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AFTER THE RAINBOW

by

Rachel Hruza

A THESIS

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AFTER THE RAINBOW

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Advisor: Judith Slater

This thesis contains a multi-genre collection featuring fiction and memoir. It explores characterization through relationships by focusing on the external and internal forces that influence a person's connection to herself or another. Some pieces verge on the plane of magical realism while others are factually based. While most of this collection is serious in tone, the author hopes the reader will find joy in the small moments as well as the momentous.

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Introduction

Life is relationships. Whether with a partner, friend, family member, inanimate object, or even oneself, how a person reacts, both internally and externally, will reveal his true self. Writing is about describing life, interpreting and manipulating relationships so they are at least understandable, if not explainable, in some way. In a recent interview with Charlene Bauer in *ELLE* magazine,¹ Joyce Carol Oates describes the loss of her husband, Raymond Smith, editor of *The Ontario Review*, in 2008. While her experience of widowhood influenced a new book, she posits that there are relationships that are greater than the book, greater even than art itself. Reflecting on widowhood's effect on her life, she writes, "All this you have lost...The happiness of a domestic life, without which the small—even colossal—triumphs of a 'career' are shallow, mocking." Bauer goes on to quote from Oates' memoir, *A Widow's Story*, where Oates comments on the idea that writers can find solace in the lives they create on the page: "How I wish I could believe these words! Brave defiant words that claim, for the writer, a privileged life of meaning, significance, and value beyond that of mere 'life'—the claim that art is compensatory for the disappointments of life."

I cannot share Oates' loss. Having a happy marriage for forty-seven years is something I can only imagine at this point in my life; however, I do share some of her opinions on the writer's life, for without relationships there would be little to write about. I know that many writers, far more successful and experienced than me will disagree, but so far, my writing is inspired by those around me. While I do believe that art can replace

¹ Bauer, Charlene. "Every Day She Write the Book." *ELLE* 11 March 2011: 372-374. Print.

some feelings of sadness or joy in one's life, I don't believe art is ever greater than the people who create it or experience it.

Nevertheless, there is an innate sense within me that can only be quenched by the art of creating. Without it, I don't feel complete as a person. For these reasons, this collection, *After the Rainbow*, is written with the main purpose of life in mind: people and the relationships that matter most, either for a brief moment or an entire lifetime. People learn to live with some moments for the rest of their lives; others try to block them out. My goal with this collection was to expose those moments that define or redefine relationships. Several of the pieces, namely the short flash fiction pieces, include an element of mystery or balance on the edge of magical realism. Ever since I read Randall Kenan's *Let the Dead Bury their Dead*, I have been consumed by the imaginative plane of creation: namely, what is real—and what is not. I've always believed that creation is the most intimate form of communication. To create something is to show one's innermost thoughts, and therefore allow those thoughts to commune with other people. After reading Kenan's collection of short stories, particularly "Things of this World; or, Angels Unawares" where the main character is killed and only the reader knows of his loss—if the end of his life is classified as loss—I found myself wondering specifically about creation through mystical realism and the mysterious. What is real in his stories? What is real in mystery? And most of all, what is real in writing? As I wrote the pieces in this collection and pondered these questions, what resulted were three words: truth, loss, and character.

Kenan surprises the reader by incorporating a character's sense of confusion or mystification. In the story mentioned above, the main character, Mr. John Edgar, is struck

by what he finds in his back yard: “When he first saw the man Mr. John Edgar gave a barely audible *Huh*, almost a sigh as if he had been pushed in the chest by some invisible hand. He stood there staring, contemplating whether or not he did indeed see a Chinaman, or what looked to be a Chinaman, from the back, face down in the southwest corner of his yard.” By introducing confusion in Mr. John Edgar, Kenan insists that the reader experience the same sort of bewilderment. It is moments like this, where the reader is on the same level as the character and even the writer, who discovered the moment of confusion when creating it, that creation through writing and reading connect.

Other authors whose use of understated drama and subtle surprise has influenced my writing include Tobias Wolff and A.S. Byatt. Wolff’s playfulness with the truth within a story, particularly in “The Chain,”² affects the reader’s trust in each character. His ability to manipulate expectations within this story propels what should have been a small insignificant moment into a climactic event. Likewise, in “Raw Materials,”³ a story about a writer who teaches his students to avoid melodrama and falseness, Byatt surprises the reader with a violent and shocking ending that turns a simple moment into a melodramatic yet believable event. Like these authors, this is my goal as a writer: to create small moments where the reader connects with the character in realistic drama.

Professional influences on my work include Judith Slater and Joy Castro. Besides being a part of their writing workshops, being able to read their creative work has encouraged me to continue my craft. Slater’s *The Baby Can Sing and Other Stories* wrought images in my imagination that made me yearn to create characters like those within the collection that would have the same lasting effect on a reader. Castro’s *The*

² Wolff, Tobias. *The Night in Question*. New York: Vintage, 1996. Print.

³ Byatt, A.S. *Little Black Book of Stories*. New York: Knopf, 2004. Print.

Truth Book: Escaping a Childhood of Abuse Among Jehovah's Witnesses made me realize that creative nonfiction could be written in such a way that it tells a story while maintaining a poetic approach—that memoir is not just a factual retelling but is creatively inspired. Other influences are Gerald Shapiro and Ted Kooser. I envy Shapiro's ability to include comedy into writing that is clear within the drama of a piece. Poetry has influenced my writing for years, and Kooser's aptitude for meaningful word choice is unsurpassed. Working with him helped me to think about word choice and concise meaning within all my creative writing.

Like I alluded to before, creation through writing has allowed me to express myself and communicate to others my inner thoughts about life and truth. While I write, the definition of truth unravels itself from a tangled mess of possible meanings, and usually I find that I am seeking some form of actuality, what actually exists within the character to create truths within the story. Truth exists in both fiction and nonfiction. Therefore, as a writer I find appealing the stories and truths that exist within each genre. Incorporating nonfiction was more of a discovery than a planned intention for this collection. The nonfiction pieces in this collection, "The Incessant Wavering of the Adoration and Alienation of a Twin Sister," "Clue," "My Father's Hands," and "Loaded" have truths that I discovered through the process of writing them. While I find when writing fiction I have a plan for the story before I begin to write, with nonfiction I first struggled to write about myself or from my own experience. It was both intimidating and exciting to tackle a new form of storytelling with which I was unfamiliar.

Fiction, on the other hand, allows me to pull from my past experiences as well as from my imagination. Therefore, the rest of the pieces in this submission share truths

through fiction writing—through imagination—which is just as surprising and invigorating as the discoveries found through writing nonfiction. The reward of creating characters is incomparable; it is a constant reminder that everyone, whether a living being or a fictional one, has their own story—even if he can't or doesn't want to tell it. The fact that one *has* a story is enough to promote the need for communicating it. This need exists within me, and the stories in this collection are a varied selection of truths that needed to be told.

I feel that most of the pieces in *After the Rainbow* encompass some form of loss that alters the characters' realities in some way. How they cope with this loss is where the truth lies within each story; however, with loss comes discovery. Just as discovery unfolds for me as I write, the reader will unearth the realizations of loss as the story unfolds, and that is part of the pursuit of writing. In literature, once loss is realized, knowledge is gained as well. The characters within the story and the reader, and sometimes only the reader, discover a new understanding about the fictional world. A good story takes the reader to new world, another life, for awhile. What I mean by this, is that when I read, I sometimes experience an out-of-body experience or even other-body experience. I am part of the story, no longer myself. To be buried within a story is one of the greater rewards of a reader.

As a writer, I experience the same phenomenon. I float somewhere between reality and imagination, and the stories unfold. I've heard other writers speak of this occurrence, but it is important to me to include the reader in this creative state. In literature in general, even though the reader does not create in the same way as the writer,

the two artists, the writer and the reader, work together to create lasting stories—which is why they are greater than the art itself. Without them, the story wouldn't be possible.

Fiction

After the Rainbow

Colors. Imogene heard colors, or rather, she saw them—little bursts of bright yellows, pea greens, and aquamarines. With every sound that filtered through her eardrum, Imogene saw a color to match. She first noticed her power as a little girl. With the back and forth, sway and repeat, of the wooden swing in the backyard, a flash of neon white played across her vision with each creak of the old swing set. She leapt off the swing and looked around, only the line of trees and green grass playing across her vision, nothing out of the ordinary. When a blue bird landed on the birdbath and chirped loudly, Imogene saw its sound. Not what you'd expect—light pink. Imogene didn't tell anyone because, well, she rather liked seeing sounds. As she grew, she realized other people did not share her ability. When her friends would tell a joke, the tone of their jokes danced in the air between them and Imogene. "That's so funny," one would say. "That's so purple," Imogene would agree.

Somewhere, Imogene could no longer remember, she had seen the most beautiful sound—caught a glimpse of it, anyway. She distinctly remembered it being smooth, creamy, and glowing all at the same time. Was butter a color? She wanted to taste it, or slip some of it onto her heels and glide across the room until she became the color altogether. She just could not remember the sound. It was lost in her memory somewhere, but clearly its color had been more beautiful than its resonance.

These days, as an adult, Imogene's favorite sounds were the laugh tracks on old sitcoms, and she'd sit with a bowl of popcorn, watching the cacophony of reds, blues, oranges, and greens tumble and cascade a few feet in front of her, while the actors paused their lines behind her, waiting for the mirth and guffaws to end. It reminded her of going

to an orchestra, each instrument with its own color, the violins bright green, the cellos blue, the basses deep violet, the flutes red, and the piccolo the lightest of pinks. She had to quit attending them because of the headaches they gave her; even if she shut her eyes, the lights flashed, her eyelids serving as a canvas for the painting of sounds.

Rarely did the flashes of light affect Imogene's life on a day to day basis. She walked from her apartment to work. Just over a hill, and there she taught kindergarteners the alphabet, addresses, and colors. The children that left Imogene's class knew more colors than any other class across the state. Her favorite days to walk to work were the days when it rained. The pellets of water fell continuously against her nylon with a gentle tap, tap, tap that emitted a flow of purple lines across her vision. Although the colors only flashed across her vision for a moment, the same reverberations linked her sight and her memory to create constant coursing hues.

This day it rained. She slipped on her yellow trench coat—the ruffling fabric was white—opened her umbrella—flash of red—and walked onto the gray clouded street. She had only walked a block when she heard it. A screech, loud, and frightening, and took her breath away for its color was the one she remembered. The golden buttery hue blazed across her vision, and she stopped in the middle of the crosswalk to watch it spew in front of her as if it were the aurora borealis itself, all her own, and then suddenly it was gone. The squealing tires caught dry ground and the car skidded to a stop, inches away from Imogene's upper thigh. She glanced at the driver, wide-eyed and pale. Imogene just waved, wishing she could thank him for the glorious sight she had just experienced. He turned the car off and hopped out to ask if she was okay. She was fine, and began to walk up the sidewalk when the man started his car again. The start of the engine, a sound very

familiar to Imogene, had no color. She stood under the umbrella and listened to the drops of rain hitting inches above her head. Nothing. Imogene wanting to scream out, to plead with any onlooker, but no one was around. She paused only a moment more, and continued on her way with the rain beating down and the cars racing past, and for the first time that she could remember, saw only the world that was in front of her.

Choke

Erica Rethwich turned thirteen four days after her eleven-year-old next door neighbor choked himself to death with a belt. Andrew Cook was discovered by his parents, the belt loop still tight and the leather end tied around the knob of his bedroom door. Erica's mother, Kathy, left the house every afternoon at three the day after it happened with a different kind of casserole for the Cook family to eat. She just doubled the recipe of whatever she made for her family and gave them the same thing in a separate glass dish with directions to bake it at 350 degrees for thirty minutes.

"I don't know what else to do," she'd say. "I just can't imagine what they're going through." She'd stare at Erica, her only child, with one arm across her stomach and the other elbow resting on top of it, her palm pressed tightly against her cheek, and then shake her head quickly and run into the kitchen or living room muttering under her breath.

Erica wondered if the Cooks knew they were eating Hamburger Helper each night.

The school let out for one day, and the day after that each individual grade had a series of lectures about the new fad of getting high by choking themselves or having someone else choke them to the point of passing out. No one mentioned Andrew. They droned on about the deprivation of oxygen and its effect on the brain. Mostly they stressed the danger of participating in this activity, one result being strangulation. Erica had heard some of the boys joke about it in the hallway before Andrew died, including Andrew's older brother Devin, but it hadn't meant anything to her. She always thought people only used drugs to get high.

There was also an assembly for parents. Erica's parents came home and her mother immediately removed all the belts from all their closets, and demanded that Erica's door remain open at all times. From then on, Erica changed clothes in her bedroom closet. She didn't tell her mother that she didn't even need belts anymore, that in fact, most of Erica's jeans were too tight. Despite her mother's constant worry that Erica might do something drastic to herself, she didn't seem to actually notice her. Erica hated changing into her clothes for school in the morning, but more often than not, especially on cold mornings, she would be late because she spent too long staring at the dimpled loose skin hanging from her stomach and small breasts. Over the gray sports bra she wore every day, she wore extra large t-shirts she found in a box in the attic that her father used to wear in high school. They came down to her mid-thigh, and kept her as shapeless as she had been in elementary school. Erica liked that her mother didn't say anything, but she didn't like that her mother was unaware of her physical appearance.

For the past few days, both Erica's parents stayed home to eat breakfast with their daughter. Her father, Jamison, an engineer at the local electric company, was a quiet but happy man, but he did not know how to act in a time of crisis. So he baked pancakes for his daughter and wife, sprinkling powdered sugar over the perfectly round cakes.

Erica walked down the stairs the three mornings, ate one pancake, and then left for school.

The day of the funeral, and also her birthday, she carefully but quickly duct-taped a black garbage bag over her window, the one that faced the Cook's house.

"Chocolate chips, Eri?" her father asked, when she entered the kitchen.

"No. Too sweet."

“It is early for chocolate,” her mother said. She stared at the pancake on her plate and then sipped her coffee. Her father nodded and poured the batter, picking out the small chocolate pieces.

