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Fearless Girl: A M-M-Memoir

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FEARLESS GIRL: A M-M-MEMOIR

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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Western Kentucky University
2014

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2014

ABSTRACT

This is a coming-of-age memoir about stuttering, and the temptation to misuse alcohol to achieve fluent speech. This is also about relationships, impactful ones—ones that have influenced my stutter, for better or for worse.

Keywords: memoir, coming-of-age, stuttering, alcohol, family, relationships

Dedicated to my mother,
for knowing the words my mouth couldn't say.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My writing has a stutter. It has moments of fluency, of honesty poured from bottles, flowing to my blood—to the gravity of my world. But there are gaps, stammers, uncharted waters, creatures that haven't surfaced. Because I am still on the boat. I am on the boat and squinting, holding bait, waiting to see what lies beneath. The stutter is here and there and in my thoughts, in my moments of doubt, a heightened awareness I cannot overcome. I believe now that I can endure it. But I have never been more self-conscious of my stutter as I am now, writing this memoir. These moments—piercing and fresh—belong here, on pages. Just not yet.

But what has surfaced is contradicting—ugly, stunning, coy. You will see me read, laugh, cry about stuttering but never find a solution—a lasting concealer to rub into my speech and clog my pores and change me, make me unblemished. I will grow, regress, and discover. I will be a drunk, a fighter, and a stutterer. I will realize slowly that I am much more than this.

CHAPTER 2

WRITER'S INTENT

It seemed simple, really. I wanted to share what I had learned about stuttering, tell my story, and be a voice for those too scared to speak. But the more I wrote the less assured I was until I became self-conscious, inconsolable, once again desperate for a cure. What began as a social platform became nostalgic, folded love letters addressed *to my stutter* signed *always yours, but do I have to be?* And the stutter became a shadow, invisible and warm, what others called *cute* but what I knew to be poisonous, inescapable.

CHAPTER 3

Prologue

The banjo has a maple neck—delicately blonde, freckled in silver. It's open-back, five-string, finished in satin. I want to mention these things because it will sell them, I know it, and it's been too long since we've had a sale. I say, "You can see here that it's an o-o-open back banjo..." The couple is older, with a small boy beside them—elementary age. Christmas is in a week, but the music store has only sold strings and straps and tuners. We need this.

"So, it'll be l-l-l-light enough for a s-s-small child to carry," I say, handing the banjo to the boy. I've worked here for years...I know what happens next: the boy will pluck the banjo's strings, stretching its steel and \$400 price tag. The couple will laugh and ask him to be gentle, looking at me expectantly, shaking their heads that say *aren't kids just so cute* and I'll smile and agree, showing them hard-shell banjo cases. But this time, they're more interested in something else. They're laughing and I'm squinting, trying to understand why.

"You sure do have a funny way of talking," the man says.

I smile through the heat, through the clouds of red spreading across my skin. "I have a speech impediment," I say. "Sorry for the m-m-misunderstanding."

That night, I mix liquor until my cheeks are pink and I'm laughing, talking, moving with ease around the crowd. As a teenager, fluency was a warm bottle in a trunk snuck into bedrooms and parties. It was a toupee, a diet pill, a cure-all for stutterers who have no cure. And stuttering was the blemish, the obstacle, the ruin of dates and speeches and telephone calls. I would wake sore and sweaty, wearing clothes from yesterday—and the stutter would be there still. I've gone to therapy, I've read books. I've slowed down, I've stopped. But the stutter never falters like I do.

It took me too long to realize that alcohol wasn't cure or a crutch, but something else entirely...much of which I'm still discovering. I've learned that memoir is uncooked, curved like a question, written on palms and born—unwillingly—from the subconscious.

CHAPTER 4

Iron Cast Wine

2008

My Chuck Taylors started white. After a year, they turned a light shade of brown—the cloth and rubber covered in sharpie, a cursive collage of song lyrics and quotes from *The Fountainhead*. This was when every band screamed, when my head was sore from sheer volume but I embraced it—reveled in it—believed it made me alive.

I was fifteen.

This was before we drove to the factory, before we held Burdett's and slid in Jada's pool...vodka mixing with chlorine, laughter soft so we wouldn't wake her parents. This was before my hands felt empty, before wine bottles and cigarettes filled them. This was raw, uncertain—a malleable stage. Back then, everything felt too important. But there's something about time that makes secrets seem small.

Let's say it was winter. I loved gray trees—skeletons of spring. That contrast of six o'clock shadow and hills rubbed in snow; this is how I saw myself among my family. *Hoge* held more weight than any other four-letter word. We lived in southern suburbia: red bricks, two stories, flowerbeds combed and framing porch rails. My parents worked two decades to buy a house that's too big now. They didn't graduate college, but decided

their kids would. I followed Jenni's high school recipe: ambition, A's, Tommy Hilfiger, teacher's pet, pressed powder. And then later: private college, marriage, pregnancy, grad school. Those parts I couldn't copy. It took me too long to realize that Jenni and I are made from different ingredients.

In December, the student council and I sold tickets to our annual Black and White Ball. I went with my gay best friend, Ian. Neither of us could get dates. At the ticket sale, I stuttered to a girl as I counted back her change. Her name was Brittany: five foot, beautifully mixed, cheerleading captain. This was before I knew Jarrett, before the factory. But I will come to know her as Jarrett's ex—his first taste of sexuality.

At the ticket booth I'd said *you're w-w-welcome* and Brittany laughed, said some form of *w-w-what?* in cruel imitation. Weeks passed but I still couldn't shake it—the repetition of W's, my least favorite consonant, unbearably present. Since then, I was on edge. Speaking tightened my muscles...stuttering spread nauseous adrenaline like electricity.

