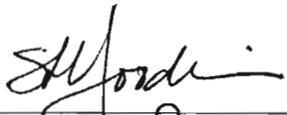


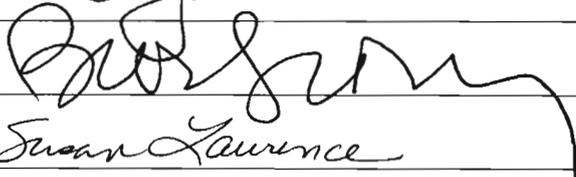
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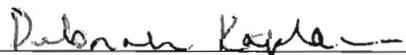
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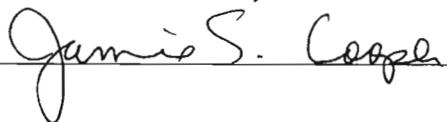
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Date: May 1, 2008 Spring Semester 2008  
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Lady of Courage

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

By

Marique H. Newell  
Bachelor of Arts  
University of Massachusetts, 2003

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## DEDICATION

To my strong, brave parents, Connie Rae Newell and Joseph Henry Newell.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not be who I am had I not received my mother and father's daily doses of love, support, discipline and humor. Even on their worst days, my parents served as each other's better half—what one could not give, the other compensated for tenfold—and I thank them, with kisses.

My two beautiful, wise sisters, Josceylon and Sarah, who surely do not remember our childhood as I do, have given me vision and confidence to find my voice and to share my account as only I see it.

To Megan Perry, Audra Bodestab, Elizabeth Boyle, Emily Knight, and Susan Freeman, I bow my head in admiration, in thanks, for their courage, strength, patience, and presence in my life. They listened even when I couldn't speak.

To the Journalism497B class of 2002, the bravery needed to write the first draft of this piece came directly from the encouragement, feedback, laughter, and inspiration I found in that Tobin Hall classroom. A thousand thank yous.

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## ABSTRACT

LADY OF COURAGE

Marique H. Newell, MA

George Mason University, 2008

Thesis Director: Stephen Goodwin

*Lady of Courage* chronicles three specific events—a first visit to a Quaker meetinghouse and serve, a day trip to Concord, Mass., and the author's 27th birthday. Within each, the present relationship between the author and her parents and the author's parents is explored and understood through reflections on the author's childhood experiences. Within these reflections, the author confronts several pressing issues regarding the ups and downs in her parent's 38-year marriage and the ups and downs in her relationship with her mother and her father.

## Section One: Pennsylvania

“My parents, I have to believe, had a marriage that ran the typical course from early infatuation to serious love to affection occasionally diminished by impatience and disagreement, bolstered by interdependence, fanned now and then by fondness, by humor.”

- Charming Billy, Alice McDermott

My parents had their first open talk about divorce seated on our back patio beneath a humid, June-night sky.

Their faces were sweat-shined masks when I stuck my head outside to tell them I was off to bed and to thank them for decorating my high school graduation night with pink roses and congratulatory cards and gifts. They avoided my eyes, their gazes shifting northward, sideways, down to the terrace where my father had recently finished laying the flagstones himself, looking everywhere but at me, their youngest daughter, their new graduate.

My father didn't speak when I asked what was wrong, but later, my mother came to my room and climbed onto my bed and held my hands and kissed my wrists and cheeks and mumbled about change and blame.

“You know that this isn’t about you, honey,” she whispered, her breath hot on my neck. She moved closer against me, my body wedged between her softness and the hard line of my bedroom wall. *This, this what?* This talk? This divorce? This marriage?

“I know, I know,” I replied, automatically.

“You know how much we love you, right? You know we’re proud of you. Honey?”

I heard her words, but in my mind I only saw the videos we were forced to watch in middle school guidance classes, the scenes in which children of divorced parents were told, repeatedly, that they’re not “to blame.” My mother, strangely like the mothers in those videos, asked me these questions not in a reassuring manner, but in a desperate, panic-rimmed voice, in grief, and so I gave a quick “Yes, I know,” although, in truth, I didn’t know anything, not in that moment. She then curled my long body tightly to her, wanting her words and warmth to comfort me, but it was *my* 18-year-old arms that held her for an hour or more.

The next morning, my father made breakfast as usual. A man who had worked long hours as a family counselor and as a program director at Shippensburg University and who traveled often once he became self-employed, he often missed snack-time with my sisters and me and seldom made it home in time to drive us to swim practice or to sit down for dinner. And so breakfast was his chance to eat with his daughters, to tell us stories and jokes or talk to us about the day ahead.

As someone who believed breakfast to be the most important meal, he took pride in serving us hearty, healthy food and spending those first, brief moments of the morning

with his girls. He'd be downstairs at the stove by 6:30 a.m., playing John Denver or Juice Newton and making whole-wheat pancakes from scratch, frying eggs in his mother's black, cast-iron skillet or pulling tray after tray of hot, sticky cinnamon rolls out of the oven. Sometimes, he'd make holiday-related treats, like homemade doughnuts on Fausnut's Day—or, more commonly called Fat Tuesday—or cranberry-walnut waffles after Thanksgiving.

On mornings when he made oatmeal, he'd bring the bowls to the table and say, "Now, this is a batch of BBA oatmeal, girls," and my sisters and I would have to guess what ingredients he'd added. We would ramble through the possibilities—banana-blueberry-almond, perhaps? Or maybe banana-buckwheat-apple? Ever the game-player, ever the parent to push for a laugh, he loved trying to stump us with his abbreviated concoctions, trying to start the morning with a giggle or two.

The morning after my graduation, my mother, father and I ate dry scrambled eggs and burnt-crisp bacon and listened to the birds and the traffic and the radio weather report. There was no laughter, no giggles. We passed the salt and pepper, keeping our gazes low. I picked at my food. They pretended to read the paper. I carefully watched for eye contact, for their hands to touch briefly, accidentally even, for any sign of communication or acknowledgment from one to the other.

But by then, we had a routine, my parents and I. They acted as though the other wasn't there, and I became the focus, the facilitator, the one filling the silence with my wavering voice, the one trying to nudge them together again, the one waving the white flag. That morning, I played my part as usual. I tried small talk first, told a painfully

unfunny story about Stephen's party the night before, and then explained what I had planned for the day, namely my first Quaker service with Susie, a family friend. My parents listened, drank their coffee, shuffled through the newspaper, kept their lips closed, their sideways smiles at me thin and strained.

Finally, I gathered the plates and glasses and silverware, wanting to scream, wanting to stomp my feet and throw my fists to their faces and remind them that *they* were the adults in the house. Instead, I broke three dishes while I washed the breakfast plates because I could not stop my hands from shaking in the soapy water.

This was not their first battle.

I reminded myself of this as I slammed shut the front door an hour later, my car keys swinging alongside my thigh. If I wanted to be honest with myself, then the whole of my childhood blurs with memories of him sitting three rows away from her at swim meets, with empty seats at the dinner table, with strained silences in the car, with separate visits to watch me ride my horse, with her crying at night when the house was still, sounds drifting like ghosts through the wood and stone. With the exception of a few poignant memories—my mother's surprise 40th birthday party or catching them mid-embrace in the kitchen one night or finding their early-romance poems and letters—I have no memory of my parents as a "couple." My mother had no engagement ring. My father never even wore a wedding ring.

But that morning was the first time I could actually feel them seething with every tense, brief movement or word. I sensed the long, horrible wait was over—the rot had, at last, collapsed the lone, thin pillar left in their marriage. I didn't know what final splinter had cracked—my parents were never ones to talk about their problems, marital or otherwise, with us children, let alone me, their youngest daughter—but a force had shifted, somewhere between when we left the house to attend my graduation and when I came home hours later. And for the first time, as I pulled out of our driveway and rolled down the car window, I cried.

The air and the open windows dried my salty cheeks as I drove down York Road. I cursed our old, stone farmhouse and my parent's refusal to install air-conditioning—which, ironically, they eventually did, but only after all three of us children were out of the house and in college—and tried to ignore how hot and soggy and irritable I felt. Instead, I thought of my garden-bound mother, waving to me when I left, ready to go wrist-deep in the cracked earth, to water her thirsty boxwoods and to weed through her newly planted beds.

Many summers my sisters and I helped her tend to our yard, which covered less than 1.5 acres in south-central Pennsylvania, but was to us a vast spread of potential forts, uncharted forests, and beautifully kept gardens. On some early-summer Saturday mornings, we'd carry buckets of dead leaves and twigs to the compost pile and push mulch-filled wheelbarrows, always dangerously close to tipping over, from the bottom of our property up to the garden, my mother shouting directives whenever we looked as though we'd lost focus on the task at hand. We'd pull up the brown remains of the

hundreds of daffodils and tulips my father had planted over the years, careful to leave the bulbs safely buried, and sometimes, if we were lucky, we'd get to use the big, hand-held clippers and help trim the front hedge or various garden shrubs. We never lasted more than an hour or two before my mother would have to turn the hose on, dousing her own face before spraying us, laughing, cooling our flushed skin with the icy-cold well water.

I thought how wonderful an icy-cold shower would be as I swiped a tissue over my brow, wondering why I had been my mother's only confidant last night, why she came to my too-small twin bed, why Sarah and Josceylon, my sisters, had never come home, as promised. I hoped I was following Susie's vague directions correctly as I drove down Route 15, the summer air thick with the farmland smells neither Sarah nor Josceylon ever appreciated all the years they lived at home. To them, the cow farms, the cornfields, the horse pastures and the sweet scent of earthly decay and manure, hovering over daily drives to school, to the four-aisle grocery store and to the Boiling Springs swimming pool, was never an enjoyable part of our rural Pennsylvania countryside.

Sarah especially hated "living in the country," always fearing the open windows would stain her clothes, her freshly pressed shirts and slacks, with the smell of dirt and animal. I was the opposite. In the car, I loved leaning my head back against the seat and staring out at the rolling acres of dairy farms and wheat fields, listening to my sisters prattle on, drinking in the warm air, my head back and my mouth open as though the land could pour itself down my throat like orange juice for breakfast. I was always a little disappointed when the time came at the end of the day to get a bath, to wash the earth off my skin.

For many years throughout my childhood and even into high school, I spent most of my free time at the barn down the road from my house, dirtying myself for hours on end by mucking stalls, riding horses, and stacking hay in exchange for free lessons. I reveled in the sweet perfume of leather and saddle soap and grain on my hands and beneath my fingernails, the wet-nose patches on my arms and shirt sleeves, the salty film beneath my chin and on my cheeks after hours of barn labor and riding. On nights when I had swim practice, as soon as I was off the school bus, I'd run down to the barn for a quick hour or two of riding and chores before running back home again to eat dinner quickly and then head to swim practice. My sisters and the kids in my swim team carpool would groan and complain about how badly I smelled of sweat and horsehair and straw, but I never minded. Truthfully, I didn't even notice.

My father was my greatest advocate when it came to riding, always repeating what Jim Dodge, the barn's owner, said the first time he saw me ride: "She has a natural seat, Joe, a natural seat." A farm boy and an animal lover himself, he enjoyed my fervent adoration of horses and my love of the barnyard life. Neither he nor my mother came down to the barn all that often to watch me ride, but when my father did come, he'd bring bags of Golden Delicious apples or carrots with their long, green stems still attached and watch me feed these treats to whatever horse I was riding at the time. He especially enjoyed when I'd encourage my horse to use me as its rubbing post and would then watch me brace myself, knees locked and back rigid, as my horse thrust its full weight into me and dragged its head against my spine and ribs. I think he liked that his daughter was confident and strong enough to stand company with such powerful creatures.

I couldn't help but think about my riding days as I drove past the Berkheimer's farm, noticing the fields were freshly turned—corn season will soon be underway. My father always told us girls one sure way to know whether it'd be a good corn season: by July 4<sup>th</sup>, you had to be able to squat down in the bright green stalks and not be seen, otherwise, the corn wasn't growing well. He was always telling us little farm facts. As a child, on drives like this through the country, whether we were on our way to the Adams County orchards or to Lykens for a visit with my grandparents, we rarely passed a farm field without some discussion. My father often quizzed my sisters and me on what fruit grew in which orchards based on the shape and size of the trees and their limbs or on which crops grew in the fields alongside the road.