In the past, during the summers, when the sun had almost set completely, and the stars began to stand out in the dusky sky, Erica would sometimes watch Andrew across the yard. Their windows were parallel to each other, and Andrew would sit on his bed with a book or a video game, his head sticking up above the pile of pillows. Since she could see him, and he was turned away, completely unaware, Erica would lie on her stomach and stare into the house next door. She didn't remember any particular thoughts from those quiet, secret moments, but she knew she felt at peace knowing he was comfortable over there, reading. Andrew had shared a room with his fourteen-year-old brother, Devin, but his bed was across the room, under the window facing the street. Even though Erica and Devin were closer in age than she and Andrew, she'd always been friendlier to the younger brother. He'd smile and wave when she said “Hi,” but Devin usually looked away before she could make eye contact.

The day of her birthday, the day she decided to block out the Cook's house from her view, she'd seen Devin standing next to Andrew's bed, staring at her. For a second, his rumpled blond hair and slouching skinny frame looked exactly like his younger brother's. Erica jumped back. Devin didn't move, but slowly raised his arm and waved. She felt as if she'd been spying on the dead. She put the garbage bag up as soon as he left the room; even though he'd see it later, she didn't want him to be in the room when she did it. She couldn't explain why.

The funeral was scheduled at ten o'clock, but the service didn't start until after eleven by the time the Protestant Episcopal Church filled past capacity and a projector was set up to show the service reflected on a white sheet in the reception hall for the overflow of people. People stood in the kitchen and closed their eyes, leaning against counters and the refrigerator as they listened. Most of the students from the middle school were there along with their parents. Erica and her parents passed by them as they entered the church; they were sitting behind the family because of her mother and Belinda Cook's close friendship over the years. Her mother clutched onto her father's arm, her knuckles white and almost plastic in the yellow light of the stained-glass windows. They passed the Cook family as the pastor prayed over them before they entered the church. Belinda and Michael Cook sat in metal folding chairs; Belinda cried openly, and Michael leaned forward with his hands clasped together, covering his face. Erica followed closely behind her parents and pulled the clingy material of her black dress away from her stomach.

"I don't know how they're getting through this," her mother whispered to her father. He shook his head. Erica wondered how her mother was going to get through the service. Every other breath that left her chest included a deep throated sigh or a whimper.

Erica turned to look again at the Cooks again. Devin wasn't there.

The funeral service was fairly short; people wept and kept their faces hidden for the entire service. They left immediately after for the cemetery on the outskirts of town. Erica didn't understand why cemeteries were placed on the edges of towns. People entered the city limits and were welcomed with the same thought: people die here.

"I'm sorry this happened today, honey," her mother said.

“It’s okay,” Erica said. She didn’t know what else to say, or what the proper words were to let her mother know she wasn’t holding anything against the Cook family for having their son’s funeral on her birthday. She didn’t think it’d be necessary; what kind of person did her mother think she was?

“Do you want to stay home?” her father asked.

“Jamison,” her mother said. She looked at him quickly and blinked several times in row at Erica before tilting her head and mouthing the word, “Alone?” She dabbed at her eyes again.

“She doesn’t have to go see this. Not today.”

“I’d like to stay home,” Erica said. She’d heard her parents talking about Andrew’s parents having to buy plots for themselves right next to Andrew. Her mother had wiped her eyes and sighed loudly. “They’ll all be together then,” she’d said.

“Alright,” her father said. Her mother blew her nose.

When her parents drove off to the burial site, Erica ran upstairs to change her clothes. She walked to her room, slowly shut the door, and lay on her bed. Whether she expected to cry, or shout, or laugh, she couldn’t make herself do any of those things; instead, she felt a shooting pain in her lower abdomen. She cringed as she pulled her legs up to her chest. The pain was almost intolerable, and she’d never felt anything like it before. After a few minutes, she dragged herself off the bed and went to the bathroom where she discovered a small droplet of blood in her underwear. She let her mind wrap itself around what had just occurred, and then bunched up half a roll of toilet paper and shoved that in her underwear. She went to her bed and collapsed. Her eyes began to fill, but she pushed her face into the pillow, the fabric soaking up her tears before they could

leak down her face. She fell asleep, her stomach cramp lessened by the knowledge of what it was.

A few hours later, Erica woke up. She rolled onto her back and looked at the ceiling. When she was eight, she had put glow-in-the-dark stars up on her ceiling. Almost all of them had fallen down by now, but one pale yellow star remained right above her bed. It's the thing she saw every night before she fell asleep, and usually what she first looked at when she woke up. There was always a feeling of doubt before she looked to see if it was stuck up there, that it had probably fallen off in the night and was lost in the blankets of her bed. She continued to stare at it, the once pointed ends now curled in on themselves and covered in powder white ceiling dust. The doorbell rang. She groaned as she rolled off the bed, but as she gently kneaded her fists into the loose skin of her stomach, she realized she didn't hurt anymore.

When she went down the stairs, she glanced through the frosted glass of the front door and saw a figure close to her height. The doorbell rang again, seconds before her hand rested on the handle and she pulled it open. Devin Cook stood there in black pants, a dress shirt, and a black tie. They stood looking at each other without speaking for almost a minute.

“Hi,” Devin said.

“Did you want to come in?” Erica asked. She knew she sounded mad. She was upset, almost angry that he was there. She had stayed home to get away from him and his family, and the grief people would show for the day. But eventually, most people would forget it. They'd retell the legend of the tragic youth's death in a warning or to entertain

shock and watch their audience shake their heads sadly. The Cooks wouldn't forget. She wouldn't forget this feeling either. Or at least she didn't think she could.

"Sure," Devin said. "Yeah." He walked in and followed Erica to the kitchen. She figured she could keep quiet with food. She took two plastic containers of pudding out from the cupboard and grabbed two spoons.

"Are you hungry?" she said.

"I didn't go to the burial," he said as if she'd asked about that instead.

Erica hesitated before she answered. She set the tapioca on the counter and stacked them on top of each other before she spoke. "Why?"

"I couldn't see him—go, go into the ground like that," he said. "We were sitting there, me and my parents, and the pastor was saying a bunch of stuff, and I just took off. Running right out of the cemetery and up the street. My parents, the crowd of people—I didn't even think of them other than pushing them out of the way. I just left."

"Oh," Erica said. She didn't want to sit right next to him because then she'd feel like she'd need to comfort him, put her hand on his knee or brush his hair from his eyes. She sat across from him.

"Say something."

"I'm sorry." Erica said.

"No. Tell me I was wrong to leave."

"Oh," Erica said. "No." She thought he was wrong. He should have stayed with his family.

They were both quiet. Erica watched him with his hands clasped like his father's were before the funeral, and his head bent low above the table. She glanced at the tapioca, the only thing she felt comfortable looking at.

"It's so weird, you know?" he said.

"What?"

He hesitated. "I'm an only child now."

"I guess you're right," Erica nodded. She'd been an only child her whole life; she didn't know what it was like to lose a sibling, and she never would.

"I didn't go because I thought maybe this way it wouldn't seem like he was gone. I'd go home and he'd be there to fight about who gets to use the computer, or who gets to sit next to Dad when we watch football." Devin looked Erica in the eye. "Now it'll always be me."

Erica thought he was going to cry, but he didn't.

"I couldn't go in there alone." He jerked his head toward the Cook's home. "The house. So I came here." He sniffed loudly. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay," Erica said. Watching his face, she stood up. "Do you want to watch T.V. or something?"

Devin nodded. She led him to the living room and they sat on the couch together, on the opposite ends. They flipped through channels, never settling on one show. Erica asked a couple times if he needed anything, but Devin just shook his head. Erica stood up quickly when she heard the garage door open. She felt the couch material stick to her sweat pants when she stood up. Turning, she saw the small dark spot on the couch. She immediately looked at her guest.

“Are you okay?” Devin asked.

She wanted to sprint to the bathroom, but the door opened. Her parents walked in. Erica sat back down involuntarily. She felt as if she and Devin had been caught doing something indecent.

“Oh thank God. He’s here,” her mother said. She walked over to Devin and hugged his head against her. “Your parents are so worried about you.”

“I didn’t mean to leave them like that,” he said quietly.

“We know,” she said.

“Your parents will be home soon, son,” her father said. Devin nodded.

It was strange to hear her father say “son.” He almost sounded stronger, more confident than normal. Erica knew it could be from choking back tears during the emotional day, but somehow there was power in her father’s voice she had never heard before. She knew it’d been hard for her parents to conceive, that it was a miracle she was alive herself, but she’d never wondered before if maybe they’d been disappointed with their luck in getting a girl. Her father put his hand on Devin’s shoulder and squeezed it slightly. Devin stared at the floor.

“Thanks for hanging out with me, Erica,” Devin said, without looking up.

“Sure.” Erica watched his face. He hadn’t cried the entire time he was there. His face really didn’t resemble Andrew’s. His younger brother’s face had been rounder, his nose shorter and stubby. The Cook brothers’ eyes however, were exactly the same. Erica wondered if Devin knew. Maybe when he’d look in a mirror he’d realize Andrew’s eyes were gazing back at him.

The phone rang. Her mother answered.

“Yes, he’s here, Belinda,” she said quickly. “He’s been with Erica the whole time. They’re watching television.” She listened for a few seconds, nodding her head as if Belinda could see. “Alright. Goodbye.”

She hung up the phone. “Your parents are home, Andrew,” she said. She looked at him sadly.

Erica’s eyes were wide and she didn’t know if she should correct her mother. Devin sat perfectly still; he hadn’t even moved his head in her direction as she spoke. Her mother stared at him, and then realized her mistake. She stiffened and stepped back.

“They’re waiting for you, Devin,” she said. She didn’t put any stress on his name, in fact she barely spoke it, her voice hardly above a whisper.

Devin stood and went to the door. “Thanks,” he said. He left quickly.

“Oh. My. God.” Her mother collapsed onto the couch where Devin had just been sitting and burst into tears. “I’m an idiot!”

Erica watched her father as he absently rubbed his wife’s shoulders. “It’s been a stressful day. He understands.”

Her mother rocked back and forth in her father’s grasp with her head in her hands until her gasping tears turned into quiet hiccups. “I just feel so awful for them,” she said.

Erica felt awful too. She felt bad for Devin because it was probably his fault Andrew died—hearing him talk about it, maybe even seeing Devin and his friends choke each other out with one of their arms tight around another’s throat, laughing as his face grew red and his eyes bulged until suddenly, for a split second, he was entirely gone. Devin probably knew that, too. She felt bad for her mother, who couldn’t grasp the idea of losing a child, only the sadness that accompanied the sense of loss. Mostly, Erica felt

bad for her father—the small wrinkles perpetually plastered on his forehead the past four days since he heard the news of Andrew’s death—because maybe he was sad because he didn’t have a boy in the first place. Maybe his connection to Andrew had been greater than any of them realized, even her father himself. All those evenings the past few years when Erica and her dad would play catch with a football because even a girl needed to be able to throw a perfect spiral, and Andrew would wander over, his hands in his back pockets and his mouth missing a random tooth, asking if he could play too. Erica wondered if her father was sad, never admitting it—even to himself, because he never even had a chance to get to know the feeling of being a father to a son, and he never would.

Erica stood up and as the faux suede fabric stuck to her pants, she immediately sat back down again. Her father looked up at her and sighed. He hadn’t seen. Then he left the room.

“Come here, honey.” Her mother patted her own lap.

“I can’t,” Erica said.

“Please, I just want to hold you for a second,” she said.

“No, I can’t get up. I think I’m stuck.” She tried to stand and the couch fabric slowly peeled away underneath her. Her mother was such a clean person; Erica suddenly felt nervous about the stain left behind.

“Oh, honey.” Her mother looked at her daughter and smiled.

“I’m sorry about the stain,” Erica said. “I was going to clean it, but you came home.” Her mother looked at her and began to laugh. She fell back against the cushions

and held her stomach, and new tears filled her closed eyelids. Erica just smiled slightly, wishing her mother would let her go.

“You’re becoming a woman,” her mother said after she calmed down. “On your birthday and everything.”

Erica wanted to vomit. She didn’t want to hear any of the forced statements all the women on the videos she’d had to watch at school about menstrual cycles were required to say.

“Please don’t make me talk about it,” Erica said. “I don’t want to.”

“It’s okay, I won’t make you.”

“Devin saw the blood,” Erica said quickly.

“Oh. I’m sure he didn’t even know what it was. Young boys don’t pay attention.”

Erica wasn’t sure; he’d commented. Even after going to his brother’s funeral, he’d been in a healthy enough mental state to notice her defilement of her parent’s living room furniture. “Did you get a *pad*?” her mother asked.

Erica cringed at the word as her mother lowered her voice and stressed the “d” at the end.

“I have some in the cupboard under the sink in the bathroom. Help yourself.”

Erica went upstairs and paused at the bathroom door when she heard her mother’s rapid footsteps go into the kitchen where her father sat reading the newspaper. Erica waited to hear their conversation, but neither of them spoke.

Erica's parents planned a birthday dinner for her. Just the three of them. They had pizza and a cake from the grocery store because her mother didn't have time to bake one. She brought it out hesitantly, apologizing to Erica the entire time.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I should have made it yesterday, but Bob's Grocery will have to do for this year." She lit the candles, and as she moved from one to the next, her hand got too close to the candles already lit. "Ouch," she said absently, not moving her hand until the final wick caught.

"Make a wish," her father said.

Erica looked at him. She shut her eyes, and blew. All the candles went out except for one, a green spiral on the right side. She blew it out.

"Do you want presents now or after cake?" her mother asked.

"Now is fine," Erica said. She shifted her weight. She felt uncomfortable sitting with pad underneath her, and even more uncomfortable knowing that both her parents knew she was using one. Her mother pushed aside the cake and set three packages on the table. She handed Erica one. It was a new pair of jeans—the same too-small-size that she wore now.

"Thanks," Erica said. She smiled and set them on her lap.

The next was a new CD player. Erica thanked her parents again and said she'd put her old one in the bathroom and she could listen to the radio while she got ready in the morning. They both smiled, but it seemed as if neither of them was really paying attention.

The last present was oddly wrapped. Erica knew what it was before she picked it up. She glanced at her mother before she opened it. She tore the paper off the top, but left it to hug and hide the box of tampons and cushiony plastic wrapping of menstrual pads.