I was desperate for a cure.

It started innocently. I was reading a Meg Cabot novel about a mediator—a teenage girl who was a portal between the living and the dead. I craved escapism, exits that allowed my mouth to stay silent. As a kid, I was drawn to the fantastical gluttonously—fighting cravings, sudden indulgences, embarrassment that warranted secrecy. On Sundays my family would eat supper at Granny's, and while Jenni played with my cousins, I was alone—gathering sticks and mud and handfuls of grass, dumping them into the basin of Granny's bird bath and pretending to make potions. I never thought

I was a witch, but I liked pretending. I saw slime-covered eyeballs instead of grass, glowing green tonics instead of mud. I was chubby and disheveled, avoiding baths and bows and dresses, hoarding food and books like my grandparents saved coffee tins and grocery bags. In my imagination I could be anything—as pretty as Jenni, as fluent as my friends.

But that night, books couldn't distract me. I went to my desktop computer, clicked on Google. I found the search bar and typed “ways to cure stuttering.” I read articles and blogs and forums. They said to relax, breathe, imagine my words so I could claim them. Others said herbs would fix me—only \$39.95 a month.

I stared at light poles through my window. One was alone, situated in the dark. Its bulb was broken, and I squinted, thinking—look at me, a burnt bulb. A person who barely speaks...like a cat that's been declawed, abandoned on the street.

How can either of us make it?

It was in the last link. I found the word startling: *alcohol*, bold font. My friends had all tried it, but I'd stayed home those nights, scared my parents would somehow know—would feel the liquor on me like residue on shower tiles. I don't remember what the website said, only the danger it created: alcohol is a cure.

It was almost midnight. I walked to the dining room, my feet sweating against the hardwood—soft, vanishing imprints. My parents kept their wine in a cast iron holder—circular, ornate with grapes and twisted vines. I held a bottle in my hands.

“What are you doing?” I whispered. I didn't answer.

The wine was pinot noir, red like Jenni's lipstick. The back label had small, curving text: *pinot noir is the grape that winemakers love to hate; it's the prettiest, sexiest, most demanding...and least predictable of all.*

I looked at the bottle, imagining myself fluent. I read the label again, shaking my head, thinking—how do you become a pinot noir?

I laughed and put it down, walking to bed.

When I finally test this, I will be sixteen at a summer field party...squinting in the porchlight glow. My hands will be wet from cans dipped in water. I'll hear snapping lids, the chirr of cicadas. I'll take shots of Cruzan rum. I will have late nights with Jada and Ian, then Jarrett, then Ben. I will be an pinot noir.

But I'm still fifteen and I wake up worried, wondering if my parents will notice—will see the wine crooked, the label rolled at its edges. I walk into the dining room and wrap my shirt around the bottle, erasing my fingerprints.

CHAPTER 5

Bully

1997

In school I sat next to a skinny girl with long hair, curly and golden from sun. I would later learn her mother was a Girl Scout leader, her family spending summers riding horses and winters selling cookies. In class we sat on the carpet with our feet crossed, reading words as the teacher pointed on a grid. This grid had slots, and each slot had a picture—bright fire-trucks or litters of puppies, drawn happy like cartoons—and my peers would say their word aloud and walk to the front, sorting through slips of papers until they matched pictures with words. I knew my word already—the picture showed a flat ground, filled with cactuses and tumbleweeds. But my mouth felt dry, like peach fuzz. The word wouldn't come. I turned to the girl, Hillary, who sat next to me.

“W-w-what's my word?” I whispered. I was only five.

Hillary squinted forward, then turned to me. “Desert.”

“Desert,” I said. When the teacher called on me, I repeated, “Desert,” and slipped the paper into its slot. Hillary nodded towards me and smiled, in encouragement or pity. That was my first method of hiding—the parrot game. I tricked people into saying words I already knew—words that spun and twirled on my tongue—but I couldn't say unless I

heard them first. It's a method that's somehow still effective, that I can't stop myself from doing...even when years have passed and everything about me has changed.

Hillary lived two streets down, and on Saturday mornings we'd eat instant oatmeal and watch cartoons. As a kid I was often cruel to Hillary, though I don't know why. I was ceaselessly curious and falsely entitled—an awful snoop—and somewhere past five but younger than ten, I read her diary. She hid under her bed and cried, but I kept reading—feeling I owned words, loved them more than anyone. Didn't I deserve to read them all?

Hillary was always getting injured around me, too. I was not only chubby but sturdy, a softball player who did everything with force. I'd fought with Jenni for years—our nails breaking skin, our legs striking without apology—and like most kids, I was unaware of pain outside my own. One night, I discovered that if you rolled off the couch, the reclining mechanism became a spring—and off I went, like a rock inside a slingshot—rolling across the carpet, laughing. I showed Hillary once during a sleepover, and we padded the floor with pillows and blankets and played for hours. It ended when I accidentally fell on her, smashing her face against the couch's metal. Her nose started to bleed—more brown than red, drippy like a faucet. I'd never had a nosebleed before and thought it made her special. Mom held toilet paper to her nose and looked at me like I was a bully...something I've often worried was the case.

Mom took me to the pediatrician. They covered the bench with paper that crinkled and folded under my thighs. Nurses strapped my arm in black velcro, squeezing teardrop-

shaped rubber until my arm felt sore. When the doctor came, she said not to worry about my speech—that I would grow out of stuttering. I still wonder what might’ve happened if I’d had treatment then, when my mouth was new and words were still foreign, still forming—like a shapeless infant clinging to the womb.

