ignorance, the way their world isn't about to change like I already know mine will. She's all I can focus on as I walk up the bank.

The homemade bridge looks like something from a fairytale, wide enough for a couple of people to walk across and just enough space underneath for a troll or two or whatever's supposed to live under bridges.

She leans against the railing, facing me as I approach. I stop in front of her and turn to look over the edge, down at the snow-melt creek, crystal clear and only a few inches deep, rushing over the hand-sized rocks on its way to the Yukon. I think she waits for me to look at her, but I don't. I can't. I have to know, but I don't want to know. She speaks first.

“I talked to Social Services this morning.”

“How?” I ask. We’re a hundred miles upriver from Everett, sixty miles up from Lakebay and sixty miles down from Bremerton, the closest places with phones, electricity, and actual bathrooms. It’d be better to just rip off the Band-Aid, ask what’s wrong, what happened, but it’s easier to not hear, to delay, to pretend it’s not going to be bad.

“Russ radioed the camp’s contacts in Nenana and they called Social Services for me. Erin ODeD.”

The unfinished edges of the bridge’s railing cut into my stomach. I lean into it further.
“Erin?”

“She ran away from the hospital on the Fourth of July. The police found her that night on the side of the road.”

It’s the sixth. I think back to the Fourth and because it’s a holiday, it’s not hard to remember what I’d been doing. Eating a hamburger and potato wedges. Taking the boats over to the sandbar with the rest of the counselors and blowing off fireworks. Laughing while James and Walter threw firecrackers at each other. And Erin had died by the side of the road. Alone.

I might never find out what road or where she’s buried. I’m not sure I’ll ever want to know – it would just be the name of a place. Instead, I’ll have that bridge. That’s where she died for me. That’s where I’ll go every Fourth of July and I’ll drop a flower into the shallow creek below, until we stop going to camp in the summer and then I’ll just have that date, that holiday.

My mom’s turned towards the water now too, watching the water. She says, “She was supposed to come back. She was supposed to come home. They knew she was miserable in those treatment centers and they said they were going to try one more place and then they’d let her come back.”

My mom cries. I lean over and hug her and I feel like something breaks inside me and I can't handle it, but I have to, because there's nothing else I can do, and there's no one in front of me to blame except a faceless, nameless They.

We leave to go find Natalie, who's playing beach volleyball with a group of six or seven other kids, all younger than her. She was a camper during junior high week, and this week, she's in that between stage where she's too old to really hang out with the campers but too young to do much as a staff member. She stands at the edge of the court keeps the beach ball from going out of bounds, hitting it to one of the eight-year-olds on her side of the court so the littler kid can then be the one to hit it over the net.

My mom gets her attention and the three of us walk out to the bank. My mom tells Natalie as we sit beneath the three large crosses that loom over us and actually do offer comfort when I think about Erin and her faith and how even though she'd had a shitty life, she still believed. And I think about how maybe, some people just weren't meant for this world.

I put my hood up and lie back against the hill. My mom hugs Natalie as my twelve-year-old sister cries. Little willows and weeds and sticks poke into my back and I sing silently in my head, focus on the lyrics, *NSYNC because that's what I've listened to the most over the last few months, and I concentrate on remembering the lyrics exactly and try to ignore my mom and little sister, crying two feet away.

Spring 2001

My mom calls me in March, half-panicked, half-pissed, and half-scared, and it takes me a minute to understand what she's saying. They took Erin, they took her while she and five other high schoolers were on a school trip in Anchorage. Trisha, the teacher chaperone, hadn't known

what to do or say and by the time she calls my mom, Erin's already gone. No one had warned Erin and no one had told my mom they were going to do this and Erin had only packed for the weekend. I figure, based on context, that "they" is Social Services.

My mom does not take the removal of Erin well. She calls Social Services at least once a week, she demands updates and wants to know where Erin is and when they'll send her back. They tell my mom they moved Erin to Anchorage so she can get the psych treatment she needs, which sounds ridiculous to me, because she was fine when I was home for Christmas and she was good about taking her meds every day, but I've been gone for three months, so maybe something's changed, except it must have sounded just as ridiculous to my mom because she keeps calling and she insists that Erin was doing well at our house and there was no need to remove her and they should send her back to our house where she belongs, not keep her in some kind of psych treatment place that she hates, clearly, because she keeps running away.

Maybe they think it really is for the best, moving her to Anchorage where there are real psychiatrists, people with more training than the behavioral health counselor in Everett. Maybe it's a road of good intentions. Maybe they think my mom doesn't mean it when she asks to get Erin back. Maybe they think she'll forget about Erin once they send the next foster kid to live with her.

Christmas 2000

Erin, Natalie, and I find and cut down a tree a few days before Christmas. It's the middle of December, so we have limited daylight hours, but we don't rush through the job. We need to find the perfect tree, short enough to fit in our living room and full enough that my mom doesn't call it a Charlie Brown tree when we carry it into the house.

I drive. Erin looks out the passenger window of the SUV at the trees along her side of the road, while Natalie sits behind me and watches for a possible tree on our side of the road. Once we identify a tree that might be The One, it'll be Natalie's job as the youngest to shake the snow off the tree so we can see what the branches really look like. Sometimes Erin and I send Natalie to shake a tree, and all the snow falls on her hat and some gets down her collar, even though we know it isn't a good tree, because that's our job as the older sisters. I'm not sure what Erin's Christmases have been like before, but she takes quickly to our family's traditions. She fits.

Once we find the perfect tree, Erin and I join Natalie in the deep snow off the side of the road. Snow slips into our boots and pine needles and sap stick to our gloves as we alternate between the rusty saw my mom has had since the '80s and a cute little hatchet. Erin and I carry the tree back to the SUV and tie it to the rack on top using a piece of red yarn.

It's -20° and it took us an hour and a half to find the tree, so when we get home, I'm grateful that my mom has the hot water ready. That's her job as we wander around in the cold – she makes the cocoa.

Later tonight, we'll decorate it and Erin and I will stand on opposite sides of the tree and pass the lights back and forth as we weave them through the branches while my mom stands in front of it and dictates how the lights should be laid out and whether they're too close together or if the rows are too far apart, and then Natalie's job, as the youngest, will be to put the star on top of the tree.

Erin stays downstairs long enough to drink hot chocolate with us and to help us tie the tree to the ceiling so it can drip on the tile floor in the kitchen, before she disappears upstairs. A minute or two later, I hear her in the loft bedroom as she sings Mary J. Blige's "Your Child." I'm pretty sure it's on repeat. Even someone who's good at singing would struggle with that song's

wavering notes. Erin's not good at singing and she doesn't care. It's what she does, sings along with her Discman. There are no walls between the loft and the rest of the house, and there's no effort on her part to sing quietly so as not to disturb anyone else. It amuses me and my mom. Perhaps if we'd had longer to put up with it, I'd have regretted burning that CD for her and would have eventually gotten annoyed enough to throw slippers over the loft railing in the hopes that they'd hit her, but all I will get is three weeks of Erin singing.

There's a knock at the door and my mom moves around the tree that drips water and sap in the kitchen to answer it.

"Hey hey, merry Christmas," Auntie Janet says as she walks in. My five-year-old cousin Russell trails behind her. He packs a snowball between his gloves as I pick him up and kiss his cheek, cold above the scarf that hides half his face.

"We brought cookies," he says as he wriggles out of my grasp. He stands in front of me and I put my hands on his face to warm him up. "Can I have one?" he asks, twisting to look up at me.

From upstairs, we hear Erin, "And could I understand, she's afraid and aloooooone."

My mom winces and laughs. "Natalie, go tell Erin there are people here."

Natalie does and Erin stops for about two minutes before she starts again, because she can't help herself. "Yet so preciouuuuuuuus."

It's been less than two months since my mom first called me about Erin. She said that she's a new foster kid and that she's a bit different, takes meds to quiet the voices in her head and that she'd been adopted and then unadopted and ended up back in foster care.

She's seventeen, one year younger than me and in eleventh grade. The way my mom talks, this is going to be a long-term thing, where she'll stay with us until she graduates and

always be a part of our family, like Miranda before her and Alyssa after. That's how it's supposed to go.

I meet Erin over the phone. I'm sending a small box home with an MTV tape and *Toy Story 2* on VHS and a CD for Natalie, *Natalie's Music, Vol. 2*. Erin gives me a list of her favorite songs and I burn them to a CD. I label it *Erin's Music, Vol. 1*.

ONE SMALL STEP, ONE GIANT LEAP

It was the beginning of junior year. Time to bond with my classmates, returning and new. At Clarendon, that meant things like hiking trips and bowling. And the ropes course. We had to put our lives in the hands of our fellow teenagers, trust them as we climbed to the rafters of the old World War II airplane hangar the state had converted into our high school gymnasium.

As a boarding school, Mt. Clarendon brought together three hundred students from across the state every year. About half of them were new students each fall. Some were freshman, some were new upperclassmen, like when Catherine had joined me at MCHS our sophomore year.

Apparently, the Powers That Be at the school decided that defying death in various ropes course challenges would help unite the students.

As freshmen, our task was the Flying Squirrel, where we hooked two of our harnessed classmates to ropes strung through pulleys attached to the ceiling. The two students ran in one direction, the rest of us on the belay lines ran in the other, and the “squirrels” ended up swinging through the air. Sophomores did the High V, where two people went up forty or fifty feet into the rafters, and then leaned against each other as they walked out on two beams that formed a V, until the beams were too far apart and they had to fall (gently, the rest of us were on their belay lines) back to the ground.

It was optional, thank God, and there were always a handful of us that chose not to participate. Though I helped on belay lines, I didn't go into the air during either of our freshman and sophomore ropes events, and again when we were seniors and had to climb the Ladder in pairs, where the beams were so far apart that the first person had to stand on the other to go up

and then the second person had to pull themselves up with the first person's help. I wasn't about to stand on anybody and I didn't have the arm strength to help pull.

Junior year, we conquered the High Beam. We climbed a rope ladder to the rafters and walked across a narrow beam, maybe ten feet in length. It was more of an individual exercise than the High V, but we still had to trust the five or six students on our belay lines to keep us from plummeting to our deaths. I chose not to participate every other year of high school, but my junior year, I was determined to walk the High Beam.

Up to that point in time, I'd spent my entire life up on the sidelines. Passive.

When I'd played basketball in elementary and middle school, I'd been perfectly happy on the bench. If the coach sent me into the game, I stayed on the outskirts of the action. If a teammate passed the ball to me, I treated it like a hot potato and passed it off as soon as possible.

I followed that same pattern when I'd started at Clarendon as a freshman. I stayed as quiet as possible in class, even when we were graded on participation and I risked my GPA by staying silent. I tried to be invisible, scared to speak up, scared to join a new club, scared to meet new people.

If an activity was optional, I opted out.

By my junior year, I didn't want to hide on the sidelines anymore. I was more comfortable with my classmates. A good forty or fifty of us had been together since we were freshman and at boarding school, that meant we lived, schooled, and ate together for nine months every year. I knew them, and as introverted as I was, the setting made it impossible for them not to know me.

But I wanted more. I didn't want to just be there at the school, I wanted to be a part of it.

The High Beam was my step in that direction. My attempt to join life rather than watch it. I was going to do it.

That determination wavered off and on as the day passed and everyone else climbed to the rafters and jumped off. There was no climb-back-down-the-rope-ladder option, not that I'd seen at least. The point was to trust our classmates to lower us safely to the ground.

At the end of the day, I was the last junior who still hadn't gone. It was after four o'clock, so most students had been dismissed. Only a handful of us remained to make sure that those who did want to participate still got their chance, even if it was after the official end of the school day. That left mostly the nice kids, the types who didn't mind sticking around and helping on the belay lines, even though they'd already had their turn up in the rafters and technically were free to leave. Catherine stayed because she knew I'd been working up the courage to go, that I'd decided that this was my year, and she wanted to make sure I actually went through with it.

I stepped into the harness and tightened the straps across my pelvic bone. There were other students who had willingly stayed after to belay for me, so I couldn't chicken out now. I couldn't.

Mr. Cooper, the PE teacher/counselor who'd been assigned to our group, checked the harness, pulling on the bright red straps at my shoulder. The harness might have been the most embarrassing part of the whole exercise. It circled my thighs, outlined my size-sixteen butt, and stretched across my chest. Even though the group that had stayed was made up of students I knew wouldn't tease me, or make fun of me behind my back, it was definitely the most embarrassing thing for a body-conscious fifteen-year-old. Unless I got so scared I wet my pants. Pretty sure that would win for worst embarrassing moment. And now that thought was in my head as I approached the rope ladder.

I placed my foot on the first rung and began a mental platitude-filled pep talk to remind myself that I wanted to do this. This was my choice. *Carpe diem*. If not now, then when? Just do it. This is the first day of the rest of your life.

I began the climb. Mike and Derek anchored the bottom of the ladder, but it still moved enough to make the climb strenuous. The ladder leaned with me, putting extra strain on my upper body, and made it more of a diagonal backwards climb than straight up. I had to use my arms more than my legs. It would have been easy for someone with muscles. I didn't have muscles.

I stopped and looked up. I didn't look down because everyone always says, don't look down. The High Beam was above me. It didn't taunt me. It already knew that it was better than I was, it had no need to taunt me. I thought I was about halfway up at that point. At least, I prayed that I was halfway up. If it was like one of those movie scenes where the camera pans out and the viewer realizes the person climbing the wall/cliff/rope/skyscraper/whatever was actually only two feet off the ground, I was going to cry. Crying in the middle of the ropes course, that might have been the most embarrassing thing.

"Carlee, you doing okay?" Mr. Cooper asked. It sounded like he was far away. I hoped he was far away and that I was almost to the top. Maybe my limited hearing came from fear and adrenaline, maybe that was what made everything else seem quiet, but I hoped it was more about the distance.

"Yeah. I'm just taking a break." I realized after I said it that it was true. I really did need a break. My heart raced and I was breathing like I'd just run the French Fry, the loop around campus, up and down the hill, that we had to run in under ten minutes as part of our freshman PE curriculum. There was a reason I'd avoided every PE class since.

"Alright, keep moving when you're ready."

My classmates shouted encouragements. “You can do this.” “You got this.” “Keep going, you’re almost there.” We’d been told at the beginning of the exercise that the encouragement was part of the bonding. I hated them all. I so didn’t have this. I wanted to believe I was almost there, but I was pretty sure it was Catherine who’d said it. Liar.

But they did stay after just so I could go on the High Beam. Our day of orientation was over, they could have been chilling at the dorms, unpacking their things, putting up posters and pictures and making the white-walled, straight-rectangle dorm rooms their own space, but they were here. Now that was bonding. I climbed.

I had to take another break. I told myself I was close, ten feet left. My arms shook as I clenched the rope ladder rung. I tried to put more weight on my legs, but the ladder just swung me back into an angle and all my weight ended up back on my arms. That ladder sucked. I wanted one of those crate thingies they used to change the ceiling light bulbs. Just deposit me onto the High Beam and I could take it from there. Why did I have to climb a rope ladder?

Ten feet. The distance from the floor to the basketball hoop. The height we would have been if Catherine had stood on my head. We might have even been taller. I could do this. It was about perspective.

I looked up. It might have been physically impossible, but I think the High Beam moved further away from me, closer to the ceiling. Right. No need to look up. I climbed.

The people on the ground continued to yell encouragement. I wished I had brought something with me that I could throw at them.

And then I was there. Touching the rafter. Physical contact. Solid. No more rope ladder that moved every time I did. No more struggling to pull myself up. I’d made it to the top.

I sat on the beam and breathed. I wanted to shake out my arm muscles but I had made it that far and I wasn't about to risk losing my balance. There was a bar that ran from the beam to the ceiling and I leaned back against it. It was my new best friend. Sorry, Catherine.

“Go ahead and stand up, Carlee. Walk across the beam.”

Had Mr. Cooper ever been up there? Sure, standing and walking might have seemed like real nice ideas, things I generally did on a daily basis, but up there? Not happening. I thought of maybe just living up there. They could use ropes to send up my meals and homework. Possibly a laptop so I could work on my English III papers. Maybe even a pillow.