“We want you to be comfortable coming to either of us with questions or concerns, okay sweetie?” her mother said. Erica nodded. She looked at her father out of the corner of her eye. He didn’t look relaxed at all; his eyes never left his wife’s face, and his lips were pursed into a tight smile. After they ate cake, she took her presents upstairs. She dropped them all in the corner of her room and flopped onto her bed. The star on her ceiling was gone. Fallen and buried who knew where in her bedroom. She rolled onto her stomach.

A piece of tape had come loose on the window sill and stuck to the garbage bag. Erica could see through the slit, but couldn’t make out any actual shapes. Reaching up to pull the tape back into place, she imagined Andrew’s head there, lying back against the pillows, the sun reflecting off his blond hair. She shivered—she had to look, to make sure there wasn’t anyone there. Pulling up on the carefully placed pieces of tape, she turned her head to face the Cook house. She stopped breathing. There he was.

Devin Cook lay on his brother’s bed, his body quivering. Erica put her hand against the glass, watching his body shake. His head popped off the pillows. Even over the distance, Erica could see the bright pink tear-streaks on his cheeks, the damp eyes, and his open crying mouth. She could see his teeth. Erica pulled her hand away, but she didn’t replace her plastic cover right away. She held Devin’s gaze as he continued to quake, coughing in huge gulps and tears, until he rested his head back down on the pillow

and his body finally relaxed. She let the bag fall back into place, but she didn't tape it down.

That night, Erica's father came upstairs to tuck his daughter into bed. Usually one of her parents stopped by her door to say goodnight, but tonight her father pulled the comforter up to her chin, sat on the edge of the bed, and asked how she was doing.

"I'm fine," Erica said.

Her father looked at the big black garbage bag covering her window.

"I just...didn't want to see out," she said. Fearing her parents would want her to seek counseling, she added, "For awhile."

He nodded. Erica waited for him to say something else, but he just sat there, his hand resting on her blanketed foot.

"Dad, I'm sorry about the couch," Erica said. She stretched out the last word, hoping she wouldn't have to go into any more explanation.

"You don't have to be sorry for anything, Erica," her father said. She loved when he said her name. He didn't speak much, but when he did, he always enunciated well. The "c" clicked off his tongue and resonated long after it left his soft palate. Erica smiled. He leaned in and gave her a hug, clutching her tightly like he never had before, his shoulder digging into her neck. Erica felt the air leave her throat for a split second, the room spinning until she blinked her eyes and took a deep breath. He stood up.

"I love you, Erica," he said.

"You, too, Dad," Erica said.

He stood at the door and then shut off the light before going back downstairs.

Erica's eyes were heavy, but again, she felt as if someone in the Cook's house was there that shouldn't still be. She imagined the roundness of his haircut, the way the tips of his ears barely poked above the pile of pillows. She rolled onto her stomach and once more lifted the loose corner of her plastic curtain. No one, alive or otherwise, was there.

Tape Recorder

Everywhere Mary Corrigan went, she carried a tape recorder with her. “For my memoirs,” she’d say, her nine-year-old voice holding out the “moi” of the word she found to be so intriguing, so adult. Mary recorded everything: her school lectures, her classmates at recess, even the hubbub of the gymnasium during lunch period. Her best friend Peggy asked her why she carried the handheld tape recorder and Mary whispered back, lifting the device close to her own lips, “I want to know everything.” Peggy nodded, but she said, “Why don’t you just read books?”

Mostly Mary listened. Her family was quite ordinary: Mary’s parents, Joshua and Gretchen, a bank president and a nurse, respectively, were peaceful people who only let their emotions get the best of them on stressful days near the middle of the month. Once, the only time Mary’s mother yelled at her—the poor woman was constantly on tape after all—she tried to grab the gadget and throw it against the wall, but her hands were too slow for Mary’s small sprightly maneuvers and she swore under her breath. “Dammit, child! Don’t you understand you won’t have enough time in your life to listen to these tapes?” Mary considered this, but she kept recording until her mother stopped huffing in front of the kitchen sink and gave Mary the cookie she had asked for.

One result of Mary’s constant recording vigilance was the tapes that lined her bedroom walls, all neatly labeled with the date and time of day from when they came. For awhile, she had tried to conceal them in boxes and archival shelves, but eventually her three months advance in allowance ran out. She was careful not to bump them on her way to bed or when picking up her clothes scattered on the floor, and she’d often stop to glance at a tape in her large, slow cursive scrawl: “My piano recital (recorded from under

Joe Bishop's chair)" 7 p.m. March 3, 2007, or "Opening Christmas presents" 6 a.m. Dec. 25th, 2009. Floods of memories would crowd her mind and she'd stand for a few minutes, caught up in her own thoughts before she realized she had wasted valuable space on her present cassette.

Gretchen, however, hated the tapes. There wasn't a point to them. Gretchen knew once her daughter popped one out from the recorder, she placed it on the pile never to be heard from again. Gretchen's house was clean and uncluttered. She made monthly trips to donate junk and clothes that didn't have a purpose in her home. She had first allowed the recordings to start when Mary recorded their family dinners. She prided herself that her children sat around the dinner table every night and talked about their days at school. Since she and Joshua didn't see much of each other on a daily basis, maybe years later they'd listen to the tapes and look back on the happy life they'd created together even though they were stressed with work and raising children.

Mary's favorite tapes were kept in a specific corner of her bedroom. She hadn't listened to them—she hadn't listened to any of her tapes, too worried about moving on to trace the next event of her life—but Mary knew as soon as they clicked out of her hand held recorder whether or not they had a place of importance or not. The main ones were family games nights from years ago or funny moments from camping trips. Mary knew there wouldn't be any revelations found from these particular cassettes in the future since nothing she considered dramatic happened on them, but she valued them anyway.

Two Christmases before, Joshua had given Mary a smaller digital recorder that could be connected to a computer. Mary would be able to upload her daily recollections and save them on a single drive. Gretchen had relished the idea, thinking she could box

up the piles of tapes for good, but Mary shot it down. She didn't want to share the family computer. "Besides, I'm a traditionalist at heart," she said. Joshua looked at Gretchen. Neither of them knew where she learned that word; they were both Democrats.

On one of Gretchen's days off, she couldn't take the stack of cassettes any longer. An empty box sat in the middle of the room as she began to look for tapes her daughter might not notice. Realizing she couldn't be thorough without actually hearing what was on each tape, she brought an out-dated dual cassette player from the bathroom she and Joshua shared into Mary's bedroom. She plugged it in and then sat on the edge of the bed, absently running her fingers over the comforter she had just placed over Mary's unmade bed. She slid a tape from the top of the pile and gingerly placed it inside the player. She pressed play.

"—ver seen a penguin?" said a young boy's voice through the tinny speakers.

"No." Mary's voice.

"Oh. Well, they're my favorite animal."

"I like rabbits. You can see them everywhere."

After several minutes, Gretchen lay back on the bed. She felt guilty. She was disappointed at how boring her daughter's life was, and she suddenly felt incredibly lonely. She turned off the cassette player and shut the door behind her as she left the room so she wouldn't see the stacks of tapes that remained untouched, silently laughing at her with their hours of boringness and mediocrity.

The following afternoon when Mary was at school and they were home for their lunch breaks, Gretchen brought Joshua with her into Mary's bedroom. Gretchen couldn't explain why she brought him there. Part of her wanted him to agree that the tapes were

pointless; Mary would never use these pitifully uninteresting tapes again. Her gut feeling was that she was trying to hide her guilt for invading her daughter's space the day before. He sat on the bed while Gretchen sat in front of him, leaning against his legs as they listened together. A teacher was lecturing about mathematics, her voice engaged and excited. Once in awhile, a pencil could be heard scratching across paper, muffling the information about adding and subtracting double digit numbers. When Joshua reached his hand under his wife's shirt and with the properties of subtraction relayed behind them, they rolled onto the floor in such a fit of passion, one so passionate they hadn't experienced in years.

“We can't,” Gretchen said.

“Shh,” Joshua said, his finger over her lips. “Just listen. Pretend that they're not here.”

Gretchen listened to the voices. She pictured the two of them in a dressing room at a department store in the mall or Joshua's office at the bank with his coworkers walking past the curtained windows. When Joshua kissed her, she kissed him back. Maybe there was a purpose to the tapes. Strange and perverted as that purpose may have been for the two of them.

And so the days went on with Gretchen and Joshua arriving home early from work, and heading up to their daughter's room to listen to her life and make love. Joshua and Gretchen couldn't help themselves. The fact that they rarely heard their daughter's voice helped the fact that they were invading her privacy, there was something that kept them coming back. All was well, until Gretchen couldn't look her daughter in the face anymore. After she'd dropped Mary off at ballet one morning, Gretchen broke down.

“I can’t do this anymore, Joshua!”

Joshua looked up from his oatmeal; the spoon hadn’t broken the lumpy surface.

“We need to get rid of the tapes!”

Joshua’s mouth dropped open. He enjoyed this newfound passion in his relationship. “You’re frantic, Marge. Don’t be hasty here.”

“Mary’s going to find out. We’re horrible parents,” Gretchen paused, her eyes wide in a crazed moment, and then she turned and sprinted up the stairs. Joshua followed. He tackled her outside the bedroom door.

Gretchen stared at her husband. She kissed him. Roughly—she bit his lip. They pulled apart when they realized someone was watching them. Mary stood a few feet away from them, the tape recorder in her right hand pointed directly at them.

“Wha—” Gretchen almost yelled at her daughter, dumbstruck at how Mary discovered her and Joshua’s afternoon rendezvous, when she realized that Mary was giving the device to her.

“Just listen to it,” Mary said.

Gretchen pressed play. Nothing happened. She looked at her daughter. Huge tears ran down Mary’s small face. The tape recorder was broken.

Gretchen took the smashed recorder and looked at Joshua.

“We’ll get you another one, honey, don’t you worry,” he said, quickly peeling himself away from Gretchen.

Weeks later, Joshua gave Mary a new tape recorder when he picked her up from school. Mary said thank you and gave him a hug, and then slipped the device into her

backpack. She chattered on and on about her day the entire drive home, things her friends said and what she studied in each class. The Corrigan's had acquired a talkative daughter. When Gretchen confronted her about this, Mary suggested they get rid of the tapes up in her room. Not her favorites, which were stored in a box underneath the bed, but the rest of them Gretchen hid up in the attic, too afraid that they'd be needed someday.

On a sunny Saturday morning, Mary planned to meet her friends at the nearby park.

"Don't you want to take your new recorder?" Gretchen asked her.

Mary shook her head. She paused at the door. "I know you listened to some of the tapes."

Gretchen froze. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah," Mary said. Her eyes narrowed. "You could have asked, you know."

"I'm sorry," Gretchen said quickly. "Is that why you wanted them out of your room?"

"No, I guess I decided there are some things I'd rather just remember." Mary shut the door behind her and ran off with a spring in her step.

Mary thought of the tapes in the attic and felt an urge to take Joshua up there with a tape player, but for the moment, the memories were enough.

Rifle

She hadn't cut her hair once in ten years. The day after they put her youngest son in the ground, she quit worrying about her appearance. Make-up, hair brushes, and bottles of lotion were tossed in the trash. Devin dug through the pile and found a long blush applicator. At fourteen, he selfishly tucked it into his pocket when his mother wasn't looking, and could almost feel the soft silk bristles gently brushing over his cheeks, forehead, and nose, a gesture his mom had performed on his face as a child when she finished applying her own.

Devin reached his hand over and touched his mother's hair. The nurses wanted to cut it after she'd entered intensive care because the long braid kept getting wrapped around the IVs and monitor cords. Belinda, in and out of consciousness, didn't respond, but Devin told them not to cut it. He'd laid it over her left shoulder and it trailed down over her breast and almost touched her waist. Now it seemed to him some sort of talisman or charm. All those years, it seemed to him, she'd collected and contained her painful memories and now they grew up out of her head in white wiry strands down her back.

She'd never said it, but he always suspected she thought it was his fault Andrew died. Sometimes he thought so himself. He had been in the bathroom at the time, reading in the first week of March's issue of *Sports Illustrated* about a football player who had cheated on his wife for the fortieth time but had finally been exposed, when Devin heard his mother scream. He hesitated only for a moment, to wait for a glimmer of a hint at what might be happening outside that closed door, and then he pulled up his pants and

ran out. His father pushed him back in with a phone in his hand. If only he'd left the bathroom sooner.

Devin leaned back in his chair and heard the soft crunch of the fake leather material of the hospital chair. Even at twenty-four, it was hard to separate his thoughts, each meandering experience of the past amalgamating in on the one before and the one following.

Now, the one vision that floated above the rest was from last night, his mother walking up the street in her white nightgown like a banshee with the butt of a rifle locked against her shoulder and her right hand gripped around the stock. Her hair was pulled back in a long braid, but curled blond and white wisps flew around her face, reflected in the light of the street lamps she passed. The rifle, a U.S. Springfield, belonged to her great-great-grandfather, a man who had taken a bullet in the head in the first Great War and lived, but not to tell about it. He sat in a wheelchair for his remaining six years and stared out the front window waiting for his children to come home from school. He couldn't move his hands to touch their faces.

For years, the rifle had been kept in a closet, packed away on the top shelf along with old clothes and forgotten Christmas presents. His mother found it one morning and told Devin the story about the man who had carried it. Devin had been impressed by the story, but not the rifle. The barrel was missing; just the long wooden handle remained, and his mother brandished it like it was a second extension of her right shoulder. It was then that he realized she could no longer contain her pain. She lived the pain twice. She dreaded the day because her memories hung in her mind like burning candles, the wax slowly melting along with her mental control and the wick whimpering out as it

welcomed the sweet release of the night. Sleep came, but his mother never found that healing sanctuary of calm because her dreams were hysterics where the memories started anew. But they didn't hurt as much at night as in the daylight amongst other people when she put up fronts of happiness and healed grief. In the dead of night, she didn't have to hide her mourning.

Devin's father had left the hospital a few hours ago as soon as he learned Belinda had suffered a mini stroke and would recover. Devin wondered if his father realized he had been holding a paintbrush in his hand the entire time he stood over his wife's bed in the hospital. Maybe he just envied the sudden lack of blood flow to her brain—a moment's chance for forgetfulness. The memory missing from the brain like it had never happened.

