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# Azimuth

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AZIMUTH

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

By  
Leslie Fox

December 2018

AZIMUTH

Date Recommended Nov. 13, 2018

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Travels are nothing, though, without friendship. I owe a great deal of thanks to Cameron Moreno and David Haydon for listening to my rants and giving me endless

feedback in a world I often felt outside of. They gave me a sense of belonging, not to mention some great stories to tell. Graduate school is much like white water, and their companionship turned fear into adventure.

But the long journey of all of this would not have been possible without my family, which gathered around me like a harbor and offered not only solace but unending encouragement. My first mate, my partner, my love, worked tirelessly to allow me to pursue my art because he believed in me. And I'm in eternal gratitude to my mother for making me feel chosen by the Universe, and to my father for reminding me, lovingly, that I am not.

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AZIMUTH

Leslie Fox

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Directed by: Dale Rigby, Tom Hunley, and Kelly Reames

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

This is a book-length, creative nonfiction collection of essays with a critical introduction. These essays are illustrating the conflict of fitting within socially-formed identities. In theme, this collection explores class, gender, and sexuality of the self. Each section is introduced with a brief reflection which links the essays together.

## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I'm an ambitious person. Sometimes, overly ambitious. But such is at the center of the impetus of my continued existence. Life is often traumatic, but in the words of Susan J. Brison, "What is the goal of the survivor? Ultimately, it is not to transcend the trauma, not to solve the dilemmas of survival, but simply to endure" (65). Writing has always helped me to endure. It is also what drove me to undertake an MFA degree and, by extension, to write a thesis.

I mean, beyond that, I have always loved to write. I would stand anxiously next to teachers in elementary school as they read my stories, anxiously anticipating their facial expressions. Writing was the first endeavor offering outside approval, and honestly, I got kind of addicted to it. But this also fostered talent. I don't believe there is any supernaturally-given talent, only the results of hard work. The more I wanted approval of my writing, the harder I worked for it. This is at the basis of why I still write now, although a love for language, and the cracks within it, has given way to something else beyond just seeking approval.

I write for myself, mostly, but others, too. To quote Maggie Nelson, "I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth" (97). Yet, what to write about? I was particularly inspired when I got to meet Dr. Katharine Haake during my first year as an MFA student. She said she didn't like to write what she *knew* how to write, but rather she liked to take on things she had never written about, in ways she had not tried to write before. I adopted this as the ideological inspiration behind my thesis project.



I had never written a long work, it's true, but that was not what Dr. Haake meant anyway. I decided to write about my conflicts because I had no idea how to even begin. Identity is both a deeply personal topic and wildly political. And in most of my other, shorter works, I could somewhat neglect the conflicting intersections of identity. I've never been sure of my place as far as identity was concerned. Identity for me was more like the color of a chameleon than the species. The classification of species was unchanging, determined largely by science. But the color depended largely on the environment, and growing up where I did, and in the way I did, exposed me to learning to change that color as a means of survival.

I was born in Bowling Green, KY, where I have now lived for twenty years. But I moved at the age of two to my mother's hometown of Byrdstown, TN, because of my parents' divorce, where I spent most of my formative years, largely under the guidance of my grandmother since my mother worked nearly all the time. We were poor, despite my mother's hard work, and this had a tremendous effect on my identity. Growing up in a very small, rural town (the population was around 800 in 2010), class played a particularly important part in my social standing. I grew up feeling "less than" and undeserving for a large part of my life. As I got older, other parts of my identity posed even more problems. On the edge of Appalachia, Christian traditions rule almost all social interactions, yet my mother did not identify as Christian, and so I was culturally exiled. Being ostracized by a religion that is supposedly welcoming and nonjudgmental certainly left a sour taste in my mouth. Discovering my own sexuality only compounded this resentment.

But I loved the natural beauty of rolling hills and swift streams. So my first conflict of identity is rooted here in this place that was wild in its nature and rich history. I wanted to belong in this place, but I knew deep down that desire would go unanswered. It did teach me early on to mask my identity so I could reap the results of conformity. I stored parts of myself away, believing naively that I wouldn't have to encounter them again unless I wanted to. And yet, the streams seemed to carve my own veins and the hills reflected my own geography.

Then a tectonic shift rippled through unexpectedly. While I had learned to fake religious beliefs and traditional Southern niceties, I fell in love with a friend of mine who just so happened to be a woman. Up until that point, my identity had pivoted between acting and some presentable version of reality, and I had never really peered into the cracks where survival ended and veritableness began. Furthering the inspiration for my thesis writing, I sought to find these cracks in the language I used in writing about myself.

I became interested in the ways we position ourselves to be viewed by others and how authentic we believe ourselves to be. Are we as we identify ourselves? Or are we what others identify us to be? What about some combination of the two? I related particularly to these meanderings of identity reflected in the work of Lidia Yuknavitch. In her memoir, *The Chronology of Water*, she identified with the fluidity of water rather than labels, "Your life doesn't happen in any kind of order. Events don't have cause and effect relationships the way you wish they did. It's all a series of fragments and repetitions and pattern formations. Language and water have this in common" (28).

Nothing about identity seemed grounded in the concrete, but rather our own changing perspectives, like so much water, always moving toward something.

I decided if life was like water, I needed some way to navigate it rather than let it determine my course for me. I can't stop the passage of time and the distance created from this event in my life to another, so I looked for a way to connect these events for my own understanding.

Although my thesis is more properly creative nonfiction, I begin with my poem, "Cusp." Because all of my identities assume a liminal space for me, this poem begged to be included. I've always felt on the edge of things, never fully occupying most spaces. Following that poem is an essay, "Navigation," in which I begin at the end but also get my bearings and provide a chance for my reader to do the same. I want the reader to feel acquainted with water the way I have been, to understand it and feel it as I do, but also with the realization that as human beings, our relationship with water occupies a liminal space as well. We can learn to use it, navigate it as we do our own lives, but we are always inherently separated from it. This is representative of the way language, while allowing us to navigate our own lives with the use of words, always separates us from experience – changing and shaping memories and our interpretation of those memories.

I decided after this essay to title all my essays with navigational terms that likewise own meaning beyond their origin. The next essay, "Adrift," deals with my childhood, brought up unsure of where I belonged. Growing up with divorced parents with opposing belief systems and social stations complicated the concept of identity. Figuring out who I was seemed quite secondary to surviving the conflicts created by the separation of family, which waxed into separations of self. In childhood, we often look to

parents for guidance, but what happens when your two parents teach you completely different ways of life and each parent believes that he/she is correct and the other simply wrong? This essay is meant to reflect that feeling of being adrift, of having no place of belonging.

“Lying to” is a nautical term for when the sails are set up to counteract each other. An appropriate title, because this part of my life was counteracting other parts of my life which seemed more stable. There was this unraveling and knitting back of my identity at the time, figuring out who I was. But also, I was lying to myself for much of the time, not being truthful about my own feelings to avoid dealing with the conflict being honest might create. I did encounter issues with writing this section, as I couldn’t find the correct words to describe some of the sexual scenes within this essay. When describing these scenes, particularly the scene near the end with me and my friend in bed together, I found that the language tended to present one of us as the dominant, the penetrator, the aggressor, and the other as submissive, the penetrated, the acquiescent. Language was failing me here as this wasn’t the case at all, so I did take care in this section to write in a non-heteronormative way that was more accurate in describing queer sex. This struggle with finding the correct language only exemplified my struggle with identity.

“Old Salt” shows the reader the strange realm of my marriage but also the strangeness of marriage as an institution. The title is a slang term for an experienced mariner, yet it seemed equally accurate as a descriptor for the resentment that builds over time within a marriage. And while this essay focuses on the identity of being “married” and how that is misinterpreted/misapplied in relation to love, I wanted to show, too, that love and resentment aren’t necessarily correlated within the space of marriage. There is a

great deal of complexity to sharing one's life with another, so these flashbacks situated within a "quiet argument" between two married people are an attempt to show how unquantifiable commitment is. Also, I wrote this essay seeking to disrupt the idea of classification – so much of the language that we use to identify institutions and actions falls quite short of the actuality.

The essay that follows I titled, "Touch and Go," because the colloquial use of the phrase serves as an exacting descriptor. I didn't know if I would be able to maintain two relationships at the same time, or if my friend even wanted to, or how far the person I was married to was willing to entertain all of this before deciding it wasn't worth it. Everything about this time felt like so much was possible, but yet the possibilities were still so limited. This essay also plays with ideas of *beginnings* and *endings* – that these words are defined solely by the observer and not by any objective definition, and therefore, they are interchangeable. The title is also a term for when the bottom of the ship touches the bottom of whatever body of water it is on, but it doesn't ground, it keeps moving much like the story here.

But "Clean Slate" provides a sort of alternate ending and also a reminder that the ways we tend to define ourselves limit the complexity of our lives. It's a sort of addendum to this whole notion of identity – a way to say of course things overlap, but no one can be reduced to one part of their existence, whether it is identity or events or anything beyond. There's always more to the story, so to speak. The nautical definition is similar to this idea, as it relates to the idea of beginning anew, but only in terms of journey – the ship is still the same ship.

Given that these essays took on a sort of nautical theme, I decided to name the entirety of the work, “Azimuth,” which refers to a term used to describe the position of an object in relation to the direction of true north but at a clockwise angle. Also, the instruments used to determine the azimuth still use celestial positioning to do so. This felt appropriate because of the relating of time and distance and also the idea of the infiniteness of existence, that things will continue beyond language and our human need to define ourselves and other things.

There’s a certain feeling of “why does it all matter” to this, and I’m not sure I have the answer to that other than while it is true that we create language, we also create meaning from language and when we assign meaning, we limit possibility. And I can’t honestly say that the events of my life, no matter how defining, really matter from a broad perspective, but the ways we define ourselves through terms of identity matter very much on a personal level so there is a universal element to all human experience, no matter how strange or different it may seem in comparison to another. I attempt to bring this uncertainty, stemming from my own insecurities about considering myself an authority on anything, really, about life and language to the forefront in this work, with consideration to a quote from Stanley Fish, “The objectivity of the text is an illusion, and moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing” (82). I wanted to create a space where the reader is unsure of what any of this really means, because while I suppose I am an authority on my life, I don’t want my written word to be misconstrued that because it is written, that it assumes any authority on any level. Just as I expect a reader to create their own meaning from my stories, we create our own meaning in the way we interpret our lives – none of it objective or concrete, all of it theoretical.

But as I mentioned at the beginning, I also write selfishly. I wanted to write this work because I wanted to see myself represented and to explore how I create meaning for myself. Not in any therapeutic seeking to be at peace with these events, but rather how I have created this version of “self” through these events. I wanted to explore how the theoretical self is similar to assigning meaning in literature, how I was only a version of reality and not an example of it. An essay by Sarah Fawn Montgomery expresses this notion better than I can, “Nonfiction writers try to weave the minutiae of their lives with the greatest threads of humanity, hoping like hell they end up with a braid, though more often the result is a knot. The goal is complexity, contradiction. Nonfiction often resists resolution entirely, instead a search in order to get lost, to not-know.” And while the goal might surely be a braid and result in a knot, it is the knots which secure the sails as we cross the distance of our own lives.

# Azimuth

Leslie Fox



## Cusp

Rivered with night, I sit in the lapped edge  
of her pebbled banks, catching the silver  
flash of minnow. Upstream, the dam opens  
his maw, retches, and all the wet roughens to stir  
bends of driftwood and pull from under toes  
bare. Her deep water, I know as my own. She cuts, too  
far down, and runs her course now set  
in meandering. She is caught in the constant act  
of leaving, but never gone.

## Navigation

“Your life doesn’t happen in any kind of order. Events don’t have cause and effect relationships the way you wish they did. It’s all a series of fragments and repetitions and pattern formations. Language and water have this in common.” -- Lidia Yuknavitch, *The Chronology of Water* (28).

*Endings are beginnings, and the beginning of anything is the end of something else. Time is not natural. Farther out in space, with more perspective, we can’t even see what is happening right now. Everything is what has happened. It’s over, done now. Every time you look up at the sun or farther to the night’s stars, you are looking back, at least relative to time.*

*Distance is real, though. Tangible. Measurable. Like gravity, there is proof. If anything made of matter has gravity, could this be why people are attracted to one another? No, there are no physical laws governing sexual or emotional attraction. At least, none we know of. Perhaps with more distance, someday we might figure it all out.*

*But not time. Time is an illusion concocted by chemical releases between synapses, to help our small little minds make sense of incomprehensible distance.*

The water sparkles and glints in the afternoon sun. I watch Rick as he tries to get onto his kayak first. His is blue, like mine, but a sit-on, rather than a sit-in. Easier to flip in my opinion. He misses the point of balance and lands in the water. I laugh. He squints his already narrow eyes at me playfully.

“Careful, there,” I warn through my giggles.

“No shit.” He pulls the kayak back to the edge of the swift water, and this time, he manages to get on.

Sure now that he is squared away, I hop into mine. I set my waterproof bag of snacks between my legs and wedge my water bottle under the side.

This is the first time we have kayaked this stretch of river. Rick wanted kayaks to fish out of, but I just like the idea of balance and water, that if I am careful with my paddles and positioning, I can trust the water to take me where I need to be. We operate this way in our day-to-day – him all utility and purpose, me all intuition and feeling. Could be my bipolar disorder, I don’t know.

It’s just us, here. He’s ahead of me a bit, so I don’t even paddle. I just watch him cast out and reel. There’s something rhythmic, soothing, about it. But the water is fast, and it keeps turning him sideways. It’s a struggle, because he keeps having to set the pole down to use his paddles to reposition.

I smile to myself. He’s never seemed as comfortable in the water as me.

We were broke for our honeymoon, so we went and camped on the edge of the lake where I grew up. I swam out really far at the Obey River dock, all the way to the edge of the designated swimming area, which was marked by an orange-buoyed perimeter. I remember looking back as I threw one leg over the buoy to sit straddle of it. He looked sour.

“You better get back here!” he bellowed from chest deep water. “I can’t come get you if something happens.” I don’t know how deep it was where I was sitting, but it didn’t matter. I’d swam out this far hundreds of times.

“I won’t need you for nothing! This is my lake!” I yelled back, laughing.

He wasn't laughing. I guess he was worried. He grew up in a house with two younger brothers and no real father. I tell him all the time to stop trying to parent me.