Enthusiastically, confidently, I always shouted out answers. But I guessed wrong more often than right. Only after we'd struggled to answer correctly would my father carefully explain how to distinguish the various crops.

Patiently, he reminded us, "Timothy is long and sweet, alfalfa is short and curly, like clovers, and wheat is tall and plain."

He would go on to say how hay comes from timothy, clover and alfalfa, and straw comes from barley, wheat or—though seldom seen in Pennsylvania—rye. He would then stick his tan, muscled arm out the window, opening and closing his fist as though grabbing invisible hands in thanks and in praise of the farmland he loved, and would give a loud sigh, saying, "Good fresh country air!" as we girls laughed and held our noses.

I drove that morning with my own arm out the window, the morning humidity moist against my skin. I turned off Route 15 onto a small, two-lane road, catching a

glimpse of my tangled hair and shiny cheeks in the review mirror. How much this back road on my drive to a Quaker meetinghouse in York County somehow, strangely, reminded me of the poorly maintained roads we traveled on during our annual drive to Topsail, North Carolina, our family's vacation island since the late 1980s.

The last leg of that trip is spent on back roads such as this, seemingly endless and deserted strips of jagged roadway dotted with potholes, faded and torn billboards, abandoned houses, dilapidated front porches and forgotten fruit stands. When I was younger, I used to wonder what kind of people lived in those once-white houses, the paint peeling off the wood siding like birch bark, and who, if anyone, dared to climb the sloped and sinking porch stairs. I'd become momentarily lost in the area's depression and poverty, my imagination kicking into high gear as I envisioned the abandoned houses' dark insides, the walls papered with moss or ivy that had snuck in the back door and since taken residence. And then, just as I would be gathering the courage to ask my mother if we could stop, if only to let me peer through the broken window panes, we'd be crossing the bridge onto the island, the air suddenly clear and ripe with vacation promises of tanned skin, blond hair and better moods.

One summer, when we had driven two cars down instead of just one, we stopped on a last length of highway because Sarah was hungry and wanted food from the other car. I remember Josceylon, Sarah and I sat on the roadside in a patch of dry grass, eating peanut butter sandwiches and grapes, while our parents fought over the fastest back road way onto the island.

“Joe, I *know* we took that route last year and complained about how long it took,” my mother insisted, impatiently pushing back hair and sunglasses and sweat.

“Connie, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” my father snapped back, staring at the map, not at her.

“But—” my mother tried again to make her point, but my father slowly folded the map together and said in a steeled, foreign tone, “Do whatever the fuck you want,” before calling my name and climbing back into his car.

When Susie called to ask if I was still planning on coming to the service, I tried to sound perky and excited and covered up my stuffy nose with bad excuses of allergies, all the while just wanting to blurt out the truth of what had happened the night before. She probably knew anyway.

A dear family friend, Susie owned and managed a modest, 14-table restaurant in downtown Camp Hill called Café on Market, where I worked as a busgirl all throughout high school and then off and on throughout college. On nights when she and I were both working, we’d gossip and tell jokes to stave off our dinner-rush stress, and then, toward the end of the night, when the crowd had thinned and we were nursing just a few lingering tables, we’d order our own batch of food from the kitchen, relieve our swollen feet, and then lean our elbows on the table and talk and talk and talk, our tired faces aglow in the restaurant’s soft candlelight. She was more than 10 years older than I and was married and raising her three young children, but somehow, we understood each

other perfectly. I envied her wisdom, and she appreciated my innocence, my interest in self-reflection. We could talk for hours and never tire.

At times, Susie became a stern older sister who I desperately wanted to please and impress, and at other times, she morphed into my dearest confidant, a woman to whom I told nearly all my secrets, including my fears, my rage, and my sadness regarding my parent's unraveling marriage. She played the part of friend, mentor, eldest sister, mother, and advisor and provided me an inexhaustible listening ear, unwavering support, and gentle reminders of how lucky I was to have such a close and seemingly healthy family. I valued her opinion enormously, and so when Susie started talking to me about coming with her to a Quaker service, I paid attention. She believed Quaker services offered a balance of traditional religious practices and open-minded spiritual exploration, and she particularly liked the quiet acceptance and peace she felt whenever she attended. Never all that religious, I figured Susie simply wanted to share this unique religious/spiritual experience, which she had enjoyed for years, with me before I left for college, and so I circled one sacred Sunday on my calendar.

Before my father launched his consulting business in the mid 1990s and began traveling to California, Illinois, Texas and Tennessee each month, on most Sundays he dragged me from my bed—either because my sisters had ignored him or because I was the most energetic at 7 a.m.—and we drove to the Silver Spring flea market off the Carlisle Pike. My head pressed against the back of the car seat, my eyes fixed on his lips, I listened eagerly as my father played Annie Lennox or the Doobie Brothers on the cassette player and told me stories from when he was a boy on the farm. Although I'd

been told numerous times that my father was, in fact, “husky” in his youth, in my mind my father as a boy meant lanky, thin limbs in too-small t-shirts and cut-offs, my grandmother’s black silk slip draped like a cape over his shoulders as he jumped from the porch roof of his farmhouse onto the woodpile, pretending he was Adams County’s youngest *Zorro*. I laughed at the anecdotes in which he tormented his sisters, telling them the sky was falling, when really the trees were just shedding their October skin. I giggled at his tales of playing in his own childhood Sherwood Forest and his summers spent picking—and eating to sickening excess—peaches and sweet cherries from the local orchards. We would hold hands and tap our feet to the beat of songs and to the bumps on the country back roads, and when the old Dodson’s strange squeaking noises grew particularly loud, my father would grab my arm and say, “Can you hear Jimminy Crickets making all that racket?!”

At the flea market, he would treat me to hot chocolate and cinnamon sugar pretzels made by small, silent Amish girls as we roamed through stands of used books, antique furniture, blue willow plates and estate jewelry. I never knew what exactly we were looking for each Sunday, and we rarely returned home with any purchases. But I loved the dusty, damp smell of the old warehouse buildings, the incredibly bizarre assortment of wares—a cloudy jam jar filled with rusted nails, a doll with no dress, a dull hatchet, stacks of torn comic books—being sold as prized possessions, and my father’s heavy hand on my shoulder, guiding me from one stand to the next. Sometimes, I filled a bag with penny candy before we climbed back into his truck and headed home, our stomachs full, our eyes misted wet with laughter.

This Quaker meetinghouse was nothing like a Sunday morning with my father, but it was as plain and silent as those pretzel-making Amish girls. If Susie weren't standing by her car waving, I surely would have driven right past. I parked alongside her sedan and grabbed my journal, again cursing the miserable humidity for my pulled-back hair and damp underarms. Susie gave me a hug, and if she noticed my dark eyes, she was too kind to say anything.

Instead, she took my arm and led me up the path to the front door. It was a modest wooden building that looked more like a rustic log cabin than a house of God, with small windows which had the old, hand-blown glass in them, the kind of glass that swirls the world when you look through it. There were four or five men and women milling around outside on the porch, dressed in plain, black clothes, waving, calling out a hello as we climbed the steps.

“The air feels old, don't you think?” Susie said quietly as we step inside.

I nodded. *Everything* felt old—the air, the wooden benches placed in rows, the floorboards creaking beneath our feet. The floors at home were as thin and ancient as these, and my sisters and I spent the whole of our childhood running, jumping and falling on them and never once did the floorboards abandon us and cave through to the basement. But here, I walked gingerly, and I kept my breathing shallow, and I hoped it was not strange that I had my journal tucked under my arm and not a King James Bible. Susie and I took our seats on one of the long, narrow benches near the front of the small room. My muscles pressed painfully into my bones as the wood refused to give with the weight of our bodies.

I looked around, noticing there were no lights, only oil lamps and candles, with wax folding down the sides of the windowsills. The walls were unplastered, wood as bare as summer skin, with no paintings of Christ's body or the cross or the crucifixion—only splinters and candle holders and cracks where thin lines of sunlight pierced through the dim room. There was no alter, no communion table, no place for a choir to stand and sing. There weren't even any other congregation members sitting inside with us. Only ten long benches in two rows of five facing the front door, and Susie and I seated on the second bench on the right.

I was immediately uncomfortable and nervous, but the smell of the dry, aged wood and my fidgeting hands made me think of my own church and how my father used to slip me peppermints and gum to keep me from loudly interrupting our pastor with questions and comments about his sermon. I learned as a child that my father came to Sunday services prepared, with paper and pencils and candy in his suit pockets, smiling at our hushed excitement when he presented these small but substantial pieces of entertainment to my sisters and me.

As I dug through my own pockets in search of a lifesaver, I suddenly wished I was at our old church, Silver Spring Presbyterian, tucked safely between my father and my mother, their hands in my lap as I played with their palms and laced their fingers together. For a few years, we were disciplined and attended service every week. I loved those Sunday mornings with my family, listening to my mother's deep vibrato and my father's off-key baritone, watching my father slide enveloped money into the collection

basket, having Josceylon absentmindedly twist thin strands of my hair while the pastor gave his sermon.

In my memory, we were always a family at that church—participating in the Christmas services, my sisters and I lighting the advent candles while our parents read small pieces of scripture; having our first and only set of family portraits done, my mother matching with painstaking effort the family wardrobe for one night of photographs; Josceylon helping my parents teach the junior Sunday school class while Sarah and I sat in a corner, eating animal crackers and drinking apple juice and coloring pictures of the apostles and Jerusalem.

“Why does everyone draw God with a beard?” I asked my mother once, when it was my assignment to decorate the Sunday school room with my 8-year-old renditions of Bible scenes.

“I’m not sure, honey,” she replied, smiling. “Ask your father. Don’t you know by now? Everything I don’t know, your father knows. See, that way, put together, we know everything.”

Those words and those years at Silver Spring held my parents together and made my family intact, a young and working unit. As I think of it now, I could say it was good while it lasted. But as I twisted and kneaded my fingers, I realized it was better than good. It was damn near perfect. It was *happiness*.

Raw and dizzying childhood happiness.

Susie rambled on about the hour ahead. She explained to me how the Quakers didn't believe in someone being between God and themselves, someone like a preacher or a pope. They believed that God spoke directly to them, that if their beliefs and their prayers and their attempts to communicate with him were strong enough, then His words would come right to them. Their services were not about preaching or about someone standing in front telling God what to forgive us for or about confessing our sins. Susie told me it is a time to make your own peace, with yourself, with Him, with the world.

I nodded, watching the handful of men and women previously standing outside enter the church. A small, balding man with a thick, paper-white beard stayed in the front of the church while the others seated themselves. He briefly read from Psalms, then sat down, the wood silent beneath his aged limbs.

Everything was still, as though no one sitting around me was even breathing. I was scared to move, to make a noise, to open my journal, scared the scratch of my pen would disturb these unmoving, soundless people, scared that all the words clattering inside my mind would come together in cohesive and painful sentences that my hand wouldn't be able to ignore. I was scared to cry in this peaceful place. I clenched the journal in my lap, fiercely, hating that I needed it.

My father had bought me this journal, as he bought me my first journal in third grade, a book all my own with a big, beautiful unicorn adorning its cover. He told me it was to help "remember everything," that one day, I would read back through the scribbled pages and see how I came to be who I am. He bought me nearly every journal after that first one, each more ornate, more expensive, more personalized to whatever age

or space of life I was in, and I rapidly filled them, one by one. My father insisted on inscribing everything—after all, it wasn't a proper gift if it wasn't inscribed or at least initialed—and in my new journals, he would write things like, “For cantering thoughts that dust the tracks where rings of words jump to meet your pen - with love, this Christmas, Papa.” When I declared I wanted to study Latin when I got to college, my next journal inscription read, “Ex animo, tu padre.”

He loved that I wrote, loved that I valued my voice enough to document it.