Michael Cook had an old Volkswagen Beetle that he repaired—at least, that's how it started. Before Andrew died, Devin's father had purchased the car as a project for the three men of the family to work on during warm summer evenings. After Andrew passed away, the car had remained as it was when it was purchased—just a shell. Eventually, after Devin's mother complained about the uselessness of the car, Devin's father agreed to stick to the plan. Devin had been excited about the prospect of working with his father. But instead of fixing the car up to running order, Devin's father just kept the frame and replaced the exterior on it and painted the doors blue. Then he painted the roof green. He used house paint that he mixed himself, and he began to create his own colors: lollipop yellow, Ninja Turtle green, and Power Ranger red. When he arrived home from work at five-thirty, he went straight to the garage, opened the door, and painted until

the sun sank past the house. Until that first day when his father came in the house covered in drops of blue paint, Devin had never considered his father to be creative.

“Sunset Orange,” he’d always say when he came into the house with streaks of paint on his face, neck, and hands. “That’s next.”

“That will be lovely,” Devin’s mother would say, and he’d kiss her on the top of her head as she put her arms around him.

Once, the summer Devin was leaving for college, he tried to get his dad to stop. “You’re not doing anything out there. Why don’t you get a real hobby?”

“I do have a hobby,” he said. “I mix paint.”

“But you could really fix that car up. I could help you. A nice coat of black paint would look awesome,” Devin said.

“No,” he said. And then he went upstairs to bed. Devin stopped visiting his dad in the garage from then on. When he came home from college in Seward, about twenty miles away, he went straight into the house and waited for his dad to come in, sometimes after midnight. They would stay up late and talk, but never about the car, and never Michael’s painting.

The first time Devin brought a girlfriend home with him to meet his parents, his father came in from the garage early. He stopped in the doorway and stared at the honey-blond haired girl and stared for over a minute after Devin introduced her. His father asked what color of lipstick she was wearing. She hesitated and then said, “Ruby-Slipper Red.”

“That’s what I’ve been missing,” he said, and he turned right around on his heel and flipped the switch for the garage door to open again.

Belinda knew what she'd been missing. She felt she didn't know how to properly cope. For years she tried to hide her mental anguish; and then she tried to get help. She sought psychologists, psychiatrist, even life coaches, but the result was always the same: she knew why she was depressed. At least once a session she found herself lashing out at the doctor, her voice loud and throaty.

“My eleven year old fucking killed himself!” She'd throw up her arms in disbelief at the man or woman across from her, usually in an overstuffed leather chair, and stand up to leave. “Eleven!”

None of their prescribed methods or meds were successful.

She often found her mind drifted back before she and Michael were married. She had dreams for their future then, just like any young woman in love, and she'd considered tragedy then. It was possible, she rationalized. Bad things happened to people every day, why should her life be any different? When Devin was born, her mindset changed. Something clicked and didn't shut off. Life was no longer full of potential, but impending doom. Every drop-off at daycare, every trip to the playground with her toddler son, each time she buckled him into his car seat, a pit of imagined disasters wrapped itself tightly within her brain. She couldn't chase them away. At first, she contributed to being a first time mother, but with Andrew it was the same. Nothing could erase her sensations of a fateful life.

She only admitted it to one doctor, that when Andrew died, a switch had gone off deep within her head once again, and somehow, even though the devastation had been indescribable, she had felt relieved. The doctor said it was probably shock that she felt, but Belinda knew it wasn't. The cogs in her skull had suddenly started turning in the

opposite direction again. And one word kept repeating itself in her head as she crumbled and wept beside her son's body. *Symmetry*. She didn't return to see that doctor again.

Now, Devin watched his mother's face. The doctors told him the stroke hadn't caused damage to any of her facial nerves, but he wanted her to smile or twitch or something while she slept, just so he would have proof.

He arrived home several hours later. His father wasn't home, so Devin opened a can of tuna and ate it with a fork, the jagged edge of tinplate still attached. He didn't finish it, but left it sitting on the counter to come back to later. He called his grandparents to let them know his mother was going to be alright, and then he sat at the kitchen table. Devin frowned. He was twenty-four, a college graduate, and living at his parents' house because his kid brother died when he was eleven and his parents were still coping. What frustrated him most was that through it all—the years of setting a place for Andrew at the table, buying Christmas presents and wrapping them with spools of ribbon, hearing his mother talk to Andrew when she thought she was alone throughout the day—not once had his parents considered Devin's feelings. They never talked about it with him, not even the day of the funeral when Devin ran away from the church and skipped the burial. When Devin walked in the front door he expected to be chastised for running away like a coward. Instead, his grandmother shoved a plate of food on his lap and they left him alone in the living room to watch television while he ate. Alone, he ate cold casserole and watched the Lakers beat the Celtics, Andrew's favorite team. Then he cried until he fell asleep.

Michael hated his life. He hated his job, he hated coming home to his quiet wife—the one person he should be able to talk to but she refused to talk about anything that brought negative thoughts; he wasn't surprised when they seemed to have run out of things to talk about—and he hated trying to like his son. He wished Devin would just leave, at least for awhile. The one thing he liked was being alone in his garage, painting that damn car yet another vibrant or ugly color. Michael didn't have words to justify his time spent there; it was much better than being in the house, of course, but it was also an escape from life itself. An escape to the inside of his mind. He lived in a land of imagination where all things existed, good and bad, and people talked about them. People didn't stop talking.

When Michael was young, he mowed lawns for extra cash in the summer. He enjoyed mowing because his body was occupied while his mind could float off into the trees and sky above him. He told stories to himself, out loud because the excruciating decibels of the mower were noisy enough to hide his voice from passersby, and the time flew by. He enjoyed this time to himself. When the summer ended, Michael's peers were saddened to go back to school. He was disappointed that he wouldn't have his long afternoons of homemade fantasy to himself.

Devin looked at the clock now. It was just before eight o'clock. His father wasn't home yet; Devin walked outside and lifted the garage door. The Volkswagen was a cheery yellow with sky-blue doors, and the hood was what Michael called "Rosy Red." Devin went to the cans of paint stacked against the wall. Michael didn't line them up in a certain order, they were just scattered about the garage in any place they would fit. In the

far right corner, Devin found the one he wanted. He gripped the thickest brush in his right hand. As he painted, he felt his blood surge to his brain and he continuously repeated the words in his mind: *Paint the car black*. He painted all of it, the paneling, the headlights, the tire wells. He spattered specks of black paint against the walls of the garage and on his own face. He was a man possessed with a paintbrush and a purpose he himself did not understand. With each swipe he felt stronger, redeemed, more himself than he had in years.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Devin looked up. It was dark; he hadn't turned on the overhead light. Michael stood in the open frame of the garage door with bags of groceries in his hands. He stepped further in to examine the car. The groceries collapsed out of his arms, and a baguette bumped his cheek as it fell. Michael inhaled a giant sob, and then he grabbed Devin by the throat.

“What have you done here?”

Devin struggled to find his voice. Michael shook him.

“Why did you do this?”

“I—I don't know—” Devin said.

Michael released his grip. Even in the darkness, Devin could see how brightly angered his father was, how large the thick vein in his forehead grew and pulsed with each breath. They stood in silence for a few moments. Michael paced on the plastic grocery bags. Devin heard the eggshells crunch on the concrete floor under his father's hard soled dress shoes.

“It's your fault.” Michael said.

“What?” Devin thought he had grasped his father’s mumbling rasp but didn’t want to believe it. He knew it was true.

“It’s your fault your brother is dead.” Michael looked straight into Devin’s eyes and then slowly turned and walked toward the house. Devin wanted to retaliate, to verbalize hatred back at his father for the missed high school events and hours he was left alone, and he felt heat in his chest rising like scattered gunpowder, but he couldn’t ignite the flame. It seemed he only had ammo, and his mother carried a gun; his father shot to not just injure, but kill any relationship they had had between the two of them. Devin let the paintbrush fall from his hand. The bristles bounced off the concrete and the black paint blotched onto the floor.

The day Andrew died, after his dad had shoved him back into the bathroom, Devin fell against the sink and bruised his knee on the corner of the cupboard. Immediately it stung, and he held back the tears that involuntarily formed. He limped to the door and opened it slowly. His parents were both downstairs, and his mother was sobbing over Andrew’s limp body on the kitchen table while his father tried to perform CPR. His mother had the phone to her ear, but she wasn’t listening to voice on the other end. Devin ran to the table and immediately pulled away. He would never live without regretting that moment; his decision to look at his brother. He fell to his knees and wished in vain that the image would leave his mind. Andrew’s eyes—the thing that people always said were the same about the Cook boys—Devin had never seen eyes that large. They bulged out of his head as if something were digging behind them, trying to get out. It wasn’t until the paramedics came and declared Andrew dead at the scene due

to suffocation. The Cook family learned its youngest had been trying to get high by choking himself. Something Andrew had seen Devin and his friends do at school.

Devin had often wondered what it would be like to die from suffocation. He would never admit it to anyone, but he had tried to do what Andrew had done—with the belt—but he couldn't bring himself to follow through with it. He just sat there on his knees, leaning slightly away from the door so he could feel the leather begin to tighten on his Adam's apple. He wondered what Andrew's thoughts were before he died; if he were trying to impress his older brother, if he had been hoping Devin would come in at the last moment to save him, or if Andrew even knew that he was about to die. Maybe he'd passed out and that was it; nothing had crossed his mind—he'd had no final thoughts.

This was what must have stood out in his parents' minds: Their eleven-year-old had been accidentally killing himself in their own home, and they didn't realize it in time to prevent it. And that is what they lived with every day. But Devin couldn't forget those eyes. Andrew's eyes. He saw them every time he saw his own reflection.

Michael felt guilty about what he had said to Devin, but truth be told, it was all he could do to keep himself from punching his son. Devin had taken something from him with all that black paint. He'd taken Michael's ability to imagine a life different than the one Michael lived. Realizing that Devin still had hope for their family irked Michael. How could his son still believe their lives could be happy when Michael couldn't imagine it for himself anymore? Other families experienced catastrophe and survived, but his family had swam into the despair and wallowed in it too long to come out whole.

Devin visited his mom at the hospital every day. His father went once or twice, the nurses said, but never when Devin was there. Even though she was physically able to go home after the first night, the hospital staff kept Belinda a few more days for what they called mental rejuvenation. The doctors also told Devin there was a possibility of another stroke in the following days and it would be beneficial to all of them if Belinda were already at the hospital. Devin didn't object. With her being watched over by doctors and nurses, he didn't have to worry about her leaving the house in the middle of the night and going after her. He felt guilty about not being her sole protector, so he stayed for most of the day, watching television with her and eating lunch. Devin wondered if she knew about the car in the garage, now black.

Devin had heard of parents who strayed from each other after losing a child. One would feel dejected and ignored so he would go sleep with some acquaintance who felt sorry for him. Neither of his parents had done that. They didn't really cling to each other, either. Belinda stayed at home and made quilts and other crafts to sell at fairs and carnivals while Michael went to his office and did people's taxes and assessments until he came home to the garage. Days, probably weeks went by when they didn't speak one word to each other. Devin had no idea what the two of them talked about when they were alone. He couldn't imagine a conversation they might have. They were two souls, caught together in a vow of silent mourning. Devin wasn't ever allowed in, and he wondered if even Andrew was part of it anymore.

Belinda spoke on the third day of her hospitalized vacation from everyday life.

"I want mashed potatoes," she said, her voice deep and scratchy.

Devin turned to look at her. She looked better than she had in years. She had slept the sleep of the dead; as soon as she had shut her eyes, nothing could wake her.

“Then mashed potatoes you shall have, mother,” Devin said. He stood up to get a menu from the nurses’ station.

“You’re a sweetheart, Michael,” his mother said.

Devin paused. He knew his parents’ relationship wasn’t the best, but he felt guilty being there instead of his father.

“What?” he said.

“Thank you for staying with me,” Belinda said. She smiled at him, and he felt the hair raise on his arms when he realized it was genuine. She was happy to have him there.

“You’re welcome.”

They ate together in silence. The brown slab of pork was difficult to cut. Devin pushed it around on his plate.

“Mom,” Devin said. “I’m thinking of applying to graduate school.”

She turned her head. Her long braid skimmed through the white gravy on her potatoes.

“That’s great, honey. In what?”

“Business management, I guess.”

She pulled her hair off of her plate and absently chewed on the gravy-dunked ends.

“Where would you apply?”

“I don’t know yet. I could go back to Seward so I could stay with you and Dad.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Belinda said. “That’s a possibility. Whatever you decide is fine.”

She paused and then seemed to regret what she had just said. “We’ll be alright, your father and I. Don’t let us hold you back.”

Devin wanted to point out that it was a little late for that warning, but he just said, “We’ll see,” and scooped another spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

Devin went home after his mother fell asleep again for the night. The doctor said she could go home tomorrow. They thought the fear of another stroke had passed, and as long as she slept through the nights consistently, she would feel like a completely different woman in a few months.

The stroke made sense to Belinda. Something inside her brain wasn’t right, wasn’t functioning properly as it should. She didn’t feel any differently though. The nurses said she’d be tired and would need to rest, but her body ached to get up and run, to walk and be able to do anything besides think. That’s why she’d left that first night and walked the streets in her night gown. She didn’t care who saw her or what they thought she might be doing; she just needed to get out of her head.

She couldn’t, however, explain why she’d brought the rifle with her. She knew it bothered Devin, but she didn’t feel she needed to put reasons into words for him. Part of her wished it was real and whole, a weapon to threaten herself with. She could end it all so quickly, and the mess would remain with everyone else. Maybe that is what she was missing—she no longer felt fear. It made her feel good to know that. Only for a moment did she consider that maybe it was possible that somewhere out in the dark night, or somewhere in the dark corners of her mind, fear is what controlled her.

Devin watched his father out in the garage from the kitchen window, and he only went outside when his father looked up and saw him. They didn't speak at all. Pulling a scraper from the workbench, Devin got down on his knees in front of the front bumper and began to chip away at the black paint coating the clear plastic headlight. Together the two men worked, one scraping slowly, meticulously to remove the black layer and reach the clear canvas, while the other painted furiously to cover it up. They continued this way in silence until it was time for Belinda to come home.