And the water is where I'm home, even on this little patch of Barren River today. He's not, though. He's spinning and trying to catch fish. I grab my paddles and slide up beside him.

"You good?"

"I'm fine," he huffs, "it's just the water's too fast to fish, I think."

I paddle on by. I prefer paddling upstream, but it isn't conducive to his fishing. I like the feeling of fighting the water, that I can overcome it, that all the power I need is in my own body. But I paddle downstream this time, letting the water direct me, only really using my paddles to avoid stobs hidden under the water and logs floating on top. The water is quick.

I turn a corner, and I can't see him anymore. I hope I don't end up seeing his flipped kayak float around the corner. Yesterday, when we first bought his kayak, we had put in at a spot in this same river by our house, just for him to try it out and paddle around and get a feel for it.

A rain storm blew in, quickly, and while we were pulling our kayaks back to the bank as the shallow water became too swift and white, a green kayak floated upside down next to us.

We grabbed the kayak, but we couldn't grab all of the stuff floating around that had fallen out it. As we pulled ours and this new green one to the bank, a teenager, about fifteen, came paddling around the corner.

“Thanks so much,” he gasped, out of breath from paddling and water dripping from his nose. He slid his kayak up on the mud bank and hopped out.

“No problem. I guess this is yours?” Rick asked.

“Yeah, my mom flipped out upstream. Then my dad tried to get her, and he flipped, too. They’re both back up there, on the bank. They’re safe. But I swear I’m never going kayaking with them again.”

“Do they need help?”

“No, they’re coming. We got one upright and got my mom back in it, and my dad’s just swimming down.” It’s then that we saw the boy’s parents come around the corner, the mom still sort of aimlessly spinning, the dad hanging onto the edge, trying to both swim and keep the kayak straight.

Rick flipped the green kayak to get the water out.

“I’m just glad you caught it,” the boy thanked us again.

I hope today I don’t have to save Rick. But the weather’s much clearer, and he’s grown, like me. I figure he can manage.

I watch the rocks in the clear water beneath me, watch as I glide swiftly over, the way they are there and then they are gone. There are blue ones. Red ones. A ton of boring beige ones. Slick moss-covered black ones. Gone, in a flash.

I slide up to a shallow pebbled spot, pointing back upstream, and pull my cigarettes from my bag. I’ve been meaning to quit. Never seems like a good time to, but I keep telling myself after grad school. I think I’ve been lying to myself about it.

I light my cigarette and wait. A man and a woman come by in a canoe. They smile politely. I nod in return, but I’m getting a bit worried. I wonder how had they

managed to pass Rick? But if he had flipped, I'm assuming they would have noticed. They had seemed unbothered, so I just keep waiting.

There are little birds, swallows, I think, diving down and skimming the surface of the water. I wonder if and how many fish manage to catch those birds. Bass will eat anything, and this river's full of them. But the river is faster than it looks right now. The surface is smooth with only little chops of current near the shallows. These birds are fast enough that the strong current underneath doesn't catch them, so I imagine a bass would have fins full trying.

I hear people talking upstream, so I decide to go back up. Starting upstream from a dead stop is hard, but it doesn't deter me. I pull the paddles hard against the water, causing the bow to pivot back and forth until I gain enough momentum to go forward. And then I'm gliding, pulling swift against the current, overtaking the forces pulling me back.

As I round the corner, I see a large group of boats in the distance, but Rick is right there. I guess their voices carried down on top of the water.

"I got worried about you."

"Eh, I'm just trying to take my time and fish." He seems better oriented, better acquainted with the compromise between paddle and position.

"Alright, well, I'm going on ahead."

"You do you, babe."

I ride the current for a while, mildly excited and expectant each time I round a snaking corner of the river. Sometimes there are bluffs and cliffs, other times, patches of purple wildflowers lining the bank. I turn one corner to see a pair of otters floating about

twenty feet from me. They are hanging onto each other, floating in peace. They quickly spot me and slip under the surface. I'm all excited by my discovery, ready to tell Rick before I realize he is behind me. The moment loses its impact without someone to share it with.

I decide to pull back over in a shallow spot, gravel grinding on the plastic, and wait again. I light another cigarette. It isn't long this time before he pokes around the bend.

"You waitin' on me?"

"Yeah, gets kinda boring without someone to talk to."

"Well, don't paddle so far ahead!" he teases.

"I know. I know."

Now, we glide next to each other. He's given up casting for now. The river narrows, and the water becomes choppier. Up ahead, we hear the sound of white water. Nothing that sounds too bad, or rather, we hope it isn't too bad. Using our paddles, we slow as we get to the spot where water is breaking itself against the edges of rocks.

"You go first," I say, "so I can help you if you start drowning."

"Har-har," but he goes on up ahead. The water pitches him a bit. I think about how I would never want a kayak I would have to sit on top of. He begins to spin, losing control. I see he's headed straight for a big log, stob as we call them, sticking about four feet up and out of the water.

"Watch out for the-" I yell, but it's too late. The edge of his kayak smacks the wood and tilts his boat. I'm certain he's going in. I start forward, ready to grab him from

the current. But he balances carefully with his paddles, and though the boat lalts, he stays on, spinning his way out of the swift water and on to the calmer, wide river ahead.

I would have gone in a different way, if I had known he wasn't going to flip. But the water has already caught me, so I use the paddles to stay centered. I don't want to hit the big stob either, but the water is pushing me, fast as it can, straight towards it. Rick has turned and is watching from the other side. I put my paddle straight up and down on the side I'm being pushed towards. My boat corrects position, and I miss the log completely.

"You heifer!" he barks.

"What?" I play coy.

"You completely missed it."

"I know." What I know is water.

Side by side again once the river widens back out, we make conversation.

"You know, we haven't done anything like this in a long time." I muse, not expecting a reply.

"You've been so busy with school," he does reply, "and your school friends."

What he doesn't mention is Heather. We've learned to not talk about her, but she's there, like the colored rocks, just under the surface.

"I know. I'm sorry. I just wanted to experience it all. I didn't want to be that old person in grad school that just kind of lingers in the background." I'm 34, a little older than most of the other students in my cohort.

"Nah, nah, I get it," he stops paddling and just floats for a few moments. "And I wanted you to. I know how bad you wanted it. I knew what it meant to you. I'm just glad it's almost over."



My heart sinks a little when he says it. I'm not glad it's over. It all feels too fast, too over, too soon.

"Yeah," I offer as a weak reply.

"You don't want it to be over, do you?"

"Not really. I just had a lot of fun. Like going to D.C. and Tampa," for Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference. "I don't know if and when I'll be able to afford to go again. And everyone is leaving. You just get so close to these people, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it." He says it but I'm not sure he does. He's an electrician, working with the same people for years at a time. He dropped out of college in his first year, not because he couldn't do it, but because he didn't feel like he belonged. I know that feeling. I've fought it my whole time there. From being older, a bit. But mostly from being from a background where hardly anyone we knew ever went to college, must less finished. I'm second, behind my mom, in my immediate family to even go to grad school. Third, I guess, if you count my step-dad, who just retired from teaching high school. My biological father never finished 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He told my mom a story when they were married about how he used to tear his pants so they would send him home from school. He got made fun of for being poor but also not very book-smart. He went on to own his own business. He's smart, too, just in different way.

But even college for my mom was not an experience. It was just a means to have a better job one day. She didn't go back to grad school until she was in her 40's. I dropped out in undergrad four times, each time for a different specific reason, but I think if I hadn't felt so outside of it, hadn't felt like I didn't deserve it, the circumstances might

have been different. I never made friends in college until I was older, after I found other students, first generation students, who felt like me.

I knew why Rick didn't go back, why so many of us hadn't gone in the first place. Beauty colleges and trade schools were more practical, because there was always that lingering question of, "What will you do with that degree?"

It was a question I wasn't absolutely certain of now, but at least I had done it. Having done it made me believe I was capable of more. I felt I knew the waters.

We point our kayaks over to a creek running into the side of the river.

"Looks deep," I observe.

"Yeah, might be good for fishing."

The water in the creek is deep, but it is perfectly still. We paddle up a ways, Rick casting as we do. It's murky and smells stagnant. He doesn't catch anything, so we turn around.

As we come out of the mouth of the creek, the large group of boats that were far behind us have pulled ahead. They are going through the spot Rick and I theorized the people from yesterday had flipped at. We sit still at the mouth, watching to see how they navigate swifter water.

There's a young boy on a sit-on. He doesn't have a life jacket. He looks a little younger than my oldest, who just turned 12.

"I hope that boy makes it. He ain't even got a life jacket."

But he clears it fine.

“Makes me think we should get the kids their own kayaks,” Rick says in response. He reaches out his hand across the water. I give him mine. And we float there a minute, like otters.

## Adrift

“Come as you are, as you were/As I want you to be/As a friend, as a friend/As a known enemy/Take your time, hurry up/The choice is yours, don't be late/Take a rest as a friend/As an old/Memoria” – Nirvana, “Come as You Are”

*Anything I tell you is going to be a lie. The truth is too large for language to hold.*

*Close these pages; toss them in the trash. Now.*

*You're still reading? Why?*

*Maybe you're like me, then. Maybe the moment someone tells you not to do something, you're far too intoxicated by the possibility of what might be, what could happen, so you keep going.*

*Or maybe you just don't give a fuck what I think. And that's fine. But you're still reading, and now, because of my upbringing, I feel obligated to entertain you. Good little Southern girl. Good little white trash girl. Willing to oblige your request. Demand. Expectation.*

*Because who am I, if you don't tell me what you want first, and you want a storyteller.*

*Words are like a kind of witchcraft, for me, passed on through blood. I come from some of the best storytellers. Not writers, no. That's the spell I chose for you. But women that liked to sit on their porch or around a coffee table and “tell stories.” By this, I acknowledge what the women before me knew.*

*“You tellin' stories again?”*

*They liked to say this when a story was about them. It didn't matter if it was true. The moment you put words to what happened, it changed it. Forever altered it from actuality. Someone that might have seen the events of the same story happen in real time would have an entirely different version.*

*All subjective. They knew this.*

The first person I remember telling me stories was my grandmother, after school. I remember the *holler* where she lived as a sort of postcard. Lush green, deciduous woods dotted with deep evergreen, sloping down towards the icy vein known as the Wolf River, which cut through the gray bluffs and cliffs with a roaring precision. A creek, a sort of tributary, ran right through the front yard, if you can call it such, and right into the river. Sometimes, it would wash the gravel in the driveway completely away. I would get off the bus and stare down into the hole it created, carefully walking around it on the tops of the gullies left, down the slope of the drive to the small single wide trailer: a 1960's model mobile home that looked dated even in the late 80's. White metal with purposeless black metal shutters. In cold months, a continuous smoke stack coming off a room built on the back. A room built to hold the wood stove. In the summer, we had a single window AC unit. Our water ran off the bluffs and out of a bubbling spring my grandfather had managed to connect to our faucets.

Most days, I would walk in and see my grandmother in her tube top, *pedal pushers* (I think today they call them *crops*) and permed black coif sitting next to front window with a novel in her hands. With her dark lensed, oversized plastic rimmed glasses, she sometimes looked like Roy Orbison dressed as Dolly Parton. The covers of her books always had a version of the same scene: a delicate, lithe woman placing her body and the burden of her womanly cares against that of a shiny, half dressed man. Their features would be different but the pose was always the same. She read romance novels, about three a week, every week, until she couldn't really read anymore.

When I was around four to five years old, I would run around outside and catch lizards. I have always been bad at being female. I got banned from my cousin's birthday parties. I had only wanted to show them the brown ooze grasshoppers spit when they were scared. While girls of the party used their little ringed hands to smooth down the skirts of their poofy 80's dresses, I ran, in my jeans, through golden reeds of grass as tall as me, trying to find the biggest hopper I could. You could see oozing better, the bigger the grasshopper. I found a fantastic yellow specimen and ran over to the other little girls who were giggling and whispering, about what I don't know.

“Look!”

I can still hear the echo of the screams off the hillside.

That same year, I got my first *paddling* at school. Kindergarten back then required that, for an hour a day, we slept on little red and blue foam cots, but we brought our own pillows from home. A mean little boy named Roger, with narrow eyes and short, dark hair, got his kicks from seeing exactly how much he would get away with. Sometimes he would crawl up as high as he could on the worn wood bookshelves. Other times, he'd smack girls on the butt. This particular day, he had a tiny fist on each side of my pillow and pulled. My granny made that pillow by hand for me the week before kindergarten. With the rip of each popping stitch, my blood boiled ten degrees higher. I took my fist and hit him square in the nose.

And for years, in school, I would hide picture day notices so I wouldn't have to wear a dress. My grandmother and my mother would spend a great deal of time and what little money they had trying to make sure I'd at least look the part of a “little girl” in photographs. In second grade, I was particularly successful. They had found a layered

denim and pink chiffon dress. I hated the thing. When they made me try it on, the chiffon itched and the denim suffocated. The outfit hung on a door for weeks before picture day with not a wrinkle having even a chance to form. I threw away the picture-day notice on the bus, and all subsequent reminders. I say I was particularly successful, because in the picture, I have on a hot pink sweatshirt and hair full of “rat’s nests” as my mother liked to call them. My smile in that picture is radiant, though.

My mom worked all the time. She would wake up, get me ready, drop me off at my grandmother’s, and I wouldn’t see her again until dark, usually. She worked at the “shirt factory,” then, the only sewing manufacturer in town, an OshKosh facility which has been long closed since. She divorced my dad when I was two. I don’t remember her dating much whenever I was really small, but there is a story she likes to tell me now that I’m grown. When we first moved back, we lived in government subsidized housing. Apartments, that had the misfortune of being on a hill. Misfortune because the complex got nicknamed by the townsfolk as “whore hill” as it was where all the single mothers lived. One night, after I just turned three, I woke up and wandered to the living room. I asked her where her friend, Mr. Lee, went. She told me he went home.

I pointed to the pair of shoes under our coffee table. “He forgot his boots.”

I don’t remember any of this. But my mom likes to tell this story because she hails it as an example of how smart I was, how no one could get anything by me. I guess mothers are like that, seeing only what they want to see in their children.