I probably would have had to come down for the SATs. Or the bathroom. Whichever came first.

The whole way up, I'd been sure that the rope ladder was the challenging part, the point of the exercise. But no. Once I got to the top, I had to move. The rope ladder was cake.

I was left with two options – I could walk across that beam or I could quit and my classmates could lower me to the ground.

I had not come that far, climbed a freaking rope ladder, to opt out now.

I grabbed onto the bar behind me and worked into a standing position. It would probably have been easier if I had just leaned on the bar, but instead, I was wrapped around it like those little stuffed animals I'd had as a kid, the kind with magnetic hands that I folded around the bedpost at my grandma's house.

Eventually, I stood. And breathed. And then I looked down.

They looked like Lego people.

I couldn't put my life in the hands of Lego people. They didn't even have real hands to grab things, there was no way they could hold onto the rope that held onto my life.

But they had to. That was their job, their part of the challenge. My part was to walk across a beam forty feet in the air. I had to do this. I was the last one, which meant, including all the other groups besides us, fifty people had probably already walked the beam that day. And they all had groups on their belay lines, keeping them safe. Hundreds had done the High Beam over the years.

If they could do, I could do it.

If someone had died on the ropes course, we'd have heard about it. Supposedly, a girl had killed herself in our dorm and you could hear her dribble a basketball down the hallway at night. The suicide was probably true and one of the reasons the dorm aides had to check on us every hour at night.

Catherine was on the belay line. Catherine wouldn't let me die – she'd have to explain it to our family. I just needed to move.

Walk ten feet across a beam that was maybe five inches wide.

The balance beam is four inches wide and gymnasts run around on it and flip and turn and jump and somersault. My mom and I had watched the '96 Olympics on TV. Shannon Miller won gold on the balance beam and made it look natural. Course, Dominique Moceanu also landed on her head during a flip. Her neck bent, her shoulder slammed into the beam, and she barely managed to stay on.

That video replayed in my head as I looked at the beam in front of me. I focused on the fact that she continued, finished her routine.

What sadist looked at a four-inch wide piece of wood and said, "Yes. Let's have them defy gravity and the laws of physics on here and call it a sport"? I had no idea why someone would choose to do that every day.

Somewhere, there were people that enjoyed adrenaline challenges like skydiving and racecar driving and rock climbing. Like the ropes course. Hell, Catherine was one of the first people up that day and she had run across the beam. I could walk.

The first step was the hardest. Great, now I sounded like a slogan for Raven's Way, the teen rehab center that was down the road from Clarendon.

I slid my foot forward, the sole of my gym shoe nice and solid on the metal beam, squeaking, but it stayed in place when I put my weight on it. Progress. I was moving. Forward.

I pictured someone doing the High Beam in heels. They died.

Clear headspace, clear headspace. Conquer my fear. Be a part of life.

One foot in front of the other. Keep moving forward. Don't look down.

That was ridiculous. How was I supposed to see where I was going if I didn't look down?

I had to look down.

Focus on my feet. Focus on the beam. I could walk in a straight line. When we were kids, we'd run around the gym, staying on the lines that made up the basketball three point lines and boundaries and the lines for the volleyball courts that crisscrossed everything.

Why was it so different when the rest of the floor wasn't right there? That didn't make any sense. Logic. Walk.

I made it to the other side of the beam, to the other bar that attached the beam to the ceiling. I squeezed that one even tighter than its twin.

"Time to jump, Carlee."

I was unsure how Mr. Cooper could be a counselor when he was clearly insane. I would have told him so, but I was Princeton-bound and strategic and I might have needed him to write a letter of recommendation for me someday. Plus, my mom would have killed me if she'd heard

that I'd disrespected a teacher. Catherine wouldn't have been able to wait to tell her mom, who would have been only too happy to tell my dad, who would have told my mom, and I'd have received a very angry phone call by eight o'clock that night.

Instead, I said, "No, thank you."

My classmates commenced with another round of platitudes. One of them said, "We've got you."

It was almost 4:30. I was surprised they didn't just yank on the ropes until I lost my balance and descended that way. I guess that was the point. I had to trust them enough to jump.

I looked at them, so far, far away on the ground. Now that I was no longer on the rope ladder, Mike and Derek had joined the others on the belay line. There were six on there, the six that I was supposed to trust, who would lower me slowly and carefully to the ground, the six I was supposed to trust not to drop me. I could see Catherine down there. She held the rope with both hands and looked up at me.

Life had been so much easier when I'd been on the sidelines. When I hadn't needed to trust others not to let me die. When I hadn't had to participate. But that was not the life I wanted.

I jumped. Well, maybe not so much as jumped as stepped off the beam. It might even have been more of a fall.

There was about two tenths of a second where I feared I was going to plummet straight down and crash through the gym floor, leaving a dent that could serve as my memorial at the high school.

But no, the rope caught me, my classmates caught me, and I slowly descended.

Too slowly. Why was the ground still so far away?

It took five years for me to get to the floor. We'd all missed graduation by the time my toes and then my heels made contact with the basketball court.

Mr. Cooper thumped me on the back and unhooked the rope from the ridiculous harness.

I hugged Catherine. Maybe it was more like she hugged me because I suddenly realized that I'd lost my knees somewhere between the High Beam and the ground and I was shaking. I knew it was the adrenalin. Now that I was safe, now that I knew I wasn't going to become a newspaper headline, "Girl Dies in Bonding Experience," the adrenalin went away and apparently took all of my muscles with it. I worried Catherine was going to have to hold us both up, which really meant that we were both going to fall to the ground.

I had not defied death and walked across a beam forty feet in the air just to fall now. That would have been the most embarrassing thing ever.

Deep breath and legs locked. There, found my knees. And yes, I was still shaking, but at least I knew I could stand.

Hell, after that, I could do anything.

After climbing the rope ladder, joining a new club on campus wasn't nearly as scary as the idea had seemed my freshman year. When Mr. Cooper, for God only knows what reason, assigned me to drama class for my junior year elective, I didn't try to transfer to a class more in my comfort zone, like journalism. I stayed in the drama class. I joined the after-school drama club. I was in the freaking school play in March.

Maybe that was the point of the ropes course. Maybe it wasn't just about bonding and building trust. Maybe it was also about challenging ourselves. It might not have seemed like a huge challenge to someone like Catherine, an extrovert, a risk-taker, but I'd made the sidelines

my home and passive invisibility my default mode. The ropes course gave me a chance to change that. A choice. I opted in.

LIFE LESSONS IN THE EVERYDAY

My mom washed the dishes at camp. All of them, by hand. That was her job. The junior staff, the fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds that loved being at camp and wanted to stay on, even if it wasn't their age group's week, helped rinse and dry and prep the main hall, turning it from a dining hall to a singing hall to a game hall three times a day. Judith, who'd grown up in a 1950s Catholic orphanage, working in the kitchens, did all the cooking for a hundred people and I helped out with whatever Judith needed and baked all the desserts on Judith's weekly menu.

I loved being in the kitchen with them. There were the rare times where everything worked out perfectly. The meal was ready on time and I had the dessert portioned out in the tiny mismatched dessert bowls, ready to be carried into Porcupine Hall. The junior staff had the ten tables set up and prepped and they whooshed to help afterwards with take down and cleaning. We'd sometimes set up my speakers and iPod and everyone would sing and laugh and talk while we worked, like we were Snow White or something.

We were a good sixty miles out in the middle of nowhere, though, so things rarely went smoothly. Our electricity came from a generator and we'd graduated at some point in the last ten years from heating water in a barrel over an open fire to an actual propane-based water heater for the dishes. The guys had to take the slop buckets, filled with left-over food, out into the middle of the river every night to dump them so the smell wouldn't attract bears. It didn't always work. One time, Judith, being the first one awake in the camp every morning, had to chase off a black bear with a frying pan. Our kitchen was the camp's original log building, built by hand in 1964, no prepackaged housing deal or contractors coming in to build it. The windows hung on nails

along the walls and the lack of any actual sealed windows let in a fair amount of mosquitos. The front door looked like something from an old western saloon, swinging both ways and squeaking on its hinges as we carried food from the kitchen to Porcupine Hall. The back door slammed loud enough to be heard across camp when we had to grab food from the outside fridge. Just like Snow White, sometimes the animals were a little too close for comfort.

I actually enjoyed it when things were a little off-kilter. When I miscalculated the time it took to bake two huge sheets of pumpkin cake, or when the propane went out and Judith's cooking was delayed by an hour, or when the campers stayed over on the sandbar late into the afternoon and we had to push back dinner. The kitchen was exciting, frantic, and alive when the unexpected happened.

We all had our jobs. Judith left all the breakfast dishes over by the sink and my mom filled them with boiling water to soak while she went around the kitchen, cleaning up all of Judith's work areas as Judith finished cooking. Between the temperature and the bleach, the water was brutal on my mom's hands. Sometimes, I'd try to help with dishes, but I didn't know how she managed to keep her hands in the water when it was that hot. I'd only last about three seconds before declaring myself done and asking Judith if she needed help instead.

After wiping down the counters, my mom returned to the sinks and dumped the oatmeal pan into the dishwater. The junior staff was eating breakfast in the dining hall with the rest of the camp, so it was just the three of us in the kitchen. Judith looked over her lunch menu and I raided yesterday's leftovers for a pancake.

My mom will deny this with her last breath, but she shrieked when she started washing dishes with the dead vole instead of the dishcloth. Guess the little guy had snuck into the soaking

oatmeal pan and never made it out. She jumped away and was on the other side of the kitchen so fast, I barely saw her move.

“Mom? Mom? What happened?” I stood at the counter, holding my peanut buttered pancake, rolled up and half eaten. Judith went straight to the sink.

Afterwards, Judith said that she knew right away, from the way my mom freaked, that there was a dead thing somewhere. Afterwards, my mom said that she could still feel the rodent’s little claws in the palm of her hand.

That was probably why she ended up in the corner of the kitchen, shaking out her hands and rasping, “Augh, augh,” over and over.

“It’s okay, Marylee, it’s okay! I’ll get it.” Judith raised her voice above my mom’s, but my mom wasn’t paying any attention.

Judith grabbed one of the ladles that hung from the building’s low rafters. She stirred around in the water for a moment and then she scooped out the dead vole. Judith opened the back door and hurled the vole out into the woods.

She probably shouldn’t have used a ladle. Had it been a regular spoon, the vole would have gone flying, catapulted off into the woods. Thanks to the scoop of the ladle, the vole instead came right back at her.

Luckily, she had pretty good reflexes. She’d have done any NFL team proud. When that vole tried to come back into the kitchen, she kicked it straight into the underbrush at the edge of the basketball court.

When you want to get rid of something, make sure to use a method that doesn’t send it right back to you.

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I was about to get out of the car when I realized it was eleven o'clock at night and Fairbanks Memorial Hospital probably had specific visiting hours.

It had been over a year since baby Jeremy was born, but that was still the most recent birth I knew about. I called Catherine.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I asked when she answered the phone.

"Beading. What's up?"

"So, when you had Jeremy, what floor were you on?"

"Why?"

"Monica had her baby. I want to see her, but it's late. I figure that if I look like I'm supposed to be there, no one will question me wandering around the halls."

"I think maternity's on the fourth floor. Good luck. Tell Monica I said congratulations."

"Will do, thanks."

I slid the phone into my pocket as I got out of the car. March doesn't actually mean springtime in Alaska and the temperature hovered around five below. I shoved my hands into my hoodie's front pocket and walked towards the emergency entrance, the only one open this late at night.

Monica had told me she was pregnant at the midnight premiere of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2*. She'd graduated from high school six weeks before, second in her class in Everett, and when she'd decided to keep the baby, I'd been sure that her future was over. She'd done well, though, with balancing her pregnancy and her first year of college. Her grades had stayed high and so far, she'd kept the numerous scholarships that amounted to a full ride.

The hospital lobby was almost deserted except for a sixtyish man filling out paperwork on a clipboard and the twenty-something receptionist.

I tried to breeze past the front desk and not make eye contact.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asked.

Busted. But if I played it cool, if I acted like I belonged, maybe she’d ignore the fact that it was after hours.

I stopped at the desk and rested my arms on the chest-high counter in front of me. I tried not to fidget with the edges of my sleeves and said, “Oh no, I got it, I’m just going to the maternity ward.”

“You know where it is?” she asked.

I smiled and tried to project confidence. I had to look like I was supposed to be there, like I was immediate family and not someone Monica had lived with while she finished high school, but wasn’t related to by blood.

“Yeah, fourth floor,” I said.

She tried to hide the little chuckle. Points for politeness on her part. “That’s the psych ward.”

Dammit. “Oh.”

“Maternity’s on the second floor. Elevators are through the door and to the left,” she said as she pointed to the doors that said Main Entrance. Maybe she thought I really was immediate family. Maybe my fake-confidence and the mix-up made me seem harmless. Then again, it wasn’t like the Fairbanks hospital was a hotbed for terrorist activity, or whatever it was that made hospitals impose hours on when patients were allowed visitors, so maybe everybody ignored the visiting hours rule. Maybe I made her night a little more interesting with my attempt to sneak in.

I tried not to look as sheepish as I felt. “Thanks.”

I guess acting like you belonged wasn't always enough.

...

With the post-lunch lull, Judith slipped away to steal a nap. The lunch dishes were done, so my mom weaved a basket in in one corner of the Bible Camp kitchen. She perched on the edge of her red cooler, a Wheelie Cool filled with reed and raffia instead of any products that actually needed to be kept cold. She preferred that to an actual chair. The camp staff tended to congregate in small groups in the kitchen. They'd take a breather from the campers, decide on the day's activities, maybe graze in a corner of the kitchen where we kept the leftovers. With five or six metal folding chairs in the kitchen, mostly around the woodstove in the southeast corner, no one else thought to sit on the cooler and my mom always had an automatic seat.

The counselors and campers had taken the boats across the river to swim at the sandbar. The day was gray and chilled, but the kids didn't care. They'd swim no matter the weather. The counselors would probably spend the majority of their time huddled around the bonfire they built on the beach.

The junior staff had gone as well, which left only a handful of us in camp. One of the staff members, twenty-year-old Peter, hadn't been feeling well, so he'd been left behind with strict instructions to nap. Which of course meant that he was talking with my mom and me in the kitchen instead of sleeping in his cabin.

I was measuring the flour for tonight's chocolate cake desert when the sound of ripping cardboard cut through the room.

My mom froze at the sound. Peter opened the door to the woodstove, ready to throw in a piece of cardboard.

“What are you doing?” my mom asked, her voice reaching a pitch I rarely heard. I paused and glanced between them, half the flour dumped from the measuring cup in my hand to the bowl.

Peter looked at the open door of the woodstove in front of him. “The fire went out. It’s getting cold in here.”

“That’s mine.” My mom waved her hand. With the basket, her gesture indicated half the kitchen.

“What’s yours?”

“The box.”

“This box?”

“Yes!”

“Then why is it kindling?”

If possible, my mom looked even more shocked. Which is when I started laughing.

“It’s not kindling. It’s my box.”

“It’s in the kindling pile,” Peter said. He pointed at the large box on the floor, next to the woodstove. It was filled with birch bark and small spruce slivers.

“No it’s not. It’s drying. I washed it,” my mom said, which to her, seemed like a perfectly reasonable explanation.

“You washed a cardboard box?”

“It’s the perfect box.”

Peter looked at the box and the torn flap he held in his hand. “Not anymore.”

“You ripped my box.”

“Why would you put it in the kindling pile?”

“I didn’t. It’s drying next to the stove.”

“In the kindling pile.” Peter looked at us like he was evaluating our mental health, my mom outraged over her ripped, but clean, cardboard box, and me, unable to stop laughing.

My mom left her basket on the counter and walked over to Peter. “Give it to me.”

Peter handed over the pieces, still confused.

My mom spent five minutes duct-taping the box back together and I learned never to leave your treasure in a place where someone else might consider it trash.

HOW A WRITER FAILS AT WORDS

Over Christmas break, 2012, the temperature in Everett dropped to -48° and stayed there for almost a week. Our propane stove didn't work after -43°, so we microwaved meals and my mom was determined that as soon as it warmed up enough to cook, we'd make a huge batch of breakfast burritos that we could freeze for future microwaving.