In the mornings my classmates pretended to read, but passed notes instead. I was quiet, absorbing books like candy—fascinated by a green, botanical monster living in *Goosebumps* or a professor who transfigured into a cat in *Harry Potter*. I went to a place where words were safe, were made of ink. But some mornings—maybe it was Tuesdays and Thursdays—I was hauled into a room with lisps and stutters and clutters and a girl named Katie, who had Down Syndrome. In that place words were tripped over, muffled—timidly shaped, like ellipses. We read tongue-twisters like: “Sally sells sea shells by the seashore” or “six thick thistle sticks, six thick thistles stick.”

Our teacher was Mrs. Amy: a thinly tall woman, with short brown hair and lips always red. I adored her. She passed out candy and gave us coloring sheets—our problem letters bloated, bursting like balloons across the page. As a kid, my hang-up was “S” but later the stutter adapted, adding “H”—making my best friend’s name “H-H-Hillary” or “—illary,” and my last name suddenly impossible. Many stutterers have a problem saying their own name. I once watched a documentary wherein a girl met someone, and changed her name just to avoid the stutter. I’ve been tempted to try that ever since.

Mrs. Amy gave us homework: read this sentence fast, read it slow, read it in a mirror. I found it silly. After elementary school I quit speech therapy, a decision I often regret. But for years I was convinced that my childhood stutter wasn’t noticeable—that

my speech was like dairy, turning sour in adulthood. But that was just my memory. When I was fourteen, I sat in my parents' living room, lying flat in my dad's recliner, crying about something...maybe the fear of speaking, the mocking. Mom was sitting across from me, listening to my words—repetitive, immobile—like she always does.

“What I don't understand is...why it's so bad now.” I wiped my face. “I didn't stutter much as a kid.”

Mom looked at me, her eyes squinting—her differing opinion clear.

“It wasn't bad then...w-w-was it?” I asked.

“It was worse,” she said.

“I don't remember that.” I leaned into the leather, holding my arms across my chest.

Mom shrugged. “You were little...you didn't care.”

I laughed, though I don't know why. Maybe I was torn between pitying childhood Rachel, the bully with a tangled tongue, and envying her.

CHAPTER 6

Maternal History

When it comes to my mother, here's where we start: beer and boys. Mom and I have a strange kinship about this that my family doesn't understand. They didn't spend nights parked in fields, taking shots of cheap liquor—or jumping into pools naked, street lights glowing against water like lightening bugs. Sometimes, when we're in the grocery store or driving on the highway, Mom sees someone and suddenly she's nineteen again—hot-boxing, drinking, never sleeping. Things changed when my older sister, Jenni, was born—her head springing curls, her voice shy but sweet. I was silent, the hard child—my mouth clamped, my expression blank. I was unaffected by words until I knew the weight they carried, the strain they pressed into my teeth when they fell, chopped and rhythmic, like a knife slicing rinds against a cutting board.

Mom memorized the day her husband left: October 16, 1989. “He took off in my piece of shit Pontiac,” she said. Bill stole her jewelry and sold it at pawn shops, eventually abandoning her car on I-24. They were married for two years, sharing nights of warm sheets and bars, months of unpaid bills.

The first month of their marriage, they had a baby die. I like to imagine it was a boy: tall and lean like Bill, with Mom's narrow fingers—perfect for piano scales. It was Mom's first child, first miscarriage. Jenni followed soon after. But sometimes I wonder

what would've happened if the baby had lived. There's a power in decision that, at twenty-one, I'm scared to acknowledge. If Bill had stayed and Mom hadn't remarried, I wouldn't have my dad's round face or love for fires. I wouldn't sit with him in fall, throwing wood over flames, together in easy silence.

When they met, Bill was young and strong—a military man who took her dancing. After his contract ended, he couldn't hold a job—not even when Jenni was born. He was a stark contrast to my dad, a quiet engine mechanic who worked too much. Dad loves chess and drag-racing and carries a flashlight in the pocket of his shirt. When I see photographs of Bill, sensual and dark, I can only assume that Mom married Dad for security. But that's probably not fair to either of them.

I'm looking at a picture of Mom from her twenties. Her dress is blue and long, sweeping across her shins. Her shoulder pads are so high, if she tilted her head to one side her ears would touch them. She's smiling wide with big eyes. I hold the photograph in my hands, wishing I saw those happy eyes more. She's sitting on a stone wall and the trees are tall behind her, dropping red and orange leaves like dripping water. She and Dad have just started dating. The grass is so green I wonder if they've edited the photograph—but no, this was the 80's. This world, full of landlines and drive-in theaters and Polaroid cameras, is the world of my mother.

I was a kid when Jenni's half-brother came to visit...one of the many Bill fathered. The word *brother* tasted bitter, foreign. Jenni was a teenager at the time, probably around fourteen. I imagine she tossed through her closet, coated her eyes in black, curled and recurled her hair. Mom vacuumed and sprayed and scrubbed until Dad

started taking his shoes off outside. I watched their nervousness with disgust. To me, his visit was a breach—a breaking of a contract that said siblings were with you, even when you hated them, because once in a while they made you laugh or asked you to jump on the trampoline...and they were the *only* ones who knew how crazy your parents were. Allen hadn't experienced any of that. How could he and I be the same?

I know now the futility of these feelings, the selfishness of it all. But I was still young enough to justify it. I wonder what excuse my dad used.

When I was a kid, Mom climbed into my tree-house and we pretended to be witches. We smashed up spiders and added water, watching their limbs float to the top. That game was one of my favorites. I was surprised to learn, years later, that most southern mothers wouldn't even let their kids read *Harry Potter*. My friends think my mom is cool and love to be invited to lunch, seeking advice for failed romances and wanting to hear how my parents got together. "I wasn't looking for anything serious," she told them, "I just wanted to get *it* in." My friends laugh, their faces shocked. I am unsurprised. When she met my dad, she was a divorced, single mother walking to work and surviving off canned green beans. But that's part of the story she doesn't like to tell.

