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If I Remember Correctly

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ABSTRACT

This portfolio includes original fiction, plays, and creative nonfiction, the best of my work as a creative writing minor at Cedarville University. The two fiction pieces experiment with structure, one through a non-linear form and one through non-conventional dialogue. My one-act play attempts to lyrically combine dialogue and poetry. Six pieces of creative nonfiction, the majority of the portfolio, relate stories directly from life, but the entire collection relies on my own memories – which may or may not be accurate.

IF I REMEMBER CORRECTLY

by

Kristin Troyer

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to
the Faculty of the Department of Language and Literature at Cedarville University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor

Cedarville, Ohio

2012

Approved by

For Megan,
who reads my writing and understands it,
and who could have written a far better dedication
in haiku

INTRODUCTION

My mother likes to remind me of a time (or maybe multiple times) when I was small, around three years old, and she told me to go pick out a book to read together. After a bit, I returned to the old striped couch, a color somewhere between brown and orange, carrying a stack as large as my little arms could muscle. Brunette curls bobbing, I announced, “Many ‘tories, Mommy, many ‘tories!”

The obsession grew. By the time I was eight, nine, ten, and in the Book-It reading program, I was setting goals of twenty-five books per month, and I never failed to reach my goal. Said this eight-year-old self, “Aren’t books great, Mom? You can just *go* places.” These are philosophies I hope to keep for the rest of my life.

My family has greatly shaped my love of stories. When I was young they read to me and provided books for my own literary adventures. Now they graciously listen to and read and watch the stories I tell, whether these stories are verbal, on paper, or in the theatre. I have repaid this gift by telling stories about my family, mostly because there is no one I know better, no one I love more, and to be honest, no one who confuses me quite so much. Typically I write in order to understand the thoughts or happenings that disturb me, and I tend to reiterate these same themes until I have purged the confusion from my system. My family, as the ones who both delight and baffle me, had little hope of escape. They definitely got the raw end of the deal when it comes to my storytelling.

As I chose the pieces to be included in this collection, I began to see just how much my family has influenced my writing. My religious heritage, my position as the fifth of six siblings, my pity for those who do not have a family like mine – such ideas dominate the stories I tell, whether real or imagined. A few of the nonfiction and fiction pieces even mirror each other in content, paralleling characters and situations. Perhaps it is a stretch to say that all of the pieces included will cohere in this way, but let me explain.

The story “These Past Three Years” was written two years earlier than the nonfiction piece, “Black and White and Red All Over,” but grew out of the same event. The fading memory of my sister and I talking with our older brother across a glass wall is still strong enough to force me to write in an attempt to drive away the heaviness in my stomach whenever I think of it. This is the very last image in “These Past Three Years,” only with an older and younger sister. As I tried to understand my brother’s choices, I wondered, does history repeat itself? What if his own children someday find themselves in a similar situation? All of the characters in this story are named after my nieces and nephews, both as a nod of affection and out of curiosity what they might be like ten years from now. When I wrote the parallel nonfiction piece I had already forgotten about the story; apparently the fiction version was not enough, and the idea of my brother, the prodigal, continues to disturb me.

“Waves” and “I Am Elizabeth Proctor” both deal with my father’s sickness, though at different stages. In fact, it was the kidney stones described in the first piece that allowed the doctors to discover his cancer, which figures in the second. (Sometimes I wonder why I have never written about my mother; perhaps I will have to write a story examining this phenomenon.) In both of these pieces appear all of my siblings, for my memory cannot separate the events from the relationships.

As embarrassing as this is to admit, my singleness has apparently been another source of confusion, spawning another two of the pieces in the collection. These are also rooted, if indirectly, in my family. The story “Single, Seeking Bereaved” grew out of a conversation with my mother about my frustrations with dating and the absence of men in my life. I hid this vulnerability behind the pathetic-ness and (I hope) humor of Ella Mae, but in “My Favorite Gem,” I decided the time had come to face the reality of my own singleness. My family inserted themselves here as well, though more in the background.

The remaining nonfiction, “Learning India” and “A Doll Story,” both recount parts of a six-week mission trip to India, an experience that was alternately misery and adventure. Again, I

wrote in order to process my thoughts and again, my family's influence is inescapable. Without my sister's company and commiseration, for example, the trip would have been much harder. As our time neared its end, we anticipated seeing our family at home, even while we felt guilty for abandoning the children to whom we had become a family. Family means stability, and these children had none.

Mary Magdalene is an historical, almost mythical figure as well as a biblical one, envisioned by artists in nearly every time period as a contemporary. *Magdalene*, the one play included in the portfolio, began with the question of what her infamous seven demons might represent, and how she would have felt when the One who rescued her from those demons was gone. Abandoned by parents and husband, she found a family among the other followers of Christ, but finds herself alone again at the start of the play. Her isolation is destructive.

You may draw what conclusions you like about my family and their influences on my life. If you read the entire collection you will have met most of them in some form or another. Suffice it to say that some of these stories I have already shared with them and some I'm not sure I ever will.

FOREWORD

Most libraries have an entire section labeled “Christian literature.” Such aisles yield books with titles like *The Amish Midwife* or *The Embers of Love* or *When the Devil Whistles*, books that claim to integrate faith and romance, or faith and science fiction, or faith and history, leaving a person wondering just how many Amish romance novels and end-times thrillers are possible. Without judging the sincere believers who produce and consume these works, I have to say that much of this type of writing requires little thought, inspires little contemplation, and furnishes little satisfaction. As thinking Christians, we need to reexamine what bookstores and libraries have interpreted for us as Christian literature, to define this hazy term for ourselves, and then to alter our thinking and our habits accordingly.

The basis for a discussion on Christianity and literature must begin very generally, by asking, *What is the purpose of literature, any literature?* Any writing can be viewed at two levels, idea and craft. From the idea level, we should discover something about ourselves or the world around us, or at the very least, be inspired to think more deeply about a given subject.

The need for idea in literature is solidly rooted in Scripture. God identifies himself in John 1 as the Word, the description that became reality. The Greek semantic range for *logos* includes possible translations of “topic,” “motive,” or “reasoning.” Since before Creation, the Word – the reason, the idea – has been in place, speaking and creating. A Christian understanding of literature must take into consideration a God whose very identity is communicative.

Craft, on the other hand, goes beyond the realm of ideas into skill, beauty, and the overall “goodness” of a work. For many believers the merits of this second level may be more difficult to understand, perhaps because our mindset regarding everything from careers to churches is one of programs and budgets and practicability. The modern mind tends to equate value with usefulness rather than pleasure. To appreciate the value of craft in literature – play of

language, showing versus telling – we may have to rediscover why we as humans, created *imago Dei*, should even take pleasure in literature.

First, we are created in the image of a creative God, a God who thought of completely new ideas and who used words to bring those ideas into being. From the story of Creation, we see that God enjoys beauty. He created lights and plants and creatures, and at the end of each day, the writer comments that it was “good,” which can also be translated as “pleasing” or “beautiful.” In the Incarnation, God reiterated his opinion of his beautiful Creation, voluntarily limiting himself to become like those he created; even though it is broken, God still sees and enjoys the beauty of his Creation. By giving our attention to craft and beauty, whether in God’s Creation or in man’s own creative work such as literature, we function as images of our creative, beauty-loving, incarnate God.

Not only did God use words to create, but throughout Scripture we see the value He places on exact words. Many times He names and re-names people according to their character: Jacob, the deceiver, becomes Israel, he who struggles with God; the name Abram, which means exalted father, must morph to Abraham, father of many. In the Garden of Eden, God gives this onus of naming to Adam, passing along the responsibility of language to the very first man. God takes little pleasure in halfway attempts; our art should reflect his, excellent in beauty and precise in craft.

Scripture, God’s lingual revelation to his creation, may provide a model for our own writing, specifically in the use of image to convey truth. Even young writers are taught to show and not tell, and Scripture, from prophets to parables, abounds with examples of allegory and image. It is essentially creative nonfiction, with its highly stylized language and attention to minutiae. In an article titled “Thinking Christianly About Literature,” Leland Ryken suggests, “The Bible is in large part a work of imagination.... If the message of the Bible were all that mattered, there would have been no good reason for biblical poets to put their utterances into intricately patterned verse form, or for biblical storytellers to compose masterfully compact and

carefully designed stories” (“Thinking,” 25-26). The God who reveals himself through the written Word has given us permission by precedent to delight in well-crafted literature.

Beyond the philosophical and theological justification for literature, there remains the simple fact that it benefits people. “We are drawn to stories because our own life is a story and we are looking for help,” Daniel Taylor writes in “In Praise of Stories.” “They help by giving us courage to be the kinds of characters we should be in our own stories, and by making us laugh, empathize, and exercise judgment” (Taylor, 407-408). People have an innate sense that the world is somehow broken, and desire for things to be set right. Stories attract because in them we see ourselves and our lives reflected; there is comfort and hope in finding that others experience similar difficulties within their life narratives.

God, though not bound by time, has placed his Creation within time, living out the narrative arc of a story He wrote before the foundation of the world. If we humans are honest with ourselves, we find that we sense that the story has not yet reached its end, but that the climax is yet to come. Our desire to tell and hear stories, actual or imagined, comes directly from the great Storyteller. Sometimes these stories reveal our desire for a clear beginning, middle, and end, and sometimes they reflect the unfinished story of our world.

Literature, then, allows us to explore what is complicated, to create beauty from confusion. With inherent themes of fall and redemption, and a creative process that is itself redemptive, literature seems to be not only permissibly, but *essentially* Christian.

What does it mean to be a Christian within the realm of literature? Because of our basis for this work, grounded in our likeness to a revelatory, naming, incarnate, beauty-loving, creative God, our standards for the literature we read and write should be different from those of non-believers. At the very least, our rationales will diverge.

First, as regards Christian standards in reading, individuals will naturally differ. Let us simply say that we can appreciate the two levels of literature, idea and craft, separately. Though

we may not always agree with content or ideas, we can still welcome a well-crafted piece of writing for its beauty and its attentiveness to the God-given gift of language. The opposite may also be true; the ideas presented may be thought-provoking and logical and may even conform to our own values, but with little attention to technique. We may read either kind of piece for its respective merits, recognizing its strengths and weaknesses, but such literature should not constitute our only reading. Instead, we should give our attention to well-written literature with a redemptive worldview, regardless of the author.

Christians who are writers should also concern themselves with the realms of both craft and ideas. However, I would suggest that our notions of Christian themes in writing may need to be broadened. If we return to Scripture as our model, we find a book that does not shy away from any topic, no matter how “dirty.” It has been remarked that the Bible as a movie would have to be rated R for the mature themes and the graphic sex and violence contained in almost every book. Neither do we need to restrict ourselves to the safe subjects; our responsibility is not to ignore, but to approach all areas redemptively, as Scripture does. Richard Terrell, in “Christian Fiction: Piety Is Not Enough,” claims that “The desire to avoid offending sensibilities in regard to dialogue and human situations often results in...a holding back from the kind of writing that may evoke true inspiration or authentic villainy. Indeed, such fiction seems guided by an overriding necessity of avoidance” (Terrell, 244). This rule applies to nonfiction as well as fiction.

Christians who write ought to be truth-tellers and redemption-bringers. As truth-tellers, all of truth falls within our artistic realm, and this includes issues commonly ignored in Christian writing, problems like divorce, suicide, and same-sex attraction, as well as more positive concerns. Truth says that life under the fall is messy, dirty, and complicated, and believers are arguably the only ones equipped to deal properly with this reality. Creative nonfiction poses a special challenge in this area, since the writer must deal with actual people

and events and information, and memory is often unhelpful, adding entire scenes while remaining strangely sketchy on others.

Let us first establish that we should not write what we know to be false. That said, sometimes art demands that we add unremembered details, even rearrange some sequences, as long as the result is true to the characters and events. Since the life of the mind does contain truth, imaginings may qualify as nonfiction – but they should be labeled as such. Truth requires humility. The gift of writing allows us to explore deeper truths hiding behind apparent, surface truth.