I remember different stories, though, like when my mom did a horrible, beautiful, terrible, no good thing. By the time I was five, she had gotten a steady boyfriend. They went out on Saturday nights. She had been dating him for a few years, when after one of

these dates, she brought me a fortune cookie back from the restaurant they ate at. Mom is generally a horrible liar, but she's a fantastic actress. Her round face, framed in the soft volume of ironed curls, showed no signs of mischief or aloofness. And bringing me back something from date night had become common, because that way I wouldn't bitch when I couldn't go.

We were in the driveway of my grandmother's trailer, nestled tightly within the green walls, sitting in her beat-up, stick-shift Ford ranger. I opened it quickly, carelessly, as children do with any little present. But as I did, there was a bit of gold chain sticking out of the side. I crushed the cookie in my hands to get at the sparkle.

“What's it say?”

Oh, she was slick. Calm. Collected. As if this was any other day in the world.

But it wasn't, because this was the day I found a Swarovski crystal heart necklace in a fortune cookie.

“Momma, look!” I can't remember what she said after that, but I can remember she seemed as genuinely surprised as I was. “How did it get there?!” and her seamless shrug of a response. She didn't lie. She knew better than that.

Pivoting the chromatic heart shaped crystal between my fingers, watching it catch the light and each time reflect a different color, I just knew I was destined for some kind of greatness. How had this little fortune cookie with its hidden treasure found its way into my hands? The Universe must have been trying to tell me something, right?

I guess it was an easy bit of narrative for me to spin for myself. I felt different, and not in the chosen, unique way. But in the ostracized, Appalachian way. The whispers of a small town carry violent hidden blades that wound deep.



She painted portraits for people in town. They would bring a picture to her at the factory where she worked, and she would bring it home and give it life on a matte board with pastel pencils and talent. She charged around fifty bucks for these striking resemblances of others' loved ones from an awkward Olan Mill's studio photo. She charged for other things at the time, particular "artistic abilities" that I was too little to catch on to. Once, she was putting candles, hurriedly, into a gift bag.

"What are those?"

"Uh, mushrooms..."

"Did you carve them?"

"Yep."

"Why would someone want a candle shaped like a mushroom?"

"Who knows what strange people do?"

And with the dick candles she had whittled, with a knife and store-bought pillars, hidden from view in the paper gift bag, she was out the door. Who knows what the strange people paid her for them?

We only lived in the apartment for about a year. Mom, ever aware of the whispers of "whore hill," moved us rather quickly to a house down the street. Too quick, because the house was falling apart. FHA had taken her money in trade for what could only loosely be called a residence. She wouldn't let anyone visit our house for fear of them "talking." There was always the fear of them talking – saying how our house had dirty-brown shag carpet, no curtains, painted-over, wood-paneled walls. They might notice the scurry of the mice we couldn't get rid of. Or the ants might have bit them when they sat down, the way they bit me. Or if it was raining, the ceiling-soaked water might smack

that particular visitor in the face with the reality of our poverty. And then they might tell someone else.

We lived behind a long, stone church. One with a giant crystal chandelier you could see through a clear arched window, and on rare occasions, someone would stop by to invite us. Mom would quickly turn off our little box TV and make sure all the lights were off. She would grab me and pull me into her bedroom with one hand, her other placing a single forefinger up to her lips. *Ssshhhhh*. We were never home, even if we were. No matter who knocked on the door. This made friendships difficult for her, and by proxy, for me, too.

And she wasn't entirely wrong. That town loved its gossip, and we were juicy enough. Everyone went to church, but we didn't. All women were married or only recently divorced. She wasn't. I think, growing up, I only ever had three or four different friends over to hang out or spend the night, that I had to fight, beg, and plead for her to allow that, and only one of those was a repeat offender.

We were weird, and feeling that weirdness, it was easier to spin the story into being something special rather than just being the town weirdos. I think Mom knew that.

And it was weirdness I packed with me, like in my weekend bags to my dad's house. My dad didn't have to worry about dating, because he'd already been dating someone when he was still married to my mom, which is why Mom left. Naturally, he married this new woman once his divorce with my mother was final.

I got to be in the wedding, with my two new stepsisters. I didn't want to be.

My new stepmother liked to pick apart the ways in which I was not and would never be normal. I chewed on both sides of my mouth – like an old person, she said. I

wouldn't blow my nose, "just sucked all the snot back up into yer head" proving my heathenism.

There's an old home video I haven't watched in a while. I don't have to watch it, because I can remember it, but I've got the proof if they ever tried to say I've spun the story out of their favor. I'm tiny— four maybe? My hair is in sponge curlers, which I had to sleep in, because my straight hair was "so stubborn, like you" and wouldn't curl like my stepsisters' hair naturally did. We are dying Easter eggs, around the dining room table, to take to church, since the holiday was the next day. I guess my dad was the one filming. My stepmother with her permed blond is sitting at the end of the table, wrapped in a blue satin robe.

"Leslie, what kind of sticker you want for your egg?"

"I want the 'turch!"

"The church? You want the *cha*-urch?"

"Yes, the 'turch!"

"Cha. Cha-urch. Say it right." She holds the sticker just out of reach as I lean my whole tiny body across the solid oak table.

"Ta-church!" I reach, my bony shoulder popping out from under the purple ruffle of my nightgown, the backs of my knees seamless in pursuit.

"CH-UR-CH."

"Chartch!"

I snatch the sticker, and she sighs in defeat.

My dad laughs on the other side of the camera.

But then there were the stories they left off camera, too. Like when we had to fold the laundry. My stepsisters and I sat with a mound of it in my oldest stepsister's room, organizing the things into piles. I was four, Shannon was five, Ashley was eight. It seemed like the mountain of laundry was infinite, and we would never be done and never get to play. I was folding an old rag, and I set it to the side. And then I was folding a pair of my stepmother's satin underwear.

"That rag has holes in it. Pitch it," Ashley directed me, as I had never folded clothes before and was severely struggling to know what went where and what shape it was meant to be in when finished.

Happy to be excused from the mound sorting, I skipped to the trash can and tossed the rag. I lingered back down the hall, curling the plush blue carpet up in my toes as I walked. When I got back to the laundry, I sat down with a huff, ready to be done with the endless task.

Maybe it was minutes. Maybe it was an hour.

I could hear her stomps. We all could. There was a collective cringe.

"Who did this?!" my stepmother swung the door open. It bounced off the brass door stop, making the *boooiinnnnng* characteristic of a spring. She held in her outstretched hand a pair of beige satin panties, crushed under the curl of her fingers and painted nails.

We all just looked at each other, silent.

"*Someone* did this! Now who was it?!"

We shrugged, and started with, "Not me's" but she cut us off.

"Fine, no one did it, well, I guess you can all get your ass busted."

From the other hand, she produced a wooden paddle from one of those solo paddle ball games, the ball having been torn, string and all, from the paddle. Ashley went first, as a captain responsible for a sinking ship, bending over the edge of her bed, while Shannon and I went to her/our (we shared it on the weekends I was there) room to bend over the big bed. We cried as we listened to the *thwacks* we knew would soon be coming for us.

We could still hear Ashley sobbing when the woman they called mother appeared in the doorway, backlit by the bright light of the hall, like any good villain in any good ominous scene. We took our *thwacks* and sobbed.

As I struggled to collect my breath and fight back the tears, it occurred to me that I had made the fatal mistake with the panties. When I had gone to throw away the old rag, I had in carelessness, picked up instead the underwear and had, purely by accident, thrown them away instead.

I had to tell her. I had to set the record straight. I stepped softly on the carpet, lingering again as I walked from the hallway to the living room.

“Bonnie.”

“Hmm?”

“It was me. I didn’t rememb--”

My wrist was in her hand as she dragged me back through the hallway, my feet burning from the friction of the carpet. She shoved me in Ashley’s room first, where she was still sobbing.

“Tell her. Tell her you did it and you lied. And then apologize.”

“I...I’m sorry. I didn’t... I didn’t realize...”

“It’s okay,” her breath still catching, her eyes red and puffy.

My stepmother jerked me back up, pulling into the next room, Shannon’s room, my pseudo-room.

“Tell her!”

And I tried again to apologize, but I was bent back over the bed.

*WHAP.*

“I’m sorry!”

*WHAP.*

“I didn’t mean to!”

*WHAP.*

“I’M SORRY!”

*WHAP.*

My stepmother walked out with her paddle in hand. I crawled under the covers next to Shannon, unable again to catch my breath.

“Why?” Shannon whispered.

“I didn’t mean to. I didn’t remember...”

“No,” she cut me off, “Why’d you even tell her?”

## Lying To

“but you weren’t hungry./ feeling it dying away all day/ much worse than the straining/against the leash, another gorgeous/ thing that should not have happened,/ gone again.” – Michelle Tea, “Oh God”

*Life is sometimes a series of small heartbreaks.*

*Or endings or beginnings. Whatever. But one doesn’t negate the other, really.*

*Things can begin all the time without anything ending, right? We rely so heavily on correlation and causation, even when we know.*

*I give up before trying to explain to you sexuality and emotion, and how just because you have married the two, I’m not required to divorce them.*

*Here. I’ll tell you a story where I love two people at the same time. Or is that across the same distance? A person can occupy two places at once, if they are clever.*

*It’s easier to tell myself you won’t understand, though. That you couldn’t, because you haven’t lived it. That you have never searched for the language to describe a distance crossed almost instantly, the pulling of a thread through two different holes that somehow made a stitch.*

*It’s easier to say it was all a lie, like time. The distance too large for me to explain, so I knitted together a story to make it make sense. Except it still doesn’t. I can love her even as I hate her, and hate him even as I love him. The laws of religion and physics no longer apply.*

The colors discoed against the suffocating clouds. Blue then red then white then blue again. Cyclical dance of strobes reflecting back down on the dark pavement, muting out the orange of the sodium vapor street lamps.

*Oh no. Please.*

The cops had the road completely blocked. I counted the cars. One, two . . . six. I think I saw six. I pulled my SUV into an apartment complex further down the street of gray duplexes. I got out, slammed my door, and just walked toward the bustle of men in brown uniforms. I could hear a familiar, male voice screaming obscenities. My husband's brother.

What I didn't hear is her.

I walked faster. There was a car pulled off to the side of the cops with its lights still on. I didn't recognize it, nor did I stare too long trying. I watched the commotion, slowing my walk and looking for her. I can still hear him ranting.

“Useless cunts! This all you motherfuckers know how to do, huh?”

*Please don't let her be dead.*

The porch light from the stoop of her duplex fought back against the strobes. I walked only as fast as I could without drawing attention to myself, scanning the scene for her. My brother-in-law's voice only getting louder, “How are you going to come in MY house and assault me?! I didn't do a fucking thing! I didn't touch her!”

I stopped in my steps as one of the brown uniforms walked out of the apartment with his arm around someone. Not just any someone. Her platinum hair was bright enough to reflect the competing refractions of color. Her face was in her hands, shoulders sobbing, hiding eyes so blue that at times they lacked pigment. I ran.

Whatever worry I had about the police trying to keep me out of the scene was unfounded. I suppose I could have come in with drums and bagpipes, and they couldn't have cared less. A white, overweight, 5'4" female – they certainly didn't see me as a



threat. And they had bigger worries: my brother-in-law, wrists cuffed behind him, knee in his back, pinned to the threshold of the front door. From where I stood at the bottom of the steps, all I could see of him were hands and cuffs above a mop of short brown curls. Hair like my husband and son. Another officer, in a mocking soothe, told him to calm down.

“You’re the one that needs to calm down! I didn’t do anything!”

I got close enough to see tears running down her face before she saw me. My best friend of two years. I smelled her softness as she leaned into me. She was the same size as me, height and weight. But her weight felt like a comfort, warm and real. Breathing. I wanted to hold all of her up, make her light against the weight of all the craziness.

“Please don’t let them take him to jail. Please, Leslie, please don’t let them.”

The words seared through me, angry and incredulous. She was safe, but not sane. She couldn’t be. How could that be the thing she said?

An hour earlier, I had gotten a text message from her phone that said, ‘*Come get me.*’ But Jacob had been back in her life long enough that we had established rules for this. This was nothing new, really. A season. A returning of climate which I had learned to weather. To always make sure it was her, I would text a pineapple emoji and she would text one back. I sent one. No response. This meant he had her phone.

After some carefully worded texts – you see, I knew him, all too well - I had managed to get him on the phone.

“Just let me talk to her, Jacob,” I called him by his whole name and not just Jake when I was pissed. I’d seen his mom do the same and found it effective. But no such luck.

“Why can’t you just leave us alone? This is none of your business, Leslie.” He weaponized my name the same way. I was no longer, “Sis.”

“Just let me hear her say she is okay, and I will.”

Click.

I decided then to drive to her apartment, all the while Jake calling and telling me I had better mind my own. In turn, I threatened to call the cops. He hated that, and he was never entirely sure I wouldn’t.

Tonight, though, someone had beaten me to it. He didn’t know that. As I held her, arms intertwined with mine to keep her from hitting the ground, I pressed for answers.

“Heather, I can’t control this. Who called them?”

The moment he heard my voice, he screamed from his position face down in the doorway, “Are you happy, *sis*? Is this what you wanted?”

“I didn’t call them, Jacob.”

“BULLSHIT!”

It’s that moment when the guys in uniform realized I was there.

“Who are you?” an officer asked.

I explained, although I couldn’t possibly really explain this situation to him. I didn’t have enough time. I gave him the basics. I’m the crying blonde girl’s *friend* – loaded word at this point, but the screaming demon on the ground’s sister-in-law. He told me to pull my car up to the apartment. He escorted Heather to the passenger side and set her in like a broken doll he wasn’t sure what to do with.

“My sister called them,” was all the explanation she gave.

I watched her honeysuckle hair, the perfect mixture of white and gold, glow in the street lights outside of my car, in the headlights of her sister's car behind mine, the beam of police flashlights flickering as the cops talked to each other, made jokes, and wasted time. This was their every day, so while they chuckled, I looked to her for signs I could convince her not to go down this path. She was the saddest and most beautiful thing I had seen in human form. A single tear rolled down the round paleness of her cheek, then another.

Unrequited love doesn't get enough recognition in this modern time of Tinder and hookups. The exquisiteness of worshipping a being who can never, who would never, return that adoration. The knowing of this thing. The breaking of this thing. The giving and subsequent rejection of the vulnerable self.

"You have to stop this, Heather." I tried not to preach, but it was out of my mouth. I reached for her hand. I was so glad she was alive. Next time, I might not be so lucky.