Our house was built on my mother's emotions. There's something about memories that have emotions seared into them, and the wonderful—and terrible—thing about my mother is that she makes that happen. She can laugh until tears swell, or she can scream until they fall. She feels everything, so vividly, so completely that you have no choice but

to stop and feel it too. It's called hyper-sensitivity. When I told her that, she scrunched her eyes. "I call it everyone else not being sensitive *enough*," she said.

What we did when we were young—that's the only thing Mom and I share over Jenni. My sister has a sour distaste for it all and lets me know it. I don't blame her. In those nights we chase something—abandonment and independence, liberation and adrenaline—and I wanted them all and then nothing. As a teenager I drove, stretching my arms above the steering wheel and into air, the radio drowning syllables that stuck to my tongue. Those nights are tools of forgetting—and for me, they bury words that are rushed and compressed, timid and staggering. At the pit of me, there's a need more potent than liquor and stronger than lust. There's desire to hide the words that get twisted—until my vocal cords are strained and my temples are wringing and I'm forced to tell a stranger, "I have a s-s-stutter."

CHAPTER 7

Hide the Stutter Game: A How-To

Below are techniques used to mask stuttering. If applied correctly, 75% of your speech will be fluent (30% of the time).

The Ethnic Switch: This is the most popular technique, and for good reasons: not only will it increase your fluency...it makes you the life of the party! Before performing, practice elongating your vowels and applying rising intonation. Next, listen and recite different accents. You'll find that—when you're not using your own voice—the stutter is no longer present. Voila! Next time you're talking to some friends and encounter a Problem Letter, turn on your British accent and speak fluently...while becoming the funniest girl at the party! (Note: attempts at this technique in an academic or professional setting were met with mixed results.)

The Substitute: Sometimes, all you need to do to hide your impediment is switch a few words around. For example, have you ever sat in class and said something like: “This dialogue is modeled from (pause) Hemingway, and his—” *Ability, say ability. No, you can't. What else? Gift? Talent? Work? No, those are awful. Hurry up. Everyone's staring.* “—gift for doing more with less.” Aha! You might not sound as smart as you actually are, but you avoided that sneaky bastard of a stutter yet again.

The Big One: First, you must expand your diaphragm. Fill your lungs until they're stretched, expanded, and seeping with air. Then say, "This dialogue is modeled from Hemingway and his ability to do more with less." Exhale. Smile. There's a possibility that no one comprehended what you just said, but who cares? You didn't stutter.

The Squeal: Breathe, lift your vocal chords, speak: "This dialogue is modeled from—" (squeeze, burst, the H is coming)—Hemingway, and his ability to do more with less." Stop shaking, your voice wasn't that high-pitched. Just squeeze your skin until it's bright white. Congratulations on your fluency.

The Mumble: Let words settle in the back of your throat. Don't breathe, don't pronounce—hum low, let words settle like coins in water, distorted but clear. Here's the trick: if you speak too softly, they may ask you to repeat it. This is what you want. For some reason, your mouth will allow you to repeat things clearly... just not say them the first time. Mumble your way through something—then repeat it. You can suddenly speak clearly. Works every time.

Silence: When you don't have something fluent to say don't say it all. Who wants the blinks and stares, the smug exchanges—the jokes? So what if you never tell that boy you like him, or fail class because you never spoke? Remember, the only goal for stutterers is this: hide your imperfections. At all costs.

CHAPTER 8

Presentations

There was a window I loved once. It had a seat that was wide and cobwebbed, dark wood with subtle grains that faded into walls. I used to say it was made from British wood, the Queen's finest—sturdier than anything Paul Bunyan could've cut. These are things college students do when they travel: see majesty in wood.

Sometimes my roommate slept up there—hauling her mattress to the top, falling asleep against glass and stars. I used it for a different kind of comfort. I balanced books and bottles of wine—usually red, priced at ten pounds or less. I would lean against the wall and listen.

On presentation days, I started drinking before breakfast. I was nineteen and found a thirst I hadn't yet discovered. Alcohol created a light, fluent feeling that hid my stutter—something I'd started to think I needed. It seemed as essential to my academics as pens or PowerPoints. I met Ben over drinks at the local pub, swapping manuscripts and music. His wrists were dabbed in patchouli, his hobbies strange and obscure. We would sit in the hallway, sharing bottles, watching *Doctor Who* on his laptop and trying not to miss home.

My roommate brought a guy back after class. I was already in the window, two glasses in.

“And this is Rachel...my lush of a roommate,” she said.

I shook the bottle and smiled, playing along. “We can’t help what we are,” I said.

I jumped down from the window, reciting lines from my presentation in a posh London accent. The more I drank the less aware I became of the words, until my body spun and my roommate was laughing and I stood on my bed and jumped, raising my hands in a joy that I wasn’t sure how to keep.

I walked to class an hour later. The manor was where we slept and learned—a building so compressed that I often wouldn’t leave the grounds for days. The word *manor* suggests butlers and private balconies and flying buttresses capped in snow. That’s not how my manor was. My manor had a refectory with iceberg lettuce and frozen pizzas and 200 students buzzing, swirling like bees inside a comb. This is where I met Becky: hair with a slender feather, laugh strong, lips holding poetry. I will read her words with envy until two years have passed, and we are together growing over wine and workshops. We will be close when we travel to Georgia, another conference where I will read—strip bare to strangers. Ben will be on the front row. That night he and Becky will tell me *you are a writer you are your words* but I will cry into my bedsheets and walk the lakeside strip alone. I will think about being fifteen, about the webpage whispering *imagine your words, claim them* and at twenty-one, I will try and fail again.