As redemption-bringers, we are free to confess that the world is broken and not progressing upward, but downward. The reality of redemption does not mean that every story must end happily, for that is not telling the truth; this is perhaps one of the main faults of contemporary Christian writing. However bleak a work of literature appears, though, the possibility of redemption, human or divine, should still be allowed. Redemptive writing also has the responsibility to not glorify evil. Evil, while in life and literature may be temporarily victorious, even desirable in the way that evil is desirable, should not be celebrated or applauded.

Our default definition of redemption as salvation or release may be unhelpful in this case, but if we think of redemption as exchange or sacrifice, the possibilities for this theme within stories broaden. Nor is redemption synonymous with conversion, in the sense of a crisis decision to live for the Lord. Some very cheap and untruthful literature can and has been built off the premise that after conversion life changes dramatically and ultimately leaves one well-liked by those who matter. Sometimes in conversion stories, “The criterion of ‘cleanliness’ demands that really bad aspects of character may not be portrayed.... So, there is likely to be little contrast communicated” (Terrell, 245-246). Rather, to write redemptively is to show the eternal significance of every act, to tell the truth about even the messy issues, and to accurately portray evil as evil.

* * *

A clear understanding of the value of literature, including both idea and craft, and a commitment to truth-telling and redemption-bringing heighten our responsibilities as both readers and writers. This may seem somewhat of a burden, but “The world is...worthy of the writer’s portrayal and understanding and love,” as Ryken says. “The very form in which God inspired the writers of the Bible to write shows that the gift for literary composition bears God’s imprint” (“Thinking,” 32). God has offered us the freedom to enjoy, as He enjoys, the truth and beauty of language.

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THESE PAST THREE YEARS

My dad calls me his little teapot. Not because I'm short and stout, he insists, although that's true too, but because even when I'm boiling inside, I'll be whistling away on the outside. It's funny, because Leegan is so opposite, and sometimes I wonder how we could've come from the same parents. But I guess she's more like Mom, and I'm more like Dad. Except Dad doesn't whistle, he sighs. Loudly. That's how we know when he's upset. Usually at Leegan.

She was supposed to be home by midnight on the weekends, but Dad goes to bed early and he's a heavy sleeper, so she usually got away with being late. Mom would have thrown a fit, but Leegan likes to see how far she can push Dad. Sometimes I think she wants him to yell. I was home that night because Dad wouldn't let me go with Chloe and her family to the lake house. He was afraid I wouldn't be back in time for conditioning the next day. But Leegan was allowed out, even though she had to be at the same practice I did.

I was waiting in the basement, had already watched *Les Mis* and was making a sketch from a photo of Leegan and me when we were little, her trying to smother me with kisses while I screamed as any self-respecting month-old child would. The phone interrupted the whirr of the satellite box and Dad's whistling snores, and jogged my arm, elongating Leegan's button nose by several inches. Probably an emergency surgery. Dad was on call this weekend. The ringing stopped and I could hear his muted voice coming down through the air vents. When the murmuring ended, I heard him sigh, one of those long, breathy, what Leegan and I called "pffff" sighs. One of those bad highway accidents probably, or maybe a shooting. Hearing the creak of floorboards, I met Dad at the top of the stairs.

"Hey, Dad. Going in?"

"No. Leegan was in an accident."

Tiny frogs started bouncing from my stomach up to my throat as I imagined Leegan's truck smashed by a semi or upside-down in a ditch. "Is she okay?" even though I knew she wasn't.

"Well she's not in the hospital, so she's not too bad. She ran the truck into a tree."

Oh. That kind of accident.

Crap.

"I need to go see her. Do you want to come?"

"Yeah, hang on." I walked back downstairs, locking my knees because they threatened to buckle, and grabbed some flip-flops and two hoodies, one for me and her matching one. The scent of her Tango Mango lotion sent orange spirals dancing through my otherwise blank brain. Dad backed the car out of the garage into the dark, warm night. It reminded me of how we used to leave at four in the morning to visit our grandparents in Virginia, a ten-hour drive from mid-Indiana. Dad would carry Leegan and Mom would carry me, still in our pajamas, out to the car, thinking we were asleep. Leegan would open her eyes and smile at me, then zip them tight so they wouldn't know. Since she did, I did. We're only two years apart, but I always wanted to be just like her.

"Fireflies are still up." Dad pointed to the wheat field bordering our yard, where tiny beams of light telegraphed love-signals to each other.

"Did you know that female fireflies can't fly?"

"I read somewhere that there are something like two thousand species of fireflies."

"Hmm."

Dad sighed, and I remembered watching fireflies with Leegan about a year ago.

She didn't even hear the whoosh of the screen door as I stepped out onto the back patio. My eyes were still adjusting to the dark, so all I saw was a shadow as she sailed backwards toward me in her hammock, crashing me back into the door. We both yelped.

“Ow! Good grief, Leegan, what are you doing?”

“Sorry. I was... working out.”

I snorted. “Yeah, pushing yourself around in a hammock will really strengthen those quads.” I settled myself in the swing across from her and pulled my feet up so the light wind could blow me around.

“Hey, nice job today. Good for a first game,” she said.

“I missed the ball.”

“It was way over your head. No way you could have reached it.”

“Rachel could have.” Our regular goal keeper, and Leegan’s best friend, who was out on family vacation.

“Rachel’s two years older and like six inches taller than you.”

I didn’t argue. We were silent as the night sounds harmonized around us, accompanying the firefly dance across the pond – wind through the wheat, bass bullfrogs and shrill peepers, locusts, and a light tapping sound I didn’t recognize.

“Listen – hear that?” Leegan said. “That knocking. Those are carpenter ants. They do all their hammering after dark.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “I am fourteen years old. I’m not that stupid.”

We were quiet for another moment, and then Leegan started violently swinging her hammock again. “Where’s Dad?”

“Not back yet. Guess it’s just us tonight.”

“Yeah. No kidding. Hey, look how the fireflies are reflected in the water. You know, I feel kind of sorry for them. All light and no sound and only a couple of days to do it. Must be kind of frustrating. I’d rather go out with a bang.”

I imagined the bang when Leegan’s truck hit the tree, and remembered how close I had felt to my sister that night. *What are you trying to prove, Leegan?*

Dad parked by the bank, and we crossed the street to the courthouse, the same building that housed our county jail.

“She’s just here for now,” the cop or guard or whoever he was told us. “We’ll move her to ju-vee in the morning, since she’s only seventeen.”

“Was anyone with her in the truck?” Dad asked.

“No. Just her, and as far as we can tell, no harm but some cuts and bruises.”

Through the glass front of her tiny holding cell Leegan saw us coming and leaned her head back against the wall. Her legs were curled under her on the wooden bench. The cop unlocked the door and the smell of vomit layered on urine rolled out. Leegan didn’t move, so Dad went in and I followed.

“You okay?” Dad’s eyes were squinched, his face red, and he kept pinching the bridge of his nose, but not because of the smell.

“Yeah, I guess,” she mumbled.

You hear about how people slur their words or stagger when they’re drunk. I couldn’t tell with Leegan. Or maybe she wasn’t actually drunk anymore. Maybe the impact of the tree had sobered her, or enough time had passed for the effects to wear off.

“Where were you coming from?”

“Rachel’s,” she sniffed. “We were just hanging out.”

Her words were clear enough, but slow, like she had to sound each one out as she said it. Dad sat down on the bench and put an arm around her. Said nothing. I stood and mentally measured the cement cubicle. Smaller than my bedroom was all I could figure out. A few minutes later the cop poked his head in.

“Sir, we’re sending a tow to pick up the truck. Do you want to see the site for any reason?”

“Is there any damage we’ll have to fix?”

“No sir, just a dent in the tree, and it’ll be fine. Took the impact a little better than the truck. Truck’s totaled.”

Isaiah’s truck. The one he sold to Leegan as her first vehicle when she turned sixteen. It was old and gray with a red stripe on the side and sounded like a bomb going off every time it started; I think our cousin was glad to pass it on. For some reason I got this déjà vu feeling every time I heard it, this visual of Leegan balancing on the edge of a bridge and of the feeling of damp grass waving against my legs.

“I’ll beat you to that last white line,” Quinn had challenged.

Nobody used the old highway since it had been closed two months earlier for repairs. The road crews were almost done, though, and we were going to have to find another place to rollerblade in the evenings. This was two years ago, before Leegan had her license but after she had already decided she was too cool to hang with her younger sister and cousins on a Friday night. She sat in the grass with her earbuds in, looking incredibly bored but having no option since she was on restriction. True, a party or even going swimming would have been more exciting, but nobody was around to take us anywhere.

Leegan watched as Quinn, Chloe, and I lined up our front wheels with the stick we had positioned as the starting line.

“Leegan, start us,” Quinn called.

“Start yourselves.”

“Please? It’s your favorite cousin asking.” He gave her one of those big puppy dog grins, the same one he had used to wheedle his 19-year old brother, Isaiah, into dropping us off at the highway before he went to play basketball. “You know you wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me.”

“Fine. Get ready. Set... Go!” Even Leegan laughed a bit as we three burst forward, pushing against each other’s flailing arms in an effort to pull ahead. We raced toward the

overpass, hanging grey against an orange and purple sunset. Every time we came our racetrack was longer because the workers had finished more road, painting white lines as they went.

Of course Quinn won. He was taller even than Leegan, who was a year older than he was.

“Hey, guys, come up here.” Leegan’s voice came from the overpass above us, where she had climbed while we raced. We kicked off our skates and ran up the hill, thinking she meant to show us the view or something. She was at the edge of the bridge now, sighting down the outside edge of it.

“Check this out. There’s a narrow lip on the outside of the railing. You could walk across to the other side on the outside of the bridge.”

The lip was only about three inches wide, just enough for a toe hold, and anyone crossing on it would have to hold tightly to the sharp metal of the guardrail, about thigh-level, risking cut palms at best and a twenty-foot plunge at worst. Leegan reached one flip-flop forward, leaning on the guardrail.

Fear started to simmer at the bottom of my stomach. “Don’t be stupid,” I said.

“Anyone dare me?”

“No!” This was Chloe and me together. Quinn just watched, boy-like, wordless, fascinated.

She turned to face the rail, sliding her hands along it as she shuffled her feet along the ledge, out over the drop, to the middle of the overpass, where she stopped to look back at us. Her cheeks were pale in the chilly evening air, but I could see dark spots soaking her tanktop under the arms. My own armpits were slimy, but there were goosebumps on my legs as the cold grass brushed them. She grinned as if to mock our frozen fear, and then we heard an approaching roar, the sound of Isaiah’s pickup struggling up the overpass to pick us up. Leegan’s eyes glittered like a cat’s in the oncoming lights. The roar subsided and Isaiah jumped out. He was Leegan’s favorite cousin; she worked harder to impress him than any other guy because she thought he was so cool.

“Leegan, what the heck are you doing? You’re going to get killed.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him as if to say “And?” Balancing herself with one arm at a time, she wiped sweaty, or maybe bloody, palms. The pressure of her hand on her own leg pushed her body backwards and she started to swing away from the bridge, missing when she tried to catch the rail again.

Her left foot slipped, and a blue flip-flop hurtled downward. Her other foot started sliding.

Isaiah launched forward and grabbed her arm, yanking her over the rail to land sprawling on the pavement next to him.

“What are you trying to prove?”

Leegan didn’t answer, but I think she actually wasn’t trying to prove anything. When I’m boiling inside, I whistle. Leegan doesn’t know how to whistle.

We went in the next afternoon to visit Leegan. Dad had to fill out a bunch of paperwork for her month-long stay at the Detention Center. The guard led me into the visitation area, bare white walls and hard grey floors, and locked the door behind me. Quarter ‘til twelve. Other families knew not to come at this time because you’d only get a few minutes before lunch. Past some folding tables and chairs was another locked door. A face appeared in the little square window above the handle, and a guard ushered Leegan in and clicked the door shut on his way out. Leegan walked stiffly over to the table where I had set my cardboard box of goodies.