Michael and Devin picked Belinda up together. They brought her out of the hospital in a wheelchair even though she kept trying to stand up out of it while they rolled down the hallway. It was late afternoon and the three of them ordered a pizza and ate it in front of the television. A basketball game was on, but no one seemed interested so Devin changed it to a movie, a comedy they'd watched before and enjoyed. Both his parents fell asleep before the sun set completely. His father snored loudly, sometimes shifting slightly as his body slowly gave way to dreams, but Devin hardly noticed. He watched his mother. Her last movements before falling asleep were jerky and sudden, her arms reaching out and then back to her body in the dimming light and he knew she felt it, the comfortable weight of it against her shoulder, wielding her weapon to fight off the darkness.

Blindfold

Matthew walked slowly, fighting the urge to wave his arms out in front of him, and kept his grip firmly on the white sensing stick he bought months before. He tapped it back and forth across the sidewalk and tried to set up the rhythm the rehabilitation specialist, Andrew, had helped him get the feel for as they worked up to this day. Nervous about his first outing alone, Matthew felt the stick slip in his sweaty right hand. Not even twenty yards from the rehabilitation home, the stick slid from his grip and fell to the ground. Instinctively, he reached for the blindfold covering his open eyes to find the dropped guide, but he knew Andrew had tied it in such a way that he would know if Matthew had removed it from his head. He dropped to his knees on the cement and let his fingers dance across the sidewalk and grass until he grazed the thin metal cane. He wouldn't tell Andrew he had peeked through the tiny slits of light by his nose and saw the orange reflectors wrapped around the stick as it lay in the grass.

He wondered if the cars passing by on the busy street saw him through the trees; he wondered if any of them thought he had fallen, if he needed help.

As he stood, he tapped the stick again to the right and left. He neared the street corner, his least favorite part of the test. Even with Andrew at his side, he hated crossing the busy intersection. The fact that drivers were staring at him, a full-grown man with a blindfold over his eyes as if he were playing pin-the-tail-on-anything, didn't bother him. What irritated Matthew was the fact that he would no longer be able to drive his own car. The first thing he said when his ophthalmologist first described the disorder to him in the office was, "Well, that sounds shitty." The doctor didn't disagree with him but gave him

a slight sympathetic smile, so Matthew welcomed the degeneration of his eyesight with a smile in return.

He had tried to cry, but somehow that made him depressed. Each tear seemed to be taking a little bit of his vision with it as it left a tear duct and blurred his cornea for a split second. For awhile he thought he had beat the disorder, but as he noticed his central vision grow blurrier than normal, he gave up attempting to be optimistic, and just live. His present outlook on his situation was that when life provided road blocks, one just had to get around them somehow.

He listened to the countdown of clicks from the crosswalk light, and waited for the beep to let him know he could cross. The first few steps were always fine. The drivers stopped at the light usually paid attention to the man in the blindfold crossing the street slowly. It was when he was halfway across, at the median, that his heart beat faster and his pace picked up—even though he was nervous he might stray from the crosswalk into traffic—because the cars turning left didn't always expect pedestrians. He wouldn't even see a car coming, just hear it as it slammed into his body and his head hit the hood. That's how he pictured his demise every time he crossed a street. Killed by a car turning left.

This time, as usual, he made it across safely, his heart calming as the sensing stick bumped into the tactile paving of the rectangle of little rounded bumps placed into the sidewalk. He paused to catch his breath and mentally pat himself on the back. Now it was time to head back.

As he turned, he felt something touch his leg. He turned his face downward, and through the small slits by his nose, he saw a flash of a tail. He smiled. A cat. Matthew had grown up with cats and had been thinking of adopting one for a few months now. He

liked that cats were independently needy. They let a person know when he was wanted. It might be good to focus on something other than himself. He reached down and felt for the cat's head; he scratched it gently. The cat purred against his legs.

Matthew decided to walk a bit farther. He felt good, more confident than he had expected to feel. He walked up the sidewalk to the next block and then turned around. The air was warm, and the sun felt nice on his forehead and arms. He thought he was already coming to notice his other senses more. His hearing had definitely improved, at least his ability to listen for certain sounds, and he was sure if it wasn't for the exhaust of the cars, he'd be able to smell the pine trees that surrounded the clinic. He pushed the button on the crosswalk, waited for the beeps, and then walked across the street with confidence, his sensing stick jumping happily from one side to the other in his grip. When he reached the other side, he felt like throwing his arms above his head like a boxer who'd just won a championship match, but he didn't. Instead he heard the soft meow of a cat.

Cars began to honk, and Matthew felt a lump in his throat as panic seized him. He could feel the air of vehicles passing by at forty miles an hour. He wanted to shout at the cat to go back, to stay on the other side, and he did. Still, cars continued to honk. He imagined it jumping back and forth between tires and bumpers. He even tried waving towards oncoming traffic to warn them to slow down. A long screech of tires made Matthew jerk upright. His shoulders immediately slumped. He couldn't stop himself. He tore off the blindfold and blinked as the sunlight flooded his hazy eyesight. He found himself asking what happened, but no one was there to answer.

The car, only a few feet in front of him, had stopped just in time. The jumped onto the curb and ran under one of the pine trees. Matthew picked up the walking stick he had dropped and put the blindfold back on as best he could. He'd be trying again tomorrow.

Riding Atop Elephants

It was obvious by the way she stood, the cool September breeze whipping her light camisole around her waist with her face turned towards the whispered drops of mist, she didn't care about the weather. Isaac stood back and watched her thick frame; the collection of skin above her elbows cinched in large lumps that shook when she flared and flapped her arms. The sweater she threw on before running out the door was only buttoned at the top, exposing a large white belly with tiny yellow lines stretching up out from the waist line of her gray sweatpants. Her laugh was childish and simple, loud in the same surprising way the sudden scream of a wet-headed baptized baby fills a chapel's walls with its echo reverberated back and forth from sloped ceiling to dusty stained glass. When the wind began to pick up and the smile shook across her long face, Isaac opened the screen door and called to her.

When Miranda heard her name, she stopped spinning, set a side-long gaze at her gray haired father behind the front porch door and slapped her belly. She frowned.

Isaac stepped onto the stairs and sat down. His daughter, love and anger encased in a two-hundred and forty pound cage, came bellowing towards him. Each leg seemed to give a little with each step; the skin of each calf seemed to grow towards the ankle into the soft slope and roundness of each foot. The maddening scream grew until her bare foot reached the sidewalk and caught on a slight crack. The scream stopped and she fell slowly, as if a cloud or a breeze held her up until her skin tumbled onto the dirt ground.

Isaac stood up and walked down the sidewalk. The mist was heavier now, leaving a thin film on his hair and eyelashes.

“Hurts,” Miranda said. She pointed to her right foot. The largest toe was bleeding on the left corner near the nail.

“Yes,” Isaac said. If he was angry, if he wished she had caused greater injury to herself so next time she would know that getting mad only caused pain, he didn’t show it. He stepped behind her and rested his legs behind her. He put pressure on her back with his knees and cupped his hands under her shoulders. She pushed up from the ground slowly and carefully, until almost all of her weight was on Isaac. He winced and pulled her the rest of the way until she stood on both feet. Even though she was almost twice his size in girth, father stood over a head taller than daughter. The sky was entirely gray, and the wind blew large drops of water that splattered on the two of them in the front yard.

“Inside,” Isaac said. He pointed towards the screen door and Miranda lumbered up the stairs, her tongue lolling around her mouth until she salivated enough to use her lips to make loud smacks. Isaac followed her and bolted the door behind him. Sometimes if the wind caught it right, the unlocked latch would loosen and the door would flap against the side of the house. He’d replaced the spring three times since the summer months and the arthritis securing itself in his fingers grew stronger in the cold.

Miranda was lying on the green and burgundy couch, already covered with a blanket and sucking her thumb. The television was turned to “SpongeBob Squarepants,” and the eyelids of the silent watcher began to droop. Isaac thought about taking a nap, and turned the volume down of the cartoon show he himself found detestable and nothing like the entertainment of his youth. He often fell asleep in his bedroom, his radio tuned to “Prairie Home Companion”, the closest thing to “Abbott and Costello” or the “Jack Benny Program” from which the small antennae could get reception. He took a step up

the wooden staircase and took a breath as his hand rested on the banister. The phone rang. He turned and walked slowly to the kitchen, assured in the fact that nothing could wake his sleeping daughter. Once she went under, she became like a bear in hibernation; she snored just as ferociously too.

He pulled the receiver off the turn-style and held it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Isaac?” A woman’s voice, younger than his and deeper, but with the same timbre as his own.

“Ah, Rena,” he said. “I thought you’d be calling.”

“Yes. The party. I was worried you’d forgotten.”

“I’m old, Irena, not senile,” Isaac sighed. He was only eight years older than his sister, and she seemed to claim this as an accomplishment over him.

“I know, I know, Isaac. It’s just that you’ve got your hands full over there. That’s why I offered to plan it.” She paused. “Miranda doesn’t know, does she?”

“No, she has no idea,” Isaac sighed. “What do you need?”

“Nothing, I just wanted to make sure you’ll have her at the church by three tomorrow. No earlier, but the clowns and elephant rides start at three. I thought she should go first,” she said.

“Elephants? What all do you have planned?”

“Well, the grass area surrounding the church is plenty large enough to throw an exciting party for Miranda. It is a big birthday.”

“Apparently,” he said. “Although I don’t think *my* fortieth was that special.”

“We cannot have a bunch of black balloons and jokes about sailing for death’s door for Miranda.” Even over the phone, Isaac could tell his sister was becoming indignant. “It would be depressing and not at all festive.”

“And she wouldn’t get it,” Isaac said.

“Wow, Mike,” Irena said. “I think I’m going to go. Don’t let the poor girl hear you.”

“Rena, stop it. I’m not insensitive; it’s just been a long day.”

“I know.” She sighed. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Mike.”

Isaac hung up the phone and steadily walked upstairs. He had no idea how his daughter would cope with the excitement of the coming day. He was glad he hadn’t had to plan the party this year. Miranda never knew when her birthday was, but when the morning came and she saw balloons and a present wrapped at the kitchen table, she knew it was for her. The stairs creaked with his knees and when he got to the top, he leaned against the wall to stretch his legs and back. A loud creak came from downstairs, but it was Miranda just shifting her weight on the couch. Isaac sat on the edge of his bed. He always slept on the left. Over twenty years had passed and he still slept on the same side. He looked at the floor and said a prayer to have his wife’s patience for the next day.

He only meant to sleep for an hour or so, but Isaac woke to the excited screams and loud clapping palms of his daughter. He opened his eyes to her wide animated mouth, her tongue lifting and dancing back and forth outside her lips while her eyes moved back and forth in her head. She didn’t have words for what she knew. Isaac slowly rolled onto his side and pushed himself up.

“Good morning, Miranda,” he said. He kissed her head and smoothed her mussed hair down around her ears.

“G-goo-da!” Miranda cried. She ran out of the room; Isaac followed slowly, the stairs creaking and his joints popping at each step.

In the middle of the living room sat a large box, wrapped in pink unicorn paper and green and orange ribbons. Blue and purple balloons floated on strings inches below the ceiling, and two party hats sat on the coffee table. Isaac smiled. He owed Irena for her help; he couldn’t leave the house to shop and there was no way to keep this hidden from Miranda for more than one day. He walked over to the table and put a hat on.

“Happy birthday, my daughter,” he said. He pulled the rubber band around her face and set the cardboard hat on top of her head. The excess skin overflowed around the string, and Isaac had to look away when she smiled up at him. She looked almost exactly like her fifth birthday picture, just in a larger body.

“Would you like to open your present?” he said.

“Habby bir-bay.” Miranda waddled slowly to the box, as if it were a deer or a rabbit. She didn’t want to spook it and have it disappear for ever into the dark trees she didn’t know or understand.

Isaac helped her untie the bow, but she tore the paper off by herself. Miranda struggled with presents; she hated to rip the paper, but curiosity haunted her more. She ripped each piece quickly and sadly, and piled them up on the floor until the entire box was clear of the pink frolicking pastel horses. When she finished, she clapped, and Isaac picked the paper up from the floor. He smiled encouragingly, and after a quick smile and tilt of her head, Miranda opened the box. One eye peeked over the side of the cardboard

and then she sat back. She slowly leaned forward again, this time sticking her entire head into the box and laughing. She pulled a bright pink dress with enough ruffles and tulle to be a tutu. It glittered in the sunlight gleaming through the window, and reminded Isaac of a fish; scale upon scale of pink shimmer and fluffed fins expanded in the air. Miranda screamed and jumped up and down, her body jiggling in her purple night gown, the mass of skin and fat screaming to be thrust into the coral dress.

He lifted her arms for her and pulled off the nightie. Usually she didn't need much help getting dressed every day, but this was a bit more complicated than a pair of jeans and a sweater. Isaac knew the zipper in the back could be hazardous if she got it tangled in her hair. He struggled finding the opening to the bottom of the dress to slide over his daughter's head because the layers of white tulle kept sticking together and the tight bones in his fingers resisted every attempt at separating them. Miranda stood with her arms straight up in the air and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

After a few minutes Isaac finally found the middle of the dress and pulled the gown down over her head and past her hips. He carefully zipped up the back, first gently lifting Miranda's shoulder-length blonde hair out of the way. Miranda clapped and ran to the bathroom to find the mirror. As a child she had spent hours in front of it, dressing up with her mother and accessorizing to the point of garishness. Isaac followed her and smiled as he watched her spin in front of the mirror, as if the wind circled around her and lifted the skirt up around her waist; the mounds of tulle bounced underneath and covered her like a diaper. He certainly had to hand it to his sister; she had a way of making Miranda perfectly happy.

In the kitchen, Isaac sat Miranda in a chair he had decorated with balloons and crepe paper, and he made scrambled eggs with ketchup, a secret family ingredient. The yellow eggs coated in the bright tomato ketchup were what Isaac and his wife ate the morning she told him she was pregnant. They had been trying for over ten years, and the joy spread between the couple like an illness; they felt sick with excitement.

Wendy loved Miranda with all her heart and Isaac had loved those first years, the two girls of his life running around in the backyard, chasing the stray cats and catching butterflies in fishing nets. Wendy held the net closed with the butterfly gingerly attached to the side to show Miranda how she had to be delicate with the fragile wings and not touch them. Miranda watched, her mouth wide and her eyes squinted carefully at the black, gold, and blue insect. It lifted its wings slowly one time and put them back, revealing the gold pattern with blue streaks. Miranda shrieked joyfully and clapped her hands happily on the butterfly. Wendy pulled the net away and looked at the broken wings and crushed body misshapen inside the green netting. Miranda ran off; Wendy shook the mess out of the mesh. It was the first time Isaac saw she was hurt by Miranda's childishness.