I started crying as soon as I opened my journal to its stark and gaping pages.

I thought about my mother, walking out to her garden and to the day, alone—as she's often been these last few years. I thought about her strong hands, and, at the same time, I thought about my father's soft, thick-knuckled fingers. I thought about my mother's fine hair, her thin eyebrows, and my father's high cheekbones, his tanned skin, his receding widow's peak. I thought about how I loved to watch my parents' mouths move on the nights when they laid in bed alongside me and pulled one book after another off the shelves and read and read.

When I was young, my father worked for Catholic Charities and oftentimes worked late, not arriving home until after my mother had put us girls to bed and turned out the lights. But, he would come storming up the stairs, his footfalls echoing throughout the old house, and would bound into our bedrooms, shaking us from sleep with his voice

and his bedtime stories about a man named Pinky Smivey and the blue-wind boys and white-wind girls.

“Pinky Smivey is the one on the river, right, Dad?” I would whisper loudly.

“Yes, Pinky Smivey’s house has been falling down for years now. He’s trying to save it, but we’re all just waiting for it to collapse.” I would giggle then, and he would add the punch line. “Can you imagine—coming home one day with your house floating down the river?”

He’d move from one bedroom to the next, making sure to kiss and dote on each of his daughters, read a book, tell a story, ask about the day or about the next swim meet or sleepover. Once he reached my room, he’d close my closet door, brighten the hall light, place an extra four or five stuffed animals onto my bed so that I was not alone under the covers. Then he’d lay down beside me on his back, and I’d curl into him, pushing my small face into his throat, stiffening briefly at the stubbly scratch. His heart thumped against my ear as he talked in low tones, sometimes rubbing my back, telling me about his childhood on the farm or about his travels through Europe. Eventually, my mother would call his name, usually when our laughter was louder than the television downstairs, reminding him I had school the next day and needed to go to sleep. We would laugh louder—my mother, the disciplinarian.

My mother, the person who’d spent the entire day with my sisters and me, who’d organized our day into a set routine of meals, games, lessons, play, nap, and more play. She handled the squabbles, kissed away tears, encouraged constant activity and exploration, and spanked unruliness out of us—all while painting a wall here, planting a

shrub there, making a home for her family. At times, our preference for our father come the end of the day probably drove a dull knife into her heart—after all her hard work, why did he get those giddy squeals of excitement, those great bursts of affection? When she'd call up to him, secretly I wondered, even then, if she just wanted him to be hers again.

*You know he is first your father, then your mother's husband.*

Her words last night, but my words now, written black on white in the journal he bought for me, *he, him, my father, my mother's husband*. Always both, always at the head of our kitchen table, always on the left side of their bed, always on the fence at my horse shows, always the first who bought her flowers for her birthday, always the only one who remembered I hated tomatoes, always the one person who called my mother Rae—her middle name, but his special nickname for her.

He has been both, everything, always, but now he might not be *my mother's husband* anymore.

Embrace him as *my father* only.

“I always wanted to be a father,” he once told me. “It is a selfish profession, parenting. You say you do it because you want to have kids...no, I say you do it because you want to be a parent.”

I never really understood those words, but now, a balding man standing before me reading from the Bible and Susie sitting beside me wiping aside her own tears, I understood that maybe, just maybe, my father wanted my sisters and me more than my mother.

At this one thought, I was instantly furious, relieved, hateful, my emotions feeding each other, fighting for corner space. My wrist began to hurt as I scribbled, ignoring punctuation and spelling, hastily written letters tumbling over and spilling onto one another as I translated my tears into words. I could not feel my body anymore, could not feel the stripped and splintered wood beneath me, could not even hear the voice speaking quietly in front of me. I could only write and write and write, I could only try to bleed myself of all the words I want to say to them.

*Father, why can't you love her? Mother, why can't you be stronger? Why can't you leave him? Why can't you slap him raw when he is silent and indifferent?*

*Why can't you both forgive, why can't you both go to counseling, why can't you both admit you were wrong?*

Why am I *angry*?

“Don't be mad at either of us, honey,” my mother had told me last night, voice shaking, unconvincing. “I'm not angry, your father isn't angry, so don't you be angry either, ok? Be happy for what we had as a family for so many years. Be happy that you had parents that stuck together for as long as we did, be happy that you had a father and a mother that loved you more than they loved themselves sometimes!”

She tried to sound resolute. “*Appreciate* it, Mattie. Don't *forget* it just because things got harder.”

I dirtied the pages of my journal with her words, with thoughts of home and my childhood, with attempts to focus on my parents independent of one another, as just parents and not spouses.

I wrote, and I wrote.

I wanted to understand my mother as my *mother*, not as my father's wife, as the woman who juggled me on one hip while putting the final touches on a freshly out of the oven rhubarb-strawberry pie while talking on the phone.

My mother—the multi-tasker, the one who would never quit before she fully completed something, whether it be refinishing our 220-year-old house or reaching the last page of a novel that she had to spend a year to work her way through. Stubborn, thorough, always stopping me mid-sentence to correct my grammar or my pronunciation, always making to-do lists, always praising a productive day, she raised my sisters and me with a firm, demanding kindness. However long or exhausting the day, she never missed the opportunity to remind us that she loved us, that she had “mother power” which could, in her mind, protect and save us. Practical, subtly comical, and fair, my mother's favorite answer to any ailment or problem or concern was: “Don't worry, it'll all be better before you're married.”

An abstract painter, a superb cook, an Edna St. Vincent Millay devotee, an avid gardener, a high school basketball star, my *mother*, I wrote, separate from my father.

Alone, she represented the stability of my youth, the dependability of an efficient and practical parent, the stern, reprimanding voice that plays in my head, on repeat, throughout most days. Alone, she sent me off to my first formal dance in high school and

sat in the passenger seat, however nervously, the day I received my driver's permit.

Alone, she took me to buy my first saddle and bridle, and, alone, drove me to horseback-riding lessons every Tuesday and Thursday after the barn down the road closed. Alone, each night, she greeted my sisters and me with warm, well-cooked dinners after we stumbled home chlorinated and exhausted from swim practice. Alone, she stood beside me at the end of my last home water polo game, hugged me, kissed my wet cheek, told me she was proud.

And although she pushed hard and fought hard, her main concern and her chief priority as a mother was making sure my sisters and I felt loved and rooted in our family, that when we were launched we knew how much she treasured us. Her words were always simple, poignant: "Be strong, brave, and true, Mattie. *Strong, brave, and true.*"

As I wrote, I realized, when I tried to define my mother on the page, I didn't think of the times when she and my father were fighting or the nights when I helped her to fall asleep. I didn't think of all she hadn't done, all she hadn't said. I didn't think of her as weak or hopeless. I realized I wasn't angry with her at all.

Instead, I was grateful, thankful, blessed by who she was in my youth and who she continually proved herself to be to her daughters—a strong, brave and true woman.

My tears were flowing as fast as the thoughts in my head, and my wrist cramped as I tried to keep pace with all I was feeling. Susie placed a hand on my leg and squeezed gently, briefly, mouthing an "Are you okay?" to me.

I must have looked anything but okay. Flushed cheeks, bloodshot eyes, and shaking shoulders, but I mouthed back an “I’m fine.” I glanced at the balding man, still in front, still speaking, still reciting verse in a humming tone, and although I wasn’t listening to what he had been saying all this time, as I pressed harder on my pen, ready to try to trace the outlines of him—her husband first, only my *father* now, Joe, *papa*—I heard the man say something about lessons and values and God.

When I asked my father once what he felt were the strongest lessons his own parents had taught him, he laughed, saying his family always had conflicting values because his mother was a nurse and his father was a farmer.

“My mother told me, ‘Joe, what you ignore, festers,’” he explained. “My father preached the opposite. He said, ‘Son, what you feed, grows.’”

A contradiction, then and now.

If asked, my father would probably say his long hours at the office as we were growing up went unnoticed, that we had not grieved when he started traveling regularly to conduct his Ideas2B training programs and, in turn, started missing high school dances and athletic events and birthdays. He would point out that he was the one who introduced me to horses, always offering piggy-back rides, pretending he was a Thoroughbred, I was a jockey, we were a winning team. He would say he was the reason my sisters and I swam all our lives and learned to love family traditions and the outdoors and our imaginations. He would even say he was the one who taught us most of the songs we know from our childhood, although he’s tone deaf and can’t carry a tune.

He would point out the nights he woke us up after my mother had put us to bed, just to whisper that he loved us and to crawl under the covers until we drifted back to sleep. He'd reminisce about our summer tradition of going to Hershey Park—an one-day event for which he saved money for nearly an entire year—our shopping trips to the Lancaster clothing outlets, and our family excursions to the Adams County fair, where he would treat us to freshly made caramel apples and kettle corn and hot, powder-sugared funnel cakes. He would not speak of his anger, his detachment, his dismissal of his wife, *my mother*, and he might even deny his insensitivity, his sadness.

My father, a proud, resolute, hard-working man, would remind me, once again, to focus on the positive, on the good. Why waste your energy elsewhere?

I recognized, as I frantically wrote, that I was disgusted at their failure to stay together, and I was sorrowful at losing my parents as a couple—however unconventional that coupledness was. I was sick at the thought of having my mother's house or my father's house to choose between during school breaks, at the thought of having two Christmases, two Easters, two bedrooms to decorate and make my own.

But, pausing, my wrist tight and sore, it dawned on me that, despite my disgust and disappointment, I knew I'd continue to adore my father and see him as the provider, the protector, the teacher, the intellectual, the indulger and the first and most important man in my life. And I would forgive my mother's inability to think of herself and her happiness before anyone else's, but I would also try harder to give abundantly what small pieces of joy and support only I, her daughter, could provide.

Because, ultimately, I was not one to judge them. I was not one to psychoanalyze and counsel. I was not one to participate in their battle any longer.

I was a *daughter*, their youngest child who loved them unconditionally and faithfully, who put up with their short tempers and fluctuating moods.

I realized I was trying, desperately, to document them as my parents, separately, my *mother* and my *father*. I was trying to remember I would always have the best of both of them—my mother’s practicality, my father’s love of language, my mother’s off-beat humor, my father’s pensiveness. I was trying to own that my hands looked like feminine versions of his, my arm wrinkled like hers, my limbs lengthened like his, my eyebrows thinned like hers, my eyes bulged like his Atlantic blues.

I was trying to establish in my mind two individual yet complete relationships, as my mother’s daughter and as my father’s daughter.

Slowly, I moved against the hard wooden bench that I’d stopped feeling beneath me. Somewhere in the scribbled writing in my lap, I saw I was succeeding. Somehow, through the scrawl of my words, I knew, with a suddenly sharp clarity, that I would not lose either of them—or any pieces of myself—if my mother was no longer my father’s wife.

Resting my pen against my leg, my body heaved on great thrusts of breath and choked words and exhaustion, and the balding man suddenly stopped speaking. He closed his Bible and came to my bench, moving quietly past Susie to stand in front of me.

Surprised, gasping a little, I looked up. He placed a thickly veined hand on my hunched shoulder, and whispered, “It is hard to confess all that we have seen, child. God and strength be with you.”

I raised my eyes to meet his fully. I wanted to tell him that earlier I would have burst with all I had seen and stuffed inside. I wanted to express my gratitude for welcoming me into this meetinghouse, for allowing me to stain this quiet Sunday morning with my heavy sighs and sniffles, for leaving me be long enough to reach the truths I’ve uncovered. I wanted to tell him I’m okay.

But, instead, my hand cramped and my index finger scratched with pen ink, I simply whispered, “Thank you.”

I thanked more than just him, more than just his kind words and his silent church. I thanked myself, my mother, my father, and my memories for giving me strength and patience, for leaving me not filled with anger, but instead, cleansed with the blackened and smeared pages of my journey, with the loose-limbed feeling of my body and my mind.

I breathed deeply, exhilarated.

“Here.” Susie, in a hush, passed a tattered packet of tissues into my lap. “The service is over soon.”