Two days before Christmas, it was -33° and we were able to cook the eggs, bacon, sausage, and potatoes. Once we had everything mixed together in a giant bowl, we got a mini-assembly line going. My mom microwaved the cheese and tortilla, while I scooped the filling and folded the burrito.

We started late, but I was hoping we'd be done by eight or nine p.m. I spent most evenings at my cousin Catherine's house, watching movies and hanging out with her and her toddler.

She'd called earlier in the day, but I'd still been asleep. I called her back at 5:30 p.m., but Victor, her babysitter, said she was out on a call. Catherine worked as the health aide at the clinic, and had been there for over a year, but her first big training had been in November and this was only her second week-long rotation of being on-call.

I ran into her the night before, right after she finished a call.

When the phone rang at 6:30 p.m., I thought it might be Catherine, but it was Kym, one of my mom's friends. I was left alone on the assembly line while my mom answered the phone.

There's this tone my mom gets when someone's telling her bad news. I've heard it often enough – growing up in the village, there's no shortage of deaths, or cancer, or other shitty news.

My mother's "oh no" can put me instantly on alert. Even if she had to call and tell me bad news, as soon as she said, "Hi," I could tell by the quiet hesitancy in her tone.

I continued making the breakfast burritos while my mom got the details. I could only hear her side of the conversation, but that was all I needed.

"No. What happened?" My mom paced around the dining room.

"What? When?"

"How? Where?" She was turned half away from me, but I could see that her eyes were closed as she leaned her head forward. I focused on the tortilla in front of me. It was easier than thinking about what the phone call meant.

"No, that's not Carlee's house. She was renting from Pearson." My house. Well, not my house anymore, since I was going to graduate school in Florida. One of my best friends growing up, Amy, had moved to a different village after college, but her older brother, Edward, still lived in Everett. He'd moved into my old house. Shit.

I spooned the breakfast burrito mix onto the tortilla. This one looked like there wasn't enough bacon on it. I stole a couple of the crumbled pieces out of the bowl and put them on top. Better. I rolled the burrito and placed it flat in the box next to the others.

"That's so sad. That's just so sad...Have they called his family?" His family, meaning Amy and his mom and his other sister and his brother, all of whom lived in Renton.

The burritos were getting overcrowded in the box. The ones that had been in there the longest had cooled enough that I was able stack them in rows. Moving them around was kind of like playing Tetris or putting a puzzle together, making sure all the burritos fit in the box in the most efficient way possible.

"Oh, this is just going to break her heart."

Microwave. Spoon. Fold.

I was almost done by the time my mom hung up. She made eye contact with me for the first time since she'd answered the phone. "Edward killed himself."

I nodded. "I figured." In rural Alaska, anytime I heard that someone under the age of forty had died, I assumed suicide. Maybe that's not the right way to think, but then again, my assumption is rarely wrong.

"This is going to kill Amy."

I nodded again. "Yup."

We were out of tortillas and there was just a small amount of filling left. I spooned it onto two plates, passed one to my mom. We still had to bag the burritos, but that could wait until they had more time to cool off.

A little after seven o'clock that night, Amy posted on Facebook to let people know her brother had passed and apologized to anyone finding out over Facebook.

By the time I saw the post, there were already ten comments expressing condolences. I thought about commenting, but didn't think joining the masses on that post was the appropriate way to tell one of my best friends that I was sorry her brother was dead. I thought about posting on her wall – there were a few people who'd done that. I thought about sending her a private message.

I didn't.

I looked at what everyone else was saying, things like the family was in their prayers. And they were so sorry for the loss of such a nice person.

I didn't feel like praying.

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“Mom, we need bigger buckets.” I looked at the little, blue pails my mom had given Amy and me. They were washed out jam containers, about the size and look of a butter tub, but with a handle. Though the handle would be convenient for berry picking, Amy and I knew, with all the stubborn certainty that ten-year-olds can have, that we would pick way more cranberries than the buckets would hold.

“If you fill these, come back and get a bigger tub. Or dump them in a bowl and go get more. You don’t want to carry all those berries anyway. They’ll get heavy.” My mom shooed us out the door.

Amy and I didn’t have to wander far to find the high bush cranberries. Patches of them grew less than ten feet from the front steps. It was the right time of year to get them; in another week, they’d drop off the branches and rot on the mossy undergrowth. The smell of decaying cranberries is an iconic fall scent for me, the same way people associate pink with Valentine’s Day or poinsettias with Christmas.

The gnats must have been horrible. They probably buzzed in our ears and flew in our eyes and died in our bug-sprayed hair. The leaves on all the willows and bushes we brushed past must have been coated with August rainwater, splashing and soaking into our clothes as we wandered around in the woods, but that’s not something a kid remembers. I remember grabbing twenty or thirty cranberries off one bush, I remember our black rain boots with the red soles and red trim, I remember the bitter taste when I snuck a couple of cranberries into my mouth instead of my pail.

“Carlee, Amy! I’m going to the store!” The only rule for playing outside was we had to be able to hear my mom when she yelled out the front door, which gave us about a half-mile radius.

“Okay!” we yelled from the backyard. There were enough cranberry bushes there that we filled our buckets soon after she left.

“Now what do we do with it?” Amy asked as we dropped our buckets of berries on the kitchen counter. We couldn’t use the dining room table – my mom and Amy were working on a puzzle over there. Every once in a while, I’d put down the book I was reading and wander over to put in a couple of pieces, but puzzles were their thing. Later, when I was a teacher in my own classroom, I’d realize the value of a puzzle when you want to talk to someone in a low-pressure situation.

“Now we make juice,” I said. There was a paper cup dispenser attached to the fridge and I grabbed two five-ounce Dixie cups and paper plates so we had a place to dump our juiceless berry skins.

We sat next to each other at the counter and squeezed the cranberries into the cups. Sometimes, the seed would pop out and fall into the cup and then we had to fish the seed out and drop it onto the plate with the rest of the cranberry leftover bits. The juice stained our fingertips red. I tried to figure out why the juice sometimes squeezed into the cup and sometimes splashed up onto our faces or our shirts, but there didn’t seem to be a way to stop the upspray.

“Um, maybe we should put on different shirts,” Amy said. She looked at the unicorn on her white sweater, now streaked with red dots. Mickey Mouse on my shirt was also getting the raw end of our juice-making endeavor.

“I’ll grab some of my mom’s old shirts. She won’t mind.” When my mom returned from the store, I found out that, yes, she did in fact mind my using her shirts as aprons. She yelled at me, but not at Amy.

Near the end of third grade, Amy and her brothers and sisters moved to Fairbanks for awhile. Amy came back for fourth grade. Her mom didn't return and Edward, the oldest, wasn't her dad's kid, so he stayed with her mom. Amy spent more and more time at my house with my mom. She wasn't so much a guest as much as a friend that was always there.

If you think about who a ten-year-old girl is going to become close to in the absence of her mother, Amy didn't have a lot of options. Her sister, Michelle, was in high school and she was a sister, not a mom. Amy's grandma, Hazel, is one of Amy's favorite people in the world, but she isn't so much a cookies-and-milk type of grandma as she is a let-me-show-you-how-to-gut-and-clean-a-salmon type of grandma. A lot of kids are close to their teachers, especially in our small town, where we had movie nights at the school and a yearly sleepover in the gym and saw our teachers around town and visited at their houses. But for fifth grade that year, after our regular teacher had a small breakdown and took an indefinite leave of absence, our long-term substitute decided joining the Peace Corps was better than teaching our class, and we finished out the year with the male student teacher.

Everett is like a half-village – it isn't as bad as others. Some villages don't have roads or trucks, so everyone uses four-wheelers and snowmachines on the trails. Everett's an easy village compared to that, but still, a lot of teachers or other newcomers weren't prepared to be a \$300 plane ticket away from a movie theater or a McDonalds. They weren't ready for the long, dark, winter months when it was too cold to go anywhere besides work and home and the isolation began to suffocate you. Except for Mr. Prescott in fourth grade, from kindergarten until eighth grade, all of our teachers left Everett the year after they taught our class.

Then again, maybe the people who grow up in the village don't handle it all that well, either.

“Carlee, how full is yours?” Amy asked as she peeked into my Dixie cup. We’d been squeezing cranberries for over half an hour.

I leaned over so I could use the kitchen light to see the level of juice from outside the cup. It wasn’t quite half full and our buckets were far less than half-empty.

“Should we try it?” I asked. I thought about the bottles of Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice sold at the store. Ours looked different.

She nodded.

“You go first,” I said.

She nodded. She drank the smallest sip of the cranberry juice. Her face puckered and she shuddered. “Your turn.”

My sip of cranberry juice was probably smaller than hers. It was still enough to get the sour taste stuck on my tongue. “Eww.”

“Maybe it needs sugar,” she said. She stared at the contents of her cup.

My mom was on the computer in the living room, so I used her kitchen stool to climb up to the cupboard and grab the sugar bowl. I passed it to Amy while I grabbed spoons. She leveled off a teaspoon of sugar and stirred it into her cup. My teaspoon was more of a heap than a level amount.

We tried the juice again. Nope, not any better.

By the time we realized sugar was not going to miraculously make our cranberry juice taste any better, it was less a juice and more a sludge.

“Cranberry juice makes your stomach feel better, right?” I asked as I tried to slosh the juice in my cup around. It kind of shifted slowly from side to side, but wouldn’t swirl.

“If it’s like medicine, maybe it’s not supposed to taste good,” Amy said.

We agreed that our cranberry juice would now be cranberry medicine and I grabbed two of my mom's glass herb containers. We emptied our sludge into the vials, because it made us feel like witches who'd just made a medicine potion. We told ourselves that ours was the best medicine, that it didn't just help with stomach aches, that it could make anything better.

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Few women in Everett carry a purse. Most people can fit anything they want to carry with them in the many pockets of their winter jackets. But Amy had a purse. It was small, brown, with tan trim.

We had opposite schedules; I was with the students during the day and she was with them at night. The only night we both had off and could hang out was Tuesday. We watched movies and TV and talked about books or the students.

::

Catherine called at 8:30 p.m. My mom and I had bagged the burritos, and while on a normal night, I would've been over at Catherine's house already, I thought she might have wanted to be by herself. She didn't.

We sat at her kitchen table. It wobbled when I leaned on it. The floor was uneven, sunken in places. Catherine likes to say her next project will be to replace the rotten wood. She's fixed the house up a lot since she moved in almost ten years ago. She painted the walls and the cupboards and had the floor leveled. There was a carpet now, and even though it was patchworked from industrial carpet scraps, it still looked better than when our grandpa had lived in the house when we were kids.

I hadn't known him well enough to miss him. I knew him more as a label, "Amy's brother," than as a person.

“Did you call Amy?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I didn’t know what to say.”

There was silence for a moment, and I know we both mentally went to that night, eleven years earlier, when Catherine’s brother, Jeremy, had died. I was away at college, but I called her. It ranks up there in the five hardest things I’ve ever had to do. I don’t remember a single thing I said to her, just that we were both crying.

“I was going to Facebook her.” I didn’t want to talk to her on the phone. I didn’t want to have a personal interaction.

Catherine nodded. “What’re we watching tonight?” It was time to escape our lives and get caught up in a fictional version of the world.

::

Amy sat on her top bunk, legs pulled up to her chest, wearing her jacket like a blanket. I threw my backpack onto my bunk on the opposite side of the room we shared with two others at boarding school before I asked, “So, what happens now?”

“I leave in the morning.”

Amy and Catherine had joined me at Mt. Clarendon for our sophomore year, but they hung out with kids that drank and I didn’t. It was easy to get caught at boarding school where the dorm aides checked on you hourly, and if I’d been caught drinking, my parents would’ve had to pay the thousand-dollar plane ticket to bring me home and send me back when I got suspended, which would really only have cost \$500, since I was pretty sure my dad would have killed me the moment I got off the plane, resulting in a need for only a one-way ticket.

Amy had made it all the way to March before she got caught. I figured something had happened when she hadn’t been in the room by lights-out last night. She had just gotten back

from her first five-day suspension for drinking. I honestly thought she wouldn't do it again. Or, at least, not this quickly. "You talk to your dad?"

She nodded. Her short, dark hair fell into her face a little. I could still see her eyes, dry, but puffy. "I'm not coming back after."

"But that's not fair. This is only your second time getting caught. Everyone else gets three chances." We might not have been as close as I'd imagined when I thought about her being at Clarendon with me, but it was still better than her *not* being there.

"It's not the school. My dad said he wasn't going to pay for me to come back."

I didn't know what to say to that. Instead, I stared at the wall behind her, checker-patterned with light blue paper. We spent a Sunday afternoon in January cutting out the butcher paper and taping the squares to the wall. Amy and Catherine liked to hang out in the room when they were tripping on Dramamine. I used the pills for motion sickness, but if you took all twelve tablets in the tube, it caused visual hallucinations. It was cheap, technically legal, and wouldn't show up on a breathalyzer. Apparently, our improvised wallpaper improved their hallucinations, made them more interesting. I thought it looked pretty cool without any mind-altering substances.

"Do you want help packing?" I asked.

Amy shook her head. "There's not much to do. I never really unpacked."

::

When Amy's sister called to say her grandma, Hazel, had a heart attack the night before and had been medevacked, Amy and I were at the regional basketball tournament in Fairbanks, one of the few times in our twenties when we were in the same town at the same time. Amy

wasn't as big a basketball fan as I was, but she wanted to hang out with me and I wanted to watch the games.

Amy didn't have a car, and I didn't need to ask. I grabbed my camera and we were out the door. Ten minutes later, we were in the ICU waiting area. It wasn't like the movies. There were only four chairs, and it was more of a widened hallway than a waiting room. Amy went in to see her grandma, while I sat in one of the chairs, next to Amy's aunt. She told me stories about when she used to live in Everett and babysit my auntie Janet, Catherine's mom. I nodded a lot.

The aunt went into the room when Amy came back to the waiting area. Her grandma was doing okay, but didn't realize she was in Fairbanks. For the medical emergencies that were too big for Everett's small clinic to handle, a plane would fly from Fairbanks to Everett, pick up the patient, and medevac them to the hospital in Fairbanks, at least a two-hour roundtrip. Hazel is four-foot-ten with about six-foot-five worth of feisty.

"Why am I just hearing about this now?" Amy asked. I guessed she was asking me. No one else was with us, but I didn't have an answer. "I live in Fairbanks, and she's been here since last night. No one thought to call me earlier?" Maybe I'm not the only person who fails at communication. This wasn't the time for them to argue, and we both knew it, so I listened while Amy vented until her aunt returned.

I changed the subject. "I think the last time I saw Hazel was when I gave her a ride home from Jamboree. Her and Laura were leaving the gym, and Catherine asked how they were getting home. Your grandma looked down, pointed, and said, 'With my own two feet.'" On the one hand, picturing two eighty-year-old ladies prepared to walk almost three miles in the dark wasn't exactly amusing, but on the other hand, it was just such a Hazel-thing to say, so independent and determined, that Amy and her aunt smiled.

A voice came over the intercom, something about a code in room whatever. I didn't pay any attention until I saw both Amy and her aunt sit up and stare at the hallway that led to Hazel's room.

None of us talked for the next five minutes as we watched people in solid-colored scrubs going back and forth down the hallway. I tried to figure out which ones were doctors and which ones were nurses, but had no idea. No one was wearing an easily-identifiable doctor's white lab coat.

Amy tapped her foot like a rabbit on crack. She finally stilled when a guy wearing blue scrubs stopped in front of our little waiting area.

"What happened?" Amy's aunt asked.

"She coded," he said. On TV, whenever someone died, the actors would yell Code Blue or something and then all leap into action.

"What?" Amy had stopped crying before she'd gone to see her grandma, but the tears came instantly back.

He continued, "She's doing okay now."

I missed the next part of his explanation. What kind of idiot doctor tells the family the patient coded before telling them she's okay? Doesn't med school have some kind of class that teaches doctors how to break good and bad news?