"But I love him. It hurts so bad to love him, but I can't stop." She pulled her hand back, the gray sleeve of her hoodie shifted. I saw the red on her wrist. The place where repeated dull cuts couldn't quite break the skin. Blood, but only a little.

"I know," and I did.

Right there, in that moment – God, did I know.

She was a broken thing when I met her, and I could remember not that long ago being a broken thing, too.

At first, I didn't think I would like her. I was never a girly girl. I had met her through Jacob at a drunken pseudo-birthday party at my house. He brought her out on her

birthday, two days before mine. We decided we should celebrate. Rick and Jacob decided Heather and I should go to the liquor store while they stayed at the house and shot guns for fun. I didn't know a thing about her. As I drove, we made polite conversation about both of us being mothers. Somehow, the conversation turned to the subject of having big breasts.

“But they aren't, like the same size,” she admitted timidly.

“No, like I know! No one's are. One will always be bigger or smaller, unless they're fake.”

Soul sisters created in triple D cups. Some relationships happen almost instantly.

I had never had a true best friend since elementary school. To be honest, I'm not even sure what the term “best friend” means. But Heather became the one I could talk to for hours on the phone, and she was the one who showed up when I finally managed to graduate with my bachelor's degree at the ripe old age of 31. She was also the one who rode with me two hours away to another state the night I convinced myself my husband was drunk and cheating on me while working out of town. She got in my car without hesitation, ready for whatever drama might unfold. She was the one who understood I wasn't worried that he was having sex with someone else, but that he might be *lying* about it. We played Pokémon Go in stalled Nashville traffic. She was the one who laughed with me when we discovered he was only drunk – miserably, pitifully puke drunk, but just drunk all the same.

Jacob is what one would call a “fuckboy” – a player, a liar, a user. She had a place to live. He needed one. Especially a place where no one asked him what the hell was he snorting up his nose. He fucked her, and she paid the bills, except she was twenty and had

no understanding of mutually beneficial relationships with boundaries. She fell in love. I spent months carefully attempting to expose the fact that she was not the “only one,” just the only one he lived with. Eventually, as all things do, his cheating came out in the wash with him going back to jail for drugs. She would call or text me every single night begging for the answer of how to forget someone who doesn’t love you back. And I would carefully place her head back on her shoulders and screw it on tightly until the next time her self-doubt slowly pulled it loose again.

We became close.

Close enough she asked Rick if he could officiate her parents’ wedding.

It was a gorgeous, chilly Fall wedding. Downtown on the square, with pigeons flying picturesquely against the crisp blue. As my husband recited a story about how halves become separated before birth, though, I wondered how true this could possibly be. I didn’t feel half of anything. I was whole. And as I watched Heather smiling, holding her daughter, dress blowing in the breeze, I knew I cared deeply for her. Almost too much.

I was still, after over a decade, crazy about my husband. We had overcome so much together. A connection forged in hardships and creating a life together. Raising children. Buying a home. A bond built in drama and mundanity of survival.

It was a beautiful day. But it was the day I began to question everything.

I didn’t want to be attracted to her. But I was. The more we hung out, the more undeniable it became. And it didn’t feel all one sided. We would get drunk and steal random ambiguous kisses. A lingering peck, lips to lips, on the way to get another beer or

on the return back from the fridge with one. Innocent enough to be girly signals of close friendship, but just erotic enough to suggest passion.

My first sexual encounter with Heather wasn't mine, really. Sometimes, I can be too clever for my own good. For as much drunken flirting that had gone on between us, just as much had gone on between her and Rick. Now, I am not blind nor am I naïve. Heather was young and beautiful. And there was something endearing about the way she just couldn't see things coming. I mean, I was attracted to her, and I could catch the eyes of my husband, here and there, looking at her in the way ferrets look at jewelry.

For an insecure person, I am surprisingly trusting. I could see what he caught in glimpses he thought went unnoticed. Sex is just sex. Love, as a concept, I am unsure of. You can't touch it or define it. It is both an act and a thing, I think. Many things, maybe. But sex is entirely separate. An act. A biological function. A process in archaic times for continuing the existence of the human species. Wouldn't a man who had, as far as I can tell, been faithful for over a decade deserve some kind of reward? And think of all those unwashed socks and lost jobs. He had been so good to me, and I must be boring after all this time.

It began as a bet. Imagine God and the Devil and Job. Two of them, riding in a red '01 F150, to the liquor store.

"I bet you could not fuck her without her asking me if it was okay first,"

"Seriously?"

"I mean, consider the fact that you have been a married man now for almost twelve years. You have no game whatsoever. And no, me and her are as close as two people can get. She would unequivocally not do anything without my consent."

“Whatever. You underestimate me.”

“Okay, whatever. Stop the car. Right here.” I point to the Dollar Store on the corner. “I will go in and buy you the condoms because I know my best friend.”

I, clearly, am the Devil, here. I mean, what did I have to lose? If nothing else, it would be interesting to see how it all played out.

We had talked before one night through text messages about how we would only be willing to go so far with another woman, which was apparently pretty far. She had confessed an encounter with a friend from high school. I had nothing comparable except for two kisses, one with a stripper and another with a friend who had just taken it upon herself to do so. But our attraction lingered, even if we weren't acting on it.

She came over that night, and I created a nectar from a combination blueberry lemonade rum, margarita mix, and tequila. This is what we did so often on our weekends. I had just been rejected from the only MFA I had applied to after graduation, and she was still recovering from the fact that not everyone you love, loves you back. We danced in my driveway to Beyoncé's “Drunk in Love” as loud as my Nissan Sentra would blast it through the speakers. The stars melted against the early summer sky.

I was sure I was crossing lines that couldn't be uncrossed, and for the most part, I didn't care.

Every now and again, when I was brave enough to look, I could see Rick leaning closer or sliding a hand. She didn't push him away. Still, I was certain of her loyalty.

I would carefully take extra time when mixing drinks, giving them more time alone together. Eventually the rain drove us inside. Rick mentioned something about his

back hurting, and she coyly offered a back rub. Rick went to the bedroom, and she followed. I waited, not patiently.

I don't remember whether it was him or her that called my name.

I tried not to run, to count the second between my footfalls. Had she let me down?

I walked through the door, noticed both of them were still reasonably clothed. She reached out her hand to me. I took it in mine.

"He says you're okay with this,"

"I am,"

"Not just because you're drunk,"

"I'm not that drunk, Heather. What about you? Is this just because you're drunk?"

She shook her head.

"But I want you here," she told me.

"Okay."

I watched as he slid off her panties and pulled up her shirt. My veins were pumping liquid mercury, pure adrenaline, with each heartbeat. He laid her on her back as she stared into his eyes. Are you a pyromaniac if the fire you play with is your own life? He slid inside her and she gasped. I know that feeling. Interesting to watch someone else feel it.

She reached out for my hand again, and I took it.

But wait, what was he . . . no I didn't say that was okay! He leaned in and kissed her. My heart stopped and my breath stopped and for a moment, I was on Jupiter and all its momentous gravity crushed the center of me. The words caught in my throat and I swallow them down. Soft and tumbling, like a petal freed of its flower. How had I not



seen the kiss coming? It's a natural enough sort of thing. And yet, I missed it entirely. Still, I was silent.

She moaned, and I wasn't sure if it was really because she enjoyed it. Sure, I enjoyed sex with him. But I loved him. What if he only seemed that good to me because of how I felt for him. Suddenly, I was self-conscious for him. Still, I watched their bodies move together, and I held her hand and she squeezed it. I wanted to reach out to her, to kiss her, touch her hair. But I didn't have consent and he did, so I settled for her hand. I stroked my thumbs across her whitened knuckles.

She said she came. I knew it to be a lie, but she had clearly said it because she was done for now, so I didn't call her on it. She pushed Rick on his back and grabbed my other hand, and pulled me on top of him. I pulled up my dress, and pulled the top down.

Ever in control, as I was prone to do.

And we had switched places. I was having sex with him, yes. But I kept my eyes on hers the whole time, and she did not look away.

In the days after, I became obsessed with this idea that I could have it all. Like when I was little and thought I could travel the world, have a fabulous career, and a husband and family. She would tell me she loved me before hanging up the phone, and I would say it back. Rick and I had conversations about this idea of polyamory. For him, sex was sex. But for me, I was suddenly entertaining deeply hidden, primal feelings I had carefully stuffed down for years.

It was a high. This idea. My brain buzzed from it constantly. I thought of Ariel from the *Little Mermaid* and how after her first encounter with Eric, she flitted around

singing songs to herself in sort of a dazed mania of romance. That was me. I was a vibrating bubble of dopamine and serotonin. There wasn't a drug comparable.

I kept wanting it to happen again. Wondering each time she came over, if it would. But a couple of weeks passed, and I couldn't bear the suspense, so eventually I asked her if she regretted it.

Her blue eyes clear as she looked at me.

“No. Do you?”

“Absolutely not.” And then I couldn't resist the awkward question hanging in the air. “Would you do it again? I mean, would you do it again? Do you want to?” For someone generally pretty good with words, I was fucking this up. I turned away, embarrassed for myself.

If it was awkward or bumbled, she didn't notice.

“Yeah,” the word rolled off smooth and cool. My heart pumped in my ears.

And in that heart, I didn't hold any ridiculous notions that this would be some sort of committed relationship. Heather was very much like a younger version of me. I knew she had ideas for her life. Goals of a certain sort laid out by our very upbringing. Family. Not modern, traditional. I knew she would be dating guys whether or not anything more amounted between us. But love was not possession, for me. And I convinced myself my love for her was platonic, and we were more like friends with benefits.

The lies we tell ourselves. We don't even know we are telling them. We rationalize and lay out conditions, boundaries, circumstances to justify our actions. But they are still lies.

Months passed, and in those months, we would still kiss as before. Say I love you. Lay our heads on each other's shoulders. Rick had started growing psilocybin mushrooms as a homegrown medication for my bipolar disorder. The 'shrooms kept at bay the worst symptom I had, bipolar depression, without the risk of making me so manic I lost touch with reality. Heather would come over and we would get high on them and talk for hours. Sometimes we would dance together. Sit and watch movies on the couch. Normal friendship stuff. Normal couple stuff? I don't know what the difference is, still.

She did start dating a guy. A guy I considered far beneath her. Donald. Every time I showed up at her apartment, he was shirtless in sweatpants no matter the occasion. I saw less of her. I missed her. But she wasn't mine in any way. We still talked on the phone and I hoped for the best for her. If Donald was what she wanted, then I supported her.

Their relationship moved quickly. She would text me pictures of flower arrangements from Pinterest so I could try to help her pick out the right color scheme for the wedding they were planning. There wasn't a ring, and no date set. But she wanted me as her matron of honor and even, quite surprisingly, Rick to officiate. I even went with her to pick out a dress.

Bridal stores are heady places. All of the white and the pearls and veils. All the mirrors. We had looked at dresses online, so I had an idea of what she wanted. The skinny sales associate kept bringing out white, lacey, tailored dresses that reminded me of antique Victorian pictures. Something Celine Dion or Princess Diana would wear.

"No, no." I would tell them, and begin combing through the racks to try to find what I knew would make the most visual impact. Heather tried on dress after dress, all of

them with forty-something buttons, taking around 10 minutes to get in and out of. She was getting tired. I was getting frustrated.

But then, there. A soft bundle of ivory tulle sticking out from between the white. I pulled out the heavy dress and held it back, letting the light hit it. This one. This was the one.

I took it to her dressing room and knocked.

“Try this one. Last one, then we’ll go.”

She shuffled out of another “no” dress and into the one I had brought her. I waited in a gaudily upholstered chair in between all the mirrors. I can remember this moment more vividly than most. She peeked out from between the doors, her blonde waves on bare shoulders.

“Help me zip up.” She had said it to me, but the sales associate, seemingly frustrated in her uselessness, ran over and fixed before I could even get up from the chair. And then the door swung open, and she turned. The strapless bodice cinching her waist, accentuating her full breasts, which revealed only an inch or so of cleavage. The ivory, pale, her white skin, paler. The tulle skirt, not poofy, flowed off of her like waves of windblown, sunlit snow cascading down in avalanches of softness. She was femininity. She was Rubensian.

She walked up to the elevated platform that was centered between all the mirrors, and the sales girl pulled the train of the gown out flat against the paisley carpet.

“I don’t know,” Heather hesitated.

“Seriously?”

She laughed, probably from the way I was looking at her. And I couldn't help myself.

"You are so beautiful."

"Is that the one?" the sales girl broke through the moment.

Heather looked in the mirror, at me, and back at herself.

"Yeah, this is it."

They have this silly thing at certain bridal stores where they ring a little hand-held bell when you say, "yes to the dress" as they like to call it. So they rang the bell and we got a total on the dress, which was around \$1500, more than two months of her rent. I'm not sure how she even planned to pay for it, if she really even planned to. And Donald had just gone to jail a few days ago for assault – of Heather's daughter's father.

We walked to the car, me enamored.

And she said, "I don't know about all this."

"What do you mean?" I opened the car door, sliding in the driver's side as she did the same on the passenger's.

"I mean, this. Like I don't know that Donald will be enough."

And me, thinking on my feet but not thinking clearly, "You can always borrow Rick." I turned the ignition.

And she laughed, and I laughed.

A few nights later, I wouldn't think it was so funny. By a stroke of luck, I had gotten in that MFA program at the last minute, two weeks before the start of the semester. I made friends with some of the other writers quickly, surprisingly. A couple of us liked to get high, but the others either didn't or had never tried it. One of them, a sorority-type

girl, ballet thin with good posture, had said she'd always wanted to try it but had been too busy with academics and athletics. I didn't consider if she was just trying to fit in. I offered a low-key night at my house, just a few of us. Rick and Heather, there, of course, as well.

We'll call this girl Emily, because I don't want to call her out.

Cameron, another writer and my closest writer-friend, offered to drive her out to our house and would hang out with us, too.

She wanted to try the mushrooms first. I guess I had gushed about the way my mind felt free to wander, and the years of me working retail translated to being a sales person, even when I didn't mean to be. Rick weighed them out on a scale and measured out just enough for a decent high for four of us. He didn't take any. He drank whiskey instead. Cameron and Heather decided to smoke some weed to enhance the effect of the mushrooms, but I wanted to stay somewhat coherent since it was Emily's first time.