“Peace be with all of you this day and every other until we meet again,” the balding, bearded, smiling old man said to Susie and to me and to the other handful of men and women, who stood silently, bowed heads, clasped hands and gave thanks, before picking up their Bibles, their purses, their stiff Sunday hats.

“Crying certainly brings out the green in your eyes,” Susie said, skimming her fingers over her own moistened cheeks. “I hope that was a good cry...?”

I laughed as we moved from our bench to the back of the church, and I assured her that it was a “good cry” and that I enjoyed myself and that, yes, I definitely would come again next Sunday. The temperature outside had climbed, and with a grateful hug and a promise to call soon, Susie and I said good-bye and went to our suntanned cars, groaning as we opened the doors and rolled down the windows and complained about the heat. I waved as her car pulled out of the gravel lot, watching the cloud of pebbly dust dissipate behind her.

I turned on the air conditioning but left the windows down as I shifted into reverse, noticing the grass’s green lushness despite the early-summer drought and the sky’s clearness despite the suffocating humidity. The air smelled heavily of farmland and buzzed with bird calls, soft Sunday voices, and car horns. I pressed on the gas, suddenly anxious to get home and to hug my father and my mother, separately, in private.

As I pulled out of the driveway, the ripe scent of lilacs wafted into the car, and I saw a great lilac bush in late bloom alongside the road. I pulled over and climbed out of the car to cut some branches to take home. The lilac hedges my father planted along one edge of our property many summers ago—when he was still reminding us children, “Give me flowers when I am alive, when I can see them and smell them and enjoy them”—bloomed early and are done for the season, and these lilacs would make an excellent centerpiece for the kitchen table. I smiled, knowing my parents would appreciate this blossomed gift.

The lilac plumes filled my car with a heady, purple fragrance, like our backyard in the first burst of spring, when the Easter hyacinths and honeysuckles bloomed, when the tulip tree my mother bought my father years ago budded and the daffodils they planted and pulled for decades blazed like lone sunny spots among the myrtle and ivy. Despite the air conditioning, despite the heat, despite the blossoms blowing through the car, I left the windows down and rested my head on the back of my seat.

And then I laid my arm out into the morning, in thanks, in praise, as the car crested over the old country road rises, periodically reaching my right hand across the seat to hold the lilacs in place.

I drove steadily toward home, toward my mother and my father, my sisters, my family.

## Part Two: New England

### *Sleepy Hollow Cemetery*

My mother's voice  
rises and falls as quickly  
as her temperature these days,  
as she tells me  
over the hum of the windshield wipers,  
the sound pulsing through our car  
like a heartbeat,  
that she thinks  
she's lost her nouns.  
"It's the nouns you lose first,  
then the verbs," she says,  
as we drive past  
stone walls and stark houses  
and graveyards  
with rain-darkened headstones leaning  
over long, browning grass,  
exposing hand-shaved backsides  
to the eyes of tourists  
like myself.  
Later, when my father and I read her  
their faded fronts,  
my mother cries,  
her tears smearing  
through the fog on her glasses,  
and I can't help smiling beneath  
my sagging umbrella,  
thinking she will need more than one hot flash  
on this slate-gray afternoon  
to lift her mood again,  
to warm her wet body,  
to remember  
she always wanted to see Concord in autumn.

- Marique Newell, October 2002

The main street of Concord, Mass., shone with rain, headlights and leaves, and as I peered out the watery car window, I thought how depressing and empty and small the town looked. Could this bleak place really be home to Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, *Little Women*, the American Revolution?

My mother shuffled through AAA maps and Massachusetts guidebooks and said how she wanted to visit the Concord Museum, the Old Manse, Orchard House, and Wright's Tavern, as my father pointed out barely legible historic markers alongside the road. Each time he spotted one, my mother gasped and pleaded for him to pull over so she could hop out and read the signs.

"For God's sake, Connie! It's pouring down rain!" my father exclaimed, shook his head incredulously and kept driving.

Backseat-bound, I nibbled on a piece of homemade biscotti my mother had made and brought along for the trip, looked at my watch—barely 10:30 a.m.—and sighed, thinking, a little dismally, how long a day I had in front of me.

After all, this Columbus Day-weekend adventure marked my parent's first trip together to visit me at college. They'd decided to come north, swing through Amherst to pick me up, and then drive the Mass Pike across the state to Boston to visit Sarah, who'd just moved to the city after her own UMass graduation. They wanted "to see the fall foliage," they said, and to visit Boston and a few of the smaller New England towns—Concord, Gloucester, Manchester-by-the Sea—we'd heard and read about throughout the years. Sarah was ecstatic—visitors in her new city already!

I, on the other hand, wondered how much time one could pleasantly spend sitting in a car, driving through unfamiliar neighborhoods and town centers. I feared my mother would beg to stop and look at old houses, try to peer through their dusty windows, leaving my father irritated and anxious to move on. I anticipated my father's patience level would be low and worried how we'd weather each other's company, just the three of us, for two long days.

As I listened to my parents discuss the day's itinerary, I turned my gaze from the rain-soaked world outside the car to the world within it, the world of my parents and me. This trip marked one of the first times since I graduated high school that it actually was just my parents and me—no sisters to dominate the conversation, no water polo teammates to ask silly questions, no buffers to soften silence's heavy punches. The three of us together felt strange, like pulling on a too-small coat outgrown years ago, and the view from the backseat was unfamiliar, unnerving.

My college friends never asked me directly what my parent's relationship was, but I'm certain the majority of them thought my parents with either divorced or permanently separated and probably wondered why I never outright said so. I rarely gave them reason to think otherwise, because I never quite knew how to explain my parent's complicated relationship. After all, they were still married, yes, but during my freshman year, my sisters told me they sometimes slept in different bedrooms, and their voices strained when I asked one of them about the other. They didn't even try to maintain the front of being a couple throughout my first season of college water polo—my father came to some games, my mother to others, seldom a united parental unit in the bleachers.

College was the first time I'd faced real questions about my family—my high school girlfriends had known better than to ask. They simply listened if I wanted to talk, rubbed my back when I needed to cry, and offered up their guest bedrooms. But I was new to my college friends, and they were trying to get to know me and understand me, and that meant asking why my father traveled to California so much and why my parents visited me on different weekends. I talked to my parents separately, too—my mother called me from home, my father from some Fresno hotel room—and I talked about them separately, my mother the cook, the editor, the disciplinarian, the woman whispering, “strong, brave, true,” the woman with so many friends and social activities, and my father the funny-man, the world traveler, the one who sent me cards and care packages, the dapper gentleman wearing berets and Irish wool sweaters and corduroys he could have fit into 30 years ago.

Even the pictures I chose to display on my dresser and bookshelves told the story—a snapshot of my father posing with me beside the baby grand piano before my senior prom, and a photo of my mother squeezing me tightly after the last home game of my high school water polo career. In one frame, I was my mother's athletic, hard-working, well-liked and eager-to-please daughter. Her arm circled my waist. In the other frame, I was my father's smiling, stoic, confident and tall daughter. His hand rested lightly against my upper back.

A different smile, a different stance, a different daughter, depending on the parent.

I had learned, finally, after enough months gone from Stoneyway, how to see them—and my relationship with each of them—separately.

I could barely remember a time when my parents had been a couple in my mind, and yet now here they were, taking me on a weekend trip, acting very couple-like indeed in the front seats of my mother's Honda. When they'd picked me up in Amherst the day before, they exuded smiles and warm hugs and good moods, patting "hellos!" on my housemates' shoulders and complimenting me on how I'd decorated my closet-like attic bedroom in an overly priced and dilapidated house they detested and advised me not to move into. But, on their arrival, they offered surprising support and encouragement of the new life and home I'd made for myself off campus, and I was over the moon at how "normal" and relaxed they were in front of my friends, who, I could tell, were watching closely, perhaps hoping to find answers about who were these parents of mine, these people I couldn't quite explain.

And I was, too, I suppose. I wanted to know: had my parents learned to be a couple again or was this just a show, a front to appease me on their first joint visit? I wanted to know if they'd made peace, learned to love each other again.

I didn't know, but when I finally climbed into the crowded backseat of my mother's car, waving good-byes over my shoulder, I noticed my wariness had ebbed, just a little.

Once we made our way out of Amherst and onto the Mass Pike, I leaned forward, my elbows resting lightly on my parents' shoulders, and told them, together, stories about my strange poetry professor and my first season as captain of my water polo team and my life in a house of six young women. I loved that I owned their attention, that I'd tell these stories only once. I listened to them chuckle at and encourage my myriad observations

and insights. I watched them exchange amused looks and pass a shared water bottle. I sat back at one point and mentally wrapped myself in this new blanket of comfort and peace I felt draped across my shoulders and knees. We sped along, twisting our necks to see the colorful hills outside our windows, munching on biscotti, remarking on the quiet roadways, the beautifully clear and radiant New England sky.

They seemed happy. Or, at least, happier than I'd seen them in years.

Ever the child with “the wild imagination,” all my young life I never could pretend my parents loved each other as ardently, almost obsessively, as they did in the stories my Aunt Linda, my mother's sister, told to me and in the love poems and letters I'd found in our attic. I never saw them kiss or hold hands or even lay together on the sofa. I never saw them flirt with memories of their early, passionate romance during the college years at Vassar and Yale. Their love for my sisters and me—not necessarily for each other—sustained our family and buoyed them together, as parents, through my childhood and early adolescence, but I rarely witnessed physical, outward motions of affection, want, need and nurturance between them. And I desperately wanted that proof, those kisses.

My sisters and I could transform our backyard into a vast, rich kingdom—complete with masters, servants, tyrants, witches, gardens, and fields—that we reigned over from the second floor of the tree house my father built with scrap lumber, logs and plastic siding. I could set up “jumps” and gallop around the lower backyard, carrying myself over barrels and buckets like a champion mare. I could imagine a bowl full of dried and delicate maple keys was a feast fit for a queen.

But, I never had the gumption to play make-believe about my parent's happiness. I didn't even know how to begin that game.

Now, as my mother's car slowed and my father searched for parking along Concord's narrow main avenue, I wondered if they, too, had rounded a corner, as I had after a few months away at college. I found myself looking at my parents as a couple, without any pretending, even though I still couldn't quite believe it was possible.

I left my parents broken, barely speaking, when I departed for college at the University of Massachusetts in the fall of 1999.

I had a water polo sports scholarship, my sister Sarah, a roommate who I'd met and bonded with on my recruiting trip, and an entire team of immediate friends waiting and ready for my arrival in Amherst, and it was as though I couldn't get there fast enough. College had become my perceived salvation from the tattered remains of my parent's marriage and my life as I knew it at Stoneyway. For all the times I was told I was a homebody and for all the times I listened to both my homesick sisters cry to me over the telephone when they were away at school, I could not *wait* to leave Pennsylvania and head north.

I spent the entire summer before college staying as far away from home as possible, taking trips to Napa, California, to visit my high school best friend, spending nights—and days—at friends houses, going to swim and water polo practices, and working as much as possible at the Café. At one point in the summer, I spent three

straight days and nights at my friend Keri's house, only to have her mother, as she was pouring my glass of orange juice, gently ask me on my fourth morning if everything was alright. Keri quieted her with a quick shake of her head. I didn't talk much about my parents that summer, to Keri or anyone else, but my friends took my silence as an even more serious indication of how fragile and upsetting my situation was and readily made up their spare bedrooms and laid out their extra sleeping bags, lovingly, without me even having to ask.

Although both my parents told wonderful stories, wrote beautiful letters and poems, and read myriad newspapers, journals, magazines and new pieces of literature, they never communicated with me and my sisters about *them*, their relationship, their problems—during that summer or any other time. And so I had no words, no explanations, for my friends or for myself. For all the chatter, all the laughter, all the noise and silliness, the game-playing and pretending, the writing and reading that went on as I was growing up, my parents retained a chilly silence about their marriage, about their problems with each other and with themselves. And because of all that went unsaid, my parents' histories captured my fascination—I yearned to know their stories, their past heartaches, their disappointments.