When I went back to listening to him, he was explaining that Hazel's heart was operating at only twenty percent. Amy's aunt wasn't sure what that meant. The doctor started talking about water hoses. I tried to pay attention, in case Amy and her aunt went into information overload and couldn't process the information right then and needed me to explain it again later, but I

didn't do a very good job. I kept thinking about how badly Hollywood had failed me as a study guide for this hospital stuff.

I stayed for another two hours. It had never been a question for me, whether I would stay or not. This was a difficult time for Amy, so this was where I would be. Amy spent a few minutes with her grandma when the hospital staff would let her, but for the most part, she was in the waiting area with me. I told her about some of the funnier students at the boarding school and some of the gossip from home. I wasn't sure what was appropriate behavior and conversation for an ICU waiting area. I went with what I had.

::

It was 2:30 in the morning before I checked Facebook again. There was a message from Amy. I was pretty sure that I was the one who was supposed to send a message, not her.

“Hey, Keys.” When we were kids, we all had nicknames for each other. Mine ended up being Carkeys from someone trying to say my name too quickly. It was a harsh reminder that, as close as we'd always been, I should have messaged her by now. We'd been friends for as long as either of us could remember. This is what friends were supposed to do. Be there for each other, support each other, comfort each other, and yet, I drew a blank. I had no idea what to say to her, what I could possibly say that would make this day better for her.

I still didn't say anything. Within a week, I would be helping at the raffle fundraiser, where as a town, Everett would raise almost \$7000 to help pay for the expenses of the funeral and getting Edward to Renton, where he'd be buried with his mom's family. I would sell tickets for hours, in an attempt to help Amy, even though she might never know that I'd done so. But alone that night, in front of that computer screen, I couldn't find the right words to say to her.

She sent another message, “Say thank you to your mom, my friend was fielding FB messages for me.”

I had no idea what my mom had said to Amy, but knowing they’d always been close, no doubt it was profound. Uplifting. Comforting. Probably something I should have been too.

I needed to reply. Give her those words that were meant to express all of my confused, fucked up, anger-filled feelings that this shit was happening to her. Except, without the confusion, anger, and inappropriate language. Instead, my fingers sat on the keyboard. Didn’t move. What could I say? *I’m sorry about your loss?* I hated that phrase. An apology sounded weird, especially in writing, when I hadn’t done anything to apologize for. *I’m praying for you?* The way I saw it, God was going to be there for Amy or He wasn’t, and I didn’t have much say in the matter. If He only comforted her because I asked Him to, what kind of comfort was that? Thinking back on it now, maybe the comfort came from knowing that that many people cared about her and her family, but I didn’t see that then.

She sent another message while I stared at the screen. “Hey, what’s going on?”

I was still trying to find the appropriate words, glad that Facebook gave us a way to express condolences without having to have personal interactions, glad that Facebook gave me the time I needed to figure out what I wanted to say, when her next message popped up. “It says you saw my message.”

Fucking Facebook.

I had to type something. Anything. “I will,” I replied. I wrote a note to my mom, told her Amy said thanks for whatever it was that my mom had said. And then I couldn’t stall anymore, so I wrote, “Sorry – trying to figure out how to say I wish I could be there for you and that this sucks.”

There. I finally said something. It might not have been everything I wanted to say, but I got the point across.

She wrote back, “I know, it is hard to find words. And say the right thing.”

CAPTAIN FOR A DAY

Raymond gives you a ten-minute lesson on how to drive the boat. It would have been only five minutes, but you miscalculate the dock landing and you have to pull away and circle back. You don't venture more than twenty feet from the shore as Raymond instructs you on the throttle and steering. You don't want to risk going further than that – this is the Yukon River, a mile wide in some places and flowing at six miles per hour, three times faster than the Mississippi and twice as fast as the average person walks. You envision the boat capsizing as you turn and drive upriver back to the dock. Now you're thinking about the end of *Titanic* – the life jackets didn't keep them warm, just helped the survivors find the bodies.

Raymond sits in the passenger seat to your left and he looks satisfied, like he approves of your driving or at least of his choice in drivers. You wonder about that choice. Usually, only the leaders are allowed to drive the boats at Bible Camp. Maybe he's grooming you for a leadership position, but if tasks like this are what's required for the job, you'd rather continue working as a kitchen helper, thank you very much.

You worry about how the water will be even rougher if you have to move further out towards the middle. Raymond says it won't be an issue, you'll stick close to the shore tomorrow. Unless you have to cross the river to get to Lakebay, on the south bank. Or if you have to avoid a sandbar. Or if you have to cross another boat's wake if you pass someone going upriver. But otherwise, he's sure you'll do fine, even after you miss the initial landing. You think about how he has to be pushing sixty-five – maybe his confidence in you is an early warning sign of dementia.

The next day, your boat is filled with thirteen passengers: no campers, all staff, including your mom and your two younger sisters. Your mom does not look like she shares Raymond's confidence in you. Had this been a Catholic Bible Camp instead of a nondenominational Christian Bible Camp, you're pretty sure she'd have been mumbling some Hail Marys and spritzing the boat down with holy water. You're only twenty-five, and maybe it would have made more sense for her to drive the boat – although she's never driven one before either – but Raymond decreed that you'd be the driver and neither of you questioned it.

Raymond as your navigator is replaced with Jared, who actually does know how to drive a boat and has way more practice than you. If you'd done a vote, you're pretty sure your passengers would have chosen Jared as their driver, but Raymond's the boss and you are the driver and Jared is your fifteen-year-old co-captain. His job is to help look for drift, but he has to use the bathroom almost as soon as you leave camp and it's sixty miles before you get to Lakebay, the next village downriver. The bouncing waves don't do him any favors and he ends up wedged between the slanted door and the step in an attempt to minimize his whole body compressing his bladder every time the boat bounces down from a wave.

Behind you, the small boat is full – the twelve other passengers sprawl out across the baggage. A rolled up sleeping bag or a duffel bag full of clothes makes a much more comfortable seat than the metal benches that disguise the gas tanks. The rough, choppy, white-capped water makes it the worst boat ride they will ever remember being on, before or after. You have the best chair – there is some sort of suspension involved, so every time the boat crests a wave and then crashes back down, your chair sinks gracefully to soften the blow. There are a couple of times where the boat leaves the water completely and flies straight ahead, airborne for a stomach-clenching moment, before you slam into the river again. This is similar to the way your five-

year-old sister, the lightest passenger at fifty-five pounds, gets left up in the air like a cartoon character every time the boat peaks over a wave before she slams back down onto the pile of extra life jackets she's tried to turn into a chair.

You try to focus on not losing sight of Raymond's boat in front of you. During the lesson when you'd gone twenty miles per hour at the most, you'd forgotten and he'd failed to remind you that he is a speed demon. It's not like you can get lost – it's a hundred-mile trip, straight downriver, but if you follow in his wake, you minimize the risk of hitting a sandbar or a six-foot piece of driftwood and damaging the boat. Raymond's driven this route enough times that he knows the location of every sandbar and every place where the water gets suddenly shallow or drops rapidly in depth, both of which affect the size of the waves. He hits forty miles per hour on the roughest water you've ever been on and you feel like the boat is going to crash for sure as you nudge the throttle forward to keep up with him.

Even though you try to stay focused and block out the fact that thirteen other lives are in your first-time-driver hands, you can still hear your passengers sing the religious songs they've been singing with the campers for the last month. You try to tell yourself that this is a normal end-of-camp boat ride tradition. You remember being that excited about camp as a kid and already missing it on the boat ride home and singing your favorite songs so you and the rest of your boatmates could pretend it wasn't really over. You almost have yourself convinced before your mom initiates the next song. She doesn't really sing, even with the radio in the car, and now you're convinced these songs are more of a desperate prayer than a feel-good camp memory. You just know they're about to abandon all pretenses and grab each other's hands in a prayer circle. Or maybe in an attempt to keep your sister from flying out the back of the boat.

You reach Everett three hours later, safe and whole and without having lost Raymond or your little sister. The next day, you can barely move. Your muscles refuse to reach over your head or behind you and you pop four Advil and three Tylenol and sneak some of your mom's muscle relaxers just to be able to function. Although you had the best seat and everyone else was being thrown around in the back every time the boat hit the waves, you're the only one who seems to be in this much pain. Even your hands hurt and you realize it wasn't caused by the waves but from clenching the steering wheel and being completely tense and rigid for the entire boat ride.

You run into Raymond at the store and you try not to cry as he slaps you on the back and jokes about having you drive the boat again next summer. At least, you hope it's a joke.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

“One week,” my mom said. “We can do this. We can make thirty baskets in one week.”

Coils of reed littered the floor of the open dining room/living room. With her right hand, she shook out a coil and started to weave it around the sixteen straight reed spokes she held in her left hand.

There were two finished baskets on the kitchen counter. Twenty-eight to go.

I used blue reed to add a stripe to the basket in my hands. I was fourteen, and I'd been making baskets since I was ten, but my mom was better at starting them and taking them around the bend, turning them from a flat disk shape to a basket with sides. That was her job with each of the baskets we made. We tag-teamed through those thirty baskets. I wove the bottom until it was time for her to tighten the spokes and make the basket go up instead of out, then I took over again until they were tall enough for her to weave the rim.

Everett held a memorial potlatch almost every summer, often for multiple people and families. Traditionally, they happened between three and seven years after someone had died, whenever the family was ready to present gifts to those who had been close to the person who'd died and who'd helped the family when it happened. The memorial potlatch also represented an end to the family's grieving process.

That summer, my mom's friend, Teresa, and her family held a potlatch for Teresa's dad and her brother-in-law. My mom was known in Everett for her baskets and Teresa had asked her to make a bunch for the gift giving that happened at the end of the three-day event.

It was a little overwhelming, but I was glad there was something I could do, something I could contribute. Teresa had about eight brothers and sisters, and they all had kids around my age. I might not have really known the people who'd died, but I knew the family.

My mom and I watched old *I Love Lucy* tapes as we worked on the baskets. That week gave us the chance to catch up and talk about my first year at boarding school and everything I'd missed that winter in Everett. As soon as my mom had separated the spokes of a new basket, she'd pass it to me. I enjoyed the repetitive motion of basket weaving, threading the reed around the spokes, over and under and over and under. I was comfortable with following the pattern.

By the end of the week, the skin on my right hand had been rubbed raw and my mom and I both had masking tape wrapped around the knuckles on our fingers, protecting the areas where the reed had created blisters as we'd pulled and tightened and threaded. We finished them in time and delivered fifteen baskets to Teresa and fifteen to her sister, Carol.

Alaska Native groups across the state have different ceremonies to honor the dead and celebrate life, depending on whether they're Inupiaq or Tlingit or Athabascan or Aleut or Yup'ik. Even within the Athabascan Indian culture, there are different potlatches or events depending on the region. Memorial potlatches are specific to the Koyukon Athabascans in Everett and the nearby villages. I grew up contributing and attending and participating in these events.

Is that what it means to be Native?

Is it about being a part of cultural events like potlatches and raffles? Is it donating my time and abilities? Is that what makes me Native?

My mom, she's from Pennsylvania, but she's lived in Everett for thirty-five years now. She's always helped out in whatever way she can, whether it's donating items for the potlatch or

letting visitors use her car the week of a funeral or selling tickets at a raffle to raise money for someone in need.

She does all these things and participates in traditional cultural events, but she's not Native.



I adjusted the headband that stretched across my forehead. It was only ten in the morning, but I was already sweating under the Las Vegas sun and the headband, with my name spelled out in red and white beads, bordered by pink roses, kept slipping closer to my eyebrows. I'd have retied it in the back, underneath my ponytail, but Hannah was almost done introducing the Seagull Song and there wasn't time.

The day before, we'd performed at a Native American arts festival where we had the stage for fifteen minutes. Normally, each member of the group picked one song and learned the background information, like who wrote it and what it meant, and then they were responsible for introducing that song each time we performed. To cut down on the time it took for different people to cross the stage to get to the microphone, I'd introduced all the songs. I hadn't minded – I liked that the rest of the group knew I was familiar with the background of each of the songs and trusted me to introduce them. Their trust and my knowledge gave me confidence and I didn't even get nervous talking into the microphone.

Hannah finished and walked back to her place in line. There were twelve of us girls in a row across the stage, a line of similar tan dresses with varying levels of beadwork. Some of the girls wore beaded belts around their waists, some of us wore headbands, some of us wore beaded mooseskin slippers. I'd added a daisy chain around the neckline of my dress, along with three flowers and beaded danglies across the chest.

The four guys on the trip crouched in front of us, as was the traditional set up for Athabascan dancing. They wore tan vests with fringe across the back and around the hems. Einar was the only one whose vest was made of actual mooseskin, decorated with elaborate beadwork, an early graduation present from his parents that he also wore at our high school graduation a month later.

Next to me, Alexis clutched the rawhide frame drum in her left hand, her right hand ready with the mooseskin-tipped drumstick. “Carlee, how does it start?” she whispered.

“Oh hey,” I said, my voice rising at the end. As the drummer, it was Alexis’s responsibility to start every song. I usually stood next to her when we performed, in case she forgot the cue.

“Thanks,” she said. She hit the drum.

Our boarding school’s Athabascan dance group included students from across the Athabascan region in interior Alaska. We’d been in Vegas for a week and this was our last performance. We’d danced twice at a powwow and performed at a couple of different elementary schools. That last day was our second time at UNLV.

There were less than twenty people sitting on the rows of the amphitheater, but we cared less about having an audience and more about the fact that we’d gotten to travel to Vegas. We’d ridden to the top of the Stratosphere, wandered around Caesar’s Palace, seen a white tiger at the zoo, and climbed rocks in the desert. It was the best week.

I still know and remember all of the songs today. Is that what makes me Native?

Is it about traditional songs? Does it matter that I cared more about having fun in Vegas than about sharing my culture? Does it matter that when I watch the video one of the girls put together from that trip, I fast-forward through the two included performances so I can get to the

candid clips of us playing in the desert and goofing off in the van, edited like a music video to Eric Clapton's "My Father's Eyes"?

Does knowing how each song starts make me more Native? Does knowing the introductions and the stories behind each song mean I'm more Native than someone who doesn't know?

Does it matter that I know more songs from other villages than I know from Everett? If the songs I know are Gwich'in, the Athabascan group four hundred miles to the east, does that make me less Koyukon? Am I supposed to have more Athabascan songs on my iTunes than Lakota prairie dance songs? Does it matter that the Cherokee version of "Amazing Grace" has the highest play count out of all the Native songs on my computer?

Does it matter that someone who isn't Native can learn the songs and introductions just as easily as I did?

‡

When we were twenty-three, Grandma Suzanne, our grandpa's sister, gave Catherine a Native name.

"It's *Delbeetza*," Catherine said. We sat at her kitchen table, working on projects for her brother's memorial potlatch. It was still a few years away, but at that point, the family already had about ten large totes of gifts. By the time of Jeremy's potlatch in 2007, we'd have over thirty.

I concentrated on adding dark purple beads to my needle. If I looked at her, I was afraid she'd see how jealous I was that she had a Native name and I didn't. People had asked at Clarendon if I had one, and when I'd said no, I'd add that my grandma had died when I was

three, before she could give me one. It was an easy explanation, even if I had no idea whether or not she'd ever have given me a Native name had she lived longer.

“What’s it mean?” I asked.

“It means sandpiper, like those birds down on the beach. Suzanne says it’s because I always flit around from table to table when I’m working at Bingo.”

It was easy to see how well the name fit her. The sandpiper was a bird in constant motion, darting back and forth.

At a potlatch later that winter, Catherine announced to the room full of people that I didn’t have a Native name.

I yanked her back onto the bench next to me.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“What? Don’t act like you don’t want one,” she said.

“I don’t want someone to give me a name out of pity. If I get a Native name, I want it to be because of who I am. Like yours. I want it to be mine,” I said.

Whether she understood or not, or whether she quieted down because I had turned so completely red, she never brought it up again and didn’t try to make one of the elders give me a Native name.

I still don’t have one. Does that make me less Native? Would it make me feel more Native if I had one?

There’s a huge Koyukon Athabascan dictionary in the Everett school library. I could always look through it and find a word, a name. If someone outside of Everett asked, I could pretend that it had been given to me by an elder. That would make me seem more Native, but it

wouldn't make me feel more Native. Do I need to feel more Native? Am I trying to force or create a cultural identity when it should be inherent?