But I am here, nineteen and drunk. I walked three flights of stairs, masking my labored breaths. My hands felt numb against the rail. My sight seemed milky, lights and people passing like cars on the interstate. I walked inside my classroom, spotting the projection screen hanging against the wall. I felt blood beating in my chest.

I sat in my chair and crossed my ankles. A girl beside me asked me how I was. My tongue felt stuck, blocked—dipped in glue. I cleared my throat and tried to breathe.

“Really good,” I said. “H-how are you?”

I closed my eyes, my stutter tasting dry. It was a sound I’d thought the alcohol would silence. Drinking always helped at parties, where hooch and bowls were exchanged like handshakes. But this wasn’t a party.

My professor tilted his head, motioning for me to stand. I felt a knot of apprehension. My classmates looked up, already bored with my performance. We’d all given presentations—I was just another opportunity to fall asleep.

But the moment I began to speak, I had their attention.

CHAPTER 9

The Factory

When we felt invincible we drove to the factory. It was tucked behind town, hidden by trees—the sides overrun with moss and weeds. It had been abandoned for years but my grandmother had worked there once, sitting in front of a typewriter, walking wooden floors where only gravel and cement lay now. Jarrett parked his Impala and lit a cigarette, the ashes falling from his window.

“You heard this one?” he asked, turning up the volume. I shook my head, feeling the bass line in my chest. He exhaled, spreading smoke—a bitter and new aroma. I was fifteen, still young enough to be impressed with the music and the driving and the cigarettes. I know now these things are common, undistinguished. But that summer there was no one like him.

Jarrett opened his door and began to walk, his slender body a silhouette against streetlights. I followed, struggling to match his pace. We crossed the threshold, using cell-phones as flashlights, adjusting our eyes to the dark. The scrap of glass and nails against the ground sounded harsh, unsettling. I suddenly regretted wearing sandals. I’d spent hours getting ready, spraying perfume and hairspray, coating my face in powder and blush. I was wearing my pink dress—the one with thick straps and a cinched waist—the one that made me flow. The dress has somehow escaped yard-sales and spring

cleanings when newer, nicer things have left. It hangs in my closet even now. I still can't bring myself to wear it.

2009

Ian found me in the bathtub.

“You look like shit,” he said.

My hair was dripping. I wiped mascara from eyes and looked down, spotting my clothes—dark and damp—on the floor. Ian might've seen me naked, I don't know. All I remember is holding the shower curtain and wishing I could wear it like a cloak. Ian and I had history. As teenagers, my mom and his dad had pushed buggies at Wal-mart, smoking together on their breaks. They would see each other at parties, where blunts were spread like secrets. Ian and I shared their kinship.

He stood against the doorway holding a mixed drink, his body small and delicate—more feminine than mine.

“What'd Jada give you?” he asked.

I looked up, my stomach twisting. I'd spent the past hour leaned against the tub, strained towards the toilet—alcohol emptying my stomach of sweets and potato chips.

“Her ADD medicine,” I said. Normally I would've stuttered on the “A.” But I was drunk enough that words came easy.

“Adderall?” Ian turned around, his voice carrying. He was nervous; he wanted someone with him. “You mixed that with alcohol?”

“I was tired,” I said. My legs were covered in bumps. The water was getting cold.
“Jada said it would...wake me up.”

I heard the bottom stair creak and knew someone was coming. By now I was familiar with Jada’s house—the fuzzy maroon carpet, the sunroom that smelled like dogs and unwashed laundry. Her whole family was out of town and the house had suddenly become a place of ashes and skin, of vodka and orange juice. This was before Jada discovered her stepdad was having an affair.... back when her mom would spend nights alone in their bedroom, watching television and throwing candy wrappers behind the headboard. In two years Jada would find all those wrappers—crumbled and caked with chocolate—and I would hold her while she cried.

Someone was standing in the hallway talking to Ian quietly, secretly—like parents deciding whether to call the doctor or wait, hoping the fever breaks.

“I’ll call Mark,” Ian said. Mark was Ian’s boss at the pharmacy. I suddenly realized why he’d asked me about the Adderall.

“Is that bad?” I asked. “Mixing it?”

“It’ll be fine,” Ian said.

I leaned against the tub. “Where’s Jada?”

“Downstairs.”

“Go get her.” Suddenly I felt like crying. “I want to talk to her.”

“Don’t leave her alone,” Ian whispered. I heard his footsteps down the stairs. Someone walked in and started talking—probably asking if I was okay—but I was stuck somewhere different, reliving memories that, in full consciousness, were instinct to avoid.

2013

My counselor has an office of animals. They’re multi-colored and stuffed, arranged elaborately on a table like the top of a cake. They make me feel childish, uncomfortable.

“Do you have kids?” I ask, nodding towards her animal-tower.

Debra, my counselor, shakes her head. She tries to laugh. “No, I just enjoy them.”

I smile, hoping I didn’t insult her. I tell her how I still have a teddy bear on my bed at home. I don’t tell her that it’s named after my dad. I studied the Oedipus complex in class once, and now it makes me feel creepy.

We talk about why I’m here. I tell her I’m depressed, and I thought it was the drinking, but I’ve stopped and I feel worse. She asks me what drinking brings me.

“Fluency,” I say.

“You didn’t hesitate on that,” she says. “Why?”

I tuck my hair and take a drink of water. “Because...that’s what it’s always been for me,” I say. “You know, I went to class drunk last year...just so I could give a presentation. I was too nervous, though, so it didn’t help much. I s-s-stuttered all over the

place.” Months afterwards, a guy in my class told me that he felt sorry for me. For some reason, I decide not to mention this.

“Wow,” Debra says. She leans into her chair. “What does alcohol actually represent for you?”