Miranda hated car rides. She squirmed and struggled with the seat belts and the door handle, so Isaac had to make sure the doors remained locked at all times. If he spoke firmly enough, she would calm down, but today provided extra difficulty because of the large amount of dress tangled around her arms and legs. He held her hand and she sucked on her other thumb, the seatbelt tight over her right arm, holding her against the seat. As

they neared the church, Miranda began to grunt and jut her head forward. She had friends at church; people talked to her.

Isaac smiled as he parked the car across the street. He led her to the back of the church where a large dirt lot usually used for parking on Sunday services was decorated with a large open tent and hundreds of people, mostly church members, wearing bright colors of clothing and carrying balloons. Miranda screamed and started to gallop, short grunts with each stride. She was caught in a hug of smiling faces. One of them, a gray haired woman, dressed with triangle glasses and a long dress covered in sunflowers kissed Miranda on each cheek as Isaac walked up.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Rena,” he said.

“Well, it’s a special day, darling,” Irena said. She took Miranda by the hand and led her past the tent where the majority of people were crowded in a semi-circle. Isaac followed behind, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders relaxed. He watched his sister lead his daughter by the hand towards the large rough hide of the animal while the trainer stood near, gently lifted the chubby wrist to touch the gray skin. Miranda’s fingers grazed the tiny thick coarse hairs and pulled back. She didn’t make a sound; slowly, she reached again and put her whole hand on the side of the elephant. Her eyes grew and her mouth opened wide as she gazed at her aunt. Irena led her up the stairs to sit on top of the monstrous animal. They rode together, Irena behind Miranda with her arms wrapped as far they could go around her pink sequined belly. Irena laughed and spoke into Miranda’s ear. Miranda’s eyes hardly blinked, and when Irena took her hand and waved it at Isaac, she grunted softly.

“Da!” she said.

Isaac smiled and waved back. The pink of his daughter's dress was almost blinding compared to the thick gray skin of the elephant. The creature marched in its circle, led by the trainer with a rope connected to a stake in the ground. It didn't protest, and its eyes hardly moved as it made its last round. When Miranda reached the ground she screamed and clapped her hands. She jumped towards the elephant in small bursts. Irena grabbed her hands, whispered to her and pulled her away. The elephant then began its rides for the rest of the guests.

The members of the church spoke to Isaac periodically. He didn't remember most of their faces, and it was hard to think of things to say. He was surprised to see so many people, and he was shocked by the large table piled with decorated packages and presents inside the tent. Walking over to examine how large the table compared to his van, he knew he'd need to pack and repack them all to get them in it along with the birthday girl of honor.

Irena entered the tent with Miranda and a troop of children. As the director of the Methodist Children's Choir, Irena often exploited their young talent at community functions. She stood in front of them, the four rows of kids shouting "Happy Birthday" at the top of their lungs. Miranda grunted along throwing in some "haps" whenever she felt it necessary. The people clapped and four men carried out a large cake from inside the church. The cake, with its white and pink icing reminded Isaac more of a wedding cake than a birthday cake. Each tier grew smaller and a single giant candle sparkled on top. Irena helped Miranda blow it out and then they both dug a hand into the bottom tier, a tradition Miranda had followed all her life. Irena rubbed a tiny piece on Miranda's nose and she laughed, loud and happy as she plunged her own handful into her mouth.

As the party wound down, Isaac headed towards the elephant's circle. She still plodded along, a few little kids taking advantage of an extra ride as the older guests left.

"It's your turn," Irena hugged him from the side.

"I'm too old for that, Rena," he said.

"You're only eight years older than me!" she said. "And I did it!"

Isaac looked up at the animal; he thought he saw something trapped within the big monotonous eye, but it blinked and rolled over. The trainer helped Isaac up the steps and into the big wooden seat strapped to the elephant's back. He was amazed it didn't slip off the side and crash into pieces on the ground, him along with it. As he sat, he leaned back towards the young man holding the rope.

"How old is the-uh, big lug here?" He leaned forward and patted the elephant's back.

"Misty is fifteen," the trainer said. "She'll retire in another year or so. Free roaming at the zoo for the rest of her life. She'll like it there." He patted her side and Misty began to walk. Isaac felt the dip and lift of her body, and while the little box seemed clumsy and awkward, each step of the animal's walk felt graceful and poised. Misty stopped periodically to play with her trunk, and Isaac was able to look at the festivities closing down around him. He saw a couple of clowns helping his sister load his minivan with gifts, and a circle of kids were playing tag, Miranda included, her pink exterior glowing in the setting sun. He rested his head in his hand and closed his eyes, the soft sway of the broad creature below him easing the tensed lines in his forehead. He found himself rather disappointed when the ride was over. At the trainers command, Misty slowly lowered herself, and sat on the ground. Isaac climbed out of his seat and

down the stairs. With a short pat on Misty's trunk he thanked her for the ride. She didn't look down at him; she didn't even move. Irena and Miranda stood nearby and clapped for Misty and her trainer; Irena held Miranda's hair to keep her from lumbering towards the tired gray creature.

Isaac walked over to his sister and helped carry the last load of gifts to the van.

"Someone should be here to get the tent tomorrow morning. Everything else is cleaned up," Irena said.

"This was too much, Irena," Isaac said. He kissed her head, the right side above the temple. She just smiled and set two blue and pink wrapped boxes on the back seat.

The ride home was loud. Miranda turned whenever she thought Isaac wasn't looking and grabbed a gift. He let her open one, but after she opened the box and found what it was, she threw it—a stuffed turtle—and went for another wrapped package. She laughed every time he pulled a box away from her. When they got in the house, Miranda ran in the living and jumped. She wanted her gifts.

Miranda pulled away and plummeted her body into the couch. She moved it back against the wall, and knocked over a plant sitting on a side table. Dirt tumbled across the floor. She screamed and began to cry.

"Stop it!" Isaac said. She didn't. She began to punch the couch and all the pillows. Isaac ran as fast as his arthritic knees could bend, and grabbed the first box out of the van. He ran in and showed it to Miranda. Immediately she stopped her screeches and looked at the box.

"Move the couch back," Isaac said. She frowned, but he took her hand and led her behind the couch. She put her hands on it and slowly moved it back. Isaac picked up the plant and set it back on top of the table.

"Here," he said. He gave her the gift. She tore it open, not bothering to save the paper, and squealed with delight when she found a package of sparkly hair bands. She tossed it on the couch and looked at Isaac.

"No," he said. Her face began to scrunch up again, so he went outside and brought a pile back. And so the night went, Isaac bringing in a pile every time Miranda began to pout. He walked a steady circle, thinking of how his wife might react.

Isaac sighed and made his last trip out to the van. A large pile of clothes, jewelry, and stuffed animals buried the couch with Miranda sitting in front of them, unsure of what each thing was, but certain they were hers. She guarded them like a large bloated dragon, unable to do anything of substance with its treasure, but defensive nonetheless. She fell asleep amidst her gifts, and Isaac began to pick up the stray stuffed animals that were scattered near the couch. A stuffed duck, with a soft green head and glimmering glass eye, caught Isaac's glance. He picked it up and shook his head as he smiled sadly.

"Oh, Wendy," he whispered. A few years after they were married, he took his new wife duck hunting. Wendy hated it. She yelled loudly and shook the long grasses around her whenever a duck landed in the water nearby. What was supposed to be a three day trip ended after two hours. The whole ride home she cried, and asked Isaac how he could kill a living creature.

At first Isaac laughed, surprised by her overreaction, but she didn't stop crying. It was then she told him she thought she wasn't able to have kids. Isaac had pulled his pickup over to the side of the road and held her hand until she stopped crying. He hadn't known what to say then, and he didn't know what to say after a doctor's appointment twenty years later when she told him she was in the advanced stages of lymphoma. She didn't crying that time; Isaac did. She held him while his head rested on her lap, his large tears left round wet splotches on her gray pants. Those splotches stood out the most in his mind as they matched the spots that began to appear on her skin, last of all her face, as her body began to lose its battle.

Isaac slowly sat in an arm chair and gazed at his daughter. Someday soon he wouldn't be able to care for her on his own, the strain of carrying out her every need and want would be too much of a burden. But that day wasn't today. He closed his eyes while he leaned back against the cushion of the chair. While his daughter snored near him, he imagined he could almost feel himself atop the elephant again, the gentle motion of the great beast below him slowly rocking him to sleep.

Heaven Photographed by Hubble Telescope

And so they ask: “How can you be sure?” “IS it REALLY Heaven?” “When’s the last time you even talked to God?” We never have a direct answer, giving them the answers a layman would accept and understand, such as, “Trust what’s in your heart.” “Heaven is actually everywhere, if you only believe.” “Don’t doubt what God has given us.”

We always avoid the last question. If God wanted to talk to us, he would.

The telescope first picked up sightings the first day in July, a hot humid day, as they all are in July, and we reported back what we saw, the bright light that only seemed to grow brighter. Helen Basker, who had suffered from a heart attack once, and was dead for 37.2 seconds, shivered as she turned away from her computer. “That’s just what it was like,” she said. “Just like that.”

Down in the archives, we see many things. The distant galaxies, scattered bright lights that rarely make a pattern or have a star that died millions of years ago, are the most common, but sometimes we’ll get nebulas—Horsehead, Tarantula, or Eagle—the interstellar clouds of beautiful dust and gas, and these are the most pleasing to look at. We’ll spend hours archiving the images, taking our time to gaze on the bloating pinks and oranges floating through the blackness of space. But these gaseous formations do not compare to what we found that day in July, and Helen couldn’t come back to work for awhile. She said it brought back the fear of death.

After we began to allow visitors, thousands each day, we sort of struggled to keep up with our own work. Their reactions were always so different, so individual and personal to them, and yet, we felt like we’d seen them all before. Grown men and women

would drop to their knees, shouting in tongues with tears gushing down their cheeks as their children stood back in amazement until they too began to cry because that's what their parents were doing.

We sometimes wonder too, if maybe we haven't created something larger than itself, really. One woman refused to leave. She stood in front of the computer for over six hours—three hours past the time limit for visitors—and gaped with her eyes wide and her mouth strained.

“How do we get there?” she said.

No one answered her.

“There's got to be a way to get there. Put us on a ship.”

When no one answered again, she began to panic. She didn't cry, but her eyes changed almost completely white, as if some other being inhabited her skin.

“Tell me! Tell me! How do we get there?” She began to pull at her hair and massage her own temples. The woman who came with her, her daughter, pulled her away from the image, gently.

“My father died three months ago,” she said over her shoulder.

We all nodded. We'd seen and heard it before. We helped the woman sit down in a chair in the welcome area and gave her a few cookies and juice. She calmed down after a few minutes. We all went back to work, collecting different viewpoints of the great white light, but no one commented on how they all looked exactly the same.

The woman came shrieking down the stairs, we heard her foot catch on the hard rubber tread, and the thump she made when she hit the floor. The ambulance came and took her away; they're on standby these days, since we seem to call them at least three

times a week for emotional and physical disturbances. The daughter followed them out, crying.

Sometimes we talk about it, if what we're seeing is really Heaven, but then people like Helen Basker get mad, saying we're not believers. We don't disagree with her, but no one offers up their condolences to her either. We're pretty sure that's what she wants, sympathy for what she went through, feeling her heart give out and then no longer being in existence for thirty-seconds and suddenly existing again. We want to ask her what it was like, if she changed at all from the time her brain and body departed—if she even remembered what it was like to be dead at all or if she made up the light to make herself feel better. But no one ever asks, and Helen doesn't propose any comments either.

The past few days, only amateur astronomers have been hanging around. The first few months, scientists flocked from all over the world—each wanting a session with the telescope, images flashed all over televisions and documentaries were made in mere days. Naysayers denied its existence, and on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC arguments between believers and nonbelievers alike, formulated around Heaven and space, were shown in schools and churches around the world. There were riots of course, proclaiming the apocalypse was upon us, but when nothing happened after a month, and then two, those proclamations died away. Now it's left to amateurs and the everyday visitor, each hoping to notice something that will change the way earth views Heaven.

When they ask how to get there, because every person does in their way, we usually remain silent with simple grins on our faces, hoping to not influence them one way or another. We just remain in front of our computer screens, moving files into folders and photographs into portfolios.

We like to remember one couple in particular. They were young, recently married, and they held hands the entire time they were in the room. At first, they seemed as shocked as the rest of the crowd that passed through that day, some saying that it was brighter than the last time, and definitely bigger, but eventually the two of them relaxed and gazed on it as if they were watching a sunset or an attractive landscape. The young man leaned in to his wife and asked her a question. She didn't hear him so he repeated it.

“How do you think we get there?” he said.

The woman paused and smiled. “Suppose we already are,” she said, and she rested her head against his shoulder as she turned back to the viewing screen.

We continued to face our individual computers, our smiles unchanged, and the light growing brighter by the minute.

Nonfiction

Clue

She sat in her wheelchair without clothes on, her large swollen body hunkered into a black wheelchair in the middle of the room. I looked at my twin sister Sarah and we each knew what the other was thinking. I was right; she was naked.

My mother had called and set up a play date for my sister and me. We liked Christa; we loved Christa. She liked to dress-up and when we played house, she liked to be the pet dog, down on all fours and barking in the closet which served as her doghouse. Or we'd pull out our parents' old trench coats from the costume trunk and play Mystery Club in our bedroom with an unplugged rotary phone and scratch paper to make plans and layouts of other rooms in the house. We had a stuffed animal sidekick, a dog name "Clue," with a Sherlock Holmes hat on which we'd labeled his name with peeling paper stickers, the glue refusing to stick to the plaid material. We searched throughout the house for some sort of mystery—something out of whack. Once, Sarah, Christa, and I counted the jar of coins my brother had hidden in his closet. We put it back but each took a quarter as a fee for "solving" how much was in it. Christa was always on the same page as us, ready to uncover and unravel the next adventure. But then something became different about her. I first noticed it one Sunday morning in church when I left for the bathroom as I always did during the sermon, the most boring part. I walked into a stall and sat there, my white tights around my knees, when I heard someone vomiting in the next stall. I sat for awhile longer, unmoved but cautious, until it didn't stop. I went back and told my mom. I followed her and two other women back to the bathroom, but I hid

behind the wall as I heard them talking. There I learned it was Christa. One woman said to me with a pitiful look, “Christa’s sick.”