‡

My second winter back in Everett after college, the woman who developed the Koyukon dictionary offered a Koyukon Language class through the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Catherine and I signed up and attended the class via teleconference at the distance ed center in Everett, along with six or seven others, every Tuesday and Thursday evening.

We learned basic conversation phrases – the weather, emotions, numbers, familial terms. A lot of it was vocabulary we'd learned with Grandma Lorraine in our elementary school bilingual classes, but I hadn't used the language since then.

"*Do'eenta?*" Catherine asked me. Other pairs around the room practiced the same phrases.

"*Aszoon,*" I said, after a quick peek at the vocabulary handout which instructed us on how to greet each other and possible responses we could give. I, of course, went with the bland reply of "I'm fine."

"*Do'eenta?*" I asked her.

Catherine scrunched up her face and clenched angry fists in front of her. Her arms shook with the effort. "*Seeyenhulet,*" she said, dragging out the "yen" sound.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Catherine pointed to the handout and the line drawing of a little boy in the exact same pose as she'd just done. "I like that. It's so cute."

"He's supposed to be 'really mad,'" I said.

"It's still cute." She grinned before making the angry face again.

Over the next month or two, we practiced the phrases with each other and whenever we ran into other people from the class at the store or the post office. I usually told people I was fine. Catherine continued to tell everyone she was really mad.

The end of the class coincided with the Elders' Potlatch. To showcase what we'd learned and possibly generate interest for future classes, we had to introduce ourselves in Koyukon in the traditional format. The paragraph-long introduction focused on our parents and grandparents, their hometowns, and whether they were still alive or not, before getting into our names and where we were from.

Does knowing some of the language make me more Native? Does it matter that the only phrase I remember from the introduction is *Notaghaleedin lesdo*, which means I'm from Everett? If I want to call myself Native, should I know more than basic vocabulary words for clothing or animals or how to count to ten?

Few people from my generation can speak Athabascan. I'm not even sure my dad's generation can speak it. Is everyone losing their cultural identity?



In 2006, Catherine won the local Miss Nikaghun pageant in Shelton and competed in the statewide Miss WEIO pageant at the World Eskimo and Indian Olympics in Fairbanks.

Her talent was traditional storytelling. She told the story "The Porcupine Crying on the River." I loved listening to her practice – she used different voices for the porcupine and the beaver and made little crying motions for the porcupine. Her hands moved throughout the story to illustrate the setting or the action.

She wanted me to do the beadwork for her dress. She'd worn a cloth *bedzaahoolanh* for the Shelton pageant, but she wanted to make a mooseskin dress for the Miss WEIO pageant. She'd handle the sewing if I'd do the beadwork.

"Are you sure you want me to?" I asked.

"Yeah. You've been playing with vines on all your barrette patterns recently. I want you to do something like that for my dress."

She chose the colors and the base flower for the design. It was definitely not a flower I'd ever tried before. I liked my flower patterns to be geometrical and all the petals to be even. Catherine liked her flowers unique and non-symmetrical. The flower she wanted was large enough that I could only fit ten across the strip of black leather that she later sewed around the bottom hem. I crisscrossed and looped vines between the flowers. For the top of her dress, I looped the vines around the back and front shoulder panels and added a couple of leaves.

It was a lot more difficult than I thought it would be. I'd made a lot of barrettes over the winter for Jeremy's potlatch, but these flowers were bigger than the projects I'd been working on. The worst part was the black leather. The backside had a tough, smooth finish. Most of the time, I had to shove the needle through, using the pad of my finger. The back end of the needle pierced my skin over and over as I worked on Catherine's dress. Grandma Lorraine had tried to get me to use a thimble, back when she taught me to sew in kindergarten bilingual class, but it was uncomfortable and I never adjusted to it. I'd quit using the thimble as soon as her back was turned.

I finished the beadwork the night before she left for WEIO. I lathered my right point and middle fingers in Neosporin and gauze, like a mummy, before I took the leather beadwork panels to her house.

It was at least a week before full feeling returned to my fingertips.

Is being Native about cultural activities like beading and traditional oral storytelling?

Does it matter that when I think about what it means to be Native, I correlate it with knowledge?

That I've tried to build a cultural identity based on how much I know?

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“You have to come out there with me,” Catherine said as she grabbed my arm.

I looked around the school gym. The memorial potlatch honored nine people from a bunch of different families. It was one of the largest potlatches ever held in Everett. All the chairs along the edges of the basketball court were filled, along with the first four or five rows of bleachers. “No way. I’m not about to sing in front of all these people.”

“You’ve been practicing as much as I have. You know the song.”

“Yeah, I learned it so I could sing from, like, the sidelines or something.”

“Please?”

My shoulders sank as I let out a breath. “Okay. But I’m not singing into the microphone.”

“That’s fine,” Catherine said.

She walked out to the center of the court, and sat in middle of the row of five chairs. I followed and sat on her right. I leaned away from the microphone.

Catherine had written Jeremy’s song with Denise’s help, and Denise took the chair on Catherine’s left, the microphone aimed at the space between them. She was one of the women from my dad’s generation who had been studying the Koyukon language and had taken over bilingual classes at the school when Grandma Lorraine retired.

I shoved my hands into the hoodie-like pocket of my *bedzaahoolanh* shirt so no one would be able to see them shake.

The women in our family formed a row in front of us. Auntie Donna had made everyone matching *bedzaahoolanh* shirts, as was tradition, from a light blue and white flowered fabric. They'd dance in the traditional way, their hands holding a bandana and making circular motions, their knees bobbing up and down, just a little bit. Our family would stay out on the court and dance as Catherine, and anyone who wanted to after her, sang songs in memory of Jeremy.

Catherine started the song fine. For the most part, Athabascan songs are written with choruses made up of sounds and syllables that don't mean anything, mixed with lines or verses of actual phrases. I didn't understand most of the words in Jeremy's song, except Catherine had told me it was based on phrases like "beloved brother."

In the middle of the song, Catherine started to cry and her voice trembled in and out. She elbowed me, not so hard that others could see, but enough for me to understand her unspoken request. I leaned closer to her and the microphone. Our shoulders touched as my voice joined hers and Denise's over the sound system, quieter than both of them, but there. We finished the song together.

We sang the song three times. Some people joined our family in the middle of the basketball court while others danced on the sidelines.

When we finished, one of Jeremy's friends from South Hill came up to the microphone to sing the song she'd written for him. Catherine and I walked over to join the rest of our family.

That was first time Catherine wrote an honor song. Since then, she's written one or two more for close friends and sang at their memorial potlatches.

Does she ever wonder about what it means to be Native? I've never asked her. She probably just accepts that she is Native. Is it because she's seven-eighths Native, while I'm one-half?

Does it all just come down to blood? Does having Native blood make a person Native? I feel like it should be more than that, like my cultural identity is based on more than just who my dad is.

Maybe I overthink things. Is this a question that plagues other people or am I too analytical? Is this something that everyone else just accepts? Am I trying to quantify or qualify something that should be inherent?

Maybe it is about blood. Or traditional activities. Or the language. Or maybe it's all the little things that add up to and create a cultural identity. Does it matter that at the age of thirty-one, I still don't know exactly what it means to be Native?

VILLAGE NIGHTLIFE

I could be going out, sure. I could be downtown, playing pool at the one bar in town, trying to avoid the cigarette smoke that constantly emanates from the front room and drifts into the back, straight into my hair, and we could take the occasional break outside to down shots from the bottle hidden in my truck rather than pay the exorbitant bar prices, sneaking oh-so-inconspicuously, because we're like ninjas, back into the bar, where Frederick, who will have had too many shots of the cheapest vodka the liquor store sold before closing at ten, will end up passed out across the table, hidden from the bartender's view but not from our iPhones and Instagrams, and where we will continue to nurse the beers we bought two hours ago so we could stay at the bar as paying customers and not get kicked out of the limited social scene the town had to offer, and I could end the night by crawling into bed at five in the morning, buzzed or drunk, but not blacked out, because at the age of twenty-eight, I know my limits.

I could be going out, but to do so would mean leaving Alexandria home alone, where she might become bored enough to go out partying with her crackhead friends, the ones who post stupid catchphrases like YOLO! on their Facebook pages, even though she doesn't drink and doesn't particularly like to be around people when they are drinking, but she's in high school and I know there's that peer-pressure shit she has to deal with, so she might one day accept their invitation to join them because the cause-and-effect portion of her brain won't finish developing until she's twenty-five, and they'd end up sneaking shots of the cheapest vodka they'd paid someone to buy from the liquor store before it closed at ten, hiding in the bathroom so they won't have to share their bottle, hanging out with whatever creepy thirty-five-year-old was

having a house party, hoping some teenage girl would pass out there and be forgotten by her friends, which would inevitably be Alexandria, since her asshole friends would be so unused to her being out with them that they'd forget she was there, and she'd get perverted on while passed out on the floor, and I'd have to somehow explain to her parents in Bremerton, who've entrusted her to my care while she finishes high school, how I let it happen because I was too busy partying to notice that she'd gone out partying.

But if I stay home with Alexandria, I can avoid being the hypocritical adult with a bottle in my hand telling a teenager not to drink, and in truth, it might actually be more fun than going out and repeating the same behavior over and over again, because we'll end up watching our shared favorite TV show, *Veronica Mars*, which will lead to talks about our love for Sarah Dessen novels, and then we'll debate which one's better, her making the argument for *Truth About Forever*, and how much fun it would be to randomly join a catering company while in high school, and I'll praise *Just Listen*, even though a book about date rape at a party isn't nearly as much fun as a book about a ragtag group of friends. And if I am persuasive enough in my argument, which could happen since I really do love that book, maybe I can avoid having to give an After School Special heart to heart talk that I don't feel adult enough to deliver, and she'll understand on her own the oh-so-subtle lesson that Bad Shit Happens to Teen Girls Who Party.

THE BUZZARDS WERE CIRCLING BEFORE WE WERE BORN

“We grew up here, didn’t we?”
~*One Tree Hill*

The Picture

My favorite picture of you used to be from when we were kids, back when your mom used to bring you over to my mom’s house because our dads were good friends. We were small enough to fit into the woodbox together, still in that cute kid stage where our eyes took up half our faces. We’re grinning in the photo, our mouths and cheeks stained red from popsicles, my hair in pigtails, yours cut short so it didn’t hang in your eyes.

We hadn’t really been friends since then. You grew up wild and reckless, I grew up introverted and bookish. Everett’s too small for us to never have run into each other, especially since you were only a year older than me, and we were friendly, but never friends.

At least, until summer 2004, when you came to camp.

I’d already been at camp four days, for staff orientation. I’d been to every staff orientation for the last six years, since I’d become a counselor at the age of sixteen, so it wasn’t like I particularly needed it, especially since I wouldn’t be a counselor that year, but it was fun, half training, half getting to know the other staff, most of whom came from Oregon and Oklahoma. It was a time for bonding, which you apparently didn’t need. Once you got there, it was like you were insta-friends with the rest of the staff, like you’d known them forever. It wasn’t even that big of a surprise when you went to Oregon for a couple of weeks once camp was over.

James left that morning, the first official day of camp, and drove the boat to Everett to pick up the campers. The boat from Bremerton had arrived about an hour before the Everett boat, but that was usually what happened, since Bremerton was only sixty miles upriver while Everett was a hundred miles downriver.

James radioed in at about 7 pm and said they were ten minutes out. I went outside and could just barely make out the sound of the boat's motor in the distance, that low, constant buzz. There were always those five or ten minutes of anticipation, of knowing the boat was close, but not knowing who was going to be on it. Back when I'd been a counselor, it had been about wondering which of my campers were coming back that year, picturing my ideal camper roster, thinking about the week ahead.

That summer was different. I was in the middle of a crisis of faith. I'd spent the year thinking about village life and all the bad things that came with it. The endless question "Why?" that never had an answer, no matter how many pastors and church leaders and Bible study companions I asked. It would be a while before I reached a conclusion I was satisfied with, definitely not something that happened that summer. It would be a while before I accepted the idea that there had to be a God, that there had to be a plan, that all of this pain and tragedy wasn't in vain. That there had to be a reason. The alternative was simply too difficult to accept. I believed because I had to.

But I hadn't reached that conclusion then. So when the boat pulled up to the dock and James unzipped the canvas cover, flipped back the flap, and swung open the boat door, I was happy to see you step out onto the bow of the boat. You adjusted your red baseball cap, turning it backwards so the wind wouldn't catch on the brim and take off with it. You held the rope,

confident and ready for the boat to get close enough to the dock so you could jump off and tie it up.

We weren't really friends, but I knew you. I knew you didn't have the ultra-faith that the rest of the Bible Camp's staff had, that I wouldn't be alone in my uncertainty about life's endgame. As much as I normally liked staff orientation, it had been an exhausting couple of days, as I stayed quiet and tried to pretend that my faith was as solid as theirs, that I believed like they did, that I had their certainty.

I knew I wouldn't have to pretend with you.

I wasn't that surprised to see you. James had talked about trying to get you to come to camp and be on staff, help out around Bible Camp for its three-week duration. He knew you weren't exactly religious, but he saw it as a way to keep you sober and out of trouble for a few weeks while getting some help with maintenance: keeping the boats gassed, the generator running, wood for the stoves chopped and stacked.

That's James for you. His family had moved from Everett to Oregon eleven years ago, after you two finished sixth grade, but he still considered you one of his best friends, no matter the different paths your lives had taken, him in school to be a pastor or a teacher, and you living in Everett.

You were like the Pied Piper with the staff that year. Everyone wanted to be around you. When you laughed, it could be heard across camp. I'd say it was a giggle, except I don't think guys are supposed to giggle and I doubt you'd appreciate the comparison. But it was open and uninhibited and honest. Like you didn't have a care in the world. Like you were happy.

And I guess, at camp, you were.

“Seven Nation Army” had been out for about a year. For those three weeks at camp, it was constant, you either played the song’s basic seven notes on guitar or you whistled them.

It was between camps, the night before the junior high week started, when I heard the notes coming from above my head as I washed my hands. I left the washhouse and looked up. You sat on the shiny metal roof and grinned at me.

“What are you doing?” I asked. I know, obvious question, but still. You were on the roof.

You shrugged. “Playing guitar.”

“Clearly. What are you doing up there?”

“It’s comfortable.” Your knees were bent, supporting the guitar. The slope of the roof wasn’t enough to be dangerous and you used your sneakers to keep you in place as you played the opening seven notes over and over.

“Get down from there. James and Walter are going to freak.” James might have been only twenty-four, but he’d been running the camp for the last couple of years and Walter was his right-hand man.

You smiled. “Come up.”

“No way. Come down.”

You ignored me.

A couple of the counselors came out of the main hall. Ethan and Marcus joined you, climbing the ladder that leaned against the building, kept there so James could turn off the water supply to the washhouse every night once he’d turned off the generator and the water pump shut off.

“Seriously,” I said.

You kept playing. Ethan lay back, stretched out, and enjoyed the evening sunlight.

Walter came out of the kitchen with a couple of cookies. I just knew you were going to get in trouble. I waited for him to yell at you.

Instead, he climbed the ladder and joined the three of you. You were infectious that summer. Your cheerfulness even managed to suck in Walter, the super serious leader.

There wasn't much left for me to do or say. So I grabbed my camera. I might not have been the type to climb onto the roofs of buildings, but I was the type to try to capture the memory of you doing it. And then I had a new favorite photo of you.

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The Phone Call

It always starts with a phone call.

The phone rang at 2 AM the day after Christmas. I paused *Chronicles of Riddick*. I walked across the living room and picked up the cordless phone from its base. "Hello?"

"Carlee, you awake?"

"Auntie Janet?"

"Catherine needs you."

"What's going on?" I asked. It was obvious from her tone that it wasn't going to be good, but I still wasn't prepared.

"Trevor and Ian and Victor and Isaac were in an accident. Isaac's dead. She was at the clinic with them, but now she's back at her house."

I sank onto the blue, overstuffed recliner. I really should have learned by that point to sit down when I answer middle-of-the-night phone calls, but I hadn't been expecting Auntie Janet to call. You were the one who was supposed to call that night.