But when I asked personal questions, my parents usually responded with detached ambivalence, a light wave of the hand, an “Oh, honey, that was a long time ago. I don't remember.”

Part of me thanked my parents, each and every day, for keeping their lives this separate, for giving me sisters and me a blissfully happy childhood, focused solely on *our*

young lives and growing selves and not on their growing problems, which stayed, in many ways, safely behind their bedroom door. Their privacy created a nearly insurmountable barrier to their lives as people, not just parents, which meant I didn't pick up on my father's unhappy restlessness or my mother's sadness until I was older, exposed to friends' parents who held hands and attended events together and had "date nights." And even then, even as I firmly established my part as mediator between my mother and father, we still never talked about *why* I was playing such a role.

This pattern, this habit of looking the other way, has continued. For years, we didn't talk about my parents' heavy drinking, until Josceylon became engaged and had a fiancé who asked, "Why do your folks drink so damn much?" I have yet to talk openly with my mother and father about how close they came to separating so many summers ago. And to this day, neither of them have read my writing on the subject nor taken me by the shoulders, acknowledged the past, apologized, and allowed me to hear their side.

At times growing up, I ached to know and understand my mother and father better—their lives before my arrival retained a mysterious, fascinating allure I couldn't wait to see beyond. Who had they been? How had my mother captured my father's attention? What thoughts and doubts did they experience at my age? I wanted to know all their secrets, since I gladly told them all of mine, even as an awkward teen-ager, fearful of and eager for love, attention, and adulthood. My unshakable adoration for them burst through me, wholly and unabashedly, for years and years. But although we talked about my thoughts on literature, politics, economics, careers, movies, music, drugs, drinking and relationships with boyfriends and best friends, we never talked about *them*.

And so, as I got older, I resented their tight lips, the years sealed off from me. I had shared all of myself—why hadn't they? I despised my openness, my vulnerability, which mocked me in the face of their silence. That they understood me so plainly, that I was so obvious to them, that they'd heard all my stories, was maddening, given how little I knew of their lives.

And so while the rest of my friends were relishing in their last home-cooked meals or good-bye visits from grandparents or expensive dinners out with their parents, I was busy packing for college by mid-July and trying to arrange an early move-in date to the dorms. I couldn't stand to be home. All the rooms reeked of mildewed sadness. The house's silence roared in the late summer afternoons. My mother's sleepless eyes and my father's calendar of business trips haunted me. I left, as often as I could.

My sisters stayed away, too. Josceylon was falling in love with Chris, her future husband, and had practically moved in with him, and Sarah spent her summer laying out at her friend Jade's pool, working out at the YMCA, and counting down the days until she could, finally, head back to college as well. Instead of trying to work through my pain and confusion with my mother or my father or even my sisters, I—like the rest of my family—simply retreated and sought solace and attention elsewhere. The five of us splintered, just waiting for the ax's final drop.

My mother probably suffered the most in those hot summer months. She had spent more than 20 years renovating a house, growing a garden, collecting antiques, throwing parties, making friends, raising her children and watching them grow into healthy, ambitious, and successful young women. And now, not even 50 years old, she

was suddenly trapped within the very home she'd created for her daughters, for her family. The life she'd built stood perilously close to collapse, and the rest of us gave up, selfishly, angrily, cursing her for holding on. We left her, my strong, brave mother, all alone. I couldn't imagine her grief then, nor now.

Ironically, I wrote very little that summer. For years, my journals were my touchstones, my daily therapy sessions, my sanity's food. I was addicted to their blank pages, to seeing my words paint them, colorfully, passionately. But, that summer, I had no words to pinpoint my scattered emotions. I had no understanding of my rage, my gut-wrenching unhappiness and confliction—did I want my parents to stay together or break up, and end all our misery? How would our relationships change? How would *I*, a divorced couple's child, change? I asked only myself these questions, silently and uncertainly, and I put away my journal because I was not ready to write my way to answers. And, more than anything, I couldn't bear to acknowledge my guilty relief that, come summer's end, I would be free.

College would be my escape.

When the long-awaited day came for me to leave for school, I stood in the middle of my bedroom, staring at its white walls, at my stripped mattress, my empty bookshelves, feeling oddly unsettled and unexcited. I walked back downstairs slowly and sat, alone, on the sofa in the back room, my hands folded in my lap, my eyes filling, my heart racing at the finality of my departure. Suddenly, I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to leave at all. I felt selfish and guilty, as though I was abandoning my parents and leaving them for dead in a house about to fall apart, stone by stone. Our dog, K.C.,

always so sensitive to the swinging moods and emotions of her caretakers, paced in front of me, her tail wagging nervously, and made quiet, urgent noises in her throat. In those minutes, I loved her immensely for sensing my dread, for lamenting the moment with me.

My father came inside to see what was taking me so long, and when he saw me, he shrugged his shoulders, exasperated, and said, “Mattie, what are you doing? Your mother’s waiting out there. It’s time to go already.”

*Time to go.*

I wasn’t scared to walk out the door and into the next phase of my life. No, I was scared for my parents. What would they do without me to intercede, to make conversation, to kiss and hug away heartaches and bad moods? My mother would be alone, so terribly alone, with my father on the road so much, since his consulting business had taken off successfully. Would she still cook herself a real dinner and remember to lock all the doors? Who would greet her at the end of the day? And my father—was I the last reason he was still coming home at all? He was losing me, his youngest daughter, his rider, his most faithful admirer and sidekick. My father fed on my unconditional love in the same way that I fed off of his unwavering adoration, and I suddenly felt utter panic as he stood there, giving me a slightly disapproving look, his stance saying, *come on, pull it together, let’s get this over with*, while I was wanting to say, “It’s okay, Daddy, I don’t have to go. I’ll stay.” But I feared his disappointment more than my own failure, so I sucked in my lips and stood to follow him. I didn’t consider it then, but maybe, inside, he was as terrified as I was.

By the time we reached my mother's car, the tears gushed. I had been so convinced I wouldn't cry, that I'd practically skip out the front door, but now, I couldn't stop the choking, bubbly feeling in my throat. I was furious that we weren't saying anything, that I couldn't open my mouth to tell my father I was sorry for my own absence during the last three months, that my parents weren't even trying to soothe me with faked sentiments like "calm down, honey" or "it'll be fine." I hated that I couldn't appease any of us.

Silence—the sixth member of my family—simply held my hand, and let me sob.

My father, ever the gentleman, opened my car door and then opened his arms to me. I took one last look at Stoneyway, memorizing its bulky, rectangular shape in the August haze, how the sunlight hit the dulling tin roof, how the paint peeled in thin strips from the summerhouse, how the glass of my parent's bedroom window swirled ominously, and then I stepped into my father's awaiting hug, pressing my face hard against his chest, trying to suck in air and, at the same time, the familiar, wooded, lavender scent of his throat and clothes. I buried my nose into his Adam's apple.

Normally, my father's hugs comforted me instantly, sending me to a place where I felt completely and perfectly safe. I fit in his hugs. But in that moment, his body suddenly awkward against my own and all our unsaid words prickling me like thorns, I despised him for his surprising inability to placate me and shield me from my own grief. I felt as though I'd lost my father and myself, as reflected in his eyes. I let go quickly, pushed past him into the car, mumbled a good-bye, and slammed the door.

As my mother began to pull out of the driveway, I desperately wanted to look up and wave and capture with my mind's camera that last departing image of my father standing in our empty driveway, in front of my childhood home, sending me, a scared and naïve 18-year-old kid, off to college. But I couldn't bring myself to raise my eyes. I hated him for not coming on this trip, not holding my hand, not helping me move into my first college dorm. I hated my mother for bearing yet another burden on her own. I hated that I was, once again, even on such a momentous day for me, the child pitted between them, the child left to choose loyalties. I stared at the car floor, crowded with cd cases and water bottles and bags of apples, and cried.

My efforts to rub smooth the cracks of those long-ago days has left me with a precariously pasted together memory, one that no longer remembers what my mother said to me as we drove away that morning or why my father never even came on that first trip to Amherst or how I explained to my new roommate why my mother and sister were the only ones moving me in. I wouldn't say my patchwork recollections are the result of denial, because I certainly acknowledged my emotions and anger toward my parents—I felt those emotions too acutely to ignore them. They are as real as the fingers that type these words. But, having no clear category, no organization, with which to sort those feelings and no person with which to analyze, discuss and understand them, I simply filed away and forgot many, many days and many, many moments of my childhood.

How else does one move on?

Don't dwell, I was told, over and over as I was growing up, by parents who constantly nudged me forward, the slight taps of their fingertips like a crop against my

backside, a firm encouragement to pick up my heels and get on with it. They were of the mindset that if you kept moving, the past would stay where it should be—behind you.

We are only ever responsible for ourselves, our own feelings, my father would say. So, lift your chin. Bear the burden grinning. Make *yourself* happy—don't wait for someone else to do the work.

It'll all be better before you're married.

My mother and I were nearly two hours into the trip, about to cross into New Jersey, before I lifted my head, looked up through swollen eyes, took in the long road ahead, and forced myself to stop the tears.

The rain and gloom of this Columbus Day visit contrasted starkly to that hazy, humid drive more than two years ago and to my first three-day college weekend when I was a freshman, when my mother drove north to Amherst with Judi, her friend of more than 30 years, instead of my father. My mother and Judi had met in La Leche League when my mother was 25 and pregnant with Josceylon, and I don't remember a year of my life without Judi in it, arriving—late, more often than not—at parties, picnics, graduations, celebrations and Sunday brunches with a plate of her unforgettable homemade chocolate chip cookies and cheeks still rosy from the hot kitchen.

Sometimes, I resented that Judi was my mother's partner to events or weekends away. After all, why couldn't my father be by her side instead? Why did my mother have to be the parent who always had a friend with her and not a husband? But, I knew Judi's

loyalty, love, and laughter served as pillars against which my mother leaned, heavily, desperately, throughout the years, and I was thankful she had such a friend.

During that first Columbus Day visit, New England was ablaze, the foliage as brilliant as copper, as colorful as a candy store. I remember the sky shone a bright blue above the brick buildings of Amherst College. We walked the main street of my small college town, took an afternoon trip into Northampton, where my mother bought me a silver and gold bracelet at a small art gallery, a bracelet still circling my wrist today, a bracelet I rarely take off because, over time, it has become the reassuring brush of my mother's fingers round that wrist. She insisted on treating me to meals, groceries, and gifts throughout the weekend and asked me question after question about my new life.

I was only seven weeks into college, but I was completely in love with the friends I'd already made, the Massachusetts college town that fit me, just right, and the dorm room I'd so carefully decorated and made my own. I talked and talked, my happiness and enthusiasm an unmistakable blush on the skin. I felt radiant, grown up, newly independent, and I wanted my mother to see and know it all. I wanted to discuss my classes, the books that fascinated me, and how I was still trying to find my voice in the large, crowded lecture halls. I told her about Carly and Lizzy and Megan, the friends I'd known less than two months but who had rapidly replaced my high school girlfriends. My mother listened attentively, her smile genuine but weary, her hand on my arm comforting but still a little too clingy, too reminiscent of what I'd just left behind me.

Late in the weekend, my mother finally told me K.C., our family dog, had died of lymphatic cancer the week earlier. We were walking down Mt. Pleasant Street, the

October morning crisp and promising, when she told me the news, and I wandered over to a bench, sat down, and sobbed silently against the rough wool of her coat. We'd had several cats over the years, all of which died on the busy road in front of our house, but K.C. was the only dog—the only real pet in my mind—that we'd ever had. My mother rubbed my back, explaining how because my father was, of course, on the road for almost the entire month of September, which is when K.C.'s health rapidly declined, she'd nursed K.C. through her final days, tried to make her as comfortable as possible, and then held K.C.'s head in her lap when the vet put her down.

“She wasn't alone when she died,” my mother said, smiling a little. “Which is pretty remarkable considering how alone she was those last few months of her life. I think she hung on long enough to see everyone go and then went herself.”