Mushrooms can take a while to kick in. For Cameron, Heather, and me, this was a practiced ritual. We would find music we were feeling, something we could all agree on, and we would sit around the coffee table on my white, fake leather sectional, laughing and talking. But something felt off this night. Cameron and I were feeling Amy Winehouse, but Rick and Heather weren't. Emily just kept saying she wasn't feeling anything – not the music, nor the mushrooms.

“Give it some time,” but I wasn't feeling anything, either. I knew to wait, though. They often just hit all at once that way. I kept changing the music, but no one could agree on what to listen to, so eventually I gave up. There was too much quiet small talk. The ritual felt even more off.

“I still don’t feel anything.” Emily shrugged her shoulders, and Rick suggested maybe she was one of the rare people who were immune to the effects.

And I felt a little different, but with her saying she didn’t feel anything and my preoccupation with trying to make sure everyone had a good time, I suggested we take a little more. We did, and we sat around making more quiet, polite conversation. The vibe was off. It just didn’t feel right.

“I still don’t feel anything,”

At this point, I felt inadequate. Here was this sheltered girl who wanted to let loose and have a good time, and my drugs were failing her. And her not feeling anything was convincing me I wasn’t feeling anything either.

Rick ate some, to see if they were duds, so he said.

But after a bit of time, he didn’t feel anything either.

“How about weed? You want to try that?” I asked, trying to have not wasted her time. Trying to prove, I guess, that I could provide. I’m not sure. The night felt like a dud anyway.

“Sure,” she agreed.

I brought out my water pipe I had bought years ago when I couldn’t sleep and no longer trusted bipolar meds after they landed me in the hospital, suicidal, for a month. I’m not an avid weed smoker but sometimes on occasion, I would smoke up.

Rick lit the bowl and she went to smoke it but she held it too far away for her to be able to breathe in the smoke. This was the first sign that I had miscalculated someone else’s measure of fun. Rick tried to show her. She didn’t get it. He decided instead to

“shotgun” it to her, where he breathes the smoke, without inhaling, into his mouth and blows it out for her to breathe in. This worked.

She coughed and coughed, and then I felt bad. Like maybe I wasn't the person to teach other people how to do drugs I guess. These are things most people learn in high school and early in college, so it felt a little ridiculous to be honest.

Cameron mumbled, while Emily was coughing, “Please don't puke” and somehow, through her coughing fit, she misheard it as “okay now go puke.” The second sign of my misreckoning came when I walked back in from kitchen to see her standing over the toilet in our guest bathroom.

“What are you doing?”

“He told me to puke.”

“What?”

It hit me then, not in little waves as before, but in a whole heap of tsunami that this had been a bad idea. I explained that no, that's not how it works. “Just come back and sit down for a moment.”

The mushrooms hit me hard and quickly, but instead of the relaxed, floaty feeling I was used to, they enhanced the paranoia and fear I was having about the night. Heather and Cameron were all giggles, but I was a rubber band pulled taut with expectation. Emily wasn't having a good time. This was out of place for her, and I could tell she felt exposed in a way she wasn't used to.

And then she passed out. She was sitting one minute and the next, she fell across my couch into Cameron, who kind of just sat there, eyes bugged, not knowing what the hell to do.



“Fuck.” I remember saying it and how much I felt the word, coming out from my center and over my tongue and hanging in the stuffy air.

Rick picked her up and laid her down, where she immediately came to, to my relief. She was kind of mumbling, repeatedly checking her pulse, as the rest of us tried quietly to figure how to handle this situation.

She took her hand and placed it out in front of her. Waving it back in forth, I’m sure following the trails her vision created. But then, I saw a look of fear in her eyes, the kind of look animals caught suddenly by light tend to give. She picked up her phone and began to call to people.

“We should probably take her phone,” I said to anyone listening.

“Who’s she talking to?” Heather’s fuzzy voiced answered back.

“I think her mom,” Cameron assessed.

“I don’t remember how I got here,” Heather laughed.

“What?” I asked. “I brought you here.”

“No, no. Like I can’t remember yesterday, or the day before.”

“What?” I was still watching Emily talking hushed and hurriedly to someone on the other end of her cell.

“Holy shit, I can’t remember the last two weeks! What is today?”

“I have parents,” Cameron interrupted.

“What?” Heather and I were simultaneously confused.

“I just realized,” he began, very seriously, “that I have siblings – people that look like me in the world – because I have parents.”

“Oka-” and that’s when I heard Emily’s whispers.

Something about “Rick” and “Leslie” and “Cameron.”

“Cameron, take her phone.” The look on her face said panic, and I just knew she was calling someone in some position of authority – her mom or her dad, someone bound to call the cops.

“Huh?” he looked at her and then at me.

“Take her phone.”

“Hey, can I see your phone for a minute?” he tried. But she flicked her hand in dismissal, and began talking in more hushed tones.

I was certain the cops would be there in less than an hour. I was in panic. I could not get caught. Everything would be ruined. I would lose my kids. Probably my place in the MFA program, at least in my head.

Rick looked at me, thinking as I was, and mouthed silently, “She’s got to go.”

We tried futilely to get her to give us the phone, but she would not relent.

Heather, Cameron, and I discussed who should drive.

“I can’t. I’m way too high.” Heather, who had just been wondering aloud what had happened to the last two weeks because she suddenly couldn’t remember, wasn’t wrong.

I tried to reason my way out of the inevitable. “Cameron brought her. He can take her, and then just go home. The night’s fucked anyway.”

Heather shook her head. “He’s done just as much as me. If I can’t drive, he can’t drive.”

And she was right, because earlier, he had been in pure wonderment about his existence, and those who look like him, in the world.

I groaned a deep, unwilling groan.

“Okay, fine, but y’all are going with me.” They nodded.

I went and sat next to her on the couch. “Hey, do you want to go home?” I asked as softly and nonthreateningly as I could. She nodded the nod of a little girl, no longer interested in the haunted house she begged to go to.

She stumble-walked, trembling from the cold feeling mushrooms can cause, to the car and would simply not stop calling people.

“Take her phone, Cameron.” I was trying to control this situation in the only way I knew how. The logical side of me knew mushrooms and weed can’t really hurt you, but if you don’t know what you’re doing, you can hurt yourself. We had to get her home where she would feel safe and not accidentally hurt herself. I couldn’t be distracted by worrying about whatever she was saying and who she was saying it to on the phone. I was about to do something I never did – drive inebriated.

I drove into town, asking Heather repeatedly if she thought she could drive every time a car pulled behind me. Of course she couldn’t. It was up to me to get us through this. Every pair of headlights glared like a cop’s, and every car looked frightfully white, like the local cop cars. None of them were – all tricks of light and shadow. It was the longest drive ever.

When we got to her apartment building, she couldn’t find her keys. Heather and I walked her up to the door where she could look under the light. She dug through her bag, then Heather, then me. No keys. In her long, tailored trench, it must have looked like me and Heather were robbing her. I had on a characteristically unfashionable t-shirt and jeans. Heather was in a hoodie and yoga pants. The scene was definitely suspect.

Emily was starting to panic.

“Hey, hey, look at me. Right here.” I put my hands on her shoulders, making eye contact. “Could they be in your pockets?”

She began to feel through her pockets, saying “no” but feeling anyway. I could see the “a-ha” in her eyes when her fingers brushed them. We walked her up and into the elevator, certain that every person we met was on to us. Finally, we got to her apartment and opened the door. She pointed us to which room was hers. She crawled into her bed, apologizing for not making it that morning and the two pieces of laundry on the floor. We put her phone on one side of the room and her keys on the other then told her to stay put until the fog wore off. She nodded. We felt better. And the drive back wasn’t anywhere near as nerve-racking.

But when we got back, the mood of the night was off. We were all adrenaline-soaked and paranoid. Rick went to bed. Heather followed. It had become no big deal, as close as Heather and I were, for her to sleep in my king size bed, whether I or Rick was in it or not. I stayed up and talked out my paranoia with Cameron. He, being the ever-dutiful friend, nodded and listened, for hours. Until the high and the bad feelings were gone.

I was so worried she would feel betrayed by me. As though I had told her something would be fun and it wasn’t. I felt wrong and guilty.

Heather woke up and left. Rick woke up and then went back to bed. Cameron eventually left. But I couldn’t sleep, too worried about Emily and what she would think of me come Monday when we had class together.

My phone dinged. I looked at the message.

“Hey, so me and Rick fucked again. Please don’t be mad.” Heather.

I wasn't mad. I wasn't anything. I didn't have the intellect at that point to process any sort of feeling. I lay down next to Rick and watched the ceiling fan make its rounds.

Naturally, the train that hits you is never the one you see coming. That's how useless worry is. If you worry about something, it's on your radar. You are aware, and therefore begin to take preventative measures. And when you find yourself on the tracks, as I did when he said I'm sorry, you will ask yourself the million ways you didn't see it coming.

I managed to stutter out "how" which he obliged as a legitimate question. It wasn't.

"I was high and pretty drunk. She came in here and she was next to me, against me,"

I looked at the text message on my phone again. Remnants of the train.

*Hey, so me and Rick fucked again last night. Please don't be mad.*

She had spent the night. She had come out of my bedroom to tell me bye before she went to visit her fiancé in jail. Trust me, she can pick them. Apparently, I can, too. He had come out at the same time. That should have been my first sign, right? How did I miss this?

"I'm sorry," Rick said the words as if he had broken a jar of jelly on our counter or bumped into me in the narrow hall of our home.

The phrase sounded like something out of Wonderland. Like an unbirthday. Or offensive white roses. I shook my head because I was so certain I did not hear him correctly. He repeated it, with added detail.

“I’m sorry. And if you want me to leave, I’ll go right now. Just tell me whatever I can do to make this better.”

A sensation ran wild like static electricity over my skin. What was this topsy turvy world I was then occupying? He was sorry? He was rarely sorry, for anything, and never before I say it first. Not even once.

I can’t tell you how many times she had shared a bed, but not bodies, with me or him or both of us since the night I was right about Heather not betraying me. But it had happened enough that the first time felt like a planetary alignment rather than an inevitability.

“But I didn’t say it was okay. I wasn’t there. How did you think this was okay?”

“I wasn’t thinking. I was really fucked up.”

“Yeah,”

“What can I do?”

And, what can someone do to help someone else who just got smacked in the face with their own pie? Was this my fault? Did I have a right to be mad? They both seemed to think I did. Didn’t I cause this in a way? How much time must pass before explicit permission can no longer be misconstrued into implicit?

But just by him saying I’m sorry, I felt validated. He was never sorry, for anything. Except this. Except now. Birds now crawl. Snakes fly. And dogs have tea and rabbits can tell time. Because everything I knew was wrong.

I distanced myself. From her. From him. I was mad, but I did not feel justified in my mad-ness. And not far enough to dissolve these relationships, just far enough to protect them from the unchecked anger.

I wrote out the anger. I sung out the anger in my car – on the way to the grocery store, to school, to pick up my kids. But I did not get angry, with anyone. I kept to myself until I was no longer angry. Still, a scorched resentment lingered.

I had wanted to fuck her. That was the problem. Not them fucking, but my not fucking.

Jacob did eventually get out of jail, and though she had sworn she was done, it wasn't long until she was visiting him at his mom's where he was staying. I heard the first night she went to see him, she brought "a gift" – another girl to share bodies with. Was she mimicking me? I was jealous.

Rick was done with her, after sensing my quiet anger and her returning to his brother. But I wasn't. I kept clinging to our friendship. I still wanted her. We were riding in the car on a random day, when the whole situation got the better of me.

"Why Rick? Why Jacob? Why all of this? You kissed me, so many times, but never anything more. Why?"

She laughed, not maliciously, but in a soft condescension. "You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes."

"I'll fuck you," but it was only words. Nothing came of it.

Until her relationship with Jacob began its inevitable spiral down. He hit her. I begged her to leave him. He offered her meth, and she had acquiesced. I knew my continued friendship had become a way of enabling.

It was a Wednesday when she called me crying.

"Come get me." This had become a pattern. One I never objected to.

I got her in my car and took her to the gym with me. I had started swimming – several laps at a time – to get healthier, stronger, to meditate in the repetitiveness required to remind me to come up for air. To not drown in my own life.

She sat with her feet in the water, and each time I turned on the lap back, I would see her waiting. Why would she be his and not mine?

Back in the car, she confessed why she had called.

“He did something horrible, Leslie,”

And I didn’t say it, but of course he did. He was unnerving sober, but he was walking terror when he was on drugs. I waited for her to tell me, not wanting to pressure her to divulge.

“He forced himself on me. He pushed me down and he crawled on top. I said no. But he didn’t listen.” She squeezed back tears in her lids as she spoke.

I wanted to kill him.

“You don’t have to ever go back, if you don’t want to, Heather. You can stay with me. Or we can find you somewhere else.”

She asked to go back to my place, just for a bit.

“Oh, and I have to tell you something else.” I looked at her, again waiting. “I’m really fucked up right now. I know I shouldn’t have, but I’ve been doing meth with him the past couple of days. Please don’t be mad.”

Well, I could act like I wasn’t mad. I had that down.

Back at my house, we lay on our backs in my bed together. Her high, and me angry.

“Hey,” she rolled over to face me.



“What?”

“What about that toy?”

“Oh.” I had told her about a sex toy I had that could be controlled from a cell phone. Another moment where I was an unintended salesperson. “What about it?”

“Can we try it?”

And my pulse shook my brain.

“Yeah. Yeah! I mean, are you sure? I mean, what happened, with Jacob, this morning?”

“Just go get it.”

I unclipped the little blue silicone “C” from its case on my bathroom vanity and brought it back to the bed. She kicked off her shorts and slipped under the covers. I handed it to her not wanting to be too forward. She slipped it in out of sight.

“Turn it on.” I opened the app on my phone and press the power icon with my thumb. She closed her eyes for a long second, between her legs buzzing. “Show me how it works.”

I leaned close to her.

“This,” I showed her the screen of blue waves pulsing, electronic oceans of friction, “is the setting I like to use.”

And she made a low, soft sound.

“Another?”

“This,” I showed her the screen of orange rectangle longitudes, competing bars of ascent and descent, “is one that’s a bit harder.”

Her hips arched and tightened. Her low sounds got louder but not higher. She closed her eyes again.