"Wait. Auntie Janet, wait. What happened?"

“They were coming up from Shelton. I don’t know who was driving, but there was an accident and Isaac was hurt.”

“And...and he’s dead?”

“Yes. Catherine just called me. The boys were really upset. You should go sit with her.”

“Okay.”

Auntie Janet hung up. I stared at the phone in my hand as it began the continuous beep of an ended call.

It’s not surprising that she thought of your death in terms of the effect on others, that she told me in a roundabout way without worrying about the effect on me. We still talked some, and you’d called me earlier that day, but it had been five months since camp and we hadn’t really hung out since. No one thought of us as friends. Even in assigning me a task, Auntie Janet hadn’t been talking about your death, but about what it meant for the three other boys. Catherine was close to them. She’d worked with both Trevor and Ian to help them graduate from high school last year and Victor was one of her best friends. For Catherine, your death wasn’t about you. I knew my job wouldn’t be to comfort Catherine because she was upset that you’d died, but upset about the ramifications and emotional turmoil the boys were going through, having been involved in the accident.

I didn’t cry. Maybe it was the way Auntie Janet told me, maybe I just wasn’t ready to believe, maybe it was shock. Maybe it was that I still had a job, something I needed to do.

I grabbed my gloves and walked outside. I started the car so it would have time to warm up in the -20° weather before I drove over to Catherine’s. I walked back inside and stomped the snow off my boots and put the gloves on the counter, next to the unopened bottle of Captain Morgan that I’d left there. Everything felt methodical. Step by step. Like if I just kept moving,

something would click and this night would make sense. If I focused on the little things, maybe I would understand the overall picture. But it didn't happen like that. I paid attention to all the little details, but ignored the big detail. You were dead.

The TV was still on, still paused on a scene of an alien planet or ship that filled the screen with shades of yellow and orange. That scene is synonymous for me with that phone call. I haven't watched *Chronicles of Riddick* since. It's stupid and superstitious, but I worry: what if I were to watch it, what if I got another phone call? I know they aren't linked, it's not like cause and effect, but I still can't watch it. A Vin Diesel movie was supposed to be an escape from reality, a mindless action movie filled with gravel-voiced quotes and arm muscles emphasized by sleeveless t-shirts, something that would distract me from what was going on in the rest of my life. You ruined that for me.

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The Third Hill

Your favorite part of teen camp was the hike. Other people's favorite things are tubing, where's there's a chance the campers will go flying off the tube. They love it. Some might say it's pizza night, where we serve about eighteen homemade pizzas and some of them are dessert or breakfast pizzas.

You liked the third hill. Teen camp was the only camp with kids old enough to make it up to the third hill. Elementary camp, they can get to the first hill and it takes about forty minutes to go up and down. Junior High camp, about ten or fifteen campers will want to go past that and climb the second hill, and it takes about four hours. During teen camp, there's usually five, maybe six, campers that want to climb the third hill, that are willing to make a seven-hour hike.

James gave you a gun and a walkie talkie and you two headed out with the campers, James in the lead, you bringing up the rear and herding along any stragglers.

By the time you guys got back from the hike, everyone else had already eaten and dinner was cleaned up. I was in a between stage, staff-wise, not a counselor, but not a full-time kitchen helper either. I floated between jobs, depending on what was needed. Once you guys were back, I carried your dinner over to the main hall so you could eat at the table we'd saved for you.

"How was it?" I asked as I set down the tray of garlic bread. James had already started passing around the bowl of noodles and was dishing up sauce for those that wanted it.

"Check it out," you said. "James, let me see your camera." James passed it over without interrupting his dinner service.

You clicked back through the pictures till you found the one you wanted. You turned the camera towards me and pointed at the screen.

The two of you were standing on a steep incline. Snow covered the ground in patches at your feet.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It's the start of the creek," you said. The creek that ran through camp and supplied our water was about three or four feet wide. The water was freezing and I'd always known it was snow melt, but I hadn't really understood.

"How far did you guys go?" I asked, pulling the camera closer. In the picture, a little trickle of water passed by your feet.

"All the way to the top," you said, taking the camera back and looking through the pictures on your own.

You'd traveled to some pretty great places, in Alaska, in other parts of the country, overseas. But I'm pretty sure the third hill was your favorite place on earth. I don't know if it was the strenuous hike to get there. I don't know if it was the fact that only a handful of people managed to climb it every summer. I don't know if it was the fact that once you were up there, you felt like you were on top of the world. Whatever it was, you loved it up there.

We had a two-day break between the second and third camp, as opposed to the one-day break between the first and second. Most of the staff preferred to sleep those days away in an attempt to rejuvenate themselves for the final stretch of camp. Not you. You took a gun and a radio and you hiked back up to the third hill alone.

Maybe that's why it was your favorite. Maybe it was like how my favorite place was the riverbank in the middle of the night when everyone and everything was calm and silent. Peaceful. Maybe you experienced that same serenity when you climbed to the top of the third hill. Maybe you felt like nothing else mattered once you were up there. Nothing else existed except that moment.

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The Hall

You took my favorite Eminem CD to the grave.

In the days before you were buried, the days when we all came and went from the hall, when you were never left alone, when people sat next to you and said goodbye, your mom put your Discman and CD case in the casket with you.

I saw it as I sat on the metal folding chair next to you. The case was tucked between your arm and your side.

At camp, you'd wanted to borrow *The Eminem Show* from me. You had the Cranberries CD that I hadn't listened to since high school. We forgot to trade back. And now we couldn't. You were taking my CD with you. I think that's when it finally hit me that you were gone. When the shock finally wore off. Sorry it took my CD to make me realize it.

I left your side then and moved to the edge of the hall. I sat on an empty bench where I still had an unobstructed view of your coffin, but could no longer see inside.

I didn't know I was crying until my cousin Sandy sat down next to me and handed me a tissue. It was maybe the weirdest crying I've ever done. I didn't make a sound. I didn't have any of those hiccupy breath moments. The tears just came. They ran down my face and fell into the neckline of my hoodie and they wouldn't stop. I used the tissue to catch some of them, but they just kept coming.

Sandy didn't say anything and I was grateful.

I couldn't put anything into words. You were gone. And for something stupid. Drunk driving. How many afterschool specials did we grow up with that warned against that? How many people had we known who'd died in drunk accidents? And you...you were just another statistic.

James told a story the next summer, something from when you guys were kids. Is that the moment where you realized that your life could be thrown away, where you started to think it wouldn't matter?

Is that the kind of moment that makes or breaks us? What makes those moments for village kids? Is it unavoidable, if our parents are screwed up, we're pretty much fucked from the beginning? Was Jeremy's death inevitable because of his parents or the village or the drinking? Is Catherine's son safe because she's sober? Is Catherine's younger brother safe because she's

spent most of his life looking out for him? Is someone's screwed up fate decided the moment her brother kills himself? What makes one person's life spiral down while the other sister grows up to have a fairly normal, healthy life? Was that brother's short life decided the moment his father died in a sno-go accident?

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The Poem

“What are you doing?” I asked as we sat in the main hall. The campers were at the sandbar for the afternoon. You hadn't been needed to drive any of the boats and I was caught up on the camp's paperwork and wasn't needed in the kitchen.

You tapped your pen against a piece of white paper. “Writing a poem.”

“A poem?” I didn't mean to sound so shocked, but I really was. Guys from Everett did not write poetry. Or if they did, no one admitted to it. Anyone else probably would've said something like lyrics, or brushed it off. But you said it, like it was the most natural thing in the world that you would be writing a poem.

Maybe you only told me because we were at camp and it was like a place out of time, where the real world didn't intrude, and maybe even didn't exist. A place where we could pretend our reality in the village was a dream, distant and faded.

Maybe you told me because you felt comfortable sharing that side of you. Maybe you told me because you knew I wouldn't laugh.

“Yeah. Wanna see it?” you asked. You did that head toss/twitch thing that guys did in the mid-2000s, when they'd let their hair grow long enough to fall into their eyes. Some guys' hair would end up staying off to the side. Your hair was super straight and it always slid right back into place.

“Yeah, of course,” I said. I didn’t want to make a huge deal out of it, or make you turn shy about it, but it was important to me. It meant something, that you trusted me enough to share your writing, your poetry.

You pushed the paper towards me. I reached for it, my arm sticking to the table cloth. I looked and the red checker plaid of the tablecloth covered my forearm. The bug dope I wore had taken off the plastic finish and transferred the pattern. I rubbed at it as I read your poem.

It was your poem, your words, about your life. It was almost Eminem-esque in its honesty about messed up childhoods and adult addictions, which I guess makes sense, given your musical tastes.

I’d been writing in my journal while you’d been writing your poem. You snagged my notepad and flipped to one of the last pages. You wrote down the poem for me, so I’d have a copy.

I worried that you’d try to read my journal, but you didn’t, just flipped it back to its empty front page and slid the notepad back to me. I was grateful – even though you’d shared your writing with me, you didn’t expect me to reciprocate, didn’t get upset with me that I kept my writing to myself.

Maybe you didn’t care enough to read my journal. Maybe you were waiting for me to trust you in the same way. Maybe you were just a more open person than I was. Maybe you realized that you’d been more honest in your one page of poetry than I’d been in thirty pages of journaling that recounted every day’s events and none of my own emotions or thoughts.

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The Funeral

I’ve been to enough funerals that they tend to blend together.

I don't remember where I sat for your funeral. Most of the time, I end up sitting on the floor, as does everyone under the age of thirty or forty. Sometimes I stand against the back wall, when whoever it is that sets up seating remembers to pull the benches out so people can stand behind them.

It's always a Catholic service. Your little sisters, Melanie and Paige, and your nephew, Caleb, probably brought the gifts up to the front. Your older sister Tanya might have read one of the scripture passages. At some of the funerals, the person reading has trouble getting through the passage and another family member will usually end up finishing it for them. I don't remember if that happened at your funeral. Your aunts probably prepared you for the final viewing. Brother Bob used to speak at funerals when we were kids, before he moved to a different village. Now it's either a Father who's already in Everett, or one of the elders, like Agnes, who give the funeral mass and spreads the incense and holy water. I don't remember who spoke at yours, at least for that part.

I remember the eulogy. Not what was said, but I know Kerry spoke. And it was good. You would have liked it. She was one of the few other people that knew you in a different capacity, seeing as how your sister was best friends with her daughter and they took both Melanie and you on a couple of different family vacations, like Disney World. The picture on the front of your funeral program was from your trip to England, when you guys flew out to watch Kerry's daughter graduate from college.

I collect funeral programs. There are always lots of pictures, sometimes in color, sometimes not if the family had to make more programs at the last minute. Most of them end up in a pile in my closet. My mom has a stack in a desk drawer, next to all the bank statements she's saved.

Jeremy's program is on my wall. I meant to put yours there too, along with some of the photos from camp, but I just couldn't do it right away, and after a while, it was easier to not put it up. To not remember.

I do remember that as I sat through your funeral, and the potlatch later that night, I hated James. It had been too expensive for him to travel to Everett for your funeral, which left me as the only person there that knew the camp version of you. The sober, fun-loving, easy-laughing version. I'd listened to people talking about you all week, and almost all of their stories revolved around you partying or drinking.

It was like I was mourning a completely different person and I couldn't talk about it to anyone. No one who was there that week knew that side of you. James should've been there. Instead, he was down in Oregon, probably sharing stories with the other counselors who'd been at camp with us, other people who knew you as the guy who climbed onto the washhouse roof, as the guy who wrote poetry, who loved those stupid seven musical notes, who jumped right into the water fight with your own arsenal of water balloons. James got to share all those memories with other people.

And I was alone, in a room full of people who knew the worst version of you, while I missed the best version.

So I hated James for not being there. I suppose, really, I hated you, but it was easier to be mad at someone tangible as opposed to being angry with your ghost.

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The Boat Ride

"Best boat ever," I said, as I climbed over the campers' bags to get to the front passenger seat.

“Yup,” you said. You patted the steering wheel and grinned at me.

My mom called it the red convertible boat. She loved it, but she was in the tan boat with James, acting as crowd control for the campers, leaving you and me to drive the red boat with the luggage back to Everett so Roger could work on it this winter. Well, you were driving. Me, I was just along for the ride. I probably should have been in the other boat, probably should've helped my mom keep the twenty nine- and ten-year-olds occupied for the three-hour drive back to Everett, but I wasn't about to pass up this chance. Who knew what it would be like once we were in Everett, once we were in the real world. This might have been our last chance to hang out, to talk.

The sun glinted off the water, a beautiful day to be out in an open boat. There were only two chairs – white, small, and cushioned, without headrests – and they looked like they'd come from a 1960s Mustang convertible, which might have helped my mom decide on the boat's nickname. I pulled my sunglasses off the top of my head and rolled my short sleeves up, tucking them under my sleeveless life jacket. Seventy-five degrees in July. It might have been my last chance to improve my summer tan and I wanted to take full advantage of it.

You pulled away from the dock and turned the engine on low, driving us out towards the middle of the river before stopping. We drifted downriver as we waited for James to get his boat ready and to pull out in front of us.

Once James got started, you steered the boat into his wake and pushed the throttle forward. The boat started bouncing up and down on the river.

“Just got to get up on step,” you explained. The boat continued to bounce as you tried to get going fast enough that the boat would cut smoothly through the water rather than ride on top.

It took a minute or two before you said, “Maybe something's wrong with the engine.”

I imagined cutting our awesome convertible boat ride short, radioing James that there was something wrong with the engine, having to return the boat to camp and crowd into James's boat with a bunch of little kids exhausted from a week of camp but possibly hyped up on sugar and Gatorade.

We both looked back at the engine. And realized it wasn't all the way in the water. You'd forgotten to lower it once we were away from the bank.

You pushed the button on the throttle, the motor sank into the water, and the boat evened out. We sped up enough to skip over the waves created by James's wake and pulled up so we were driving with him instead of following him.

"Didn't happen?" I asked. I grinned at you, not worried about offending you or damaging your male ego. Comfortable enough to tease you about your mistake.

"What didn't?" you asked.

I leaned back in my chair, my life vest collar high and stiff enough to support my head.

"So, you're really going to Oregon after this?" I asked. You'd talked about the possibility over the last couple of weeks at camp, but I'd thought it was more what-if than reality.

"Yeah, I'll go back to camp with James tonight and leave with the rest of the staff tomorrow out of Bremerton."

"What're you going to do?"

"Just visit for awhile. See what happens. Something different, you know?"

I looked at you and nodded, even though you were focused on keeping up with James and probably didn't see me. I thought about how I'd escaped Everett and gone to college for the last four years, been gone for eight if you counted boarding school. You'd stayed in Everett after graduating from high school. You'd taken the odd job now and then, but no steady paycheck, no

career, no plans. I thought about how I would be staying in Everett for the winter while I got my teaching certificate online, my first full year back in Everett since I'd been thirteen. I thought about what it would be like when you came back from Oregon, if we'd still be friends, or if it'd be like the last three weeks had never happened. I thought about the stories Catherine had told me, of what you were like when you drank, how acted weird.

“Yeah, something different. That sounds good,” I said.

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The Graveyard

My dad let us take his sno-go to the graveyard, thirty minutes away from Everett. I was kind of shocked at that, less so with the stipulation that only Catherine was allowed to drive. I hadn't driven a sno-go since middle school, my mom's old Bravo, so I guess it made sense.

Amy chipped her tooth once, driving over a bump on a trail. I've been paranoid about that ever since. I clenched my teeth for the whole drive. It gave me something to concentrate on, something other than the fact that we were following your body.

We parked the sno-go on the frozen river at the bottom of the middle hill. Most people were parked over by the third hill, where you'd be buried, but others had parked by the first hill, and there were two other sno-gos in front of the middle hill. I guess some people had the same idea as us.

Catherine and I climbed up the middle hill's bank, to the area where our family was buried, and stopped to say hi to Jeremy. We'd put up his headstone earlier that summer, two years after he'd died.

Catherine knelt and brushed snow off the headstone. Auntie Janet and Uncle Michael had chosen one where they could include a picture of Jeremy, engraved into the stone. I'm not sure

what kind of headstone you have. I haven't been up to the graveyard in years, maybe even since we buried you. I know they built the cross and carved your name on it, and one of your friends hauled that to the graveyard while your dad or your uncle pulled the sled with the coffin.