“I don’t know...it’s a link, maybe. A bridge between me and my stutter.”

“What else does it bring you?”

I cross and uncross my legs. I’m used to talking about my stutter, but the use of alcohol is different. It’s a version of myself I’d much rather hide. “It makes me feel honest,” I say. “But it has its drawbacks, too...”

“Like what?”

I smile. “It makes me remember.”

2007

My Tennessee town is nestled between miles of fields and nearby interstates, roads leading to Nashville. It was here that Jarrett and I met—both fourteen and freshmen. Our school was under construction, so my science course was held in a white-paneled trailer that creaked with weight and wind. I sat behind Jarrett in class. He wore tight, threadbare t-shirts—spotty with holes—and old sneakers. He could barely play guitar but kept a pick in his mouth, the plastic wedged between his teeth. My family called him a sissy boy because his jeans were too tight and his music was strange. I loved him for it.

The factory had ladders that were held together with rusted screws and covered in cobwebs. Jarrett liked to climb them, especially when they were tall and on the verge of breaking. Even then I knew he was a show-off. He began climbing, so I wandered—pausing to pick-up torn papers or examining corroded nails—trying to look bored with his performance. Eventually I found an old mattress covered in a trench-coat, surrounded by newspapers and matches.

“Jarrett,” I said. My voice was shaky, but not from the circumstances. I felt my stutter coming.

“Yeah?”

“H-have you ever seen a homeless person here?”

He shrugged and stepped down the ladder, keys ringing in his pocket. I held the rungs in my hands.

“I want to try,” I said suddenly. I wanted to be bold—unafraid of the ladder’s height, of the homeless man. I wanted to impress him.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“Will you help me if I fall?”

He nodded. I lifted my feet towards the metal, feeling the gentle swing of the air. My sandals felt flimsy and slick but still I climbed, my legs shaking. My hands felt grimy from dusty metal and sweat. I looked down and remembered I was wearing a dress. I was suddenly aware that, from this height, he could see straight up my skirt. I smoothed the

fabric down with one hand and glanced down, hoping he hadn't noticed—but below, there was no one there.

“Jarrett?” I said.

Outside I heard the starting of an engine, tires pulling gravel. The sound resounded in my chest: a knot of realization, startling and cruel. He often left me—in stores, on sidewalks—and laughed, watching me search for him. This was how he joked. Usually I ignored it, convinced myself it was a game. One that shouldn't upset me.

This time it did.

I realized then we weren't in love. All he'd given me were words: perceptive and intimate, but empty of promise. I thought of him and Brittany, both thin and mesmerizing, folded in an intimacy I had never known. My stomach was twisted. The ladder suddenly felt too long. I gripped the rungs and tried to breathe. I climbed down slowly, crying from fear and embarrassment and the crush of something ending.

I don't remember what I said when I got into his car, but if I could do it again I would let him watch me cry. I was scared of my emotions then—the honesty of them, the value pain can bring. My age was irrelevant. I was young but lived completely, surrendering to someone in a way I've never been able to do again.

Honestly, I don't know that I want to.

2009

Jada's hands were rubbing my cheeks.

“You’re okay,” she said. She was trying to believe it herself. She would feel guilty for weeks about the Adderall, but I wouldn’t hold it against her. We laughed and talked too easily for that.

My eyes flashed. The room seemed bright but chalky, like light covered in clouds. “What happened?”

“You fell asleep,” Jada said.

“Blacked out’s more like it,” I heard someone say.

Jada turned around. I realized I was still in the bathtub.

“Ian said you wanted me,” Jada said.

I squinted my eyes, wondering—then remembered. The year before, Jada and I had sat on her roof during fall, watching leaves drop and change. We shared secrets and I told her about Jarrett—one of the few times I’ve really talked about him. I never told her about the factory or the ladder...about feeling insignificant. I kept out the messy, unflattering parts. I peeked through the shower curtain. The house was full. People passed—like Michael, who everyone called “Squeaky” or Charles, who has a baby now—and they still remind me how bad I looked that night. I wanted to be honest with Jada, but I felt a sense of betrayal talking about Jarrett. He meant more than drunken words would show. The alcohol seemed to mask the sincerity, the hurt.

“Help me get dressed?” I asked.

She wrapped me in a towel. I instantly felt like a child. After a bath, my dad used to dry my hair—rubbing a towel against my scalp, the friction sounding like a vacuum.

It's one the clearest memories I have of childhood—my matted hair, the cotton heavy and damp. I felt like that again, only damaged...my body fighting drugs and liquor, my tongue heavy for words.

CHAPTER 10

Letters to Momma: The Anatomy of Diet

It's spring and you're holding a lime margarita. Pedestrians pass, wearing black sequins and riding boots and hockey jerseys. Next door a bar is playing "Wagon Wheel" and the sun is down, glowing like hot coal. You are wearing jeans and a cardigan and dark lipstick. "You look pretty, Momma," I say.

"Yeah," you say. "Okay."

I remember your old closet. Work clothes hung high, like game meat—both treasured where we're from. But Momma, your closet had no Carhartt jackets, no denim frayed with mud. Instead there was red cotton, lavender silk—dresses you wore with your morning coffee, soft as your hands stirring me awake. You were a district manager of a propane company leading conference tables of men. You came home late, perfumed in tobacco. Years later, you will tell me your boss liked your dresses too...though not with my same sense of wonder.

"I'm thirsty," I say, ordering a Yuengling. I try not to think of malted barley, of calories in corn grits and yeast.

"You know alcohol dehydrates you," Jenni says. She's 25 and still uncomfortable in bars. She's clutching our buzzer, waiting to get a table.