“They said you could have some of this if you eat it in here so nobody sees. I made chocolate biscotti, and I brought a Gala apple because I know you like those. I even didn’t bake the biscotti the second time so they’re still chewy and you can eat them without dunking them.”

“Thanks.” She pulled out a chocolate cookie. “They even have almonds in them. Mom never put nuts in.”

“Yeah, well.”

“You know it never really bothered me that she took the shampoo and conditioner out of the shower, or even that calendar off the wall, but it always bugged me that she had to empty the biscotti jar before she left.”

The empty jar was still at home on the counter. We hadn’t filled it in the three years since she left.

“Know what I miss?” I said.

“What?”

“That picture.”

“I hated that picture.”

It was a picture of Leegan in action on the soccer field. Three minutes left in the second half and she soared the ball over the goalie’s head. Somehow Mom had gotten the black-and-white pentagons of the ball in focus for the foreground, with a blurry Leegan, teeth clenched, in the background. Mom could work magic with a camera, but she was so busy getting the action shot she missed her daughter scoring the game-winning point. A few weeks after she left, I saw the photo at an art show in town. That’s when I realized what was missing off the piano at home.

“Do you remember that night?” Leegan asked suddenly.

“Yes.” Of course.

“I have to do something besides make waffles and go to soccer matches. I can’t take this anymore.”

“What do you mean? It’s not like you’ve been cooped up in the house the past fourteen years. You work almost as many hours as I do.”

“Answering telephones. I have two college degrees, Tim. *Morning Star* offered me a position as a photojournalist for the travel section.”

“What?”

“They’ve seen some of my stuff in the gallery uptown. It would mean I get to travel to some really neat places. Nothing international yet, but there would be a chance. I’m sick of this, Tim. I feel like I have no life.”

When Mom argued, she usually did so rationally, seated at the breakfast table with a mug of coffee and a chocolate biscotti in front of her. Her last comment, though, rang bitter. She wasn’t really angry with Dad; she was just tired of being a mom.

I had come up for ice cream, but I turned and tiptoed back down to the basement, where Leegan had the movie on pause.

“Du-ude! Where is the ice cream?”

“Mom and Dad were talking. I didn’t want to interrupt,” I said.

“Mom’s home? I’m going to go say hi.”

I followed my sister up the stairs, running my hand along the smooth wooden panels of the walls.

“Hey, Mom. How was the baby shower?” Leegan bear-hugged Mom from behind, sloshing her coffee onto the table.

Mom hmm-ed matter-of-factly and stood to grab a paper towel. “Typical. Pastel wrapping paper, chalky icing, guess-the-baby’s-name games. Nothing too exciting.”

“Cool. Coming to the game tomorrow?”

Mom stood and raised an eyebrow at Dad, almost an *I-told-you-so*. “Sure, hon, I’ll be there.”

Next morning Mom had a headache, and when we got home, the biscotti jar was empty.

“She should have stuck around a couple more years.” Leegan looked down at her navy scrub-like suit. “Then she would have had a reason to leave.”

“It’s almost noon. Do you want this apple?”

She picked it up and took a bite, the juicy snap reverberating in the carpetless room. The door behind her swung open.

“Lunchtime,” the guard announced. “Let’s go.”

She glared at him and offered a few phrases she must have learned from her new surroundings. Handing the sticky fruit back to me, she waved and disappeared behind the guard. I knocked on the opposite door and waited, listening to the way my whistle echoed in the empty room.

SINGLE, SEEKING BEREAVED

I think I'm going to start husband-hunting at funerals, Ella Mae announced one sunny March morning. When Sandy, her best friend and Saturday coffee date, asked why the sudden decision, Ella Mae answered, Well everyone dies. And everyone knows someone who dies. If I go to enough funerals, I'm sure a nice man will turn up eventually.

Maybe even a widower, Sandy said.

Besides, no one at funerals knows everyone who comes except the dead person. They'd never know if you weren't really supposed to be there.

Think you'll be able to muster up any tears? Sandy asked.

I'll look in the obituary sections in the papers. They list times and places for the funerals, don't they? Look, here's a Piliel Post, and the Piliel Ledger, and oh, they have the Weekly Observer – and it's this week. I wonder how that poor lady's dog is doing – you know, the one who got nearly drowned while pulling that kid out of the river.

But why go husband-hunting at all? Sandy said. Oops, don't spill your chai. What's wrong with Brad?

Well, Brad's not a husband. He's a boyfriend. And not a very good one. He forgot to get me flowers last week.

What was last week?

When I came back from my work training in Indy. You know, we had to learn how to use the updated computer billing programs. Not even a petal. You should come with me – when was the last time you had a date?

Ella Mae flipped open the Post, simultaneously overturning the mug Sandy had warned her about. Sandy scrambled for napkins as Ella Mae lifted the pages, peering intently at obituary photos.

I think a grandson would be nice, don't you think? Mm, I love the smell of a coffee shop – the warm spices and dim lighting. Here, let me buy you a scone to nibble on while we check. Here, this man looked nice. He'd be sure to have a handsome grandson or two, and look, he's eighty! That's old enough to have grandchildren right around, oh, right around thirty-five. And I know a lot about grief. I had a grandmother die once. Perfect.

You really want someone that much younger than you?

Five or ten years isn't a huge difference, Sandy. They say women live longer anyway. Now, the funeral's at six on Thursday. I can leave the office by five-fifteen. You don't have any classes that late, do you?

As it turned out, Sandy would be finished teaching by four-thirty on Thursday, so the women arranged to meet at the Taco Bell across from Owens and Sons at five-thirty. They each ordered a chalupa and sat in the cracked teal booth next to the window overlooking the greening lawn of the funeral home, already criss-crossed from mowing with stripes of dark and light.

Look at the white pillars on that building, Sandy. Doesn't it make you think that going to a funeral is kind of like going to heaven?

Sandy shrugged. It makes me think of the influence of ancient Greece on America's architecture. Wipe off some of your lipstick, Ella Mae. It's a wake, not a bar. Even if you are husband-hunting.

Ella Mae dabbed at her maroon lips with a stiff brown napkin. She fished through her oversized purse until she found a package of breath mints. Here, have a Cert. She unrolled the dingy package toward her friend, unaware that Sandy only pretended to take one. Shall we?

They strutted up the long drive to the white pillars of the funeral home, Ella Mae feeling much like an Indochinese tiger about to spring gloriously upon unsuspecting prey, and Sandy feeling more like an ocelot slinking across a South American desert. This is, in reality, exactly how they looked, as their spiked heels crackled along the blacktop.

The man at the front door looked ready to crawl into a casket himself, between his age and the number of guests crushing through the door.

Poor man, his fingers are bright red, it's so cold outside, Ella Mae observed. What heroism to man the door like that in this weather, when all of us guests could very well let ourselves in.

Well my poor nose is bright red, it's so cold. Which way do we go? What's the guy's name who died?

Jeffrey Allan Bo. Bo – that means boyfriend, doesn't it? That's a good sign. Oh, there, I see, G-E-O-ffrey. Left.

They followed the padded rope corrals down a dark red hallway, which eventually opened into a large, white room where rows of folding chairs with ornate wooden backs formed a viewing area for the mahogany casket.

Ella Mae crowded past an immense bundle of lilies on the perimeter into a seat on the very outskirts of the room. I think, she whispered to her friend, that since we weren't technically invited, we should sort of stay on the fringe of things.

Yes, the fringe.

At least until the reception.

Ella Mae, we cannot go eat the family's food. Besides, they would realize right away that we are not supposed to be here.

Of course we can. What else are they going to do with all that chicken-and-noodles?

A tall, spindly man with tufts of white fuzz instead of hair approached the speaker's stand. Hands quivering – which Ella Mae noticed and commented on – he unfolded a square of paper and began to read the eulogy for the deceased.

“In Geoffrey Allan Bo, we have indeed lost a great person. My brother was a man who loved – “

– a good-looking man, Ella Ma whispered.

Who? Him?

No, up there, second row, with the salt-and-pepper goatee. He has a nice strong –

“ – loyal and kind friend. He never told a lie that was not – “

– wrinkled, said Sandy. The man is a slob. You would hate –

“ – kids he used to talk about how he – “

– needs a woman. If he was married she would –

“ – remember the last conversation I had with – “

– the younger one in the plum-colored shirt. Sandy pointed furtively. He looks –

“ – thankful for all the special moments that my brother has left us. I hope that he will continue to live on within our hearts and minds.”

Well, we each have dibs, then. I get Salt-and-pepper and you can have Plummy.

All right, then, Ella Mae, but I still think you should give Brad another chance.

He tried to call me Monday, can you belie –

“Sing with me, I’ll Fly Away.”

They stood with the rest of the mourners to lift their voices in hymnody. Ella Mae leaned over and pointed at the words on her sheet. This song reminds me of my first date with Brad. Some glad morning, when this date is over... I’m going to send him a copy. Just a few more weary days and then I’ll fly away. This is our relationship in a nutshell.

They sat again, and another ancient gentleman came forward carrying a guitar and positioned himself with a cracking of knee cartilage on a stool facing the chairs. He hiked the body of the guitar into his armpit and began to strum the brittle strings, joining his withering voice to the accompaniment of Bob Dylan’s “Forever Young.”

May you build a ladder to the stars, and climb on every rung, he crooned, and Ella Mae smeared her mascara as she brushed the tears away. Sandy handed her a paper hankie.

They passed the time of the meditation by contemplating their respective quarries, and joined the rest of the family in committing Geoffrey Allan Bo’s body “Dust to dust, ashes to

ashes.” The preacher cordially invited all family and friends to a Memorial Meal to be served in an adjoining hall, the actual burial being slated for the following morning. To this Ella Mae expressed great relief, not wanting to risk standing in the cold rain for an hour without even having made contact.

The meal was a sampling of every kind of sandwich the short, dumpy ladies in black aprons could think to spread on the long, black tables, not the chicken-and-noodles Ella Mae had assumed. Sandy was much comforted to see that a great number of guests stayed for the meal, so they did not stand out too conspicuously. The man in the plum-colored shirt had, unfortunately, not stayed.

Okay, he has his food. Oh look, he likes celery instead of carrots, just like me. I’m going over.

What are you going to say?

What a wonderful man his grandfather was. At least I hope it was his grandfather. Oh dear – what if it’s his son? I’ll just say that I think Geoffrey was a great guy. Just look at that nice square jaw. I’d love to sit and watch him eat every day for the rest of my life. Teeth check?

Ham salad around the first left bicuspid. Good luck.

Sandy watched as Ella Mae strode across the thick carpet, spearing a fallen tulip petal with her stiletto on her way to a tall man with a salt-and-pepper goatee and no neck at all as far as Sandy could tell. Ella Mae touched the man’s elbow and opened her mouth to speak.

Excuse me?

The voice came from right at Sandy’s elbow. Startled, she turned sharply to the left, driving her own elbow hard into the rib cage of a man just about her own height.

Brad, said Sandy.

Um, yes – and I was actually about to ask your name. Do I know you? Your grandfather was a wonderful man.

Sandy had an advantage over Ella Mae's erstwhile boyfriend. She had seen pictures, whereas he evidently had not.

My grandfather. Oh, Geoffrey Allan Bo. But did you see –

No, I haven't seen him in years actually. But I remember his gentle spirit and loyal friendship to my own father. He never told a lie that wasn't necessary, you know.

Ella Mae's back was to them. Brad could not have seen her face.

I'm so sorry for your loss.

My loss? Oh, I mean, that's okay, I mean, I'm fine. I really did not know him too well.

I understand. It was time for him to go. That's the way of life. I felt the same way when my grandmother passed on last year. Lovely lady, just didn't know when to quit. You look quite frazzled, Miss...

Uh, Adler. Miss Adler. Hopefully Ella Mae had never referred to her last name.

Miss Adler, you look like you could use a rest. Here, join me. Can I get you some coffee?