“What . . .” she stopped with a catch in her breath, “about the next one?”

“This,” I showed her my thumb and forefinger, simultaneously creating pink circles on the black screen, trails winding behind the places where my finger had already passed then coming back again with the circular return of my finger, “is when I control it.”

“There.” Her sounds now pitched and fell, her back arched, her knees shaking, fingers curled up in my sheets, next to her, next to me. “Don’t stop.”

And I didn’t. I rubbed the screen in labyrinths as the sweat from her knees pooled on the sheet next to my hand.

She gasped and groaned and shook and arched.

I kept a perfect rhythm with both fingers on the screen. Until she came in my bed, next to me, under my hand, but not under my hand. Under my hand but removed. But still my hand. I wanted to touch her more, but I didn’t. I just watched, feeling privileged to do so. I’ve never been more turned on in my life. I desired her. I wanted her.

But it isn’t until days later when she is sitting next to me in my car, wrist bleeding, crying, strobes flashing, that I realize I loved her, too.

## Old Salt

“I love honor and obey I do love honor and obey I do.” – Gertrude Stein, “Sacred Emily”

I don't know what I expected marriage to be. I never thought about it. I just thought I wanted to be married. That was all the thought I put into it

I loved fairy tales as a child. More than anything. *Charlotte's Web* was great, don't get me wrong. But give me *Cinderella* any day. Prince Charming chasing her down with that slipper. Don't tell me you don't want someone to chase you like that. To save you from your wretched day to day. To hold you after midnight, when the carriage is a pumpkin again and the horses become mice. And he loves you anyway. I can believe many things, because truth exists in a sort of multiverse way, as each person's reality is slightly different from another's. But I will never believe that everyone doesn't desire to be loved in such a way. Raw and unapologetically. It was all I ever wanted.

And maybe it was my childhood that set me up for this. I *did* have the wicked stepmother and two stepsisters. They forced me to clean. What are we if not the stories we tell ourselves?

There's a story I have told myself about marriage, my marriage. I don't know what's true, I just know what has happened up until this point.

*I didn't want to come today. Told him I wasn't going to. I dust the lint off his shoulder before we walk in. There aren't many people here yet, and I'm not sure where to sit anyway, so I follow Rick.*

*He is looking for the bride. We walk through a room that is wrapped, draped, swaddled in fake flowers, chiffon, and burlap into another room with a sink and a fridge, and a whole lot of King's Hawaiian rolls on the counter. A round woman and thin man, both well past 60, are arranging the rolls and other things, like plastic cups.*

*Unsure of where to go, Rick addresses the kitchen room but no one in particular, "They told me to be here at two. Is that right? Are they here?"*

*The short, dumpy woman with a noticeable limp tries to conceal the involuntary rolling of her eyes. I try not to giggle. I feel this woman's frustration, I do. Instead, her tall, white-haired husband answers, "Yeah, they're here," but he gives no indication of where.*

*We walk back into the decorated room.*

*"Who were they?" I'm curious, but I don't care.*

*"His parents."*

*"They don't seem too happy. I mean, she's wearing white. Only the bride is supposed to wear white."*

*"I don't think they are." Rick reaches for a random door, and I feel my entire body tense up, because you don't go around opening doors at a wedding venue without knocking. But he opens it cautiously, hears the bride's voice telling him to come in, and he disappears. I don't follow. This is all a little heady for me, anyway.*

*I find a chair next to a white draped table and have a seat. The sound techs, who are probably just someone's cousins with a computer, are running through the music playlist. There's white cake with yellow flowers, wrapped in burlap. A wood pallet, stood up on its end, with a sign that reads, "Love is patient – Love is kind – Love Never Fails."*

*In the middle of the table I sit down at rests a fishbowl filled with water and bits of driftwood. A fishing bobber peaks above the top, and in the magnification of the water, two circle hooks have been attached with fishing line in the shape of a heart. The cynic in me snorts.*

*Rick reappears from the mystery door, the little book which he wrote the ceremony in tucked under his arm. He looks good. He's being doing the Keto diet, and in his button down and khakis, I figure I could have done much worse. How do men look better with age? It isn't fair.*

*"Can you transcribe this more neatly?"*

*I sigh. "I guess," and I flip through the pages of what is not a notebook at all, but rather a day planner where he has written only in the notes portion. The ceremony is nine pages long.*

*"This is long,"*

*"Then just don't." He closes it and sets on the table. Mariah Carey croons from the speakers, something about forever.*

*I look around and sigh again. "I wish I wasn't so jaded."*

*"What? Why?"*

*"I just wish I could get behind all of this. Believe in it, still, I mean."*

*Now he sighs. "I'm sorry for my part in you not believing anymore..."*

*I hold up my hand to stop him there. Tears bead up under my lids. "Don't. Don't say anything emotional right now." I blink back the tears. I can't cry here, not as more people are walking in.*

I twist the shiny stem between my first finger and thumb. It isn't hard like you would think, gold-glazed with who knows what kind of chemical. I can still see the veins in the leaves and petals, traces of a life that once was, from the moment the rose was dipped into whatever magic concoction preserved it forever. The gilded edges catch the sunlight beaming through the picture window in my living room, glinting refracted light onto the bramble colored walls. Advertised as, "A flower that never dies."

I knew what he was getting me for Valentine's Day long before I got it. He was apologetic and feeling a visceral need to hang on to something he might lose. He slept with another woman in our bed. I had let him before but I was there. Wild night, I guess.

One night lying in bed and paranoid that this wasn't the first time, I pulled out his phone while he snored un-rhythmically, and proceeded to go through any app that might hold some granule of truth that might make me feel like I knew who he really was. He was not who I thought, or he would have never done it. So who was he, really? Somewhere, in his phone, there was an answer, I was sure. My finger tapped the browsing history. An unfamiliar website was near the top: [ihatestevensinger.com](http://ihatestevensinger.com). I hit the link. A rainbow array of 24 karat dipped roses filled the screen. The petals and leaves clear glazed to show the color, the stem and edges gilded like the finest Buddhist tapestry. This must be his big surprise.

I didn't let him know that I knew. And when it came via parcel service the day before Valentine's Day, I made sure my eyes were wide and my smile excited as to not ruin the moment for him. He held the long box between his large hands.

"Do you want it now, or do you want to wait until tomorrow to open it?"

“Now, of course,” I lied, hoping my eyes didn’t give me away. I won’t be the one to pretend we aren’t both liars.

His strong jaw widened to accommodate his wide, toothy grin. How was he so excited to give me this gift?

“Oh my gosh, it’s beautiful,” I told him, and it was. The macabre of a life cycle frozen at its peak, forever remaining as lovely as it could ever possibly be. A moment captured, enclosed in soft metal.

Behind my performance, my heart fell. I don’t want to say it was a disingenuous moment. I’m sure he felt happy to give it to me. Happier still that I thought it was gorgeous. But inside, I wanted to scream at him. Throw the rose at him. Crush it up into little pieces in front of his face. I still felt like I wasn’t enough, every time I went and lay in our bed. Every time I caught him glancing in any random woman’s direction. Every time his phone buzzed. Every time he spoke and the demons in my brain slithered their tongues into the synapses and convinced me his words were lies.

He would kiss me bye and stroke my hair in the mornings, and each afternoon he would greet me with a smile. He even actually started cooking dinners for me. Before all of this, he would wake me up screaming he couldn’t find his keys because of all the clutter. He would come home and zone out into his phone. He would lock himself in the bathroom for almost an hour at a time. For the months after, each morning I would lie in bed and consider what made him change so drastically. I would watch the fan spin around, keeping my eye on one blade and consider what would happen if one day one of those blades decided it wanted to move in the opposite direction. I would stay there, considering my options. Leave, and take my pride with me in a suitcase to my mom’s

where I could start over like I was twenty again. Scream at him. Make him feel terrible. Make him feel like he wasn't enough. Make him feel like he never would be. The way I let him make me feel now. Stay. Tuck my chin down, bite my tongue, grin and bear it. This certainly wasn't the first time he had lied.

Once, he drove my car into town. He came back with the passenger side window busted clean out.

“What happened?!”

“Eh, some kids throwing rocks on the corner,” and as the words spilled out across the tip of his tongue, I already knew what happened. He was throwing bottles at road signs. He rolled down the back one instead of the front, and not realizing it, chucked the bottle. The glass shattered. Tired, and knowing he lied because he didn't want to fight, I let it go until the next day. There were other lies, too.

Turns out, that night he had been drinking. I found this out a month or so later, during a procrastinated fight about the window, while we were sweeping the glass out the driveway that had fallen out when he replaced it. He grew up under the guidance of a man who drank and kept secrets. My husband had been drinking the night he cheated on me. I'm still not sure “cheated” is the right word.

I could stay. Maybe something magical did happen when he was between her thighs and he suddenly realized all he had to lose. I could stay. Small price to pay, really, for appreciation. Maybe, after this, he wouldn't lie anymore. At least, I hoped.

But on this day, today, summer blows in a warm southern breeze and I turn the rose in my hand. My own lie, preserved perfectly, forever to remind me I am no better than him. The apologies eventually stopped, and his expectant smile each morning



eventually faded to a dull thin line, set hard in his jaw. Somewhere in the months, I learned to move back to the background space I had occupied before. And today, we are fighting again.

Over the phone, from his work, he tells me, “It’s just you I don’t like. It’s not your body, or you not working. It’s just you. You are the antithesis of everything I am as a person. I just want to find someone who will love me for me, not what they can get out of me.”

“Then why did you even beg to me stay, back in January?”

Whatever he says next, I don’t hear. I can’t hear through my own tears. Every fear, every insecurity I’ve ever had, he has just laid bare through the air in the distance between us. I am not enough and, no matter what I do, will never be. I don’t even care about the answer to my question anymore. I hate myself for not packing my things and leaving then. At least then, I’d have my pride.

I consider breaking the rose in half and leaving it on the table for him to find when he comes into the empty house. I think about crushing it up and sprinkling the pieces across the floor to mix in with dirt from his feet. I want to pull the petals off one by one and leave them in a perfect trail from our bedroom to the backdoor, where I can walk out, shut it behind me, and never come back.

I don’t do any of that.

I wrap it carefully back in its green tissue paper and gently slide it back into the gold box he had handed to me the day before Valentine’s Day. I put it back in the corner of the bookshelf, high enough up so it can stay perfectly preserved forever.

*“I’m gonna go smoke,” and I tell him I’ll go with him. I’m tired of the love songs anyway.*

*Outside, we stand on the sidewalk. There’s a funeral home across the street, and next to it a dingy white single wide trailer with small wood steps. I’m not sure anything else could quite exemplify a wedding in rural Kentucky.*

*“They’ve both been married before?” I ask.*

*“He’s been married once. She’s been married a bunch. Three times I think.”*

*“Explains his mother wearing white, I guess.”*

*It starts to rain, and I flick my cigarette on my way back in, leaving Rick outside. I walk back to my familiar seat, when a woman with short hair smiles the closed smile of someone lacking teeth. I smile politely back. She takes this as an opportunity to approach me.*

*“You’re with the pastor, right?”*

*“Uh, well, sure,” I shake her hand, but don’t bother elaborating that Rick isn’t a pastor. He got ordained online because he wanted to marry people that traditional ministers had turned down. Gay couples, the divorced, the nonreligious. My mom said he must be a sadist.*

The light is on in the bedroom. It shouldn’t be. I feel it burn through my lids, so I crack one open to see what’s amiss. I see Rick’s silhouette, all biceps and shoulders, opening and closing drawers in our one dresser. Random articles of clothing fling out to the floor as he angrily rummages. He’s angry. Adrenaline jars me awake.

“I don’t ask much of you at all. Just to have clean socks when I go to work. That’s it.”

He knows I’m awake. I sit up in our bed, cluttered with covers. The same bed where we fell asleep next to each other the night before.

“Well, no one else washes anything of mine and yet I manage,” my smart mouth is worse in the morning.

“You’re a leech. You take from me and give so very little back. This is why we don’t have sex as much as you’d like.” I sit in the bed, trying to remember where there might be a clean sock somewhere, anywhere. “I just feel taken advantage of.”

I sigh. This fight is not new.

“The ways I contribute can’t really be quantified the same way.” I get out of bed and at least appear to be looking for a clean sock.

“The ways you contribute can’t be quantified because they are abstract concepts,” his voiced is raised as he jerks the bottom drawer completely out.

We are tired and no one wants to be up at 5:30 in the morning. I scream, he screams, no one gets ice cream. He’s going to work, and this is my day off from my part time job. My leechiness exemplified. I don’t get a kiss goodbye. I go back to bed and ponder whether or not I am the bad person he tells me I am. Maybe. I haven’t worked anywhere near as much – and by “work” I mean I haven’t brought in as much taxable income – but I rationalize this by saying chronic illness is a valid excuse. No one would ask someone with cancer to do these things. But somewhere in the back of my mind, I know bipolar disorder isn’t cancer. There was a part of my life where I refused to drive without talking to someone on the phone to distract me from the fact that we shuttle our

bodies around in two ton machines at deadly speeds. There was a time when I couldn't stand to be in the dark because the abyss was not infinite but walls closing in. There have been moments where I have convinced myself that I was entirely capable of joy but it came through the purchase of \$500 worth of clothes or pretty rocks or books or tarantulas. No, cancer you can see. And cancer isn't an alternate reality. Everything that was wrong with me was in my head, little electrical misfires between synapses.

After hours of lying in bed, feeling sorry for myself, I decide to apologize and fix this. I'm a fixer of all things. Whenever we would be broke, whether by hand or simply circumstance, I would pawn this or that, sell this or that, hustle here, scramble there. I can, when I put my misfiring brain to it, come up with unconventional ways to fix things. I could fix this. I call him, tell him we should have lunch together. He acquiesces.

I drive on wet roads a whole county over to where he has been working at a Smucker's factory. He's an electrician and the factory needed new machines to cut the crust off of Uncrustables or something. He's helping to wire them in. The whole way I practice what I'm going to say and wonder if it makes sense.