Christa stopped going to our school when the cancer in her brain came back a second or third time. I remembered seeing her at the swimming pool one summer in between one of the relapses. It was really cold that day, and everyone was leaving at the same time. Our mother stood behind us as we talked to her in the women’s locker room. As she talked about whatever first-graders who are going to be second-graders talk about, she peeled off her swimsuit and stood completely naked in front of us. I had never seen anyone naked besides myself and my sister, and it was scary. She was extremely thin. She put her clothes on as she talked, her mouth never breaking its smile or her eyes leaving our blanched faces.

Several months later, she was swollen from chemotherapy and as her health worsened, clothes became a nuisance. This was unnatural to me; people wore clothes around other people. I remember thinking that it was the cancer that made her gain weight to four times her previous size and felt extremely stupid when some adult corrected me and said it was her body’s reaction to the chemo treatment. By that time she was going to school in a town twenty minutes away where her mother taught music. That way they could be together if something happened. In her absence, her body had changed so drastically that no one except for Sarah and me recognized her picture on the Sunday schoolroom wall.

On this visit, when we visited Christa at her home, we brought tracings of Disney characters. She and her family were given money to go to Disneyworld, and so Sarah and

I decided to trace pictures for her of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy. We had traced them because we were given a Disney character drawing set for our birthday, and we had wanted them to look nice. We had colored them in and outlined them in thick, black permanent marker. While following the black outline, I had been proud of my handiwork. Now, I was embarrassed. I remembered my mother walking into the living room with us, pushing on our backs as we slowly walked up the stairs and then leaving us there alone. I slid my tracing across the table attached to Christa's chair and tried to watch her eyes above her enormously swollen cheeks. I couldn't imagine her face anymore as it once was in my bedroom, as she barked happily and sat on her haunches, her front paws in the air.

She was so excited about the pictures, she yelled for her mom Colleen to come look at them.

"Look at what Rachel and Sarah drew!" she said.

Her mother proceeded to compliment our artwork. We were avid drawers, lying in front of the television for hours, sketching with markers and colored pencils and paints. I wrote stories, drawing illustrations for each page. I dreamed I would be an artist someday.

"We traced them," Sarah said quietly. I nodded, embarrassed, but I didn't think either of them heard us.

There was a dog, Apricot, a curly haired mix that was deaf. She jumped whenever she saw something move unexpectedly in her vision, and her gangly lumbering body jerked in the opposite direction when I approached. When I finally I left her alone, she eventually came into the living room on her own.

We sat in silence for awhile, waiting for her mother to bring us boxed macaroni and cheese and hotdogs. Colleen sat and helped Christa eat while we watched television. Sarah and I sat on either side of her, flanking her like bookends, and it was hard to come up with things to talk about when we couldn't see each other to read the other's expression. We watched more television until we finished eating. Colleen brought out some board games. I was disappointed. Watching T.V. made it easier. With the flashy cartoons on the screen, I didn't have to look in Christa's direction.

I don't remember all the games we played or what we talked about, but I do know we ended up playing the game of *Clue* for several hours into the late afternoon and evening. It was the first time Sarah or I ever played it, which is probably why Christa chose it. For this game, Christa is Miss Scarlet. It stands out in my mind because that was the character I wanted to pick since red had always been my favorite color. Sarah was probably Mrs. Peacock since she was going through a "blue" phase, and I was Colonel Mustard. I liked his name; it was pungent and strong.

We took our cards from the pile and took turns showing one another any card we had to prove our conjectures as defunct. I liked checking each item off the list. The three cards of truth were hidden away in the small manila envelope in the middle of the game board. There was a real mystery even though it was a game. I could have reached out and discovered the answer, but instead I made small dark x's in the box next to the name of each weapon, room, or person that I saw.

The game lasted forever, even after Christa's four-year-old brother Collin arrived home. He might have been at daycare or at a friend's home for the day. I was infatuated with Collin. He had amazingly smooth tan skin and wispy curled dark hair. At one of

Christa's birthday parties, he had tried to kiss Sarah, his mouth wide open in an "o" as he waddled towards her. Not long after we had become friends with Christa, our parents told us how she was adopted. I was surprised that they were able to have Collin too, since he was so much younger than Christa. My mom told me how some people would try to have children and after adopting, they would end up having one of their own, too. A double blessing.

When my mom arrived to pick us up, I didn't want to say I was tired of *Clue*, so I decided to guess the mystery of the who, what, and where of the game. It was a premature guess. There were several options left on my list of objects, rooms, and people. Part of me wanted to show off for everyone, to show that I could solve an actual mystery on my own; part of me wanted to be done with the game. I guessed the weapon and the murderer—me, Colonel Mustard—but I incorrectly guessed the room where Mr. Body was killed. I happily put the cards back in the tiny manila envelope, glad to step away from the game, and tried to talk to Collin, but he was busy climbing on the furniture. I sat on the couch alone and watched Colleen and my mom talk. I pondered what it was like to wait so long to get something you truly wanted and then have to give it up so quickly. Apricot walked by. I sat up to pet her and she leapt away, scurrying into the kitchen.

Before Christa died, the pastor at our church tells my mom that Christa and he talked about what would happen to her—she knew where she was going and what death meant. When I heard this, it frightened me. How could she possibly know? We all had mysteries inside of us. How did she know at eight years old what was going to happen to her? I lay awake at night, often wondering what it felt like to never be gone, to live

forever in the sky. Something about my mind always thinking—forever and ever—made me want to vomit. I pressed my eyes into my pillow and waited until I saw stars streaming behind my closed eyelids. I imagined death is like that, running through stars.

Christa passed away a few weeks, maybe months, later. It was early in the morning when the phone rang and my mother came into our bedroom to tell us. She walked to my bed first, and I was already awake, the light from the hallway streaming into the dark room.

“Rachel, Christa died this morning,” she said. I immediately crawled out of bed and followed her into her bedroom. I may have asked how she died or where she was, picturing her naked and alone in her wheelchair in the middle of her family’s living room; but my mother told me at some point after I climbed into her bed that Christa was in her parents’ bed when she died. All of us knew how Christa would die and from what, but the when and where wasn’t specified. I buried my face in the pillow. I didn’t know what time it was, but I was scared because I couldn’t make myself cry. In second grade, I cried at everything—stubbing my toes, not being able to sit next to Sarah in reading period, even when a substitute teacher replaced my regular one for the day—but that morning, my eyes were completely dry. I squinted them and pushed my face deep into my mother’s feather pillow and I heard Sarah crying next to me, but I couldn’t express emotion on my face.

At school that day, another friend of mine named Dawn walked up to show me a picture she’d colored from a coloring book. She was going to give it to Christa.

“Christa’s dead,” I said. “She was in her parents’ bed.”

Dawn ran immediately to the teacher. Even in second grade, I knew how undeniably and inconsiderately cold I was then. How shocked she must have felt to hear from me that her friend was gone, without emotion, without sympathy for her unawareness; she'd never see Christa alive again. No one would. I remained at my desk and stared out the window or worked on an art project, either way, I didn't look over to see Dawn crying as the teacher led her out of the classroom.

Sarah and I didn't go to the funeral. My parents didn't force us, and I didn't want to see Christa lying in a casket or put in the cold ground. Even now, looking back, I'm okay with this. The adults around me had called her brave and strong to know at so young an age what death meant. I thought Christa was brave because she knew what life was. She could laugh, steal quarters from her friends' brother, be an unconventional female character while playing house, make a tracing seem like work of genius, and be victorious in the game of *Clue* when her tired friend gave up. I liked to think I quit playing the game because I thought Christa was going to get better eventually. She'd done it before—we'd play again. Maybe she and Sarah both thought I would guess right, both of their hearts racing as I pulled those cards out of the envelope and learned the secrets to Mr. Body's murder. Really, I hope Christa didn't know I was tired of playing—that I was bored with the game she'd chosen. But then again, maybe Christa wasn't worried. Maybe she knew I'd be wrong because she had her own list, and on it, more correct answers than I had.

Hands Full of Rhythm

My father's hands belong to a man who feels music flow through his body like an electric wave. When we traveled in my family's conversion van, where my older brother and twin sister and I each had our own bubble of space but still managed to fight over a renegade arm or leg overlapping into the others' territory, sometimes I would be offered the front seat next to my father. The radio, always loud enough to receive an objection from my mother, blasted oldies that my dad had sung as the lead of a band when he was in college. The second I took a seat next to him, my hands grasping a new book, he'd grab my wrist and begin to conduct the raucously present audio but imagined band. The descending slash of the downbeat, the swooping right and then left of the second and third beats and the ascent to the peaking fourth beat—all on the ictus—were joined together in fluid motion and then repeated. Sometimes he would switch from four-four time to two-four and switch back to test my sense of the tempo. By the time our hands sailed together through three measures, my small fingers clumped into a ball in his strong but gentle grasp, my book would have closed or fallen to the floor where it would remain for the rest of my time in the front seat.

My mother has told me she has always been attracted to men's hands—the palms, thick fingers, and squared fingernails—something about them is appealing. Maybe it's because of their strength and width, how they could cover more area than hers when wrapped around an object. My father told me after making sure my mother wasn't within earshot that he learned how to give back massages because that was the only way I could have come into the world. Back problems run in my family's gene pool, and my father had rubbed my shoulders many times—never sensually, but aggressively, as if he wished

he could take away the curve and deformity in my spine. He'd dig his thumbs into the meat of my lower neck and grit his teeth, as if the strength from his hands could perform miracles.

I had corrective back surgery for scoliosis the summer before my junior year in college. No longer was there a chance of a cure for my spine. My father grew angry with nurses and doctors, but he never let me see his frustration. He'd sit next to my bed and rest his hand on my arm, tapping his fingers once in awhile against my skin. After my first shower after the surgery and my chin-length wild hair had dried in tight curls around my head, my dad came into the room. When he saw my hair, he said, "Your hair is too tight." He pulled a brush from my mom's purse and slowly pulled it from my scalp to the ends of curls. It was the only time he'd ever combed my hair, and his touch reminded me of his mother's, a woman who had only raised boys and always complained when I asked her to pull my long hair into a ponytail, unsure of the exact pressure to use to collect all the right strands into place. When he finished, he said, "There. Now it looks softer." He patted me on the crown of my head, and then sat next to me, his hand gently tapping on my arm in what could have been a four beat pattern of rhythm.

Loaded

In the casket, my grandfather's hands looked flat and tired, his fingernails yellowed, cracked, the left thumb nail chipped diagonally like a jagged tooth. I wanted to reach down and touch his hand, to feel the smooth wrinkles with tiny dark hairs poking out of his skin. Slowly dragging my arm up from where it dangled at my side, I willed it to quickly but astutely brush against his hand. Instead, I settled for his gray-suited arm. Behind me, my dad's sister-in-law pulled out the dried head of a rose from a plastic Ziploc bag. My uncle passed away the year before, and she wanted to include a piece of him with my grandfather who couldn't attend his oldest son's funeral in West Virginia. They both died knowing they wouldn't see the other die. Maybe they preferred it that way.

I avoided the woman rolling around in a wheelchair, Jeannie, my step-grandmother who swore-off our family when she saw a picture of my grandpa with us grandchildren and his ex-wife from my brother's Confirmation. It was an innocent photograph: my parents just wanted a generational picture, and they sandwiched the three of us children between our two disconnected grandparents. Why my step-grandmother didn't come to the celebration herself, I can't say, but it was probably because she didn't particularly like my brother. She was always mad at him for his seemingly unnecessary verbal outbursts; she visibly stiffened when my brother talked, and he was only ten—he talked incessantly.

Earlier that day, before the funeral, Jeannie made sure we had a part in the church service. Grandpa Ivan loved poetry. He'd been forced to memorize poems in grade school, and he could recite them from memory up to the day he died. I read a poem called

“The Village Blacksmith” that he had liked, encouraged to read by my parents since I was an English major. I don’t remember any real words from the poem, but I remember images of hands. I thought of my grandfather’s rough hands: the fingernails we always asked him about as kids, and he readily said it was from smoking while he lit up another cigarette; the hands that clapped and hugged when we performed dances for him in our living room.

In the church, it was hard for those present to hear me; not only was my throat clogged from crying, but I felt as if I was part of putting on a show. I hadn’t wanted to read, but I couldn’t find it within my conscience to have had refused. Jeannie’s children got up to speak, talking of Ivan like a father figure to them in their late middle agedness—but these were people I hardly knew. Someone needed to represent our side of the family, my father’s family. I loved my grandfather, and even though I’m positive he never would have understood my weeping, warbled voice were he alive, he probably would have appreciated the gesture—with pause, a twinkle in his dark brown eyes, and a cynical yet sincere “thank you.”

For the middle of February, it really wasn’t that cold out. The wind bit unsympathetically at our skin, but behind the blue flimsy walls of the tent, we tolerated the chilly weather. Jeannie sat with her children, fathered by other men in her life years ago, but she still seemed inconsolably alone. I think it was the way she held her mouth. As a child, I always noticed that she held her mouth open for a few seconds, her lips twitching ever so slightly, before she spoke. The same phenomenon happened before she closed it as well, as if she were still thinking midsentence and didn’t want to be interrupted. Now, she sat, her mouth open and twitching like I remember, but she had no

words to say. It'd been years since we'd heard her orders. No cutting remark to my brother, no order to my sister or me to sit with our "butts" completely flat on the chair rather than sitting with our legs folded under us. Without our grandfather there, she had no command over us anymore.

The shells fell simultaneously from the seven rifles—first one set, then another round, and the final seven. A man stood and held a computerized trumpet to his lips, relaying the recorded "Taps" to the small group of people that stood around the coffin. Whether people cried or not is unclear. His death wasn't necessarily expected, but it was still a relief. My grandfather had wanted to die for years.

We stood behind my father who sat in one of the chairs under the blue tent. The funeral homes, they always used blue. It was calming. We stood at the end of the row of chairs, away from Jeannie.