A sudden thought slunk, cat-like, into Sandy's mind. Why shouldn't she? She closed her deep-set eyes – russet pools, a man had once called them – and offered an audible sigh. That would be lovely, thank you. Decaf, please, and not too much cream.

He found her a seat halfway between Ella Mae and the food, and scurried off for the coffee. With his brown facial fuzz and disproportionate hips he reminded her somewhat of a rat. When he arrived with her drink and pulled one of those folding chairs up next to her, she found it difficult to distinguish between the nutty bouquet of her coffee and the leathery blast of his cologne.

So how did you know my grandfather? Her eyebrows shot high and innocent.

Oh my father knew him. Used to shoot pool together.

Across the room, Ella Mae broke away from her conversation and was coming in their direction.

You know, Brad, I have not eaten anything today. I am sure you understand, not feeling hungry. Do you think you could you get me something – a few carrots, or something?

Of course. With a little leap to his feet he was off, in the opposite direction of Ella Mae.

Sandy, he's gorgeous. Absolutely perfect teeth. A little wrinkly, you're right, but he is single. Well, divorced, but that counts. And such a gentleman – he offered me a spot under the tent tomorrow in case it rains at the burial service, since my aunt was such great friends with his grandfather. And he hates golf! I never thought I'd meet a man who did, except Brad of course, but he doesn't count. I just came to make sure you were okay, didn't want to leave you all alone, but look at that, you have coffee. I know you, dear, with your coffee. You'll be content for hours. I need to get back to Kim.

Kim? asked Sandy.

Yes, well that's his name. I know it's rather feminine, but in reality he's as masculine as they come.

I will be just fine here.

Oh, I knew you would. Brad?

He had appeared suddenly behind the empty chair carrying a paper plate filled to the outer ridges with carrot sticks.

Ella Mae. What are you doing here?

Ella Mae pointed her round chin as far as it would stretch. Offering my condolences.

You?

Geoffrey Isaac – Allan – Bo was a friend of my father's. They used to shoot pool together.

He was lying, Ella Mae knew from the twitching in his right eyelid. You followed us here, didn't you? I wouldn't answer your messages, so you followed me.

Followed you? I saw in the paper that this... dear old gentleman had passed away and I came –

Dear old gentleman, I guess so. I bet you can't even spell his name correctly. Did your father even play pool?

That's what he told me, Sandy said. It is funny, don't you think, that both of you had connections to the same old gentleman and had no idea? Your aunt, Ella Mae, might have even met Brad's father some time when they were both with Mr. Bo.

Brad and Ella Mae stood on either side of Sandy's chair, nostrils quivering as they glared at each other.

Ella Mae? A salt-and-peppered goatee thrust itself into the standoff. What was your aunt's name again? Someone over there thinks she might remember her. Oh, I'm sorry, am I interrupting?

Ella Mae sighed. I'm sorry, Kim, I think I have to go. It was nice to meet you. I don't think I'll make it to the burial tomorrow after all.

Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Well, could I possibly –

Kim, this is my boyfriend, Brad.

Both Brad and Kim looked momentarily startled.

Well, nice to meet you.

I think we need to be going, right Brad, if we want to make it to the movie on time?

Oh, uh, sure. My condolences – Kim, was it? Your grandfather was a, very, wonderful man. We'll leave you two to your grief. Miss Adler, your carrots.

Brad and Ella Mae shook hands, very business-like, with Kim, and made their exit.

Kim stared after them, a bit dazed, before sitting in the still-empty chair. So, Miss Adler, how did you know the deceased?

What made you decide to forgive him? Sandy asked.

Well, he followed me to a funeral, poor man. It just shows how desperately in love with me he is. Ella Mae took a long sip of her chai and basked in the Saturday sunshine straining in through tinted windows.

And the flowers?

I'm still working on him. But he does have the most lovely cologne, don't you think? And I do enjoy the fact that he still looks so young. No gray hair for me, no ma'am. Could I have a bite of your scone, do you think?

Did you tell him why you actually went to that funeral?

Thank you. No I didn't. He said he admired my compassion for going to the funeral of a man I could hardly remember. I couldn't really tell him then. Mm, I think apple-cinnamon scones are my favorite.

MAGDALENE

It is the night/early morning before Easter morning. Technically, the setting is outside of Jesus' tomb, but this need not be realistically portrayed.

Mary Magdalene is a young woman in her early twenties, dressed in a contemporary style. Long sleeves cover scars on her arms. Her clothing, hands, even her face are smeared with blood. With Jesus dead, she no longer knows who she is and is almost too worn out to fight. This weariness must be portrayed by her physicality and facial expressions rather than by the lines themselves.

Characters One through Seven are the personification of her seven demons, cast out by Jesus two years earlier, the tangible versions of her grief, hopelessness, and depression. They may be played by males or a females or a combination. Each has a different personality and physicality, but work together as a single entity.

(MARY enters alone and sits, staring off into space. After a moment, ONE enters, carrying a sharp rock, and looks MARY over)

ONE Just you? All alone?

(She turns to look at him)

(TWO, carrying a knife, and THREE, carrying a branch of thorns, enter)

ONE Where are the twelve sweaty men?

TWO Eleven.

ONE Oh yes, eleven.

THREE Surely not hiding. Inside?

TWO Sheep without a shepherd.

MARY Go away.

(FOUR, carrying a large nail and a damp cloth, enters)

FOUR What a nice new outfit you have on. Did you get it just for the show? So magnificently produced.

TWO And what a concept, to stage an execution on a hill called The Skull.

THREE How did you feel about the interactive aspect?

(She groans)

TWO It is a bit nauseating, yes.

FOUR Although it was nice you were able to stand so close. You could hear every breath.

ONE It kind of rattles, doesn't it?

TWO, FOUR It's because they have to push themselves up with their feet in order –

MARY Stop. Please.

TWO Scientifically fascinating, too, that when he died, his blood separated into blood and water.

THREE Did you stay for that part?

FOUR They were going to break his legs, but he was already dead.

ONE Not as strong and heroic as you thought, this Teacher.

MARY I don't –

FOUR Well, at least you got to see the whole processional.

ONE, THREE So dramatic.

MARY I never saw you. Why were you there?

TWO I knew you'd need me, Magdalene.

ONE I was just behind you the whole time. But you never turned.

FOUR Couldn't take your eyes off that stripped,

TWO bleeding,

THREE mutilated figure.

FOUR A bit masochistic of you really.

ONE Nice touch of your Teacher to have someone else carry his beam. Very symbolic.

MARY Of what?

THREE Of weakness.

ONE It was like he sent a clear message to everyone watching

TWO that he realized he could not be the Messiah after all,

FOUR and any stranger off the street could do as well.

MARY Simon.

TWO Yes, Simon. So perfectly cast for the part. Fresh in from the country,

ONE of course who wants to carry a splintered bloodstained beam, and his little boys

FOUR watching your Teacher stumble along.

THREE Precious.

FOUR Masterful.

TWO, FOUR Gave me chills.

MARY Why are you here?

(FIVE, carrying a piece of broken pottery, enters)

ONE, FIVE To keep you company, Magdalene.

MARY I have company.

FIVE Yes, ignoring you, sitting in the house,

THREE eating fish.

MARY It's Sabbath – it's cold, leftovers –

FOUR And still they gorge themselves. It's a nice wake, really.

ONE Let them eat fish; we'll sit our own shiva together out here. All night if you want.
My schedule's open.

TWO You're right not to eat anything. From the looks of you, a little self-discipline is in order.

FIVE Look at you. The memories, oh the memories.

TWO Except that this blood isn't yours.

MARY Stop.

FOUR Is this your only outfit? And out of money to buy a new one.

THREE You could at least clean yourself up.

FIVE Please don't say you tried to attend temple today.

ONE I can imagine, "Unclean, unclean!"

MARY I didn't go.

TWO Probably best that way. You did touch a dead man.

FOUR *(Hands her a cloth)* Here, it's damp. See what you can do.
(She tries)

FIVE You can't.

FOUR That's right, I forgot,

TWO blood stains.

THREE Guess it will have to stay that way. That's too bad.

ONE-FIVE "Unclean, unclean!" *(They laugh)*

THREE I forgot how much I love hearing that.

MARY I hate you.

FIVE Unclean. Have you forgotten how to say it?

FOUR Don't you remember this taste? *(Forces one of her sleeves into her mouth. She gags)* Haven't you missed it?

THREE Sweet.

TWO A bit savory.

ONE Unclean. Oh come, Magdalene.

ONE-FIVE Say it with me.

MARY Unclean.

ONE Yes. Good. Only this time it's not yours.

FIVE It's his.

THREE All you have is scars.

FOUR *(Pulls up her sleeve and sees raw scratch marks on her arm)* But this looks fresh. I'll bet that felt good. It's been awhile since you felt anything that tangible.

TWO Fingernails are so inefficient though. *(Offers knife. She turns away)*

(SIX, carrying a piece of splintered wood, enters)

SIX Tell me the truth, Magdalene. Did you actually think he could change you?

MARY He got rid of you.

ONE For a time.

ONE-SIX But like your scars, I'm still a part of you.

TWO *(Points to a scar)* Look here, do you remember this one? This was after your first miscarriage. It's deep.

FIVE I remember being impressed by your resiliency.

THREE You were strong then. You could stand any pain.

MARY I wasn't strong. I couldn't – I couldn't have –

SIX And this one. After your husband divorced you.

FOUR And this one. When your family wouldn't take you back.

THREE Here, after you begged your first penny.

MARY *(Stares in fascination at this scar)* And minutes before the Teacher found me.

FOUR Think back. These faint lines,

ONE from when you were so weak with hunger you could only scrape at the skin.

FIVE And here, when your father, out of pity and that wonderful sense of Levitical duty, gave you a bag of money

THREE – that you would use to support your beloved Teacher those two years.

SIX And this one – for no reason at all.

MARY But He did find me.

FIVE Yes, and wasn't He good to you? A campfire. A dusty road.

FOUR Mockery and exposure to gossip. Constant danger from the temple leaders.

TWO A veritable god among men.

SIX You gave him more than He ever gave you.

MARY He taught me.

THREE And what did you learn? Name one thing –

MARY He taught me that He – that I am...

ONE Your father was right. He always told you

THREE that women could not learn.

FOUR When you were five years old you begged to attend synagogue with your brother

and your father told you,

SIX God did not mean for women to study the Scriptures.

MARY But He taught me.

FIVE And now

TWO He is dead.

MARY Leave, please.

ONE, TWO, FOUR Don't you remember what you felt when I left the first time?

MARY Freedom.

FOUR No. Emptiness.

FIVE Loneliness.

THREE And you can still feel it, right now.

MARY He sent you away. He filled the emptiness.

TWO Once, maybe. But now He can't.

SIX Now He's gone,

THREE and it's my turn to be your teacher. Now I am the strong one.

MARY What can you teach me?

THREE First.

SIX That He never loved you,
FIVE never desired your company,
TWO never actually healed you.

FOUR Your money was the attraction.

MARY He came before I had money. He came when I was begging pennies on the street.

ONE He knew who your family was. He knew they would give you money.

THREE How much of your father's gift did you pour down his throat and the throats of his obnoxious disciples?

MARY Stop.

(SEVEN, carrying a piece of glass, enters)

ONE It was nice for a while, wasn't it?

THREE But really, it's good it ended when it did,
FIVE since you're almost out of money.

SEVEN I know you were worried. You don't have to hide it.

FOUR Maybe Joanna will take you in.

FIVE You won't get any offers of marriage, especially after this trick. Two years with a group of fishermen and tax collectors.

MARY I haven't done anything wrong. I'm married.

SIX You're not married.

THREE Your husband divorced you.

MARY It wasn't my fault.

SEVEN Whose then? Was your barrenness his fault?

MARY I tried.

TWO You tried for three years.

FOUR You disgusted him.