The gravel of the factory drive crunches under my tires. I pull over to where he is standing, the rain just mists now. He opens the door and gets in, looking forward the whole time.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Let's go to Harper's"

Harper's is this strange little building that I'm not sure if it's made out of trailers put together or simply parts salvaged from a trailer park. It's situated down a long gravel drive, hard to find if you don't already know where it is. There are two ponds out front,

and I wonder if that is where they get all their catfish. Most people around where we live go to Harper's on Sunday for the catfish. My dad used to bring our family here after church on rare occasions when I was little. The walls are wood paneled, and every room is on a different level than the other. The place smells like old insulation and catfish. I don't remember it seeming so old when I was little. When we walk in, a chubby waitress greets and seats us, at a plastic table with a metal rim around the edge that looks like it was stolen from a 1950's diner.

“What would you all like to drink?”

I say, “Sweet tea,” and Rick says, “Coke with no ice.”

She bops to one of the other more elevated rooms. We wait.

I start the conversation with him by saying I am sorry. That I can do better. That with school and work and being a mother, it's hard for me to focus but this is no excuse.

He nods. “I know you're sorry.” And I can't figure out if he means he knows I am apologetic or if he means he knows I am a sorry, pathetic excuse for a human.

I try to let him talk, but the silence lingers for more than I can bear.

“Will you talk to me?”

“What do you want me to say?”

I want him to say he's sorry, too. But I'm not sure what he would be sorry for.

A different waitress comes to take our order, this one older with glasses and a no-bullshit-today sort of attitude. She doesn't smile. I order a cheeseburger and fries. Rick gets the catfish. She leaves, and I go back to trying to get him to talk.

“I love you, and I'm tired of fighting like this,”

“Me, too,” is all he offers.

We sit in more silence for a while. Our food arrives, and we eat in more silence.

When we are done, he takes the ticket to the counter and pays, and then we walk out to the car, his 45-minute lunch almost over.

I drive.

“Okay, well, how about this,” I start my speech, “How about we make a real effort to talk things out calmly from now on? How about we don’t scream and don’t yell? Maybe just take a breather before we start to talk to each other. We really should learn to discuss our problems, calmly, like adults. I think we should try to make our relationship healthier and more open to discussion. Maybe it’s time we discuss our problems like adults, real adults, like the kind that go to marriage counseling. I know we can’t afford it, but we are smart enough to do this on our own, I think,”

He looks at me and smiles. “Yeah, but wouldn’t that just be so boring.”

I know what he means. This isn’t how we were raised. If we were to act like healthy adults, it would be just acting. Our parents raged at each other in front of us, and there is a certain familial comfort in acting the same way.

*Rick returns to the table.*

*“Are you nervous?”*

*“No,” he replies, but he bounces his knee and stares off. I rub the top of his hand, and he leans forward to kiss me on the cheek. I wonder if the familiar gestures of married couples belie the currents underneath. Not that these gestures are disingenuous, but there’s more going on here in this moment. Each tiny detail of someone else’s beginning*

*(ending?) serves as a marker for our own distance. Our kisses and touches are reminders of an affection wrought from trauma, more specifically, the trauma of each other.*

I try slyly to put the gun into my pocket. Quickly. I know I'm being watched. It's a derringer, 32 caliber. The kind, in wild west movies, prostitutes yank from garters as a last line of defense. Freedom: a bullet. What's more American than that?

But I am not so clever. He sees me. I can hear it in the swiftness of his steps, coming up behind me.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

And in a scene I have practiced mentally many times, I am incredulous.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Get fucking real, Leslie," and he reaches for my pocket. I laugh. Not a laugh of joy. But the laugh of someone caught suddenly in their own ugliness.

"Stop," and in a fluid movement I step out of his reach. He closes the distance in a single stride. I'd be a liar if I didn't admit it was sexy. The way he just can't be outmaneuvered.

He grabs my shoulders with both of his large hands. Callused and stained dark from pulling wire for hours at a time. Hands, that when I put mine against them, curl over my own fingers at their second knuckles. Giant hands. Grabbing my soft, weak shoulders. But it isn't his hands I am thinking about, then. It's the neon green flat brush just within reach at the end of our broken king-size sleigh bed. I snatch it.

“Don’t,” but it’s fight or flight and I refuse to be controlled so I hit him with all I have, aiming for the back of his head. This is my choice, not his. Mine. My life is mine. Even if I want to end it.

And he had told me not to, in all fairness. I don’t know how to listen, and I know even less of making good decisions, much less quick ones. So I hit him, I can’t tell you with any certainty where it hit him, just that it made contact.

Then, there is a fire in my left shoulder and I am sinking to the floor. Black is all I can see, but the white-hot flames are shooting down my arm. I realize my eyes are clenched shut. And he hit me. With everything he had behind those hands and arms, he hit me. Despite the pain, I am relieved. It’s something, and great passions are never just wild nights of sweaty flesh tangles followed by sweet sun-licked mornings. No, great passions are just as violent. And he still has passion for me. He cares. He could have walked away, left me to my own devices, where I may or may not have pulled the trigger.

But here, he bends over the slump of girl/woman I am in the floor of our bedroom and reaches into my pocket and takes the derringer. Or maybe he took it as I was falling. Either way, my pocket is empty and for the moment, there is no escape. I don’t laugh now.

I can see the guilt on his face, how he has hidden it there. It flickers in his eyes as he watches me. I watch him mentally snuff it out. There is only disgust left. Whether or not it is disgust for me, both of us, or the entire situation, you would have to ask him.

We screamed for a while after that, me on the floor and him standing. I can’t tell you what we said.



But everything you need to know about how we operate – our inner tickings, our pasts as individuals, what will become of us – is in this moment. Freeze it. Have a look around the room. There are clothes everywhere, washed and unwashed. College textbooks that couldn't be sold back spilling out of a box in the doorless closet. The gun safe door next to the closet is swung open. Above it, on the wall, a deer skull stripped of his flesh hangs, antlers almost touching the ceiling even though they are small. Look at my love in the middle of the room, unmade bed behind him. The ceiling almost touches him, too. Short walls in a trailer. It's suffocating.

*More guests file in, some with babies, some with dates, almost all with visible tattoos. Little kids whose mothers keep pulling them off the sanctified chiffon. Young women in short dresses and tight rompers, because Southern weddings are the rural equivalent of fashion week. They pose for selfies: chin down, eyes smiling, neck long. Older men are laughing obnoxious laughs to clichéd jokes about having a wife. I wish for just a moment I could really see inside other people's marriages. What moment could they define their marriage by, if they could only choose one.*

I can barely remember anything. But I remember he put me in the tub. He took the warm water as it ran from the faucet into his hand and splashed by body while the tub filled.

I was crying, I remember that.

“We just have to get you cleaned up.” His words were soft and warm like the water.

I don't know how long it had been since I had bathed before that.

He kept taking water in his hands and pouring it on to my skin.

I stared at the water, watching in slow motion the second-by-second rise as the tub filled around me.

I had been on the couch maybe. Or in the bed. But wherever I had been, it seemed like I had been there for days. My brain does this thing where sometimes it just stops working. Or at least working the way I'm used to. This time when it happened, I stuck to where I was and didn't move. Or maybe I moved, but only in so much required of me. Enough to warm up food for the kids, who were only four and six. Enough to wash their clothes. Enough to make sure they had something to occupy them while I returned to whichever spot I had gotten stuck at and zone out again. But today, I think I had stopped moving from even there so when Rick came home, he fed them. Washed their clothes. Made sure they were occupied.

I had gotten stuck on a word. The word I was. The word I am, sometimes still.

*Failure.*

So he decided I needed a bath, and I watched the water from somewhere inside myself, peering out of my eyes, allowing for sensation to occur in these small, soft moments.

*Failure. Failure. Failure.* He turned off the faucet, and laid me back to wet my hair. The tub was full enough by then that I floated while my hair soaked in the water.

The word was stuck to the ceiling. *Failure.* Like a spider web. Maybe just a spider.

He lifted me up, put soap in his hands, and softly lathered my hair. The spider word stuck itself to my synapses.

*Fail-ure. Your fail. You're fail.*

Yes, I know.

“It’s going to be okay. We just got to get you cleaned up first.”

*Fai-lure.*

He covered my eyes with his hand, and used the other to rinse away the suds and dirt.

*Fail Lure.*

How did I always end up back here?

*Lure Fail.*

“I promise you’ll feel just a little bit better after a bath.”

*Lure of Fail.*

It’s easier to just give up.

*The groom, in his ridiculous cummerbund, is standing near the sound techs, yelling answers to questions I can’t hear: “Yeah, well, I’ve done wilder. Nothing wild about this. Most natural thing I’ve ever done.”*

*I squeeze Rick’s hand.*

## Touch and Go

“Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence.” – Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (60).

*I wanted to explain it to you. I wanted for a moment to feel understood in this situation I still don't understand. I'm not sure I believe in any sort of God, but sometimes I think psychologically that this is the purpose a belief in God serves. A small place carved out in the world by a supreme being, a parental figure, who understands when we don't. Our capacity for understanding is limited; this I understand.*

*And if I could get to your empathy, maybe I would feel less confused.*

*Part of me wants to say to say fuck it all, wants to believe I am as alone as I feel. Not lonely, just singular. But I grew up in a world where stories created bonds, and the little girl in me hopes you feel closer to me through my story.*

*I'm not good at being vulnerable. Every time I try, I have to back up and start over again. And I feel like I'm lying again, because I wrote this to try to understand it myself. But not entirely.*

*At some point, I have to admit I don't know what's happened or what's going on, just that it did and now I've had some distance to think about it. But more so, I have to admit that distance hasn't given me the perspective I had hoped for. Of all this which has transpired, the events only seem smaller, not clearer.*

*In the vacuum of space, objects just keep moving, just keep creating distance until something stops them. I haven't yet found an equal force to stop this falling away from myself. I just keep moving.*

On a nondescript Friday night, I'm sitting in my living room when my phone dings.

"Who's that?" Rick is knocked back into consciousness from whatever show he has lost himself in.

"I don't know. Some number I don't know. But I have a feeling." I pick up the phone and put my thumb over the home key. The screen unlocks.

*Hey*

I reply with "hey" back. I know who it is, but I don't know. I know with some instinctual gut intuition, but I don't trust it. I can't get my hopes up.

*How are you?*

I could ignore it. I really could. But I can't. It's not who I am. So I ask the most obvious question: *Who is this?*

*Just a stranger with some  
great memories. I just wanted  
to see how you was doing,  
that's all.*

*Don't be cryptic*

*You know who this is.*

*Maybe. But I can never be sure*

*these days*

*Pineapples.*

*Feeling brave I guess*

*Yes I am.*

*Is it too late?*

I haven't talked to her since the early morning after she begged me to stop him from going to jail. After I convinced her to go to the hospital, to get help. After, in a panic, she signed herself out of the hospital, and I picked her up and took her home.

I had told her how things had to be, how they couldn't be anymore.

"Heather, you can't talk to him again. If you do, we are done. I mean, truly done. I can't keep being a part of this."

"No, I know. I'm done."

"No, seriously, Heather. If he's back here tonight, don't ever think you'll speak to me again. Seriously. I mean it."

"I know, God. I mean it, too, I'm done." But he was back at her apartment that night. And I raged, sending her angry text messages telling her again how done I was. And I cried, to anyone who would listen about how I couldn't reach her and had to let her go.

Ten months later, and I answered her, because enough time had passed for me to not be angry and not cry. She said she wants to meet up and talk in person. Why, I don't know. But it's been long enough for hope to linger under the stillness of her absence. Sure, I tell her.

I sit in the parking lot of the First Baptist Church near where her sister lives, where she is staying. I see her walking towards me before she sees me. She doesn't know this car. It's a different one than I had since the last time she's seen me. She's thinner – not thin, but thinner. Paler. Not the rich pale glow from before. The pale of something missing, something gone.

She gets in the passenger side and smiles, weakly. I decide there not to look at her anymore. I have to just drive and talk to her. I can't see her like this.

Something in me knows this is it.

"This is fancy."

"Yeah. Wrecked the other one." I pull out into traffic and just go straight. I can go straight for a long time on this road and not have to turn around. And I have so many questions. Like why, and what was the point. But I'll word them differently, carefully. I ask her first about the meth, then Jacob, then questions beyond that – her daughter, her family, what she plans to do for a job. The road stretches out and traffic thins. I don't have to look at her if I just keep looking at the tunnel of light reaching out into the distant dark.

Her replies are the expected ones. She didn't think she'd get addicted, she thought she could change him, she's going to court to try to get her daughter back, and a bunch of "I don't know." I listen, not hearing what I had hoped to.

I say the thing I'm not supposed to. Admit the thing we'd never acknowledged.

"Heather, I love you, you know I do. But not just like a friend. I'm attracted to you, too, sexually. I don't know what that makes us. Or what we can be. I still love Rick, we have a family together. But whatever is between me and you, regardless of how you feel about it, it will always have a different meaning than friendship for me."

She is quiet. She's quiet and I don't care. I've said the thing I waited years to say. The thing I was taught years ago not to say. Not to acknowledge. Not to be.

Where I grew up, there were no literary circles or coffee shops, still aren't. There weren't even stop lights. And to fit in, you couldn't be a girl and unfeminine. You couldn't be butch. You couldn't even be androgynous. Had I known acting was an option, no, a requirement, I would have done it before the age of 13. But I hadn't, and I had ground to make up.

I devoured *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire* like a zealot reading gospels. I bought clothes I didn't like in hopes that others would like them. I started blow drying my hair out. Wearing mascara.

I tried out for cheerleading.

I had been practicing a walkover for weeks with other girls who planned on trying out. We would hang out in the parking lot of the Baptist church in front of my house, which was somehow always freshly paved and smelling of oil. The other girls would flip into their cartwheels or round-offs, moves I could never master. But this walkover – this simple bending backwards, unnaturally curving the spine, then swinging up to the sky with one leg, letting the other quickly catch up so when you landed, you landed feet first and together. It took no flexibility or any modicum of athleticism, mostly just tenacity. I had that if nothing else, and I had mastered this piece of tumbling.

I had a loud personality but only when I wasn't being terribly insecure. And being insecure was becoming more of a personality trait than a mood the closer I got to womanhood. I wasn't particularly good at shouting, either. I certainly wasn't pretty, or rather I wasn't the kind of pretty praised in small towns, the kind of pretty that is expected of cheerleaders. I was a plain, awkward kind of preteen, with a strange mix of



woman features (breasts, ass, shapely legs) and girl features (rounded belly and face, and an insecure hunch to my back).