I had never considered how all our departures—from my father's travels to me, the last child, leaving for college—might have affected our 12-year-old dog, who, according to the vet, had probably been living with cancer and in pain for at least a year.

My mother remarked on how peacefully K.C. went, how she seemed relaxed and even had a little wag left in her tail when the vet arrived. She told me how she and Josceylon had dug a grave beside the tree we'd planted in honor of my grandfather after he died and how Chris had placed K.C. in it, burying her beneath a shallow bed of soil in which my parents later planted giant irises and violet flag flowers. I cried and cried, and I noticed my mother's eyes were watery, too, which was surprising, considering she didn't particularly warm to K.C. until the last few years. I wondered if she was crying for the

loss of a beloved pet or for the loss of one more element of the life she'd created for her children, or for yet another rough, emotional experience she had to bear alone.

And, mostly, I wondered if this, my childhood dog's death, pried open memories of how K.C. entered our young family so many years ago.

Both of my parents were fond of animals, my father more so than my mother, who usually cited "dirty" and "smelly" as reasons for not having pets inside the house. But, they allowed us girls to care for fish and hermit crabs, which I'd buy each year at the beach, and my father always showed us birds' nests and rabbit nests he'd find in the backyard. On drives to and from swim practice, my father would stop alongside Hempt Farms' pastures so I could "ooh" and "aah" over the spring foals, and my mother tried to admire and compliment my horses, although sometimes she just couldn't stop herself from quipping, "For being such big animals, horses sure get scared so dang easily! And over the silliest things!" And anytime we passed the Mechanicsburg humane society—a dingy compound set back off the road among tall oak trees and overgrown shrubbery in such a way that if you weren't specifically looking for it then you wouldn't know it was there—my sisters and I would beg whoever was driving to stop and let us have a look at the kittens and puppies, let us give those love-starved animals some attention.

One Saturday morning, when I was about seven or eight, we were on our way home from a trip to Schencks bakery, licking bear claw crumbs and cinnamon stick sugariness from our fingers, and, as usual, we began our pleas to my father to stop at the shelter. He surprised us that morning and made the right hand turn onto the little bridge

that crossed over the Pennsylvania turnpike and then the turn into the shelter's parking lot.

My sisters and I tumbled out of the car, squealing, and, within minutes, were leaning over the puppy cages, scratching ears and patting soft rumps and pleading, "Can we get one, Daddy? Please? Please?!"

My sisters fawned over a little beagle, whose somewhat spastic efforts to lick and nip and jump out of the cage made me nervous. The thin, quiet mutt crouching behind two other much bigger, louder puppies captured my attention. She was all black, with a thick white strip running from her chin to her belly and four white stocking feet. Best of all, she had a white tip on the end of her tail, too, which looked like a freshly dipped paintbrush. I liked her shyness and her huge goldish-brown eyes, and I liked that, in all her quietness, she seemed to notice me as much as I noticed her. When I reached in to pet her quivering back, the light thump of her tail against the cold cage floor matched the excited thump of my heart. She was perfect.

I pulled my father's pant leg and pointed.

On the way home, we decided to name her Katherine Charlotte White Stockings, a title to match our cat at the time, John Henry Nibs Newell. Josceylon, sitting in the front seat, held K.C. in her lap, laughing as K.C. squirmed and licked at her cheeks and neck. We stopped at the grocery store quickly for my father to run inside and buy dog food and a collar, and we girls stayed by the car, playing and falling in love with the newest addition to our family. We'd never had a puppy, so everything she did—lapping up water from a small rain puddle, running in circles, trying to climb up my leg—was hysterical

and adorable to us. Even when she peed all over Josceylon when we were just five minutes from the house, we laughed.

That was until we brought K.C. inside and my mother saw her. I don't remember how my mother responded, and I didn't hear my parents yell or curse at each other that day. But, what I do remember is that they didn't talk the whole following week.

At the time, I found the situation comical, as simple as saying, "Look, Mom, we got a dog! Isn't she great?"

Anyway, what was the big deal? We'd always had cats, and our house, with its splintered hardwood floors and clouds of plaster dust and paint chips and unending repairs, wasn't exactly a spotless space.

I didn't realize until later, when I was older, when I had been in a relationship or two, how enraged and hurt my mother must have been at my father's total lack of respect, of his refusal to include her in the decision, of her sudden responsibility, thanks to him, to be a dog caretaker in addition to mother, wife, caterer, Stoneyway repairwoman. I know now the corner my father wedged her into—if she demanded the dog go back to the pound, she'd have to endure her children's tears and disappointment and confusion. "Why can't we keep her, Mommy?" on repeat, for God knows how many days, and no simple, justifiable answer a child would understand. But, if she allowed us to keep the dog, then my father won. He got his way.

My heart hurts to think of my father's betrayal, of my mother's fury, of how they acted purely out of love for my sisters and me and protected us from their direct anger. I cringe in wondering how many times my mother crawled on all fours across her prized

Oriental carpets and newly stained floors, crying, as she scrubbed up the piss and black hair of a dog she never wanted in the first place.

After the weekend visit with my mother was over, after I'd written the story of K.C.'s death and my subsequent thoughts and memories about my beloved dog in my newly minted college journal, I laid on my bed, staring at the pumpkin-colored leaves scratching against my dorm room window screen and thinking about my mother and K.C. during those final days.

In the last few months, K.C. had taken to laying beside my parent's bed at night, sighing and whimpering and getting up every five minutes, desperately trying to find a comfortable spot on the hardwood floor. Her sleeplessness echoed my mother's own tossing and turning in an empty bed, and I can't help but believe the two of them felt each other's sadness, loneliness and loss. Life's recent punches left bruises, and they understood the other's pain, heard the other's muffled weeping. In a strange way, the closeness they shared in those last few nights, after so many years of staying in separate rooms, comforted me, at least a little.

I went to my window and pressed my fingertips against the screen, against the approaching evening, feeling a deep, emptying sadness in my heart.

Another piece of my old life was gone.

The sun dipped below the roof of a neighboring dorm building, and I whispered a good-bye to K.C., to the last shred of my childhood that she embodied. Mostly, though, I marveled at my mother's strength, at her ability to forgive my father for yet another searing, unforgettable slap in the face.

I wished for the beautiful, autumnal skies I'd enjoyed in years past when we awoke to an overcast sky in Concord. By the time my father found a parking space along Main Street, great sheets of rain hit the car windshield like giant brush strokes. We sat for a few minutes in the car, in no rush to hop out into the cold wetness, and kept repeating and giggling at my mother's bizarre observation regarding her recent experiences with menopause.

She said, in all seriousness, "It's the nouns you lose first, Mattie. Then, the verbs." I could not stop laughing.

My mother always had a penchant for delivering hysterical, witty and strange one-liners such as this. Once, when we were on our way to a yarn store she had newly discovered, my mother warned me that the storeowner was a rude, odd woman, and murmured off-handedly, as though she'd finally pinpointed the real reason for the woman's madness: "I think she lost her mind several sweaters ago." I loved the line so much I wrote it on a gum wrapper, which I carried in my wallet for nearly two years. Another time, in my early twenties, I was lamenting my naiveté when it came to men, how I felt so ill-equipped to understand and play the manipulative, complex dating games, how I kept choosing men who only wound up hurting me, and my mother shook her head and said, quite simply, "You're innocent, Mattie. And that's okay. But, at some point, innocence gives way to foolishness." I wrote that one down, too.

Growing up, my mother rarely left the house without calling over her shoulder, "Focus on the focal point, girls, and things will come into focus! Be productive!" When

she'd pinch the soft fleshiness of our arms or cheeks or bottoms, and we'd squeal in protest, she'd say, "I'm just letting you know that you're real." Sometimes, my mother gently held onto us by the elbow or the knee and would whisper, in all seriousness, "I'm helping to keep your arm on," as though, at any given moment, we might fall to pieces.

Even when she wasn't trying, she'd let novel-worthy lines slip. One morning, we were in our kitchen, standing side by side at the sink, drinking coffee and staring out the window at my father's birdfeeders. We watched a sparrow land on one feeder and then hang from the edge, pecking at the suet block dangling below, and my mother said, softly, sadly, "Look at that poor bird. It's just not right to have to eat your breakfast upside down."

I always found my mother incredibly amusing, but I had not seen my parents share a laugh in years. And now, I could hardly believe what I was seeing: my *father* chuckling, looking over at his wife and smiling, almost sweetly. My mother, her face flushed from the attention, was trying to explain herself, and although I desperately wanted to dig through my backpack and find a scrap piece of paper on which to write my mother's line and capture the torrent of emotions rushing through me, I didn't want to miss this moment. My parents, in one car, sharing in the hilarity of a simple and strange observation, ready to embark on a little day trip of sightseeing and antiquing and spending time with me and, more importantly, with each other. Somehow, in those few minutes, they finally seemed like a real couple, one I didn't immediately recognize, but one I desperately wanted to know, to understand.

Up until that point, I was convinced all love between my parents had rotted away. I'd accepted the eroded foundation on which my family was built. I'd forgiven my mother and father for their short-comings. And I'd decided their once ardent love for one another was buried, like my dead childhood dog, beneath the soil and rocks of the backyard gardens they'd spent more than two decades cultivating and caring for.

I had come to understand, finally, willingly, that anything—any relationship, any great, passionate love that's promised to last a lifetime—can, and oftentimes does, end.

We are powerless to stop a rockslide, however carefully we thought we were climbing, however slowly the ascent. So when the dust settles, when the rocks lay still, all we can do is decide what pieces to take from the rubble and ruin.

My parents chose to take each other from the ruin of their marriage.

That morning, as we laughed at what my mother was losing—and as I understood what she had gained—I realized this choice they'd made and committed to. And even after all the fights, the pain, that one horrible summer, all the rain in the world could not have washed away my amazement, my gratitude.

When we left the parked car and braved the rain, we decided to forget the maps, forget the itinerary—we were just going to let the day evolve, naturally. Considering how many times I had cursed being the lone child left with my parents, now I absolutely gloried in their shared company, suddenly pleasant and loving and easy. As we made our way into the heart of town, my parents shared a beach-sized umbrella, and I walked

behind them, holding my own smaller one, wishing I had a camera with which to capture their side-by-side bodies, both their hands holding onto the umbrella, a small but magnificent tent of unification suspended above them.

We found an interesting Polish cheese and butcher shop, which my father and I enjoyed for the first 15 minutes of free samples, until, 45 minutes later, we had to drag my mother out, with promises we'd return later in the day. When we stopped by a local convenience store to pick up a few bottles of water, my father treated me to a tiny, oval tin filled with teaberry candies that, once emptied, I used—and still use, to this day—as a pill container to carry in my purse. I couldn't remember the last time he'd bought such a frivolous little thing for me, solely because, well, I *wanted* it. Perhaps that's why I've kept it these many years, even though the intricate paisley design painted on it is nearly worn away.

Toward the end of the main avenue, we wandered into an upscale office supply boutique, which had on its shelves a collection of the most beautiful leather-bound, gold-tipped journals, address books, personal planners and notepads I had ever seen. I wanted to pull each journal off those shelves, run my palms over their saddle-smooth covers, flip my fingers through the silky pages, suck in the tanned leather smell, and I almost did, until my mother gave me an admonishing look and told me I should probably purchase merchandise before fondling it.

“Put it *down*,” she whispered sharply, as she walked by me. “People are *looking*.” The “people” being my father and my mother, of course, since no other customers were in the store.

I was a broke college student, though, and hardly able to afford a \$95 journal, so I simply stared, longingly, and forced myself not to beg. We left the store, with my parents making the same promises to me that my father and I had made to my mother about the cheese shop—“yes, yes, we’ll come back later in the day, but let’s keep moving.” Of course, we didn’t go back into that boutique, but the following Christmas, I opened not only one caramel-colored journal from that store, but also a smaller, equally exquisite address book, in which my father inscribed “Marique, Christmas 2002, for remembering the who’s and the where’s...when and why are for another book!”