FIVE You could not accomplish the one duty of a woman;
SEVEN you could not have children. What was he to do? He needed heirs.
SIX An unattractive woman who couldn't bear his children.
THREE You can't blame him.
MARY I lived without you for two years. Please just go back to your wasteland.
ONE You have nowhere left to go. Your precious Teacher isn't coming back.
SEVEN I would feel awful leaving you.
ONE-SEVEN You have no one else.
MARY The others –
THREE Huddled inside just like you out here?
FOUR You've abandoned them;
ONE they don't want you anymore.
FIVE They can't keep supporting you and your needs.
TWO Look at you. The Sabbath sun has set and risen and you're still covered in blood.
SEVEN You're a mess.
ONE-SEVEN Unclean, Magdalene, unclean.
MARY It's not true. The Teacher never told me I was unclean.
SEVEN Of course not. If he offended you,
THREE you might not buy food for him and his bottomless-pit disciples.
MARY I chose to. I wanted to.
FOUR Because you were important, a leader,
SEVEN the provider. Isn't it satisfying to have a job to do?
FIVE But it's over now.
SIX Your significance died on a bloody beam with that Galilean.
MARY The others –
ONE If you're concerned about the others, why are you sitting here?

THREE Aren't you supposed to be in charge of the women?

FIVE Do something.

FOUR Your Teacher taught you that a leader should be a servant of all. Such an interesting idea.

THREE It's your chance to show them what you learned.

SEVEN Show us all. Help them.

TWO Serve them.

FOUR Lead them.

MARY I don't know how. I can't help them right now.

ONE They're waiting for you, Magdalene. A dozen at least.

FOUR Joanna,

THREE and Mary,

SIX Salome,

THREE the other Mary,

FIVE Susanna,

THREE the other other Mary...

ONE They're waiting.

TWO Unlike you, they feel pain.

SEVEN But I suppose you can't be expected to sympathize with them. You've never been able to feel pain like that.

FOUR That's why you have these. (*Gestures to scars*)

MARY Those are your fault.

ONE, TWO, THREE My fault?

SEVEN I never hurt you.

FOUR I watched as you made them yourself,

FIVE, SIX your own choice.

TWO I remember the warm blood sliding down your arms,
ONE pooling,
FIVE drying,
FOUR staining.
SEVEN Rather a comforting sensation.
MARY He sent you away. Why are you here now? With everything else.
SEVEN I am your strength, Magdalene.
ONE You couldn't be Magdalene,
FIVE the "tower,"
ONE without me. I am here to be your tower,
TWO your fortress.
THREE Never mind my suffering these past two years. It's been –
MARY Absolute hell, I'm sure.
ONE-SEVEN But I'm here now.
MARY All seven of you.
FOUR To help you decide.
SIX What will you do, Magdalene?
MARY I'm not Magdalene anymore.
FOUR, FIVE Oh?
THREE Who then?
MARY I'm Mary. The Teacher calls me Mary.
SIX Called.
MARY I'm Mary. He said my name is Mary.
ONE Mary.

(ONE through SEVEN spit)

TWO It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

THREE You would give up your strength?

FIVE Or did you think He was going to be your tower?

ONE He's gone.

FOUR You thought he could give you a soul, a heart.

SIX He's gone. He couldn't keep his own life.

TWO Your body – this, here, now – is all you have, all you can feel.

MARY I don't have to –

SIX Sell yourself? No, don't bother, nobody would buy you anyway.

SEVEN Choose one, Magdalene.

ONE-SIX *(Variously) Choose one. (Offering their various "weapons")*

TWO One more scar.

SEVEN How deep will you have to cut so you can feel it? How would you like it to look?

FIVE Jagged

ONE Edgy

SIX Daring

TWO Precise

SEVEN Delicate

FOUR Deep like the Jordan

THREE Or feathery like a spider's web

(Mary reaches for a weapon)

VOICE Mary

MARY *(Looks up, pauses, weapon in hand) Teacher*

BLACKOUT

LEARNING INDIA

“How many Indians can you fit in an auto?” one of us would ask, and the other would finish with “One more.” Sunny yellow on top, mint or forest green below, the miniature taxis just need a white stripe in the middle and they could be metal-canvas flags rippling through the frenzied traffic of India. With three women – my sugarcane-shaped sister, our buxom friend, and myself, somewhere between – we think we have maxed the capacity of our three-wheeled locomotion. Smaller than the cars we dodge, our auto braids through three to ten lanes of traffic in downtown New Delhi, leaving a wake of near misses and placid drivers. I reach my hand out to wave to our friends in another auto, risking that appendage and drawing curses in Hindi from our driver as a bus pulls between us. A hazy breeze fills my face with exhaust as the bus passes, causing me to cough and squint to see our friends through the pollution. On a continuum from terrifying to exhilarating, my scale tips slightly in favor of exhilarating.

“I think I’ll be an auto driver in my next life,” I comment, trying to be jovial even while considering the imminent approach of that era. In India, we discover, a centimeter is as good as a kilometer, provided one’s hands and feet remain inside the vehicle at all times. Signs declaring that Lane Driving Is Safe Driving make little impact on drivers of cars, bicycles, motorcycles, lorries, rickshaws, or heavy machinery, as they crowd over painted lines, relying on their horns to warn nearby drivers of their advance. The horn of each vehicle seems to have its own peculiar tune, and I cannot decide whether the resulting medley qualifies as a symphony or a cacophony.

Outside of New Delhi, traffic thins enough that an arm or foot dangling outside the auto is slightly less hazardous. The question is no longer a matter of life or maiming, but of how many transportees can sidle together into one auto.

If the auto stops, a person will climb on – sort of a fourth Newtonian law. Under normal circumstances, the seat comfortably fits three, but we Americans may forget the possibility of

sitting on each other's laps, of snuggling up to the driver on the single front seat, or of simply finding a toehold and hanging off the side. I am impressed the day we squeeze seven passengers into one auto, though one man we meet reports hiring a single auto to carry twenty-six boys, between the ages of seven and sixteen, to school. In our own, slightly roomier coach, my sister rides on my lap, her bony hips jolting against my thighs. In the opposite corner, a set of Himachili sisters whisper to each other in Hindi, unsure whether we are Indian or outsiders. We remain silent, nodding at the driver's foreign pleasantries, refusing to betray our nationality by speaking.

We watch on the television, from an apartment five hours away from our Indian home, the riots protesting petrol prices. If a bus attempts to run today, it will be pelted with rocks, blockaded, possibly burned; we are stuck. Our foreign clothes and American accents will not protect us. Mobs with torches and signs (in Hindi and English), women making speeches from disabled train cars, laborers trampled to death in the confusion – violent scenes intrude our room in Mehatpur from New Delhi by way of the television. “Why are they rioting?” we ask our Indian mother.

“Because they are unhappy. They say the price of petrol too high and try to make the go'erment to lower prices.”

“It's not a free economy? The government controls the petrol prices?”

“Yes. India is Socialist Democratic go'erment.”

Mama Deborah has a degree in Economics. We must believe her answer.

The next morning my sister and I and our host mother leave Mehatpur on the five a.m. bus. Sloshing through a miniature lake left by the still drizzling rain, we press into the bus, finding, even at this early hour, standing room only. Every seat is filled, rails lined with hands ranging in color from light cream to umber, yet one more passenger can always push into the mass of sweaty bodies, through the cloud of moist dust. Soon enough a seat will come open,

Mama Deborah assures us, but we will have to be aggressive in claiming it. At every stop, though, men in suits and boys in t-shirts join us, snatching any free seats. At first I grip tightly the baggage rail above my head, attempting to remain upright as we play blind man's bluff with the mountain roads. Soon my arms become tired, and I find that no handhold is necessary for verticality. Instead, my knees press into the leg of the young professional in one aisle, while the teenager behind me rests his head on my hip to finish his night's sleep. I close my own eyes, wishing for a picture and thinking that I would title it "Sleeping Like a Horse."

My own smell mingles with that of the bodies pressed against mine, sweat without deodorant, alleviated by a thin damp breeze filtering through the open windows. I look back at my sister. The businessman between us obscures her striped skirt and fiery t-shirt; as long as we do not speak or show our teeth by smiling, our dark hair and eyes will disguise us as light-skinned Indians. Her face mirrors mine, amusement smeared with mud and affability. "Tikhai? (Okay?)" I mouth to her, and she nods, unwilling as I am to break the illusion that we, too, are Indian and that this cramping in our legs is commonplace.

A DOLL STORY

Barbie

My voice reaches screech register as I bob Barbie back and forth, exaggerating my enunciation so Sangeeta will be sure to understand me. “Look at my hair,” the doll squeaks, her voice emanating from my lips. “My hair is so strange. It’s yellow and white and I do not like it and nobody has hair like this. I like your hair. Your hair is beautiful. It’s so black and shiny.”

Sangeeta snuffles, but my peripheral vision catches no movement of her eyes, still staring into her empty hands. Indian eyes are so dark the slightest shift in focus is like the spiraling of a yin yang. I shift position on the cold concrete, cross my legs and pull them under me, goosebumps raising the stubbly hair on my shins. Shutters mute the rhythmic calls of evening market vendors from below the building. Shadows cover this corner of the church sanctuary; my ears eavesdrop the ten-year-old’s private thoughts, consciously repelling the play-echoes of the other children, waiting for a giggle to replace the snuffles she breathes so quietly to muffle. Barbie continues her rave, willing for the sake of a smile to abuse her own beauty in the eyes of the girl.

“And look at this silly pink dress. It has no sleeves and I feel like I have no clothes on. You would not want to wear this. I want a shirt, and pants, like yours. And my eyes – look, my eyes are blue-color. I want black-color eyes.”

A wispy giggle. She points to the ridiculous mulberry heels that keep slipping from pointed toes. I know that my flippancy cannot diminish her love for the doll, and so Barbie obliges.

“I cannot wear these funny shoes. I will fall off and hurt myself. And this purple color does not look nice on me. Do you think you could walk in these shoes? You try. I will take off my shoes and you wear them. They are not nice.”

An undeniable chuckle. She has relaxed and in her loosened hands I see a two-tone scrap of paper, edges blurry from caress. A young woman, round face, smoothly parted hair, no teeth showing. Your mother is beautiful, I tell Sangeeta. Your mother, whose work allows her to visit her three children once a month. Who prefers her children have three solid helpings of rice and vegetables a day and a bunk to share in an unventilated room in this children's home rather than stay with her. Who could only hold your sister's sobbing form when she bolted to greet her yesterday, Saturday. Your mother, who took you to town and in true Indian fashion proffered her love to you by buying you this beautiful new treasure, this cheap blond Barbie. Your mother in the cerulean saree who this afternoon left your tears to be dried by American fingers and English voices.

Baby

Matted flaxen hair pulls away in strings from a rubbery plastic head. It gathers in a frizzy mass within one of the hair "rubbers" we have lent. Electric blue orbs stare eerily from under half-closed lids, the kind of eyes that are supposed to open when dolly is upright and close when she lies down, but she seems rather to remain in a nebulous state of semi-consciousness. The disproportionate ice cream cone in her right fist is still too large to fit between her open lips, slightly agape as if nursing. Her stuffed body covered in an orange jumper, snowy frills bursting from beneath the neck – she is resplendent.

She belongs to Seema, a gift from her mother on visiting day. After initial tears, Seema's habitual prance turned to floating, her elfin smile a gloat. She perched on the arm of the couch, clutched her parent's hand in her lap, basking in her mother's presence.

From Saturday to Wednesday the lace collar has grown dingy, the face smudged ashy from lavish kisses and hairdressing. Sixty fingers in sepia have stroked and coddled Baby's pudgy form as Seema graciously allowed the five other girls to share her memento.

Enter the double doors to their tiny bedroom, avoid scrapes from corners of the first metal bunk, crunch shoulders to sit on the lower bunk, where Sangeeta has curled herself into the corner. The other girls, lonely tenants of similar narratives, shift out from under my feet piles of clothes, backpacks, shoes, and plates that will not fit into the room's one four-drawer dresser.

“Look, Didi!” Seema exclaims, and thrusts the homely moppet at me. “Hair is beautiful.” Waxy dreads half down, top half up in the yellow rubber, the way she fixed my hair as she declared her mother's hair to be “also this.”