A couple of people had walked over from the other hills to yours so the trail was easy enough to follow. Everyone was gathered at the far edge of the third hill. You loved the third hill at Bible Camp, so maybe it was fitting that you'd be buried on the third hill at the graveyard. Your final resting place and all that.

Kerry brought flowers to the graveyard. A bunch of pink roses. I'd seen something like that on TV, but I'd never done it before. I threw one into your grave, before they started filling the hole back up with dirt. I didn't think it would, but the gesture really did add a sense of finality.

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The Return

When you came back from Oregon that fall, it didn't take long for the village life to suck you back in. Whatever clean living you'd had for the last six weeks, whatever sobriety or happiness, I guess it didn't last.

Amy and I picked you up while we were driving through downtown. You climbed into the backseat of my mom's SUV and had trouble figuring out how your legs were supposed to fit. I guess when you're drunk, everything's a puzzle.

"Hey," you said, dragging out the vowel sound. You laughed and it was almost like the laugh I'd heard at camp. Almost.

“What’s up?” I asked. I smiled at you in the rearview mirror. Even if no one else in town realized we were friends, and even if we really weren’t once we’d left camp and returned to the real world, I remembered the weeks at camp. I still thought of us as friends.

“So, can you guys buy for me?”

You slumped into the backseat, stretched across it. Your head rested against the passenger side back door, your feet tangled up in the space behind me. Gravity was not your friend.

I knew you were on the No Buy list at the Liquor Store. Even though there was a sign at the Liq that explained the law about selling to underage kids, the one cop in town didn’t really get involved. Instead, the Liquor Store just added you to their list of names. I think it was a long list.

But I didn’t think about that back then. I was twenty-one and stupid, and you were already drunk. It didn’t matter to me, I didn’t think about things like consequences. I guess you didn’t either, seeing as how you were in the position that you had to have others buy for you, even though you were twenty-three. I didn’t think about the fact that you’d managed to stay sober almost the entire summer. Amy and I agreed.

Amy bought the bottle. We found out later, the spring after you’d died, as I fixed a girl’s hair for prom, that we’d really bought the bottle for her.

You weren’t even around anymore. It’s not like I could blame you for making me implicit in buying for a minor. Instead, I got mad at her, like she’d disillusioned me or something. Looking back, I know who was really at fault. That I couldn’t be mad at her or even at you.

I should've known. But I hadn't thought about it. We just bought you the bottle. We always bought you the bottle.

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The Final Lesson

If you were waiting for the happy ending, our lives don't seem to come with one, do they?

That winter, as I thought about the way we grew up in the village, as I cried in the hall, as we buried you, your death became a puzzle piece that helped me figure out my crisis of faith. There had to be some kind of end game, some kind of plan involved. This many deaths and tragedies, they had to add up to something. They couldn't be for nothing, there had to be a reason. If I didn't believe, where did that leave me? I had to believe. I needed to.

But I was never again going to be caught off guard by a phone call.

Because your death taught me something else, not just about faith. I learned that nothing is certain. Everyone's at risk. I lost that element of surprise that makes people say, "Oh my God, what happened?" or that pushes people into the denial stage of grief. I expect it now. It's never going to sneak up on me again or surprise me at two in the morning. There's no shock left. I'm ready for that late night phone call, that question, "Did you hear what happened to..." It'll come for everyone eventually.

Some people live a little closer to it than others. Like you and Jeremy, recklessly playing with your lives like no one cares, or maybe like you don't care that people do. The people that talk about suicide like you did so it's not surprising if they go through with it or just do stupid shit while drunk until it happens. Suicide in stages.

I learned my lesson.

I don't know if I should thank you for that or not. Bad news doesn't hurt like it did when I was in my early 20s, when I made friends without thinking things like what if and what happens when.

I like that it doesn't hurt.

LIGHT EXPECTATIONS

Is it really dark there all the time? Is it light twenty-four hours a day? Are there really thirty days of night? These are the common questions when people find out I'm from Alaska.

It's not exactly true, at least not at Everett's latitude. There are about four hours of daylight in the middle of winter, through December and January. In the summer, it actually is the land of the midnight sun.

A Princeton friend from Massachusetts came to visit me after our junior year. We did the tourist activities for a couple of days – Denali, white water rafting down the Nenana River, driving from Anchorage to Fairbanks – before going to Everett. Everett's tourism industry is pretty much nonexistent, but she had never experienced nighttime sunlight. One night, we planned to stay outside and read until it got dark. We relaxed in camp chairs and our hoodies smelled like campfire smoke for days afterwards. We went to bed at five AM when we realized it wasn't ever going to get dark enough to prevent us from reading.

People ask how I sleep during the summer when the sun never truly sets. The light doesn't bother me. I feel kind of like a cat. I enjoy sleeping in the geometric shape of light as it floats through the window at three AM. A bedroom and curtains block out some light, but we also spent a month every summer at camp, sleeping in white canvas tents that did absolutely nothing to provide an illusion of night. Tarps stretched across the top of the tents to keep out the rain – one summer, someone tried to use a black tarp on one of the tents. Nighttime daylight still filtered in through the sides.

When we've grown up with it, it's what we know, what we're used to. My mom, coming from Pennsylvania, had a harder time adjusting. For the first twenty years that she lived in Alaska, she covered her bedroom windows with tinfoil as part of her spring time ritual. Now, she sleeps through it fine.



I'm a night owl. Whether it's just part of who I am, or a product of growing up under summer's midnight sun, I don't know. But I love the night hours, whether it's four AM and dark in November or four AM and bright out in June. I like to be awake.

It's fairly common. A lot of village kids fall into strange sleep patterns in the summer. It's easy to stay outside and play basketball until two AM when it never gets too dark to see the hoop. Even as adults, it's warm and light so we don't notice the time passing when we sit outside by campfires until one in the morning.

I liked the night best at camp, in the summer. At four AM, everything was still, quiet. Once they turned the generator off at eleven, the buzz of electricity disappeared. The kids were silent, when normally their laughter and voices and noise carried throughout the small camp. Even the mosquitos were asleep. I could sit out on the bank, watch the mirror-smooth river, and breathe. Think. We were sixty miles from any other villages. The rest of the eighty-five campers and staff were asleep. It was just me, alone in the world.



My last four years in Everett, I taught in a classroom without windows. I called it The Cave.

It was dark when I got to school in the morning and the sun was long gone by the time I left in the evening. The boarding school had one dormitory – boys lived on the second floor, girls

on the third. I worked in the stairwell on the weekends, like a proctor, making sure the students didn't accidentally wander onto the wrong floor. It was another lightless job.

I didn't get depressed or experience that SAD disease. But I missed the winter sunlight. It's almost brighter then. The snow reflects light from all directions. A long time ago, Alaskan Natives wore snow goggles, masks with eye slits that protected the eyes not only from the sunlight above, but also below.

I ripped up an outdated calendar of Ireland and taped the pictures to the back wall. Pictures from an Alaskan calendar bordered the side whiteboard. Large two-dollar plastic wall hangings depicting beach scenes hung on the front and back walls. When the students commented on the lack of windows, I argued that we did have windows and ours were even better than normal ones. Out the back window, we had Ireland. To the north, Alaska, and we were surrounded by beaches. I don't think they bought into that mentality, but I needed to believe it, even if they didn't.

My last year in Everett, as I imagined what graduate school in Florida would be like, I pictured the sun. I couldn't wait to have access to sunlight, even in the middle of winter. I pictured light, flooding my room. I pictured windows.



My mom had ninety-seven houseplants when I was a kid. I would count them when it was my turn to water them. I hated my turn. They survived through the dark months, soaked in the sunlight during the summer months. When I was in third grade and the temperature dropped into the negative sixties and our heat stopped working, my mom sent my foster sister and me to spend the week with a teacher who had a woodstove while my mom stayed in the house and used space heaters to keep it warm enough for her plants to survive.

The shamrock plants in the living room told me when it was bedtime. Their leaves scrunched closed every night. I didn't have to be old enough to read a clock to know when it was time for bed. When I was young, I could be ridiculously stubborn, so this plant helped keep the peace between my mother and me. I couldn't argue about bedtime in the summer, even if it was still light out, and my mom couldn't send me to bed at 5:30 in the winter if I was getting on her last nerve.



Florida. The Sunshine State.

Liars.

I moved to Florida in August of 2012. I drove straight from the airport to orientation to my hotel room and crashed out for five hours. When I woke up at 10:30 PM, I wandered downstairs and asked the girl at the front desk what there was to do. I'm not exactly sure what I was picturing – maybe a movie theater or a bar or place to eat. She was confused. It was 10:30 – places were closing, winding down. People were going to sleep.

It was already dark out. August in Alaska, it's light out until one or two in the morning. I'd forgotten that the rest of the world had regulated daylight hours.

And then I realized it was raining, because that's what Florida does.

It rained almost every day in the fall.

Nobody told me this.

I moved into my apartment/dorm room on my second day in Florida. Just like I imagined, even with the clouds, it was filled with natural light. I loved my window. It was my new favorite thing. I closed my eyes as I stood in the light and knew it was going to be a great winter.

I opened my eyes. And saw straight into the room across the quad. My window faced a wall of similar windows. Seven floors of windows. Seven floors of people.

Students rolled their belonging through the quad, headed for the front door so they could move into their rooms. I could hear them as they yelled to others across the street, across the quad, to others who lugged suitcases and carried bookshelves. I could hear music playing from the UCF arena next door. Cars honked on the street as parents tried to get the best and closest parking spaces.

There were people. Everywhere. I closed the blinds.

WHY I STAY

Out of the thousand people in my undergraduate Class of 2004 at Princeton, only four of us were Native. Two months into my freshman year, the campus newspaper ran a series of articles about minorities on campus and interviewed me and Adele, an Indian who'd grown up on a reservation in New Mexico.

“What do you miss most when you're away from home?” the reporter asked.

I had to think about it for a moment, but then I answered, “The community.” Adele nodded in agreement.

The reporter was confused. “What do you mean by that?”

Her question confused me. The idea of community was such an intrinsic part of my life, I realized I had no words to describe it. And although two thousand miles separated our hometowns, when I looked at Adele, I could tell she knew exactly what I was talking about and was similarly unable to explain the concept.

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A knock on my door woke me at noon-thirty on a Saturday in October 2007. The door wasn't locked, so whoever it was opened the door and asked if anyone was home. I gave some kind of answer. I don't wake up speaking intelligently.

“Your smokehouse is on fire,” he said. I couldn't see the front door from my bedroom and I never did find out who it was.

“Okay. I'll call Pearson.” That response probably didn't make a lot of sense to him, but I was awake, so he left.

My landlord, Pearson, the high school English teacher, had been smoking salmon with Bradley, the science teacher, last night. Maybe some flames had escaped from the half-barrel stove inside the 8x8 smokehouse that Pearson had never bothered to move to his property, one road over.

I pulled on the first hoodie I could find (gray, so at least it didn't clash with my neon pink sleep pants, although if I'd known that half the community would end up seeing me in my pajamas, I might have taken the time to put on jeans) and I stepped out onto the front porch. The smokehouse wasn't just on fire, it was going up in flames. Engulfed. Blazing. Flames were coming through the roof. The smell of smoke was heavy in the air even though the plume rose straight up without any wind that day.

I ran back inside and called my mom to get Pearson's number. She gave it to me and said she was on her way over.

There was no answer at Pearson's house, so I left a message. My tone was even as I said, "Pearson. Smokehouse. Burning down." My brevity and delivery would make it the quote of the story when Pearson and Bradley later told people what'd happened. Especially since I called Bradley right after and told his wife, Leslie. She then called Pearson and left a somewhat more hysterical message.

I called 911. It was busy. I wasn't even sure if that was the right number. For medical emergencies, we were supposed to call the clinic, and for the cop, we were supposed to call his regular office number. I thought 911 was supposed to be for fires.

Since I was on my own, I looked behind the bathroom and bedroom doors for the fire extinguisher, but couldn't find it. I realized later that even though I'd been in that house for two years, the places I checked were where the fire extinguishers were kept at my mom's house. In

my house, they were on the bedroom wall and behind the TV. I like to think that I keep a level head in a crisis, but maybe I wasn't as calm as I hoped.

I have no idea what I planned to do with a fire extinguisher. I'd never used one, but the instructions had always seemed simple enough during fire safety week in grade school and people easily used them on TV. Even if I'd found it, the fire was far beyond fire-extinguisher-level.

I slipped on some shoes and went back to the porch. My mom and two of my sisters were walking down the driveway, watching the fire destroy what had been a rather nice smokehouse.

They joined me on the porch and I called 911 again. It rang as Mr. Prescott pulled into the driveway. I hung up the phone. In addition to having been my fourth grade teacher, he was also in charge of the volunteer fire department.

He spoke into a handheld radio as he got out of his truck. "It's a smokehouse, no people in danger." I found out later that Maggie, the neighbor between mine and my mom's house, had called 911, which was probably why I'd gotten a busy signal.

The neon green fire truck showed up next.

"Carlee, where's your camera?" my mom asked as Allen, the volunteer fire fighter who ran the local radio station, unrolled the hose from the truck.

"What? No!"

She rolled her eyes at my lack of understanding of this as an event. She turned to my fifteen-year-old sister. "Alyssa, go get my camera."

"Alyssa, you stay right here. We don't need pictures."

"Marshmallows?" my mom asked.

"Shut up."

The town fire siren went off. It normally gets tested with three rings every Friday at noon. It went off four times to indicate an actual fire, loud enough to be heard from either end of town (which didn't require a lot of volume in a town only three miles long).

The phone rang from my hoodie pocket.

"Hello?"

"What're you doing?" my dad asked.

"Um. Watching the smokehouse in my yard burn down."

"So it was you?"

"No. I mean, yeah, the alarm went off because of the smokehouse, but it wasn't me, I swear. It was Pearson."

He laughed and hung up. My entire life, my dad's never said bye at the end of a phone conversation. Sometimes, it takes me a sentence or two to realize he's no longer on the other end of the line.

Bradley and Leslie showed up next, Pearson right after them. Leslie stood on the porch with us while Bradley and Pearson talked to Mr. Prescott.

There was a rocking chair that looked like it had been sitting outside since the seventies, the wood weathered and gray. The chair had been under the house when Pearson bought it, but he'd never cleaned out that space. Bradley pulled out the chair and sat down to watch the excitement.

Over the next half hour, it seemed like half the town stopped by to see if any help was needed. Once they realized it wasn't an emergency, most stayed to watch and hang out in my yard and talk to everyone else who stopped to help and stayed to socialize.

Allen sprayed the lost-cause smokehouse as well as the trees in the area to make sure the fire didn't spread. Maggie had joined us on the porch and I'm sure she appreciated that part. The smokehouse was technically in my yard, but closer to her house than mine.

Rick, my friend's dad, wandered into the driveway. "Carlee, what'd you do?"

"Not even," I said and pointed to Pearson and Bradley.

I ran the football pool with my mom, and Rick was just the first of the participants to stop by. Most of them went by her house on Saturdays to pick up the spreadsheet.

When the new cop had started in Everett earlier that fall, my mom let him know that we ran a slightly illegal gambling pool. He'd waved her off and said he had more important things to worry about. (Apparently, this did not include underage drinking or domestic violence, but did include stopping me for speeding. Well, attempting to stop me for speeding. I had my loud music on in the car, the back window was caked with snow and ice, and I didn't realize he was following me with lights and siren blaring until I stopped at the store two miles down the main road. Which is how I ended up with the longest police chase Everett had ever seen. Possibly the only police chase.)

The eventful afternoon died down as Allen and a couple of other guys collapsed the smokehouse shell and laid out all the wood. Allen wet it down again to make sure it didn't flare back up.

As Allen spread out the wreckage, he held up a salmon strip, burned completely black. "Anyone hungry?"

Allen passed it to Bradley, still in the rocking chair.

That was the relaxing fire, the easy one. No danger, no real property damage, but big or small, the community was there to help, just like it always is.