By then, I’d finally returned to my writing, in gusto. English class inspiration spurred hundreds of pages—short stories, poetry, book-specific journaling, long handwritten letters to friends, and even an attempt at a screenplay. No matter how much I wrote though, my words always returned to one thing: the home I’d left behind. A poem I wrote, simply titled “Pennsylvania,” about my drive from Massachusetts to the Keystone State captured my young creative writing professor’s interest so much that he asked me to stay after class one morning to discuss whether I wanted to try submitting a poetry portfolio to a few small, college publications. In another class, I wrote a paper on the mother-daughter relationship in *Obasan*, comparing it to my mother and me, and beneath the large “A—well done!” at the end, my professor wrote, “How very lucky you are to have such a mother. And very lucky your mother is to have such a daughter.”

School was a little more than 350 miles from Stoneyway, but my heart rested within its thick walls. As I listened to my new college friends describe their home-lives and looked at pictures of other towns, other houses, other families, my devotion to my

pre-college experiences and upbringing soared. The more time I spent away, the more my appreciation of my home, my carefree childhood, and, most importantly, my parents, grew and wrote itself clearly, abundantly, across all the pages of my myriad school assignments. Pennsylvania—Stoneyway, my mother, my father, my sisters, my gardens—spilled onto each page I put the pen to. It seeped from my skin like perfume.

My stories—of my family’s past, of my efforts to understand those I loved most—had finally found voice.

My father has long joked about “feeling a little 3 o’clockish.”

In other words, he’s ready for a small bite to eat, a beer, quiet moment or two, a rest for his weary bones. After a few hours of shopping, antiquing, and walking the small streets of Concord, my father declared this feeling. It was time for a late lunch. An antique store saleswoman recommended a local pub down the road, complimenting their clam chowder and club sandwich, and my father clapped his hands, smacked his lips, and exclaimed, “Perfect!”

The pub was poorly lit and somewhat un-pub-like, with velvet curtains, quiet clientele, tightly starched, white linen napkins and table candles, which cast an eerie, romantic glow in the late-afternoon rain. My parents and I sat at our little table near the front door, shivering each time a draft came through, and ordered our food, my father asking for a cup of coffee, a bowl of soup and “a good crust of bread.”

Growing up, my family rarely went out for meals, except on birthdays or particularly special occasions. We'd usually head to Rillo's, a well-known, family-owned Italian restaurant on the outskirts of Carlisle. My mother's friend, Judi, waitressed there for several years, and whenever she'd wait on our table, she'd make sure our Shirley Temples had nearly a bottle's worth of maraschino cherries piled in the bottom of our glasses. We'd feast on the garlic bread placed in the center of the table, ignoring my father's warnings that we were spoiling our appetites, and drink as many as three full Shirley Temples even before our meals came. I almost always ordered a hamburger, which I never finished, or spaghetti with meatballs or sometimes even a creamy, rich fettuccini alfredo dish—all foods my mother rarely made and, therefore, seemed extravagant and exciting.

My sisters and I would pretend we were extraordinarily wealthy, distinguished young ladies dining out with older, foreign royals, and we'd practice daintily sipping our bubbly pink drinks or taking delicate bites of our French fries. We'd fold and then refold our napkins in our laps. We'd try to act as politely and graciously as we imagined the rich did when they dined out. Then, we'd toss our tangled hair haughtily over our shoulders, pretend to look bored, and finally collapse in fits of giggles, groaning, holding our stuffed stomachs and sighing contentedly.

As I child, I didn't pay attention to how infrequently we dined out, especially considering my mother cooked gourmet, restaurant-quality dinners almost every night. When we'd sit down to one of my mother's meals, my father would boast loudly how "you couldn't get this kind of food in a restaurant!" And so "going out to dinner" was a

rare treat, a moment when we each wore our best clothes and brushed our hair and were a family. It wasn't until I was older that I realized my parents spent most months stretched incredibly thin financially, with my father's small salary as a family therapist for Catholic Charities barely covering house repairs, car repairs, bills, new clothes, and groceries.

Of course, I knew my family was different from my friends, given we lived in an extremely old stone farmhouse that was in a constant state of renovation and the majority of the clothes and toys in my closet were hand-me-downs. For years, our Christmas trees came from the mountain ridge running alongside our house—my father drove his truck and his three daughters off the main road and up into the brush and pines so we could cut down our own blue spruce for free. Our family vacations weren't to Disney World or Europe or ski lodges up north—we went on long-weekend camping trips to Rehoboth Beach or partnered up with aunts and uncles to share a house at Bethany Beach or, one year, the Outer Banks.

I never thought we were poor, per se, but we were constantly told we were rich in love, and material things were just that—material. And so I learned to appreciate the simple treats—a dinner out, an extra bag of candy, a brand-new shirt, an overly priced team swimsuit—that my wealthier friends took for granted. We didn't get allowance, so throughout our childhood, my sisters and I always worked, cramming shifts around school, sports practices, and social activities. I started baby-sitting and fruit-picking jobs as early as fifth grade, eager to have my own source of income that I could spend however I pleased.

My sisters and I constantly wanted new everything, but my parents merely shrugged when we girls asked how they sacrificed new cars, new clothes, new electronics and jewelry and trips for themselves for so many years—hadn't they missed those indulgences? Even if they had, my mother and father never let on, reassuring us their concern was that *we* never felt in need. Their frugality taught me money wasn't something to spend casually or thoughtlessly, and even now, friends often tease me for how easy I am to please, how I receive and appreciate the smallest, cheapest gift as though it were priceless.

Although it's been years since my family and I ate together at Rillos, during this 3 o'clock meal in Concord, I found myself feeling as giddy and young as I was all those years ago. I almost went so far as to order a Shirley Temple. After all, my parents were conversing easily, calmly, making small observations about the restaurant's menu and atmosphere, wondering aloud about how my sister was adjusting to city life in Boston. I kept waiting for the awkward, strained silences, for a sharp, unfeeling word or two, for pressure to fill the gaps with my own soothing voice. Watching them warily, as though I still didn't quite trust them together yet, as though I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, I felt strangely young and awkward with these new parents, this new dynamic.

When my father's hearty, steaming bowl of clam chowder arrived moments later, he offered the first bite to my mother, who dipped her spoon into the thick soup shyly, before taking a bite and exhaling, "Oh, Joe, it's delicious!" My father smiled fully, looking pleased.

I stared incredulously at these two strangers until my father glanced at me and, misreading my look, pushed the bowl toward me, too, saying, “Here, honey, have a bite.”

When we left the pub an hour later, the rain had eased to a soft mist, a damp whisper. My parents linked arms against the chill.

Earlier, we had passed a graveyard, which my mother thought looked poetic, dating back to the American Revolution. “Who knows what interesting people might be buried there?” she had remarked, intrigued. So, we wandered up and down a few wrong streets, until we found the cemetery, which resembled a small park, with its waist-high rod-iron fence, its weeping oak trees, its crumbling benches. When we walked through the front gate, I sucked in my breath, lightened my step, felt a *huuuusshhh* move through the gravestones. I shivered.

Graveyards equally unnerve and fascinate me, and when I turned to tell my parents this and to ask that we all stay close, I saw they’d already drifted away, to their own corners of the cemetery. I buried deeper into my coat and began to stroll carefully through the wet grass.

Many of the graves slanted backwards sharply, bent by decades and even centuries of wind and New England weather. Great cracks ran through a few like gulleys. Some had even splintered in two, like broken bones. I crouched before a particularly small gravestone and reached out, tracing the faded etching of words with my fingertip: *Here lies Sarah Elizabeth, aged 8, beloved daughter.* My throat filled. Sarah—my sister’s

name. This was why graveyards unsettled me—I imagined my loved ones rotting beneath the ground, too.

Very few immediate family members or close friends have died in my lifetime, so the graves I've visited over the years were usually for those I'd never known or loved. Both my father's parents died well before I was born, and my father's brother, who was an alcoholic, died of liver failure when I was 8 years old. But my parents had made sure I never met this uncle, and so his death was just a story to me. He had no face. I don't even remember if I went to his funeral.

My maternal grandfather's death when I was 13 marked the first death I understood and mourned. Driving up to my grandparent's house in Lykens the afternoon my grandmother called, babbling incoherently and hysterically about finding her husband cold on the basement floor, my mother cried silently in the front seat, my father gripping the steering wheel tightly, the car speeding down the highway faster than usual, my sisters and I silent and still in the backseat. The day of his funeral, I stood alongside my cousins and sisters, our faces wet with fearful and confused tears, and watched the adults around me. I saw a few tears in my father's eyes, too, and thought how I'd never seen him cry and wondered how he was consoling my mother, who was losing her first parent.

But, my mother, ever the rock against which we all threw our weight and worries, stood straight, shoulders back, her stance saying, "This is life. I can handle it."

Precious, precise details remain with me from those few days we stayed in Lykens, when my adolescent world stood still and the frightening, unfamiliar adult landscape took me prisoner. I remember my grandparent's house overrun with dozens of

bad bouquets and condolence cards; my Aunt Linda crying, inconsolable, in the living room; Sarah and I playing cards at my grandmother's dining room table; my cousins descending the basement steps to kiss my grandfather's grey cheeks; Josceylon's hand-me-down black velvet dress I wore to the funeral; my cousin showing me the mint green spearmint candies my grandmother stashed in the buffet hutch; my father's limp hand in my own during the service.

But, even my grandfather's grave, which I remembered standing beside so vividly, so emotionally, I have not visited in years. I couldn't picture it in my mind. I don't know if I'd even be able to find my way back to that Lykens graveyard. So, how is it I am so moved by the burial sites of those whose smiles I never knew and adored?

I wished I remembered the writing on my grandfather's grave, but since I couldn't, I focused on trying to read the Concord cemetery graves. Some had biblical quotes, some had smooth, clear faces, the words long eroded away, leaving nameless graves for those who died generations before I was even born. I started imagining the lives of these dead people—John, Mary, Rebecca, Emily, Matthew—wondering how they'd died, what illness had taken a 13-month-old baby or killed a 37-year-old mother. I noticed I could not find a grave of anyone who'd lived longer than 50-odd years.

I looked across the cemetery at my parents, who were bent, shoulder to shoulder, over a particular grave and thought how precariously old they seemed now, how lucky I was that they were here, how they could be taken from me at any given moment. College and 300-plus miles of distance finally taught me to appreciate each and every minute, however strained, my parents—together or separately—shared with me.

There, in that silent, rain-soaked graveyard, mourning the lost lives of strangers, and watching my parents *be* together, an overwhelming clarity washed over me. I suddenly understood my parents' fear of living out the rest of their days alone, of arriving to this very place after years of sadness and loneliness, of going into the ground without the other standing graveside, sobbing, mourning the loss deeply. I finally understood their return to each other, to the foundation of their marriage.

They had, perhaps, broken each other's hearts, and disappointed, and realized they were no longer the people they had promised to be 30 long years ago. They had surprised and failed each other. They had said and not said so many terrible things.

But, in the end, they moved on. Chins up. Focused on the focal point, the only point—they loved each other, still. They had a life together, still. And however broken, big enough fragments of that love and that life remained, and my parents were, slowly, gluing the pieces back together again.

This weekend trip north to visit me, a witness to their worst days, was a first and important step in a reconciliation they would continue indefinitely, maybe even for the rest of their lives.

Their love had taken many, many shapes during the years, and I realized I had mislabeled most of those shapes. In the beginning, their love flooded them with passion—I used to see that love as the enemy, because it didn't last. It left my parents in a desert, directionless and alone, parched for simple affection, daily kindness, and devoted companionship. My father wrote a letter to my mother in 1970 that ended with this line: "Tonight, I was vampire for words, and there was your blood on the page." Once I found

this letter, nearly three decades later, I didn't marvel at its romantic suggestion but, rather, cynically thought it apt, since love had pierced and bled them both.

That early love warped—at a point still unknown to me—and became a ghost of what it was, a ghost that haunted my parents, loudly, persistently, even as they slept in different rooms and went days without speaking. It was a ghost that roamed the empty hallways of their house and then settled onto the tips of their ears and whispered, “I am still here. I have not left you.” A ghost begging attention and refusing dismal.