American Girls

Next to the rolled-up covers on top of the bed I have piled the excess, not what will not fit, but what I wish would not fit. My glance remonstrates with our bronze carry-on to shrink, so we will not have to pack these last items, could give them back to their owners. But a suitcase called American Tourister will only perversely extend its capacity for every last souvenir. Gifts from our host family, from church members, from the teenager next door whose name we learned just last night, from the principal of the nursing college – all lie snuggled and ready in the suitcase, but a few items remain that I wish we had no room for.

A semi-risqué fairy figurine, dressed suspiciously like a bride, my twentieth birthday gift from the young guitar player at church. I maintain that at eighteen, he was much too young for me.

A poster of Caucasian Jesus knocking at the wooden door of someone's heart, a wall-hanging which our host mother insisted on sending to grace our own mother's house.

A box of the highest quality of Darjeeling tea, its clove-like scent escaping from the broken vacuum seal, crinkly silver, from Bunty, the wealthiest woman in the church.

A curvy blond in a hot pink gown, one purple heel missing. Sangeeta's motion was stiff, joints frozen like a Barbie's, as she pulled the gift hesitantly from behind her back. “For you,

Didi,” as she pushed the doll past my protest. “Please take. From her too,” she added, pointing to the girl on the top bunk tracing the path of imaginary tears down her cheeks, lamenting that she had no gift.

A hideous tow-headed baby, orange jumper smeared gray in places. In neat Roman letters is written “Kristin Didi” on one wrist and “Megan Didi” on the other. The pen is smeared where farewell hugs must have enveloped Baby before the ink dried. Her hair lies flat, the rubber removed.

I pack them on the very top so they can breathe.

BLACK AND WHITE AND RED ALL OVER

The tour was meant to deter us grade-schoolers, I guess, from slipping checkout-aisle candy bars in our pockets or from letting our friends drive drunk or from doing something truly terrible like joining the Mafia. Or maybe it was just to instill in us that cooperative attitude known to teachers as “appreciation” for our local law enforcement. A policeman (maybe his actual role was different, but I remember a uniform) let us peer through the unbreakable glass to the small, colorless cement room with a toilet where arrestees stayed initially. Was there a cot or a board in the wall for a bed, or maybe my memory is confusing the school tour with pictures I’ve seen of torture chambers.

No one is in the cell now, but my memory has juxtaposed this dull chamber with an image of my brother that I have never seen – bruised, stumbling, confused, belligerent, ratty t-shirt, ripped jeans slung low on his pelvis, laughing, arguing, shoulder-length curls matted together in a rubber band – a lot of detail for a scene conjured from imagination. I must imagine because no one ever told me, and I need the details. I wondered whether he was still unable to see straight when they shoved him in here to wait out the first night, or if the impact had shaken some of the alcohol from his brain. Did anyone watch behind the wide window as he stumbled up against the naked toilet and there vomited (or maybe it was already out of his system by that point)? What a terrible place for a hangover, with the gray cement converging on an already spinning head.

Funny how gray is a mixture of black and white, and yet its monotony bears no witness to the harsh contrast between light and dark. If white is all colors and black, the absence of color, then is gray a color? It can’t be. Colors spark and bite and whisper and mew and protest. Gray simply drones on in endless blah.

On days that my shirt is black or white or gray I usually add a colorful headband or a flower in my hair. Somehow a touch of red makes me feel more alive.

All Mom and Dad told us was that we had to pick up Stevan's truck in town. I thought then that I hadn't seen him in several days, but that was hardly unusual since he was often out late. My six-year-old sister and I rode along to the courthouse, curious as to our mission but sensing the need for silence with a childish intuition. Like any courthouse, ours has imposing stone steps and carved letters with U's that look like V's, imprinting on my mind words such as *eqvvs*, *eqvitas*, and *vnitas*, probably none of which were actually etched in stone marquee around the basilica that held my brother.

Dad got out of the van, and when I thought Mom's forehead crease had lightened, I quietly asked why we were picking up Stevan's truck. I took her answer in stride, as I've taken most news since then, because I could think of no other response. "Oh. Okay. Is he okay?" Since we were uptown, we probably ate at Kewpee for lunch, the squashed greasy burgers and thick salty chili that had been the forerunner to Wendy's sloshing indigestibly in disillusioned stomachs.

I vacillated between which of my brothers was my favorite. Brent, nine years older than me, was closest to my age and let me play with his Micro Machines and would swing me by my arms through dizzying circles. Stevan and Seth were twins twelve years my elder. Stevan was funnier, but Seth taught me wrestling moves. Both let me play their Nintendo on occasion.

The truck, if I remember correctly, was peeling navy, with a band of skinny multi-colored stripes, dilapidated to begin with and completely mutilated after its rendezvous with an oak tree.

Everyone knows the old joke that goes, "What is black and white and red all over?" Children are quite young when they first hear it, and when they confess their ignorance, the time has come for the wiser child or capricious adult to crow, "A newspaper! Get it? It's *read* all over!" And the child blushes and wonders how she has missed such an obvious answer, secretly

considering it unfair that the joke must be heard rather than seen. In ink the solution presents itself plainly, with stamped-out letters. Out loud, anyone could have made the same mistake.

In time I would learn to associate black-white-red with pleasanter things, like music. The ebony and ivory of piano keys, the crimson roses or carnations from my family, the satin sheen of concert black, the warmth of faces under hot stage lights: cool elegance and sharp contrast to stimulate the eye as well as the ear. The black and white are sensible, the red, exotic. For my high school senior recital, my outfit was red and white, and my sister left some of my curls in dark ringlets around my face. It was my time, my show, and I was beautiful. My brothers, of course, wouldn't notice.

Stevan's six months were marked for us by "pay to stay" bills from the jail, white envelopes with cobalt writing that I handed to Dad without comment. This is the only incarceration I remember, though I have since gathered that he was in and out of jail for DUIs and drug possession for several years. My older sister mentions this casually, as if our brother's record is common knowledge. It is not. Sometimes at family dinners I can hear Seth or Brent toss out a suggestion of past trouble from the other end of the twelve-foot table, but a glower from Stevan usually terminates the sentiment. My sister's nonchalance sends a crawling, wormy sensation into my stomach.

I don't remember any doors clanging behind us, like in the movies, but there was a small waiting room with black padded chairs, where we bounced until the guards finally escorted us through even though my sister and I were technically too young. Aren't jumpsuits orange? Maybe Stevan actually wore orange when he appeared at the window booth, his sandy hair tangled into a snarling, tight ponytail, but I remember stripes. Black and white. Good and bad. But now just bad. No crisp, clean distinction between colors, just dirty smudges where white faded into black and back into light again, over and over, numbing in its repetition.

Recently Stevan asked if I remembered coming to visit him in jail. "Of course." He was really mad at Dad, he said, for bringing his kid sisters to see him in jail. If the goal was to shame

him, it worked. I was eight, I think, and Megan was six, and it was summer because I told Stevan over the echoing phone about my birthday. Between awkward pauses we made polite conversation, ignoring the black plastic wood of the cubicle and the muffled metallic clink of voices across the phone and the cigarette smoke wafting from the visitors flanking us, the families of actual criminals. The phone was black. The walls were white. My pale arms glowed against the dark cubicle. The stripes on his suit went black-white-whack-blite, like a straight-line version of those spiraling optical illusions. Strawberries. I had just turned eight. Was it a strawberry pie I had for my birthday, or chocolate cake with strawberries?

Strawberries were my favorite fruit and they seemed safe to talk about. Sun-burnt skins, miniscule hairy seeds that lodged in your molars, their oozing sugary juice would have contrasted richly against the white of the pie crust or the almost-black of chocolate cake, redeeming the bland non-colors into rich vibrant taste. Stevan said my birthday dessert sounded delicious, and I envisioned myself rolling the pin over the wax paper and dough, lifting the round into its shallow dish and crimping the edges, stirring the mashed berries and cornstarch over medium heat until the mixture was clear, at last sliding the glowing pastry into the fridge to cool. One glance at its ruddy radiance and the grumpy officers would wave it on through in dazed silence, mindless of any opiates it may contain. My pie's presence would vivify this entire dingy institution, and return my family to normal.

WAVES

City wind is different from country wind. Country wind ruffles poplar leaves and bullies rippling water into peaks and chases cloud shadows over the grass. City wind tousles ladies' skirts and dances mischievously over steaming pavement. I watched the city wind waltzing with the shadows five stories below me and wondered if the wind in the country was strong enough for sailing.

A week ago Dad had said we would take the boat out soon, but this week the only breeze I could feel came from an overhead vent driving cold air onto my bare arms. The warmth of the lounge's cranberry-colored cushions seemed out of place. The white walls smiled with flower gardens and lighthouses, but just then I wanted a painting of Galilee, howling in one of those sudden storms that are said to come without warning.

Beepings and rustlings from the nurses' station around the corner reminded me that my older sister was still on the other end of my cell phone. I knew, of course, that Karen was not to blame for Dad's kidney stone and impacted bowel, and she knew it wasn't my fault that the doctor had stopped the pain medicine and then disappeared. Threatening gestures and verbal abuses via cell phone, though, kept Karen from over-filing her fingernails and me from asking incessant questions to which no one had answers. My Sunday afternoon nap had been replaced by a nerve-wracked waiting game.

I glared at the nurse carrying a tray of hospital food towards Dad's room – smelled like more salty chicken broth that he wouldn't be able to eat. He hadn't eaten a full meal all week, I loudly informed my sister, who was already aware of this. The nurse passed a whiteboard marked with a list of patients, all first names neatly trimmed to initials. Apparently no one cared about Dad's pain, I explained to Karen for the fourth time. We were not sure who to be more upset with: the doctor for not knowing what to do, Dad for being in too much pain to think

clearly, modern culture for allowing doctors to be paid by the hour, or our brothers for not “getting medieval” with the staff.

Earlier in the summer, both of my twin brothers bought catamarans, like the one Dad used to have before someone sailed it into a rocky coastline, breaking the rudders and bashing in the hulls. That happened on Lake Erie, which I have heard compared to the Sea of Galilee because of its sudden storms. Even on Bressler Reservoir, our usual sailing destination, wind patterns can change quickly. Several times my brothers have been forced to paddle to shore when the wind died unexpectedly.

With a strong breeze of 15-20 mph, we might get the catamaran to heel up on one of its twin hulls. Now I can climb carefully off the trampoline and catch the trapeze handle, grasping the hull with my toes so an unexpected wave doesn't heave me into the reservoir. My brother taught me to lean back as far as I can; more weight helps level the boat, resulting in less water resistance, and faster travel.

Wind angle also affects speed. When I was younger, I could not understand why we didn't sail with the wind at our back, since common sense seems to imply this would be fastest. But sails, like wings, operate according to the principle of lift. Wind breaks across both sides of a sail, causing a low pressure system on the leeward side that pulls the canvas forward and a high pressure system on the windward side that pushes the canvas ahead. When the wind pushes the sail directly from behind, the low pressure system cannot be formed on the leeward side, so only part of the potential force is generated. The fastest angle of sail for most boats is between thirty and forty-five degrees into the wind.

To determine the direction of the wind, Dad taught me to turn my head until I could hear the wind equally in both ears. The problem with this method, though, is that the wind in my face is “apparent wind,” not actual wind. Technically speaking, apparent wind equals the vector of

actual wind speed plus the vector of wind speed caused by the movement of the boat. Apparent wind, then, differs from true wind in both speed and direction.

I turned in my pacing, and suddenly found myself at the mouth of an empty hallway. St. Rita's Medical Center's recent surge in renovations had added a lot of space that was apparently not yet necessary. Earlier Dad had discovered a similar darkened hall, ending in a silent, shadowy rehabilitation and exercise center; he had hoped by walking to dislodge the stone, but had only succeeded in wearing off the last of the painkiller. Of course I would let her know when anything changed, I assured my sister. Perhaps even now, through the semi-lighted hall in front of me, past rows of locked doors and beyond the Sleep Disorders Lab, our absent doctor was considering new angles to Dad's case as he inaugurated the new weight benches.