The bartender asks for my ID, my newly legal face. You laugh, smoothing down your cardigan. “What...you don’t want mine?” you ask.

He smiles politely. “That’s one of the perks of life,” he says, “not getting carded.”

You nod and sip your drink, salt falling from the rim.

Your mother tells me to save my carbs.

“They’re like a treat,” Nanny says. It’s Christmas Eve but she’s still counting, still skipping potatoes and rolls. I remember her fried cornbread, white beans slow simmered with ham hock. But now she’s 72 and forty pounds down. She tells me her daily regime: fat free cottage cheese, sugar-free jello. My sister and I exchange looks, ask her if that’s healthy. “At my age,” she says, “you do anything to get it off.”

She had been a singer in Nashville, a blonde in a cotton blue dress. She has pictures in headphones: her stance, her ease like Dottie West or Tammy Wynette. But now her husband has died and she’s dating online. She’s taking a dietary supplement, says it’s natural. “It’s from a plant,” she says. “Won’t even show up in your blood work.”

We find it in the vitamin section. “That’s a good sign,” Jenni says. We tell ourselves it’s healthy. We split a pack and agree to keep it secret.

Our fitness coach is clapping. Another week of grilled chicken, another three-pound loss. I watch you on the scale, measured like deli meat. You are 5'8 wearing a size four, size two. I'm thirteen and thirty pounds heavier. You are forty but I forget, can hardly remember. I see photos of you from 1995 and think no time has passed.

You're getting dressed for a date. Dad thinks you're too skinny...he barely holds you now. But you can't stop yourself from touching, from pinching excess skin. You cup your bra—ivory and lace—and watch it fall again. You want a cigarette, but resist. Your chest hangs lower than you remember. You put on your robe and cross your arms. You're shivering. But Momma, it's summer. It's summer and you're blistered, tender as berries, spinning like pinwheels without wind.

My sushi has no cream cheese, no deep-fried skin. It's rolled in brown rice without teriyaki. I'm dieting for graduation, for weddings, maybe for my health. I order two rolls but don't finish them.

You're across the table, wearing a sweatshirt that's too big. You rarely dress up now. Jenni gives us her new low-fat coleslaw recipe. We talk about women from church.

“She l-l-looks great for her age,” I say. The diet pills have too much caffeine—they make my stutter worse.

“She should...she's had enough work done.” You laugh, the tone unsettling. “Not that I can blame her.”

My eyes squint. “W-w-what'd you mean?”

You shrug. "I'm older, I've gained some weight...you know." You clasp your hands. "I've thought about having some work done."

I look down at my plate. I ask why. You tell me about the UPS guy, the one who thought you were 50. You're only 48. This will crush you in ways I don't yet understand. You become quiet. I become angry. I tell you our society is wrong, that you shouldn't feel this way. "You're right," you say. You don't need it anyways, I tell you. You're stunning already. You laugh, roll your eyes, say nothing.

CHAPTER 11

To the beat of blood, the omnipresence, the silence

I saw you on stage. Velvet curtains, the vibrancy of red. Top hat and tie, hands wringing, veins pronounced like latitude lines. They admired the curve of you—triceps sloped like mountains, muscles warm with heat. Patches of brush line your chin. Someone nearby says *I'd like a piece of that peninsula* and then it's 1492 and they're sinking posts into the earth and claiming you as their own. They don't know you're tight as clay, layered with gravel, poisonous to anything that grows.

I found you backstage. You had bottles soaking in ice and offered me a glass—white wine from Napa Valley. I refuse you and you say *c'mon, you need it* and I do, you know me, you were there when I opened my throat and parted my lips and found words heavy, like hoes chopping weeds.

“Read for me,” I said.

You shook your head.

When I was a child, we made tepees from lodgepole pines and dressed in furs warm from fire. We killed and cleaned our meat, pulling arrows from their sides, washing them in rivers. At night we learned the sound of green—the rustle of leaves dropping, the

mantra of trees. I didn't know you yet, but thought I did. I saw you on faces, in reflections and eyes.

Doctors tried to crush you like pesticides on ants. But you were strong and years passed, and then it was too late. You became a glitched piece of space hanging low on my tongue, cutting words like thorns breaking skin.

“Just one paragraph,” I whispered. “Read it.”

You put the book in your lap and bit your nails.

“You love words,” I said. “Remember that?”

But you aren't here. You're back in the tepee in winter, the front flaps quivering like an infant in sleep. I'm shaking you but you're counting, measuring the impossibility of stars. And I'm hating you for this and your inability to change. I cry because you chose me, infected me, spread like a parasite without a cure. I come to my knees and hold you, your body bent and coiled, my hands eager to kill.

That's how someone finds us. My evening class has ended, and I'm stacking books. A girl approaches me.

“This is probably weird,” she says, “but I just had to tell you...your stutter is so cute.”

I look at you. You're smiling.

CHAPTER 12

Dictionary

My professor smiles, crosses his ankles. “Take a seat,” he says.

His office is piled with books, papers, clipboards—scattered like dog-dug holes in a backyard. Clutter usually makes me anxious, claustrophobic. But I’ve been here before. The shelves of first edition hardbacks and knickknacks in dust feel familiar, settling. We’ve known each other for years.

“So,” he says, “what are your after college plans?”

I smile, used to the question by now. “Probably going to w-w-work for a year or two. Then apply to grad school.” Take a breath. “That’s what most of my p-p-p-professors have advised, a-a-anyways.”

He leans back, his hands folded. He’s thinking.

So am I.

Get it together. Just breathe. Oh, come on. You can do this. Avoid those W’s. You know better. Oh, your head hurts? You feel dizzy and strained? You should. What’s your problem? You can’t be normal for one minute, can you?