When the service was over, the ceremony to the official veteran's burial, Jeannie wheeled herself up to our family. She held several shells of the bullets from the twenty-one gun salute. She rolled them nervously in her knotted hands as she offered them to us. "Did you all get one?" We thanked her and took a few more, handing them to each other. There wasn't much else to say. We stood there awkwardly, looming over her until my mom leaned down to hug her. My sister followed suit and maybe my brother as well, but I stayed back. I felt like I must stand strong for my father. Someone must stay on his side. Someone needed to remember the man that he did. As I clenched my fists around the shot-gun shell and stood my ground, I remembered my grandfather's hands, wishing I had touched them when I had the chance.

The Incessant Wavering of the Adoration and Alienation of a Twin Sister

The Beginning

You will share a womb.

You will be born first.

Forever after you will be blamed (jokingly) for breaking your sister's amniotic sac.

Growing Up Identically

You will wear matching outfits and wear ponytails on opposing sides of your heads. People will get you confused with each other, and you will correct them. Once, someone will ask if you are your sister. You'll say no. "So you're Rachel, then." You'll say no to that, too. Laughing, you'll correct yourself, confused at eight-years-old why you didn't know who you are.

You will celebrate birthdays together. Your mother will make two separate cakes until you get old enough not to care anymore. You'll take turn opening gifts, unless they are the same item—purchased twice—which you open together, each trying to be the first one to reveal her prize and cry out with glee. This is one day you do not mind sharing.

Together your sister and you will climb into bed on cold winter nights when one of you feels the chill of a nightmare or the other doesn't want to sleep alone. You will remember the day your parents buy you matching twin beds, thinking the beds were named after you and your sister. These will be the same set of beds you find her sleeping under, the day your parents think their four-year-old has been kidnapped or trapped in a

well, and you find her because it is the same place you would go if you had popped a Mylar balloon given to your mother, the balloons reserved only for the most special of occasions, and you had only meant for it to be a hot air balloon ride for Barbie and her extroverted band of female friends. Feeling guilty about ruining the gift to your mother, she crawls under the bed and falls asleep. Years later, you will feel guilty about your childhood self relishing the attention given to you and only you from all the neighbors and family friends that come to help look for her and keep you distracted from the sister that might have suddenly been taken away from you. You will also feel guilty when you will remember with anger the sting of falling off the swing set face-first and smashing your nose in the dirt to find that actually no one really does care about you that day. As you will retell it later, you will feel like you always knew where she was—you are connected in spirit after all—and maybe your heroism is a consequence of ESP.

She will always make room for you on the playground. You will sometimes go climb alone on the tall single metal pole with the tire cemented at the bottom. The feeling of dangling twenty-five feet in the air is exhilarating, and it doesn't occur to you that you could fall. But when you tire of hanging from a pole by yourself, she is there to welcome you. You play soccer with her and her classmates (you'll be the goalie, so you're still rather alone), and for awhile you feel as if you belong in a group, thanks to your doppelganger in pink wind pants (yours are purple) and an extra-large t-shirt.

You will always feel plain in her presence. Alone you are shy, but with her you are complete. Her smile, her wit, her laughter echoes yours, but louder. She will laugh when you are ten and you tell her that God "broke the mold" when he made her. You

weren't good enough as a prototype—too boring and ugly—and so you claim he made a newer, better version. You laugh, too.

You will dance for hours in the living room and on the front porch, the small tape-player you share blasting your father's oldies or Celine Dion full volume. You'll buy a cassette tape together by Ace of Base which will be your first pop musical purchase; somehow it'll end up being "hers," (after all, she and her friends lip-synched "I Saw the Sign" at the all-grade talent show in music class and though you went along when they practiced—you were more interested in one of the girl's hermit crabs than the dancing), but you don't mind her having it because you know where it is. The two of you create dances that you won't remember when you try to show your mother, but you'll delight in your presentation just the same. The rhythm catches your and her feet in a similar, rapturous way, and you run around the carpet in circles, as if you're both drunk or in love.

You will play dress-up, always with the same plot: she, the fun-loving popular girl makes friends with you, the lowly introvert, thereby popularizing both of your reputations held by others in your imagined society. You will write plays and she stars in them with you, making costumes and performing on the stage at the St. Mary's Elementary School where your mother works as a music teacher. Your biggest work, "From City to Country, Country to City," a complete rip-off of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* with allusions to Disney characters, will be much practiced but never performed. On Saturdays, you will often be asked by other teachers who are doing lesson

plans for the upcoming week to “keep it down.” You stop writing when your sister says one of them isn’t very good, and you realize you have been writing to impress her and it isn’t working any more.

In third grade, you will switch places with each other on April Fool’s day at school. No one notices.

You will still continue to wear other people’s clothing and pretend you are debutantes, teachers, and astronauts up until you are twelve, the day she and a friend shove you out of the room in just your purple Hanes underwear. You will hear their laughter behind the closed door and no matter how hard you push you can’t budge it. As you sprint to the bathroom, your older brother’s friend sees you. He gasps as he falls back into your brother’s room. His wide, surprised eyes will be in your mind forever. You lock the door and will cry unremittingly until your father comes home from work. You don’t want to talk about it with him so you stop.

You will feel your heart stop during an innocent game of neighborhood hide-and-seek when you shut the garage door on her head. You have hid in the garage and open the automatic door two feet off the ground to let her know where you are. As she lies on all fours and looks into the dim dust-ridden room, you push the button, not realizing she has begun to crawl forward. Her head is facing the other way, as the door pins her down, and the girlish warbled screams of your male neighbor reverberate in your skull with your own thoughts: “You’ve killed her.” And you swallow the vomit that’s come up to your

throat after she stands up and runs to the house to lock you out. The pressurized door was made for stupid kids—it opens when it detects something underneath it. You will fear garage doors for the rest of your life, but fear causing injury to her still more. Even now, this memory will make your stomach heave and tears come to your eyes.

The Causal Interplay of Personality Formation

You will suffer a series of firsts:

1) You are the first to learn of your friend's death in second grade after a battle with a malignant brain tumor. She was asleep in her parents' bed when she died. Both of you go sleep in your own parents' bed, but you can't get yourself to cry like your sister and you don't know why. You hide your face and pretend.

2) You are the first to get your period, and unwilling to accept this mandatory bodily maturation to womanhood, you pretend to be sick with the flu for a day or two and it goes away. When she gets hers, you let her think you haven't gotten yours yet. Really, you just didn't want to go through it alone.

3) You will be the first to be prescribed a back brace for adolescent scoliosis. Informed that this will most likely keep you from surgery in the future, you go with your mother to the Orthotics and Prosthetic Specialties, Inc, where your specialist is a tiny man named Mark whose voice modulates from normal to a hushed squeak when he tells you sad stories about other people in worse situations suffering with the same deformity. He lets you know "things could be worse," but you'll still be angry when he brings in the three-foot long plastic body wrap and pulls it around you. He'll come back multiple times

before it fits you, and you and your mother will cry without speaking to each other until she quietly says, “It’ll be okay. It’s going to be okay.”

Your sister will suffer with you when you both wear back braces in junior high. You’ll shop for extra-large clothes to hide the sharp hard points of the plastic Boston braces and cry with frustration how everything looks “weird.” Since your back shifts back with your hump of ribs, you notice your chest is uneven; the left side is bigger. Your mother will cry too, but only because she blames herself for passing on the hereditary disease, not the clothes.

In school, you’ll help each other adjust the Velcro straps in back. You’ll try to make yours as small as possible, the plastic sides almost touching when the thick white Velcro is pulled tight in hopes that no one will notice the bulky plastic edges with your extra large clothes draped over them. One day when all your classmates are gathered to read through the script of the junior high musical, you’ll sneeze and the Velcro will come loose, the fabric ripping so you feel as if your own flesh is being pulled off your ribs. You’ll feel tears come to your eyes as you sit up trying to make your back erect in your chair so no one sees the brace sticking out against your shirt. Your sister will fix it in the bathroom for you later, and you both laugh at your misfortune.

When you are mad, you will punch each other in the breasts, aggressively and hard, and sometimes it will bruise, much the same way the marks from pinching will when you are younger, digging your fingers deep into the tight flesh of the other’s arms.

You hope to give the last injury—it hurting more and longer than the rest—to make the fighting stop. It does, but only for a while.

Only twice will either of you say, “I hate you,” only to apologize minutes later.

You will play sports together, often subbing in and out for each other because the coach sees the two of you as one being. Instead of names, you’ll be known as one of “The Twins.” Even though your talents are similar, you both know where each of your strengths lie. You will consider yourself a good defender, keeping your hands to yourself while making the ball-handler move the direction you want her to go. She will often go in at the end of basketball games and be asked to shoot a three-pointer to tie the game. More often than not, she’ll make it.

For your sixteenth birthday, together you’ll receive a gold Grand Prix with a giant green bow on top of it to share. You say you get to drive first because you were born first. She agrees, but only after you give her the keyless entry and you stick with the manual key. You choose precedence over ease. You take turns driving to and from school, and you never need to adjust the driver’s seat.

When Jealousy Becomes You

She will experience a series of firsts:

1) A senior boy who sits by you in pre-Calculus your junior year will ask her out. He plays on the basketball team, plays trumpet in the marching band (like you), and is up

for Homecoming King. You help them with their homework on nights before volleyball and basketball games. You aren't attracted to him—too outspoken and goofy for your taste—but you still wonder what he sees in her that he doesn't see in you.

2) They will kiss after a basketball game. It's just a peck, but it takes your breath away to see how easily she accepts his lips. You've never kissed anyone on the lips that wasn't family, and your sister somehow seems older, wiser than you since she kisses boys in public. When they part ways, you run up to her. You'll say, "You guys kissed!" She'll look at you with raised eyebrows and a frown. "So?"

3) He will cheat on her with a senior girl who once wore a bedazzled tank top to school that said, "Sexy: Doesn't mean you have to have sex." Your sister will cry a lot and you promise not to tell your parents. You hate him for this, and you know that she should hate him too.

As you drive to school in the Grand Prix you will ask, "Why don't you break up with him?"

She'll answer quietly, "Because I still love him."

You try not to laugh.

You will cry the nights you bring home your report cards, seventh grade through senior year, with strings of A's listed one right after another in a perfect uniform line. But it is never the same as a B+ or B in a course that she complains about daily, and your parents always seem to praise the prodigal. You thank them in your valedictorian speech, and you hope that maybe that is enough to get the praise you feel you deserve. You and

your sister share the graduation party, and no one, family or guest, comments on your speech.

Years later, while cleaning out old school paraphernalia with your mother, you find old brochures and application forms sent by Harvard, Yale, and Stanford that you will not even remember. Your mother smiles and won't let you throw them away. She will say simply, "I was proud."

You will ask your sister to be your roommate at college on a bus ride back from some high school event that didn't mean as much as her answer: "Yes." You were both afraid to ask the other, aware that maybe it was time to venture apart. For the rest of the ride home you are giddy.

You will not like the new boy she falls in love with in college. For awhile, you watch *Jeopardy!* with them until you get tired of the sexist jokes made when he and his roommate guess more of the answers right. You will avoid being around the two of them in the college dorm room you share with her, and you will in turn meet a boy she does not like. You will like how he tries to make her like him: he learns a song on guitar to play for her, he offers to cook meals for the three of you, and he helps carry her luggage to the car before Christmas break. She learns to love him like a brother, and the three of you will spend time together when her significant other is not around.

She will experience another series of firsts:

1) She will be proposed to by this same college boy she has dated for over two years. It is January. They go to dinner. He asks her outside after opening her car door. She asks, “Does Rachel know?” When he replies with a no, she begins to cry. She says yes, and they will reenact it for you later. You will be as shocked as she is, and when they leave to go tell his grandparents you will lie on your bed and sob for fifteen minutes—without reason. Or at least you don’t admit it is because you don’t want to let her go on her own, without you. You try to tell your boyfriend and your mother about the aching in your chest, but they grow angry. You’re supposed to be happy.

The wedding plans fall apart when she is offered a grant to a different graduate school than him. You are overjoyed when it is the same school you have chosen. They live in different states for two years, and she becomes less and less excited to see him. When he visits, she doesn’t want to be alone with him, but asks you to stay around. Most of the time, you decline her invitation.

2) Her heart will be broken when she admits to falling out of love. She will not talk about it, but you’ll hear her crying through the wall that separates your rooms in the apartment you share. She will not tell anyone how she feels because of the other heart she knows she must break.

3) She will end her engagement after two years. Secretly, you will be happy—not because of her sadness, but because of her ability to recognize it.

At least that’s how you will justify it.

The Reality of Sharing Too Much

You will be proposed to by the man you have dated for four years who has carried you and your sister's baggage for just as long. He has already asked for her "permission." She is there when he takes a knee and asks if you will marry him. You already know the answer, but having her there makes you know it is right. She takes pictures of the two of you and smiles. Unlike your experience on the flip side, she's joyful for you. You switch roles; she must help you plan a wedding after you helped her plan one that never happened. This time, she must let her sister go first.

You and your future husband will ask your sister to move in with you—to be the "Cellar Dweller" in your new house. She hesitates at first; she doesn't want to infringe on the newlywed couple, but then accepts, knowing all of you will benefit from the cut in rent.

You will weep the night before the wedding, deep sobs like thunder caving in and out of your chest as you lie on your bed. You wonder how you will marry the man who asked her (your sister, the maid of honor—or as you will write it in the wedding program, the "Best Woman") to sit at another table so his parents could join you and the groom at the rehearsal dinner. She is left to sit with another bridesmaid and the pianist and her husband. The perfectionist, organized part of your brain wonders why there wasn't a seating plan, but part of your heart aches because you wonder why she would be mad at you the night before your wedding.

She will curl your hair and put a flower in it.

You will get married. She stands behind you and fixes your dress.

You will both regret your decision to live together after the wedding to “save on rent and gas,” but really you just didn’t want to let her go, to have her out on her own, a twenty-something girl who helped you make friends and approved your outfits before you went off to school. You’ll have been each other’s confidante, backbone, shoulder to cry on, and security blanket. But sharing everything for so many years has its consequences; some things are meant to be only yours.

You will still be afraid that if she goes, you’ll lose her forever, the copy, the doppelganger, the mold-breaker, and she’ll be different when you meet again. What will it be like to meet people as a wife, rather than as a twin sister? You will wonder if she thinks the same thing. Really though, dear sister, you know it is for yourself you fear.