I swiveled my phone closed just as Mom, Megan, and Seth appeared from the direction of the whiteboard. We were leaving. My lips pinched together. "Seth, did you talk to the nurse?" Seth's answer was clipped out of frustration with the hospital rather than his bossy little sister. "The nurse can't do anything," he explained as he flung the door open. We were out in the wind and the sunshine now, but thoughts of sailing no longer excited me. Not with Dad still in the cold whiteness of the hospital.

Sailing has a tang of wildness about it. Even while tacking, or adjusting sheets to harness maximum wind, we are never quite in control. For my brothers, a sailing excursion is not complete without at least one capsizing; I suppose battling with the righting ropes and then watching a soaking sail accelerate to vertical resonates with their "man against nature" instincts. We ride the catamaran on one hull, feeling gravity pull against the mast, waiting for one more gust, clinging to the trampoline as the sail groans downward: mission accomplished. We dangle a couple feet above the water, then drop to safety.

* * *

St. Rita's is nice as far as hospitals go, but I do question the choice of name. Rita was a 14th-century nun who prayed that she might suffer as Christ did. As she prayed, a thorn fell from the crucifix above the altar and struck her in the forehead, causing a painful injury that never fully healed. Somehow I found it difficult to maintain confidence in a place of healing named after an accident-prone woman of incomplete recovery. And though Rita is the patron saint of lost causes, I was not quite ready to classify my father as a lost cause.

When sailing upwind, the apparent wind is stronger than when sailing downwind. It also feels colder. The temperature itself does not change, only the sailor's perception.

During intense muscle spasms we massaged Dad's back, hoping to give a measure of relief. He only took the painkillers in small amounts because they had impacted his bowel. Pain hunched him like an old man when he walked, so he remained horizontal most of the time. Mom prepared herbal teas and fresh lemon juice as natural painkillers, and tried to nourish him with jello and chicken broth – all without effect. We watched waves of pain replace intense hunger after two or three spoonfuls. When drugs and doctors and home remedies and herbal cures failed, we dropped to the safety of prayer.

On a sunshiny Sunday afternoon a month later, we finally drove to Bressler Reservoir. My brothers launched their twin catamarans and Dad and I caught enough wind to flip one. Falling was never so much fun.

I AM ELIZABETH PROCTOR

Maybe the crew forgot to give us fresh food. Beef stew wafts up at me, forcing my face up and out, away from the scent of cold leftovers. Up in the back, my eye catches a mosquito-sized beam illuminating the light board for the op, the only light in the house besides the dim aisle markers. As the last words of John/Ben's speech bring me back to Massachusetts, I draw a breath for my next line and immediately begin coughing. The haze in the air outlines the shafts from first and second electrics, creating eerie cones of blue light, but the same chemicals irritate my sinus infection. My diaphragm slams against the long narrow sash bound criss-cross over my ribs. At least I don't have to wrap an ace bandage around my chest like Mary/Lindsay; I'm not big enough. Finally I've expelled enough mucus to spit out my bitterness against my husband. Phrased in in the grammar of seventeenth-century Salem, my accusations of deception have the tang of Scripture, but they tumble out automatically by now, my lips drawing out the w's and bouncing off the b's, my throat cutting off the harsh k's, my tongue snapping every d and t.

Use the sounds. Our director's reminder circles in my brain amid the jumble of other thoughts.

I'm so tired of being sick. Will the antibiotics ever start working?

Stay in the moment. What are you saying?

Crackling. Someone has chips. Really, second row? We're live up here, not a movie.

Put your frustration into your character. What is John/Ben saying? How dare he! Now guilt him. He can't say that to me.

Angered by my husband's stubbornness, I turn out, gazing beyond the fourth wall of my home into the shadows, glimpsing a silhouette by the exit before honing in on an aisle light. Fairly short, one foot on the floor, leaning casually against the wall, shocks of hair forming individual outlines – I guess the silhouette to have been the show's technical director. He seems

magical, really, appearing inexplicably at first one entrance and then another with no time to travel between.

Mary/Lindsay enters and I shuffle to the cane-backed chair, knocking the hard heel of my shoe against the floor louder than I intended. Her eyes stay down, her hands meet and press together at the waist, the dutiful servant; she looks near tears and her voice has reached whine-pitch, but I can't tell who is struggling more, Mary or Lindsay. It's been a rough week, she told me offstage as I guzzled water sympathetically.

Outside the curtains the sun was shining, a crisp October Wednesday. Inside, heavy scents of woodsmoke, honey, and beef stew dimmed the restaurant. The four-vegetable entrée came sliding from our teenage waitress to me over the nicks and burns in the wooden table. Glazed baby carrots, cinnamon apples, sweet corn, and mashed potatoes with chicken gravy. Correct. My gaze shifted back up. Mom's expression was the same as when she used to ask me to wash the dishes, or tell me my dog had died. Dad had paused too long, and I had already guessed what his flat, matter-of-fact tone was about to tell me.

I found out in a Cracker Barrel on the first day of fall break during my sophomore year of college that my father had prostate cancer. We were driving to Kentucky to eat chicken salad with grapes and drink chai in a cabin built a full story off the ground and then hike between formations of soft red sandstone and maybe find one of those tiny, stick-out-like-a-sore-thumb Baptist country churches for Sunday. I was the last of the six kids to know.

When I was small and could just reach five keys, I thought my Dad's ability to reach an octave and one note meant he was basically a concert musician. He was embarrassed when I told my teachers that he was a pianist. He always claimed his kids were smarter than him, but he helped me with algebra and he could tell me how to check my oil from over the phone. His patience with both his kids and his employees always impressed me, the way his voice became so

quiet and controlled when he was upset. He made me think through my decisions and answer for myself whether I thought a late movie before 7:30 a.m driver's ed would be smart, and he would drive two hours to hear my choir sing two songs in a concert and then give me his honest opinion over coconut lattes afterward. As much as he may like to waive the honor, my dad is one of my heroes.

This silence is mine to break, and I revel in it. My next line will nullify my one chance to discredit my crazed rival, prove I'm less virtuous than I thought, and hopefully, elicit a pitying sigh from the audience. It's a yes or no question. Did my husband cheat on me or did he not? Only if I corroborate his story will this nightmare trial end. John/Ben's back is to me, his twisted black belt sharply outlined against the leather vest which I imagine to be from a deer he killed. He stands rigid, and I cannot see his eyes, intensely azure, to know what answer I should give.

An image of John/Ben hanging from a rope, his muddy knee-high boots twitching, suggests itself to my scrambling brain.

What would my three sons do without a father?

What if I say yes? My husband will be charged with adultery. Furthermore, the other actors will have to cover for me and they'll hate me forever and I'll get a huge fine.

Better stick to the script.

Wait one more second. Listen. They're not breathing.

My eyebrows, darkened with "charcoal" eyeliner, draw together. The dry stage air combined with my cough is drying out my lips, gluing them together when I try to open my mouth. I touch my tongue to my lips so they will open and take a careful breath. I don't want to inhale any more chemicals from the haze machine than absolutely necessary.

"No," I whisper. A woman on the floor to my right gasps. She knows before I do that my answer is the wrong one.

I swing my elbows and try to keep my non-tread Puritan shoes from slipping off the ramp as Willard/Doug propels me by the shoulders to the dark dungeons of backstage. Babbling phrases not in the script, I beg for a do-over, just one mulligan per show. My voice cuts out in a sob, almost choking me as we pass the orange glowtape that marks the end of our visibility to the audience.

“Are you actually crying?” Willard/Doug sounds impressed. I’d like to tell him yes.

“No,” I admit. “I can’t.”

Though my friends at school would not guess it, I am one of the quieter members of my family. Not the quietest – Brent, who can and does answer any question with a word or two, claims that distinction – but my siblings would all agree on my introversion. I imagine their reaction to Dad’s news as a brief (very brief) silence followed by a barrage of questions. Scott and Seth would have wondered about treatment options, one twin interrupting when the other asked a question he considered dumb. Brent would have listened, the only observable difference from him being more focus on his whipped cream than usual. As the youngest, Megan was likely out-shouted in the crescendo of questions. Karen had an opinion, I’m sure. I’m not sure what about the situation would have required an opinion at the time, but she always has one. Later, talking with Dad in the living room as the afternoon light died, she probably cried, drying the tears with the tip of a finger so her mascara didn’t smear.

I had questions, too, of course, posited as we pulled back onto I-71 and later as we smeared chicken salad into flatbreads and rearranged Scrabble tiles, still swarming through my mind as we pushed along overgrown trails and hunted down Daniel Boone’s cabin. Most of my questions my parents couldn’t answer because they hadn’t yet decided on a treatment. Some of my questions I never asked because they seemed premature and pessimistic. They packed themselves into tiny labeled boxes to be stored in a back lobe of my brain, assembling into

rationally organized rows. Some nights I lay in bed hunting for the file containing tears – the ones you’re supposed to cry when your father has cancer – but I could never find it.

I like to think that I’m like the Cameron Diaz character in *The Holiday*, and actually cannot cry. Maybe it’s a physical disability or I’m shell-shocked or something. But I know that’s not true, because I do cry on occasion. Many occasions, actually. I bawled to the point of embarrassment through the “Children of the World” program, with their colorful tribal outfits and traditional choreography. A good love story makes my throat feel all oatmeal-like. And if someone offers an unexpected compliment on an exceptionally rotten day, I have to grind my teeth and tense my neck so I don’t lose it in front of them. Biologically, I have to cry to protect my eyes, right? Maybe I use up all my necessary tears on the trivial things, and then my body can’t produce for the more momentous occasions. That must be it.

After three months in a dark cell I wince at the bright lights on stage. Danforth/Matthew and Hale/James seat me on the rough wooden bench, and I scoot to the very end, rubbing dried mud off my hands onto my apron, which is already covered in mud and sawdust. Picking at the mud pulls the tiny hairs on the back of my hand. I’ll wash after the show, the brown swirls sliding down the drain of a porcelain sink undreamt in 1692, removing any reminder of who I was minutes earlier. For now the dirt under my fingernails suggests misery, and Hale/James’ voice cloys on, inspiring real shivers. My husband will die, he tells me, unless I persuade him to confess a sin for which he bears no guilt.

I’m cold. I’m three months pregnant. Exhausted from sleeping on a wooden board.
Nauseous.

Turn a little so the right balcony can see your face.

Try to pay attention to what he’s saying. John/Ben will die if you don’t.

This place smells like vomit.

Danforth/Matthew references the rising sun and I glance up, my body going rigid at the intensifying orange fixture, recognizing an Ellipsoidal and not the actual sun in only part of my mind. The amber is too hopeful. My eyes drop back to the floor, searching the wooden planks of the jail and the first few rows of audience for a focal point, and find a painted knothole in the boards. Tim and his crew have woodgrained the sheets of plywood with lines and swirls in black and shades of brown until I forget that an illusion only separates me from the fuschia-sweatered woman in the front row to my right.

It's a fairly new procedure, in the experimental stages, but not, as far as I can tell, dangerous. Side effects should be minimal, none of the incontinence or impotence to be feared of other treatments the doctor suggested. The doctor did not in fact approve hyperthermia, this localized application of heat supposed to render the leeching cancer cells defunct, because the U.S. does not yet allow this procedure. So my parents decided to make a vacation of it and travel to Bad Aibling, Germany, a spa city and health resort where the German nurses are only too happy to insert prostate-warming catheters. Even with the airfare, the week-long treatment was a tenth the price of the cheapest options. Their week's absence coincided with their twentieth anniversary, spent in a most romantic location, but celebrated "in ways differently than one would care to," to quote Dad's email. (Though he disliked school in general and English in particular, my father must be at least partly responsible for my impulse to write, judging from his emails that even now have me cackling in appreciation.) I roamed the crimson-carpeted hallways of my university and chuckled out loud at his daily reports of missing trains and talking turtles with his "German partner in prostata," a fellow sufferer from a gland heated to fifty-two degree Celsius.