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My earliest memories are of fire. I was three and Mr. Prescott's twins, Brenda and Martin, were babysitting. The memories aren't connected like movies. More like snapshots.

They let me jump on the bed, something my mom never allowed. Brenda touched the mattress and it was hot.

We ran downstairs. Brenda stopped in the kitchen to call the fire department.

Martin and I ran up the driveway. I wore his red, puffy, down winter jacket because it was March and it was cold. The sleeves flapped around my legs.

We went to the house across the street and Martin called my mom.

The night of my mom's fire, Everett's volunteer fire department responded, but the water froze and the truck wouldn't work. At that time, the Air Force Base built during the Cold War was still operational, so their fire department was called in.

It was Spring Carnival weekend, the biggest event in Everett every year. People came from other villages and even from Fairbanks. The dog sled races were the main event, but there were also snowshoe races, ski races, an ice picking contest, a pop scramble for kids and a beer scramble for adults. The only bar in town hosted a dance on Friday and Saturday nights and it was always packed. It was everyone's chance to dance and drink and socialize with people they didn't see often.

News of the fire hit the bar after midnight. Maybe they heard the town siren. I don't know if it was around back then. Maybe someone called the bar. Maybe some of the volunteer firefighters were at the bar. My mom says everyone from the bar showed up at the house on what was, essentially, the biggest party night in Everett. The fire was in the upstairs bedroom, so people ran into the house and moved furniture and bookcases filled with books and VHS tapes

out to the shed. In a couple of days, people would be back to help wipe down every book and tape and clean every surface and wall downstairs and move the furniture back.

My mom's bedroom has a glass sliding door. Maybe the people who built the house planned to add an upstairs deck and never got around to it. But the firefighters couldn't see it, so they carried the burning mattress down the stairs and dumped it out the sliding glass door on that level. Along the way, the mattress lit the carpet, couches, and curtains on fire.

My family's always had a problem with fire. I read a book series in middle school where the family members were destined to die by fire. As a kid, I worried that my family was the same way.

My dad was the oldest in his family. When he was seven, a resulting fire killed his little sisters, Betty and Clara, who got trapped in the bedroom.

There was another brother, Darryl, who died in a fire when he was a senior in high school. The oil stove that heated his house had only three legs and a coffee can held up the fourth corner. Auntie Janet says the stove would shake when it really got going and they think it tipped over. I'd only ever seen pictures of him on my dad's wall.

My mom and I had been lucky. Insurance paid for the second floor to be repaired and my mom bought new couches and carpet and curtains. I think it was time to replace the 70s-orange carpet anyway.

I don't know why there were so many fires in my family. In Everett, as a whole, there are maybe two or three fires every five years or so. Most of the time, no one gets hurt. Sometimes the fires are caused by wood stoves because that's how a lot of people heat their houses, but sometimes, it's just accidents. A lot of people live their whole lives unaffected by fire. Maybe my family is just unlucky. Maybe we're cursed.

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When the town siren went off on Wednesday afternoon in May 2011, I checked the clock automatically, even though I knew it wasn't noon on a Friday. Two o'clock. Not a test.

I tried to call my dad first. If something was happening, he usually knew about it. There was no answer, but he might have been at work. He still spent a lot of days down at the airport, though he was supposed to be near retirement and only worked two days a week. All flights downriver had to stop in Everett, so he liked being there to see people, even if he wasn't loading bags or cargo onto the planes.

I called Catherine next, but her line was busy.

I left my twelve US History students taking their final and went outside, looking to the northeast. Smoke rose into the air. There was only one road in town that went back that far into the woods. My fingers grew cold with fear.

The second time I called Catherine, she answered right away.

"It's your dad's house," she said. I think my heart and my breath stopped at the same time.

"Where is he?"

"He's fine. He was over at Duncan's."

"Do they know what happened?"

"I heard it started from the cookstove for his dogs."

My dad was a dog musher and kept his dog team behind his house. He cooked a mixture of dry dog food, water, and meat for them every day in a fifty-gallon barrel with the top cut off. He'd started the fire under the barrel and then gone to get something from his friend's house. The

ground was covered in dried grass and leaves. The fire started at the cooking barrel, but the wind spread it quickly towards the house.

I went back outside to stare at the smoke. I had trouble wrapping my mind around the idea that the smoke rising in the air was the leftovers of everything that had been in my dad's house.

Back in my classroom, I called my mom to make sure she knew. She'd been about to call me. She seemed to be in as much shock as I was.

At 2:30, the principal, Jen, called and offered to watch my class if I needed to leave. I said I'd wait until my students were finished with their final and leave during study hall. I probably should have taken her up on her offer. The last of my students' finals offered an excuse, but truthfully, I wasn't ready to go up there yet. He lived on a dead end street and I feared I'd be more hindrance than help. What if there was nothing that I could do and I just stood there, maybe even got in the way?

Instead, I graded the finals from earlier classes and told myself that I had to get this done so I wouldn't have to come back to my classroom later that night to finish the grading.

At 3:15, Jen came over to watch my study hall class. Monica was one of my students for that class, so I waited till she got there.

"Carlee, I heard it was your dad's house," she said as soon as she came through the door.

I nodded. "I'm going up there right now. Did you want to come with me?" She'd put her polka dot book bag down on the chair by the door, but picked it right back up.

Monica was living with me again. She was a lot calmer as a senior than she'd been as a sophomore. She'd quit drinking, had the same boyfriend she'd been with since January, and would graduate in two days, third in her class.

I pushed play on my iPod when we got in the car, an automatic action. Rise Against's "Help is on the Way," started playing, picking up from when I'd shut off the car that morning. It made me even less sure of what I'd be able to do once Monica and I got to the fire. The smoke rose black and strong and we drove towards it. On his road, there was a line of cars along one side. We parked behind the last car, rather than block the current one-lane.

The road turned right before my dad's house and it shielded me from actually seeing anything until we were right there. I thought I was prepared for the idea that his house was on fire, but it was nothing compared to actually seeing it. The house wasn't just on fire – it was gone. There were no walls, no garage, just a charcoaled black platform.

In the twenty years since he'd moved into that house, my dad hadn't changed anything. The couch had always been against the wall, opposite the entertainment console. He'd had a small table and two chairs to the right of the front door. There'd been a candy dish on the table and a small calendar in the shape of a triangle, from 1999. Even the smell was automatically recognizable any time I'd entered his house, a mixture of moose meat and pepper and Old Spice.

The space above and around the TV in his living room was covered in pictures. Every school year photo my sisters and I had ever taken. A couple of his parents from the seventies. His nieces and nephews. My kindergarten graduation. My older sister playing baseball.

Since the fire, my mom's goal has been to replace those photos, to copy some of our pictures so they'll be ready when he moves into his new house. She has the school photos, but my dad had taken a lot of his own over the years. He'd snapped one every fall, before I left for boarding school or college. He'd had his camera at my younger sister's first basketball game and he'd taken a picture at her final volleyball game. Growing up, there'd been a lot of events where I'd taken it for granted that he'd be there with his camera.

All of that was gone.

The neighbor's cabin was now visible, past the emptiness where my dad's house had been, and the firefighters hosed it down. The wind had spread the fire from my dad's house to the neighbor's log cabin and there was a black scorch mark down the side and a hole in the roof.

There had been three sheds in my dad's yard. Two of them were gone, the one in front of the house and the one between his house and the neighbor's.

At least fifty people were in his yard. Some moved tools and other random things he'd had in his yard away from the fire. Some stood in small groups and waited to see if they'd be needed. Tim, the volunteer firefighter, and a couple of others were near a large, makeshift pool. I found out later that the fire hydrant, installed the previous summer, hadn't worked. When the fire department had arrived, the fire was still small in the grass lake by the dog yard, but by the time they were able to get any water running, it had spread to the house.

A couple of guys loaded the last of my dad's dogs into the back of a truck and moved them away from the fire. My dad stood in the space where his boat had been, one of the first things that had been moved. He looked lost, or confused, like he expected to blink and everything would be back the way it had been three hours ago.

I hugged him when I reached him. "Hey," I said.

I felt him nod and he held on for a moment more before he let go and hugged Monica.

We stood facing the activity.

Someone called him over then to check on something at the edge of the charcoaled platform. I watched him walk away and my fears about a family destined to die by fire came back to me. I wondered if he was thinking about his brothers and sisters, like I was. It wasn't the kind of thing I could ask, but it had to have crossed his mind. I know other people in the

community thought about it. They say our family's cursed. Guess it's not just my theory anymore.

A couple of the guys walked a freezer further away from the gutted garage. One of the edges and the corner had melted. My dad came back over and stood next to me as his cousin, Elijah, drove a forklift into the driveway. The guys who'd been walking the freezer edged it onto the tines.

Molly, the lady who worked at one of the only two stores in town, came over. "Elijah's taking that over to my house. I have an empty freezer. I'll move whatever can be saved."

"Do you need help?" I asked. I disliked having nothing to do and not knowing how to help those who were busy.

"Sure."

She stood with my dad, Monica, and me for a minute, staring at the house. "Did you get your stash?" Molly asked.

He smiled at that and nodded. "Ran in before the fire really got going."

I was confused at the time – the way Molly said it, it made my dad sound like some kind of drug dealer. I later found out that he'd never had a bank account. He'd kept all his money and his paychecks in a Ziploc baggie in his bedroom. Molly'd known about it, since she'd cashed his paychecks at the store.

At Molly's house, the three of us transferred the contents from the broken freezer to the one under the eaves of Molly's garage. We washed the smell of burnt plastic off our hands in Molly's bathroom before leaving.

I dropped Monica at my house and went to Catherine's. She had a five-month-old son, so she hadn't been able to go help with the fire, but she had a container of sandwiches she wanted me to take.

There weren't a lot of people left at my dad's house, or the fire, or whatever that place was, now that there was no longer a house there. The pool of water sat on the side of the road and Allen, the fire chief, had arranged for people to take shifts at the site that night to make sure it didn't flare up again.

My dad and Duncan looked through the one shed left standing. There wasn't much in it – some life jackets, a couple of boat paddles, four blue and green five-gallon buckets. All of his hunting gear and guns and ammo had been in the side shed. He'd just packed away his winter clothing in the front shed, including the white parka with the wolverine ruff that he'd worn every time he raced. All of his dog food had been in the garage.

Later that night, when a reporter from Fairbanks called me about running a story and where to send donations, I mentioned those things. Other dog mushers across the state called pet food stores in Fairbanks and arranged to have dog food sent out to Everett. People from nearby villages and some from across the state that he'd gone to boarding school with almost fifty years ago sent donations and items that could be used at the inevitable raffle fundraiser. The airline my dad worked for shipped all the donations free of charge.

In a year, my dad will start to rebuild and he'll hire one of the carpenters in town to be in charge of the project, but every time I will drive to the lot to see how construction is going or to drop off food or cookies, there will be at least two or three others who have stopped by, picked up a tool belt, and started working. *Witness* is one of my mom's favorite movies and while it won't be exactly like the building-a-barn scene, it's what I will think of every time.

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Friday morning, I stopped at the Coffee Shop on my way to work. I parked in front of the window, so Mindy could see my car and start my caramel white mocha before I got inside. I grabbed a flier off the passenger seat. There's a coffee stand in Fairbanks that makes really great white mochas, but Mindy's are better, even if they're not, because it means I'm home and someone knows me well enough to have my coffee order memorized.

"Hey, Mindy." I wiggled the doorknob as I closed the door to make sure the latch didn't get stuck.

"Good morning. How's your dad?"

I sat on the stool in front of the kitchen island. The Coffee Shop was the small, one-story house Mindy had grown up in. She'd renovated the living room and bedrooms to make more space for people to sit and drink coffee or eat lunch, but the kitchen still looked like a regular kitchen, a small oven, one short counter, a sink, and a fridge. Lunch on Fridays was always pizza and I could smell the dough she'd already started preparing.

"He's okay. He's going to stay with Duncan until he can find a place to rent."

"Do you need any help with the raffle?" she asked, automatically assuming that there would be one. Mindy was one of the people who could be counted on to be at every raffle and to help organize and sort the items that people donated.

"That would be great. Deciding what items go in each raffle is still the part that confuses me. Can I put a flier on the bulletin board?"

"Just leave it on the counter, more people will see it."

"Alright, thanks."

She put a white chocolate-covered coffee bean on top of my cup and passed it to me.

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The next night, Monica and I were at the hall by 6:30 to set up for the raffle and cakewalk. We cleared the stage in the corner for the donated items that we would raffle off in lots. Off to one side of the large room, we taped numbers to the floor and made sure to leave enough space that people would be able to move around the circle until the music stopped and someone won a cake. Though I'd helped at raffles before, I'd never been in charge of one like I was supposed to be that night. I forgot to bring start up cash and drinks to sell concession-style, I didn't know how to divide up the items that people would donate over the course of the night, and though I had made a playlist for the cakewalk, I'd forgotten my portable speakers.

But like everything else involving the fire, plenty of people offered to help. Two of the school secretaries and my mom kept track of who donated which items for the raffle and baked goods for the cakewalk. One of the people who lived down the street from my dad made change for people, while my neighbor, Maggie, counted and organized the money. The lunch lady and her two daughters split the raffle tickets into strips of twenty. Mindy and two of my dad's cousins separated the donations into piles to be raffled off. The fifth grade teacher took over the cakewalk. My dad handled the coffee, like he does at every raffle or function at the hall. All I really needed to do was sell tickets.

"You want to help me?" I asked Monica as the hall began to get crowded.

"Sure. What do I do?"

"Go around the room with me. I'll handle the tickets, you handle the money?"

Monica nodded. As many raffles at which I've helped sell tickets, that night was the easiest. We went twice as fast since I didn't have to rip off tickets while juggling the money and trying to make change. Also, I am not an outgoing person, even with people I've known my

entire life. The more raffles I help with, the easier it is for me to smile and make quick small talk and interact with people over and over, but I will never be completely comfortable. Monica was better at it than me. Even though she wasn't from Everett, she'd gone to school there for four years and knew a lot of people. If anyone she didn't know asked who she was, she joked and said she was my kid, which we'd started telling people back when she lived with me her sophomore year.

Selling raffle tickets was exhausting. We were on our feet for hours, walking laps around the hall. The ceiling fans pushed some of the air around, but didn't do much to cool the room down as hundreds of people sat along the walls or at tables and chairs or stood by the coffee machine or walked around the cakewalk circle. Literally, half the town was in that room. There was no time for us to sit. As soon as one raffle finished, the next one started, and any in-between time was spent counting and turning in money.

Two hours in, someone gave us a couple of cold Dr. Peppers. It was the best thing I'd ever tasted, even if we only had time for a couple of gulps before the next raffle started. We left them on the table behind my mom and began our next round.

"What's in this raffle?" asked a woman in the corner.

"No idea," I said. I looked at Monica. She shrugged. Unless we were standing right at the table when Mindy put the items out, I rarely knew what was being raffled off.

"I'll take two tickets," the lady said.

At any raffle, the most tickets are always sold when there's a free roundtrip ticket between Everett and Fairbanks in the pile. Air travel is the only way in and out of town and with ticket prices nearing \$400, the chance to spend only \$20 on a ticket made for some pretty good math. Because my dad worked for the airline, they donated two tickets that night.

Near the end of the raffle, my dad came up to the microphone. He thanked people for helping out, at the fire and the raffle and the days in between. He had a paper in his hand, but he didn't read from it. Over the next two weeks, he would compile a list of everyone who had assisted him in some way. I typed and posted it at the two stores, the post office, the airport, and on Facebook.

It was Monica's second to last night in Everett. She'd graduated the night before and would be leaving Monday to go back to her mom's in Anchorage. She stayed with me and helped the entire night, never taking a break, never complaining. Though we had our problems over the two years she'd lived with me, my strongest memory of those years was that night when she helped.

We raised almost \$8500 that night. About ten people stayed to help us clean the hall after the raffle was over. We finished right before midnight.

The night of my dad's raffle, I thought about that interview my freshman year of college and my inability to explain the idea of community. I'd like to think that if the reporter had been there that night and asked that same question, I would have been able to articulate my answer. Or she might not have needed to ask, had she seen the people that filled the community hall and offered their support.