After several weeks of practice and calculation, in the old gym, with its antique hardwood and yellowed smell, tryouts commenced. I watched the other girls do their tumbling routines and felt wholly inadequate. I went up for mine and smiled the cheerleader smile, or at least the best one I could with thin lips and gapped teeth. Then I turned so my right side faced the onlookers and coach. I bent backwards with ease, still smiling. Felt the tension of the tumbling mat under the soft thud of my hands. My wrists locked, my arm muscles braced. Then, I lifted my leg and kicked.

Too hard, and too quick. My leg went too far, too fast, and the other one didn't catch up until my knees thudded, together, flat against the blue mat. Smile gone, I looked up to see my mom's painfully empathetic face. She had grown up here, too. She knew what this meant for me. I knew I was done. I waited for them to call all the other names of the people who made it.

"Rachel. Pyretta. Jill."

I stared at my failing feet to hide my disappointment, curled my toes as hard as I could to fight tears.

"Leslie."

I'm sure my shocked face as I looked up told more than I can tell you here. Turns out, they let anyone who tried out on the team. I didn't care. At least I was in. I had somewhere to belong, even if it wasn't the high spot or the most coveted.

That belonged to basketball, for boys and girls. In Pickett County, if you wanted to matter – if you wanted the social elite adults to give you so much as a passing glance –

you played ball. Ashley had just moved to our tiny town at the beginning of the school year. She was tall, naturally blonde, star basketball girl. And somehow, she was friends with me. I don't remember how we even became friends, just that she was someone I wanted to be like. She was confident; I wasn't. She laughed loudly; I smiled and looked down, meekly. There was an appeal, but at 13, I'm not sure I could call it attraction. She was someone I wanted to like me. I loved being around her, and even with our personality differences, I felt like she "got" me.

In the afternoons, every day of the week, I would pull the one phone we had in the house, with its cord and all, into my bedroom from the hallway of our old house. I sat on my quintessential-90's-preteen-girl daybed, complete with pink daisies, and felt like every conversation would determine the fate of the world. There was one that would seal my fate, or at least a piece of it.

I was on the phone with a close-but-not-super-close friend, talking about school, but more accurately, talking about the people at school. She made a comment about how close I seemed to Ashley. "So you just really like Ashley, don't you?" What was probably a question of sexuality rather seemed, at that moment, a question of loyalty.

"Of course, I like her! She's awesome," was probably something I said. I can't remember exactly. But I do know, after rambling a bit, I said this, "I would sprinkle rose petals on the ground wherever she walked if she needed me to, because she is my favorite person."

Girls don't talk about other girls in this way, not where I'm from. And I, socially inept as always – partially from being a natural-born weirdo but also my mother's election to hardly ever let me leave the house – had missed that important social signal.

The next day was Hell. Ashley sat at her desk, next to mine, but wouldn't look at me or talk to me. My close-but-not-close friend I had unwittingly confessed to on the phone sat across the room, smug and sated – having taught me my much-needed lesson. She had told everyone, including Ashley, that I was obviously gay.

Someone, I don't know who, hissed, "Dyke," under their breath.

Ashley's blue greens stared forward, looking fearful and embarrassed. The rest of the class whispered and snickered. I felt the weight of loneliness pound through the blood in my ears.

"Leslie, I..."

Heather breaks what feels like years of silence with a start, then a quick trailing off.

I'm still staring forward on this endlessly straight road, watching the light trying to outrace the double yellow lines. There are no cars, no street lamps. There are stars, and trees, and infinite road.

"You don't have to say anything," and I mean it, she doesn't. I just needed to say my piece. That's all I wanted out of tonight. All I really expected.

"No, you just..." she's flustered, but unlike any other time before, I don't try to help her find her words. I just let it hang. Whatever she wants to say, if she wants to say it bad enough, she will. "Leslie, I- I'm attracted to you, too," her voice catches, and I hear her tears, "but I don't want to be that way." And there it is. Why I never said it all out loud, and why she didn't either. She grew up like me, small town, big rules. "I want to be

married, *to a man*, have a family. I feel the same way you do, it's...it's just not...what I want.”

I'm thankful now that I've driven this far out. I blink back tears. I turn left at the next caution light. I change the subject.

“You know, Cameron goes back to Texas in month. He said he'd like to talk to you before he goes,”

“Aw, yeah, I miss him,” she says sort of dismissingly.

There was a night, back before things between me and her got confusing, when Cameron had gotten far too drunk. I remind her of that night.

I had decided, at 11 o'clock at night, that I wasn't too old to hang out with the other English department grad students in their 20's. I had gotten all dolled up but showed up way too late for a party that had started hours earlier. Everyone was drunk.

When I got there, Cameron was on the table, dancing and knocking beer pong cups into the floor. I politely turned down drinks and leaned against a wall, wondering why I had even bothered.

“Let's go to THE BARS!” another MFA yelled. He was in nothing but a pair of tiny blue briefs I was pretty sure my 11-year-old son couldn't have fit in. It was his and another student's shared apartment.

Cameron stumbled and hit the floor.

I walked outside. I texted David, also an MFA, but one who never drinks.

*Are you coming, or not?*

I was ready to go home. If he wasn't coming, then I was going to. A girl came running out and leaned over into the landscaping, puking.

"I'm not that drunk, he just, he just puked everywhere, and oh my god, the smell," she puked again.

Behind her all the grad students trailed, all of them now fully clothed. They hooted and hollered. They were going to the bars downtown. Cameron was in the far back, stumbling into the sidewalk railing.

"Hey, why don't you sit down and smoke a cigarette," I lit him one as he plopped down. The rest of them walked off, the puke girl quickly catching up to them.

"I drank too much," Cameron slurred, his eyes shut as he puffed smoke.

"I can see that,"

*David, seriously, you have to get here. I don't know what to do with Cameron.*

I heard a smack as I hit send on the message. Cameron's face was planted on the edge of the grass and the sidewalk. The cigarette rolled down the concrete steps.

"Hey, buddy, sit up,"

"Just gimme a minute, and we can go to the bars,"

"No, just sit here, you don't need to go anywhere."

"I want to go to the bars. I'm okay." His eyes were still shut as he talked.

*Where are you? I don't know what to do. I can't leave him here.*

I pulled him up to sitting and leaned him, gently, against the railing.

"You want another smoke?"

He shook his head and shoulders. "I just need a minute." He swayed, pivoting at his waist, in a circle.

“Hey, just sit still, and breathe through your nose, okay?”

“I just...” and then chunks of some kind of meat spilled over his bottom lip and onto his pants and the sidewalk.

“Oh. My. Gosh.” David had finally walked down from his apartment.

“I know, right?”

Two cop cars drove by slowly. I set Cameron back up to at least seem presentable.

“This isn’t good,” David noted.

“No, I know. This is Kentucky, not Texas. They see a Hispanic drunk man, they are going to think one thing. I don’t know what to do.”

“Does he have his keys?”

“I don’t know. Hey, Cameron? Hey, do you know where your keys are?” I squatted down, patting his face for him to look at me.

“I hate literature,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, I know, me too.” I stood back up. “I think they’re inside, and everyone else left.”

“I’ll check the door, see if it’s locked,” David offered.

“Okay,” I waited and watched for more cop cars. One had parked down the street a block and appeared to be watching.

David walked back up. “It’s definitely locked.”

“Shit. I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, you know I don’t,” he quipped.

“But I know who does!” I texted Heather, asked if she was busy. Explained the situation. She said she’d be right there. *Hurry*, I sent.

The cop circled around again, but as soon as he went around the corner, another white car pulled close to the curb. Heather popped out from the back, and the car drove off.

“Hey! He’s drunk, and I don’t know how I can even get him to stand up.”

She squatted and leaned in next to him. “Hey, Cameron, you having fun?” He nodded. “Okay, well, we got to get you inside, dude. You can’t sit out here, okay?”

“David, can we take him to your place?” I asked because it was only three blocks away. I couldn’t take a drunk man home to my family.

“Sure. He can sleep on my couch.”

Heather spoke softly, to Cameron, again. “Okay, I’m gonna need you to put your arm around my neck, okay? Do you think you can stand up?” He wobbled to a stand. I ran to get my car before he fell.

We managed to get him in the backseat. I was so thankful for Heather. A lifetime around drunks and addicts had taught her skills I never learned. I was both lucky and unskilled in that way. She sat with him in the back, and he only puked a little on the way. Once he was inside David’s apartment, we attempted to change his clothes. We only succeeded in getting him to take off the pukey pants. Heather laid him on the couch, and David handed her a blanket. He passed out.

Then her phone rang. At first, she ignored it, and David and I just looked at each other. But the caller called again and again.

“It’s Jacob, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” and once we knew, she finally answered it and put it on speaker.

His voice crackled on the other line. “You fucking whore. Are you ever coming home? What the fuck, Heather? Seriously, who you fucking now?”

“Nobody, Jacob, I’ll be back in fifteen minutes. I just had to help Cameron.”

“Who the fuck is Cameron?”

“Leslie’s friend, I’m hanging up now.”

“I should have known she was involved.”

“Bye, Jacob.”

“Whatever, bitch.” Click.

David and I gave each other a look. Maybe he was too shocked to comment. I, on the other hand, far too desensitized to it.

“Well, guys, I guess I gotta go,” she laughed.

“Yeah, we’ll see ya.” I laughed back, knowing not to make it emotional. Not to make it awkward. The way she was trying not to. “Seriously, thanks though.”

“No problem,” and she pulled the door shut behind her.

David and I sat in the silence. I wasn’t about to talk about it all – Heather, Jacob, everything. “Well,” he sighed.

Cameron stirred a bit and mumbled, “What a prick.”

“I don’t know what I would have done without you, that night. Cameron, either. I’m sure he’d like to say thanks again. You should text him.”



She laughs it off, noncommittal, so I change the subject slightly again. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do when he’s gone, man. I’ve gotten pretty close to him since me and you stopped talking.”

I glance over, and she is staring out the window into the darkness. There are streetlights coming into the view, reflecting orange of the inside of the car. My phone rings. I answer, the phone call playing through the speakers of the car, the modern miracle of Bluetooth. It’s Rick.

“Hello.”

“Hey, you comin’ home?” Heather looks at me before I answer him.

“Eventually. I’m taking her back now.” She turns away as I do.

“Ah. Did you get to say what you needed to say?”

“Yep.”

“Well, try not to be much longer. I’m going to bed soon.”

“Okay.”

“I love you.” Heather stares blankly back at the road ahead. I can see her in the flashes from the streetlights.

“I love you, too,”

*Click.*

## Clean Slate

“Honeysuckle vine clings to the fence along the lane/ Their fragrance makes the summer wind so sweet/ And on a distant hilltop, an eagle spreads its wings/ And a songbird on a fence post sings a melody” – Dolly Parton, “Tennessee Mountain Home”

*I'm a horrible person for leaving her, aren't I?*

*But she wouldn't leave on her own. I couldn't make her. Don't hate me, please. I hate myself enough.*

*Each day I drive down the road, I think about how maybe in another universe, things might be different. She's still with him and not me, and I folded myself back into this life as if she had never existed.*

*The first time I tried to write this, I began at the beginning and ended on the end. But it was a summary and therefore a total lie. This is closer to the truth, as close as I think I can get.*

*I'm measuring in distance again. Nearer, farther, to this point or that. Connecting points of light that are moving in their own way, at their own speeds. Getting my bearings, before starting in a new direction. There's no end here, just a shift of the wind.*

Her voice is loud in the speakers of my car. It's the only time she ever sounds loud.

“Well, I just told him that he'd have to figure it out all by himself, because I'm just about tired of it. I tell you what, if I *ever* decide to organize another event like this, you just come down here and slap me, okay?” Mom's been planning a family reunion with her cousin, Cletis. I grew up calling him Junior. I don't know why she insists now

on calling him by name. It feels raw and too obvious of our background, even though no one can hear me as I drive down the road.

“Momma, I don’t know why you tried to do all this in the first place,” I question her motives. Most of the people from our family are typically Appalachian, as in they keep to themselves. We’ve never had a big family reunion, ever.

“Well, I just wanted a chance for everybody to get together before we are all dead.” Mom is 64, and apparently at 64, you start reconciling the possibility of your own mortality. I’m not sure, but to me, at 34, it feels melodramatic.

Her voice softens, “Will you come?”

I knew this was coming. And I’m not sure what I want to say back to it. I watch the road, as I drive. The way the hills are blind and the trees arch over and close in. It reminds me of *home*. I haven’t been *home* in forever. I mean, I’m in my car, right now, headed to *my* home. But not where I grew up. Maybe I moved out this road because it reminded me of home. I wanted a substitute for it.

“Sure, if I’m not too busy with school.”

“Well, I at least want the kids to go.” She huffs.

“No, Mom, I want to go, it’s just not good timing. I’ve got a thesis to finish, two classes I’m taking, three I’m teaching.”

She softens again. “I know. I know. But I just wish you could meet everybody, now that you can remember.”

“I will try, I promise. Believe me I want to.”

I call my mom almost every day, or at least the days I work, on the drive back to my house. She comes to visit a few times a year. But I never go back there anymore. It’s

been years. I should go back. I shouldn't make her drive all the time, especially now that she's older.

"How's your thesis going?" She changes the subject, knowing it's touchy to ask me to come back.

"It's going."

"That sounds promising..."

"No, I just don't know what matters and what doesn't. What to write about, and what to leave out. I don't know how to spin it."

"Yeah, I guess you can't write everything."

"No."

The quiet hum of the speakers of sounds louder in the silence.

"But you know what I did write about, the other day. Remember when you put that necklace in the fortune cookie?"

"Oh my gosh, did you really?"

"I don't think you realize the impact it had on me."

"Well, I'm sorry." She drags out the apology, sounding sarcastic.

"No, you don't have to be sorry, but I wanted to ask you," my stomach lurches a little as I clear a blind hill too fast, "why did you do that?"

The quiet static hum seems loud again.

"You were just going through so much when you were little. I just wanted you to feel special."

“Hmph.” It sounds like I’m mad, or bitter, but I’m not. It’s an honest sound. A pondering. I did feel special, special enough that despite the circumstances around me, I believed in something bigger. The Universe. Karma. Myself, eventually, I guess.

I see my house in the distance. Geese by the pond, sheep grazing the gradual slope of the hillside. Pastoral for most, and I feel ungrateful in admitting sometimes I resent it.

“Well, I did. I guess I did.”

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