When I told friends that my Dad was in Germany for prostate cancer treatment, they adopted an anxious look, eyes wide and eyebrows high, lips slightly open. This expression both

gratified and troubled me. Gratified, of course, that my friends cared about me, but troubled that they seemed more worried than I was.

“Is he going to be okay?” they asked. “Are you okay?” My explanation of the process assured them on the first count.

For the second answer, my own mouth would tighten into a smile, squinting my eyes, and after a full breath I could admit, “I’m fine.” They think I’m not sure, which is what I want them to think. But really, I was fine. No nightmares. No deep questioning of my faith. No cliché of tears threatening to spill over. Just preoccupation and a few good laughs from Dad’s emails.

When I was sixteen, a girl on my basketball team was killed in a car accident. I cried throughout the whole funeral, and I still remember a white casket every time I hear the duet her sisters sang. Sometimes I tried to induce tears by imagining my father’s funeral – the mahogany casket and sickly-strong stench of funeral lilies, processing with my siblings to the front pews while two hundred people observe our loss in awkward silence. It didn’t work. Maybe prostate cancer didn’t seem to be life-threatening, or maybe I just didn’t love my dad enough.

John/Ben is raging now, shouting, weeping, protesting that he will not sign his name to sins he did not commit. In the background, my knees weak, my body shakes. Each breath catches, like a child sobbing.

Breathe faster.

This is my fault. He sees himself as a failure and it’s my fault. My lie put him here.

I force the breaths, spasming my diaphragm into near hyperventilation. The amber light has peaked in brilliance and casts the shadow of jail bars onto the wood planks. Sunrise. They will hang him. I lunge forward to touch my husband once more before the marshal drags him to the gibbet, grip his hands and see wetness in his eyes and feel his warm air on my face but cannot absorb what he says as Willard/Doug shoves between us. I stumble back.

This child will never see his tall, beautiful, tortured father.

Keep your eyes wide. If I stare at the light and don't blink my eyes might water.

They escort him violently from the dingy cell, and I turn outward to the sun/Ellipsoidal, unwilling to watch as they load him into a wagon, to see his empty stare as the twenty-foot panels of darkness open on glaring daylight. But I cannot keep myself from hearing the inexorably pulsing drum, the snare rattling louder and louder, marking time to his death. Behind me, Hale/James has tears in his voice.

If Hale/James and John/Ben can cry, you would think I could muster up a tear.

I am cold. My chin and lips and knees are shaking beyond my control. My teeth clench. My roaring ears beg for quiet. The snare reaches its final crescendo and breaks into silence. John/Ben is dead. My eyes are still dry. Blackout.

MY FAVORITE GEM

When I was six a boy at my church named Andrew gave me a green necklace. The small beads were like translucent drops of liquid grass, beautiful but cheap. I felt bad taking it, because he had three sisters who might have also appreciated its emerald glories, but I accepted with good grace. For a while it was among my treasured possessions, hanging on the coffee mug tree I used for all my jewelry, and then found its way gradually to the antique cigar box where my sister and I kept our dress-up jewels, tangling into pearl beads and chipped-paint-gold chains.

My first crush was eight years older than me. My mom homeschooled him along with my brother, so I got to see him every day and even sit near him in our schoolroom. But I had to leave too often, traveling downstairs for history class or Dad's help with math, so I created an ingenious method for our communication even when cruel distance parted us. I had a stuffed bear, wonderfully symbolic in its shade of valentine-red, with a pocket to hold the satin heart attached by a golden thread. This pocket could be stretched, I showed him, deep enough for small slips of paper covered with our messages – not love notes, of course, just general queries about the weather and about the progress of his chemistry and my math, subjects we both hated. It sat on his desk, where I checked for a new note every day during lunch, but alas, I was a far more faithful correspondent than he.

Still I dreamed on, writing stories in my journal about the day when he would return from his adventures and hear my virtuoso piano skills, a concert performer clad in a lavender satin dress with flowers in my hair, and realize that I was no longer a little girl. Then one day I blacked out the writing with crayon for fear my mom would read my journal.

* * *

From one friend's brother to another's, only this time he was only four years older than me. Chris was long and spindly with bony arms and thick reddish hair and our names flowed together perfectly. His sister, one of my best friends, knew, but no one else. When he turned fifteen I worked up the courage to tease him that he was halfway to thirty. He looked properly aghast, and I tingled. Waiting at church for my parents, "sponsors" for the youth group, I stood at the bottom of the wide stairs listening to the adult conversation at the top. HE was there, and my parents, and another girl who was new to the youth group. Seventeen, with long dark hair, stick-straight like I wished mine was, she was concertmistress of the local youth orchestra and I wanted to be her. I did not understand how she had no boyfriend, but it was okay because my brother could marry her and she could be my sister-in-law. The conversation at the top of the fading blue-green steps followed these lines:

(My dad being nosy:) So no boys in your life?

(My Heroine:) Nope.

(My dad assuming things:) Boys are gross, huh?

No, I'm just not dating anyone.

(My dad being nosier:) So there's someone you like but he hasn't noticed you yet?

Uh...

(My dad being embarrassing:) Yeah, I guess you're past the boys-are-gross part of life. Take Kristin here for example. Right now she's doing her own thing, but in a few years she'll start looking at Chris here a little differently.

Forget my face, my entire body overheated and turned carnation-red as I tried to stammer a witty rejoinder. Something about maybe I already do and you just don't know me as well as you think and I'm more mature than you might realize and then I shut up and just kept blushing. That night I relived my embarrassment, growing warm all over again as I penciled the woeful tale into my puffy 101 Dalmatians diary that had a lock and key.

* * *

When I was twelve I joined a small pick-up ensemble to accompany a choir concert at a sister church. Sitting directly behind my violinist's chair was a fourteen-year-old cellist. His cello was named Brutus, after the Ohio State mascot, and though I could see no resemblance between the glossy mahogany of his instrument and the oversized buckeye with legs of scarlet and gray, I thought naming one's cello was a hilarious, touching gesture. When Steven had finished with Brutus he packed him away in his hard-shelled "coffin."

The director decided the ensemble needed some extra practice, so a few of us met at Steven's house for music and pizza. It was one of those city houses, one story but rather sprawling, with a baby grand sitting in the corner, over cream carpeting that looked as if no one ever wore shoes. We rehearsed and then sat around the table, the four of us, the director, percussionist, and cellist cracking jokes until the violinist choked on her own saliva.

(Beautiful 14-year-old in a black t-shirt:) Pop?

(Awkward 12-year-old in a jean skirt:) Yes please.

On the rocks?

What?

On the rocks.

(Confused and sheltered homeschooler:) On the rocks?

(Confused but patient man of the world:) Ice.

(Uncontrollably giggling adolescent girl:) Yes please.

He was the nicest, politest, cutest, most talented boy I'd ever met, and he thought I was a good violinist. Peering outside I saw a pickup parked at the curb, lights glowing, the driver's seat in a reclining silhouette so Dad could nap while he waited. I stood on the small patch of linoleum by the door to bid my handsome knight adieu, unable to leave because when I entered the boy had, like a gentleman, taken my coat to a side room and now had apparently forgotten that I would need that black-and-beige reversible to face the chilly October evening. I shuffled my brown clogs with the pale-scuffed toes and tried to continue some kind of conversation as he

and his parents waited for me to simply turn the gleaming golden knob that would release me from their care. I didn't want to make my dad wait, but I needed my coat.

Perhaps, I considered, if I simply left, Steven would find it and come bounding romantically across the lawn to catch me just as I slipped on the wet grass, covering my twisted ankle with his own shirt and carrying me the distance to my sleeping father. Or maybe he would keep the jacket, recalling my intoxicating scent of lilacs touched with a bit of practical sweat. Pungent and mysterious, I would live on in his memory in beige stripes until next Tuesday, when he would ask my plans for Friday night. The knob was turning in my grip when his mother spoke.

Did you have a coat? Steven, go get the poor girl's coat.

I fairly twirled down the sidewalk, fingering the nylon hood where his fingers had caressed it. Dreams filled those six weeks, but our romance was stopped prematurely when the choir presentation ended. We shook hands and I marveled at how soft and spongy his was, so unlike the hard callouses of my dad and brothers.

Facial hair is sexy, I told my younger sister. That's why in all the romantic comedies they give the guy a five-o'clock shadow.

We were sipping lattes next to the coffee bar in the Student Center, imbibing the warm stimulant in preparation for the cold February wind we'd soon face walking back to my dorm.

(Hormonal college student:) See? That guy there. Wouldn't be nearly so attractive without the scruff.

She agreed with me and we admired the tall scrawny sock-capped individual as he ordered his own dose of caffeine. In a week I would text my sister to say that not only had I just met this "tall drink of water," but I would be working with him for the next several weeks. He had been cast in the show for which I was head costumer; ergo, it was my job to dress him. Literally.

As an eighty-year-old, his hands were covered in cream makeup, turquoise and white lines highlighting his veins, makeup so strong I could smell it, like damp chalk. So he wouldn't smear his makeup, I was forced to unbutton his navy plaid and slip the cuffs carefully past his hands before sliding the ivory button-up onto his bony shoulders and slowly fastening every button with my cold, sweaty fingers. It was my job, and only mine. The clock there ran five minutes fast, and I would check it with my phone so I'd be back before anyone else could begin at his protruding Adam's apple and unbutton, gingerly tugging up and away from the top of his jeans.

He called me Miss Kristin and when I walked through the makeup room to my costume corner he would holler hello from his seat at the makeup counter, lit by bright naked bulbs and surrounded by six pairs of hands stretching his skin taut until the layer of plastic dried on his face. Gone was the five-o'clock shadow, his sharply angled chin covered in latex and makeup, creating an illusion of deep age lines. One night the wrinkles came loose and started sagging, making him look like a turtle.

The night the show closed I stayed late to launder the men's shirts. Silvered hair, latex wrinkles, and discolored fingers disappeared fastest in the shower, so I stayed in the makeup room while he showered, listening to the whirr and occasional click of the dryer, the rummage-rummage-rummage of the washing machine. I stowed a few plastic flowers back in their boxes. Bleach and witch hazel lightened makeup stains around cuffs and collars. Finally I slouched in a peach chair with plastic arms and texted my best friend.

He's super cute and nice but I don't *like* him, I told her.

The washer buzzed for the final load of laundry. Jordan was taking his sweet time showering. I just wanted to tell him how cool I thought he was. Not that I liked him. Just that he was a nice guy. I fingered a stray fake flower and heard the outer door creak open. My chance. He entered, smiled at me, returned the shampoo to the cupboard.

(Tall sexy college student, sans facial hair:) Thanks for all your work, Miss Kristin. Have a good night!

(Exhausted, shy costumer:)

The door whooshed closed, caught from slamming by a brace of air from the next door opening. The next day Facebook displayed one of those red hearts on my news feed, announcing that “Jordan is in a relationship.” The girl was tall and, to my eyes, unhealthily thin, straight brown hair and a dainty, peaked profile, an education major.

My first crush is now thirty, married with two small kids who are not very cute, and I see them occasionally when we’re both around home at the same time. Chris is still single and still my second cousin, currently living in North Carolina as a manager at Ruby Tuesday’s. Steven, I have no idea except that he probably has his Master of Science in Acoustics by now. Jordan’s Facebook relationship status changes every few months. My extended family has started wondering where my plus-one is, expecting another face at the Thanksgiving table. I shrug and turn my mouth up and pleasantly say I don’t know, unwilling to specify that no one has ever asked.

I haven’t seen the glassy green beads since I stopped playing dress-up. I don’t even remember if they still reside in the cigar box, whose lid rests on top since tearing off, or if they disappeared with certain friends at some point. Next time I’m at my parent’s house I’ll check the attic, hunt for that treasure, that moss-colored proof. Emerald was, for a long time, my favorite gem.