“I want to show you something,” he says. He’s typing on his keyboard. I lean forward, looking at his bowtie—light blue and crisscrossed. In September, my friends and I bought him one for his seventieth birthday. It was white with black inked letters, flared and poetic, soft cotton. We knew it strange—buying gifts for a professor—but we loved him, idolized him the way only undergraduates could. We took all his classes, smiled at his jokes, recreated his staccato, falsetto voice when quoting Hawthorne.

“Have you thought about a governmental job?” he asks. I shake my head. I’m thinking about the trip we took to Mississippi—standing at Faulkner’s grave, walking through trees at Rowan Oak. My professor walked ahead, making small talk with the tour guide, while our calves burned. We loved his agility...his never-ending youth.

“I want to show you this.” The federal government website fills his monitor. His mouse hovers over a link: *disability jobs*, bright blue. “You should think about applying for these...since you have a stutter.”

Heat coils, I taste red. I turn to the door. I’m impulsive, eager to leave.

But I look at him: full suit, round glasses, small frame. Nothing but good intentions. I find my voice. It fights the same familiar urge.

“I don’t consider my s-s-stutter a disability,” I say.

The rest of the meeting is blurred, unfocused. He apologizes. Tells me I should take an internship in Washington. He doesn’t realize I have no interest in politics. He mentions his wife, we talk about my thesis. He asks me, for the third time, where I’m from. I realize then that—despite classes and trips and meetings—he knows nothing

about me. I'm the girl with good papers who doesn't volunteer to read. I'm the student with the stutter.

I'm at home sitting on the ottoman, a dictionary in my lap. It's navy blue and leather, thick with subscript like a Bible. There's an inscription on the front cover: *For Rachel, May 2002. Highest average in English.* It's from my awards ceremony, fifth grade. Dad had already packed up the camera, Mom had lifted her purse. The ceremony had run late, and my parents were walking down the bleachers when the principal said my name. "We were so surprised," Mom said, "but so proud." I read that inscription all summer. At ten years old, I was convinced it made me a genius.

I open the dictionary, the binding cracked from use. I find the word bolded, top left page:

Disability (dis·a·bil·i·ty) *noun*: a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities.

I memorized this. I think about all the starts and stops, the times I went silent. The small talk I avoided. The first dates I'd ruined. The job interviews, telephone calls—the answers I knew, but pretended to forget. The limit lines I'd drawn.

I flip back to the inscription. As a kid, I was never aware of my stutter. I was too busy reading, collecting families of worms, writing stories on construction paper. I liked myself so much it was almost arrogant—conceit that children unconsciously have.

Later, I show my roommate the inscription. She laughs, imagining a chubby, unkempt kid running to the stage, accepting the award. I tell her how I knew then that I would be a writer.

“You’re still the same, you know,” she tells me.

I shrug. “Maybe,” I say. But somehow, I hope I am.

CHAPTER 13

Fearless Girl

Nickole's hair is spun spiral, like staircases Ben loved those months we lived in England. She's wearing a black, sweeping sweater and talks quietly, intimately, like knees crossed in tree houses, worn summer skin. She is a poet.

We study ostranenie: writing common things as new, unfamiliar. Nickole brings bags of apples and we taste, spin, peel red and green—dripping white flesh. While we study apples I study her: wildflower, Kentucky grown, radish-red lips. I'm in a writing competition and she is my judge...poet, professor, performer. But I have never met anyone with such sense of wonder.

Ben comes to hear my poem. By now we've had years of classroom, car interior, porch-side readings. He's familiar with my speech: mild at best, smoother at parties, impossible when nervous. His eyes are bright, nodding *you can you can* in a language only we know, the only one I'm fluent in. Someone calls my name and I'm gripping paper, shaking, smoothing down cotton, focusing on anything but words in ink. Ben looks at me, soft and speaking, but I am staring straight, reading, tripping over S and W and L like shoes over roots.

But then: applause, blushing, relief. I sit down beside Becky and Nickole takes the stage. Her words are rhythmic, soft: April rain, training wheels, jewelry-box songs. I am

twelve again. I pray for magic *let me read, let speak like her just once, oh God* and I think of her and Jenni and the years that have passed, the ingredients that still aren't mine. But now Nickole is saying *be mean and fight for it* and it's a poem, a conversation, one that feels written for me. *That's the only way it will ever come to you...you hold that head back and walk straight. You understand? Be mean, fight for it. Hold that head back, walk straight. You'll remember what I tell you? You'll remember, won't you?*¹

I feel shaky, unnerved. It will take me months to realize why.

Ben and I are in line. Nickole's books are spread on a table and she's behind it, holding a pen, signing copies. I reach the front, her book in hand. We've spoken throughout the day. But I'm eager to leave a good impression.

"I really loved your reading," I say. "And your w-w-workshop."

Nickole smiles, thanks me. "I enjoyed reading your work." She signs my copy and we small talk, exchange goodbyes.

Ben and I stay late. Night drapes trees like blankets. The hallways feel dark, naked. "You did really well," Ben says. It's one of my first public readings. When Ben met me, I would barely read in class. Now I speak in auditoriums. "What'd you think?" he asks.

¹ Excerpt, "Fanny Says How to Be a Lady" (2013).

But I'm barely listening, barely aware of anything but Nickole's book in my hands. I have found the front page, have seen her signature—fluid, sharp. And underneath, an inscription:

To Rachel—
Fearless girl,
I hope you find every
word you need.

—NB

I show Ben and we're silent, overcome, can hardly seem to move. I feel his hand on my back, his eyes saying *we'll remember this*—mine saying *if you hold me I'll cry*. But he pulls me close and my cheeks are hot, salt-water streams, flowing to a part of me desperate to be brave.