I once asked my mother if she thought ghosts found shelter in our house, which was built in 1785 and has seen the births and deaths of many, many people. She shook her head firmly and said how in some houses, you can feel bad spirits and bad energy. You walked through the front door and they hit you, instantly, with fists and fangs. But, she reminded me how, in our house, when you're curled into a sofa corner or seated cross-legged at the kitchen table, no matter the silence or emptiness, the house breathes with you. It sighs, it settles, it listens. It rests when you rest, it moves when you move, and its shadows and spirits watch quietly, calmly, wrist over wrist, knee over thigh, souls still and respectful of the lives we lived around them.

My parent's love ghost, which had followed them from state to state, from year to year, from the rooms and ruins of Stoneyway to this rainy new England town, now stood behind them in that Concord cemetery, smiling, satisfied.

Despite my watery eyes, I smiled back.

My father stood upright then, caught my eye and my smile, and waved me over. My mother was trying to read a piece of scripture on a badly eroding grave, and they needed my good eyes, my strong knees to kneel down close. But, I couldn't decipher the words either. And so we shrugged our shoulders, my mother wiping a stray tear from her eyes—was she thinking about her dead father? Was she thinking how relieved she was to still be alive, to be here with her husband and her youngest daughter? Was she happy?—and slowly wove our way through the graves and back out onto the main street. I glanced over my shoulder, wishing I had brought my camera to take a picture or two. But, the fast-forming poem I couldn't wait to get on paper would better capture my off-kilter emotions better than any photo could anyway.

As we drove away from Concord's town center, my parents quiet, the road slick and dark, a violet dusk settling beneath the trees, I let out a sigh of contentment. In my lap, my hands clutched the candy container my father had bought me earlier that day, my right thumb and forefinger rubbing its top and bottom like a worrying stone. I held it tightly, as though I was holding my father's palm against my own.

The drive back to Boston passed silently, quickly, but the stillness in that car hummed with our thanks for such a pleasant day, with our adoration for one another, with the hazy glow of my parent's love ghost, wrapped round their necks, like a delicate, hand-knit scarf simply refusing to tear.

### Section Three: Washington, D.C.

#### *The Call*

I called her  
via the bell system  
and heard her voice therein  
and as I tried  
to organize my words  
I found I could only grin.  
So I listened  
to the music  
transcending the many miles  
and managed to mutter  
an “I love you”  
through my lips of smiles.

- Joseph Newell, 1971

The day of my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday dawned in blue-skied warmth.

As uncharacteristic as the strangely mild January morning was my crawling out from under the covers at nearly 9:30 a.m., especially when my parents were on their way down from Pennsylvania, on their way to take their youngest daughter out for a birthday brunch. My childhood years of alarms going off at 5:30 a.m. for morning swimming and water polo practices or of weekends spent waking up at 7:30 a.m. to hurry down to the barn to get in a ride before the first wave of lessons began left me with an inability to sleep late—or even to sleep in a little. My sisters and I were always the least popular

invitees for sleepovers at girlfriends' houses, because we'd be wide-eyed and eager to hop out of our sleeping bags hours before our friends. Even now, as a late 20-something woman who ends her weeks feeling as though she's carried the world on her shoulders for five straight days, I'm awake at 7:30 a.m. most Saturday mornings, rubbing my temples and throwing the sheets back over my head, praying earnestly to fall back asleep.

This unfortunate habit of waking early means anytime I rise from bed later than the 8 a.m. vicinity, I'm impressed. And, subsequently, put into a frenzied tailspin of trying to get myself ready and out the door as fast as possible.

A new day awaits. I always hate to get a late start on it.

I spent last year's birthday with my parents, too. Only last year, I drove north and let them and my eldest sister, Josceylon, take me out to dinner at the new bistro family friends opened a year earlier. We ate coconut-crusting shrimp, feta bruschetta—a recipe my mother created and generously allowed our friends to use in their restaurant—spring salads, and strip steaks, and easily finished off two bottles of red wine between the four of us. I think they each gave me a card, perhaps a little cash as well, although seeing as how close my birthday is to Christmas, I never expect much. After dinner, we headed back to Josceylon's house, where her husband had stayed to watch their new baby, and we all somehow managed to swallow plate-sized slices of a rich, dense, intense chocolate cake my mother had baked that morning. My father even insisted on topping off each slice with a generous scoop of Dairy Queen vanilla ice cream.

When I was a child, birthdays marked the rare occasion my mother ever even baked cakes—she was more of a fruit tart pastry chef. But, each year, devotedly, she

made my father the same cake his mother had made for him all the years of his own childhood: a moist, two-layer white cake with chocolate-coconut frosting. You ate three bites, and you felt new cavities forming. But, we all relished each sugary crumb, always making sure to save the last piece for the birthday boy, as was the tradition in our house.

My grandmother supposedly made special cakes for everyone in the family: a sponge cake for herself, a chocolate cake with white icing for my grandfather, a checkerboard cake for my Aunt Virginia, a chocolate cake with chocolate icing for my Aunt Jeannie, a white cake with maraschino cherry filing and cherry icing for my Aunt Sarah, and a yellow cake with chocolate icing for my Uncle Arthur. My mother used to tsk her teeth whenever my father told us, for the hundredth time, who got which kind of cake, leading us children to think she was much too practical to spoil us in such a manner. But, we certainly never complained nor made over-the-top requests for our own cakes. After all, sweets were a rare treat in our house of wheat bread, plain Cheerios and bland graham crackers, so why be picky? But although my mother never followed her mother-in-laws tradition, the from-scratch cakes she baked in her dented metal dishes and then iced with the 10-X sugar frosting my sisters and I begged to help make were immensely special, because she made them just for us, just once a year.

For our birthday parties, my mother would buy crepe streamers and bags of blow-up balloons and maybe even matching packages of colorful “Happy Birthday!” paper plates and napkins and allow us to invite no more than 10 close friends out to the house. My sisters and I would arrive home from school the day of our party wired and giddy, and when we’d charge into the kitchen, we’d find it festooned with red, green and yellow

decorations, balloons dangling from the ceiling beams or bunched into bouquets on the posts at the foot of the stairs, streamers wrapped around banisters and chair backs or hanging in delicately twisted spirals from the chandelier. The piles of home renovation and gardening magazines would be stashed away, and the floors and carpets would be freshly vacuumed and cleaned. The table would be set with our birthday plates and cups and napkins, and the birthday girl chair, placed ceremoniously at the end, would have two balloons and perhaps a streamer or two taped against its back.

I think back now to those parties and can't help but wonder what my young friends thought of the homemade cake, the creaking hard-wood floors, the strange-looking treehouse in the backyard, the paper bag game that cost about as much as, well, a paper grocery store bag. It was an odd game—we stood in a circle and each person had to pick up the paper bag with their teeth, hands behind the back. Each time the full circle was complete, an inch or two was cut off the top of the bag, making it shorter, harder to grab. The winner was the person who, even when the bag's top stood only a few inches from the ground, still somehow stayed on two feet and grabbed the bag between her wet teeth. My mother, in hindsight, said she felt a little badly for advocating such an unhygienic game.

We were never the children who celebrated our birthdays by inviting friends to join us at the roller-skating rink, bowling alley, pizza parlor or local swimming pool. We never gave party favors or gifts to our guests. We didn't usually have crisp, new outfits to wear to school on our special day. And when I was in elementary school, not even 10 years old, I knew all of that made my sisters and me different.

But, my mother, with her fun and creative flair for decorations and her ability to shine up even the most tarnished silver tray, somehow always managed to turn our 18<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse into as bright, cheerful, beautiful and warm a birthday party venue as a child could want. For my birthday, she even allowed the Christmas tree to stay up and decorated, although I'm sure, by then, nearly seven weeks after it had been cut down and dragged inside, the tree was probably a raging fire hazard and eye sore.

Most importantly, my mother made sure, in her own small ways, that we each felt incredibly loved and attended to and remembered on our birthdays, and she'd quietly, gently remind us, time and time again, that's what counted in the first place. Ironic that now, years later, as a busy, stressed corporate-world, working woman, my mother forgets to call on birthday mornings and oftentimes neglects to send birthday cards or presents or flowers.

My sisters and I joke with her about this, about how we have a mother who completely blanks on her daughters' birthdays, and she always laughs sheepishly, shrugging, and saying how she was there for our births and she remembers that well enough and what more do we want from her anyway?

I don't mind her recent memory lapses, though. I know she thinks of me each and every day, whether my birthday or not, even if I don't hear her voice telling me so.

That's what a mother's love teaches you after enough kisses.

I tumbled out of bed and then stumbled around my studio apartment, fluffing the pillows on my sofa, grabbing shoes and blankets up off the floor, and trying to piece together what clothes I wanted to wear and into what purse I wanted to throw my wallet, keys, lip sticks and gum packets. I checked my phone for messages and saw I'd already missed one "Happy birthday!" call. Sarah, God love her, who left a surprisingly perky 8 a.m. message. Classic.

I hopped into the shower, gasping at the hot, hot water against my cold skin. Twenty-seven, I kept thinking. *Twenty-seven*. How did I get to be so old so fast? How did I get to be a late twenty-something already? How did I not have more figured out by now?

Standing beneath the hard stream of water, I thought, as I always do on my birthday, about the morning I was born, about the story I've heard one thousand times and never tired of hearing. My parents tell their own versions, of course, and I've never been able to decide which one I believe.

In a way, this is the case for many, many stories they've told me these many, many years.

As my mother's third child, I was both her easiest and toughest birth. Predicted to be a Christmas baby, I postponed my arrival for two weeks, until the early-morning hours of January 6—Epiphany, according to the Christian calendar, the last of the twelve days of Christmas. My father would later explain to me how, in Greek, epiphany means "to

show” or “to reveal” and is a day that celebrates the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and is marked by a great, final feast. If we were a more religious family, perhaps my birthday celebrations would have been grander. As it was, my parents were quite content to celebrate the sheer fact that I was alive.

After experiencing mild labor pains throughout the night, my mother finally woke my father around 3 a.m., telling him she thought they needed to call Jackie, one of her closest friends, to come watch Josceylon and Sarah while my parents headed to the hospital. My father, who’d watched his young wife spend up to 30 hours in labor with Josceylon and 20 hours with Sarah, erred on the side of, “We have plenty of time,” and proceeded to call Jackie—and also to take a shower, get dressed for work, make the bed, head downstairs and brew a pot of coffee. It was only when he found my mother halfway down the back hallway steps saying, “I feel like I have to push,” that he realized I was coming, and I was coming fast.

Even still, he coaxed my mother all the way back upstairs so she could get dressed. Only, when they reached their bedroom, my mother said, “I’m ready to have this baby. Just let me lay down a minute,” and Jackie, a naturalist free spirit, excitedly suggested my mother just have me right then and there, on the same bed on which my parents had conceived me. Stubbornly, my father insisted otherwise and directed my mother right back down the steps, throwing only a coat over her thin nightgown.

The thermometer read 12 degrees that morning. The hospital was at least 20 minutes away. And the defroster on the car wasn’t working.

My mother kept telling her husband that I was coming, I was coming. But, he wouldn't hear it. When they were just two miles from the house and still a good 10 or more miles from the hospital, he started saying, "Only a few more blocks, honey! We're almost there!" Realizing he thought she had no awareness as to where they were or what was going on, my mother decided simply to stay quiet.

"He thought I was irrational, and I knew he wasn't dealing with reality," is how my mother put it.

The steam from my mother's sweat and body and breath fogged the Volkswagon windows, and so, despite the freezing cold, my father rolled his down, desperately trying to clear the windows. I can only imagine his fear, his panic—would they make it, had he jeopardized a safe birth, why had he thought there was more time?

As they drove, my father said my mother moaned softly, holding her pregnant belly, whispering, "My baby, my baby."

Did my mother think she would lose me in those final moments? Did she think I would freeze to death as soon as I left her body's warm, safe cavity? Did she feel horribly alone, sitting there in the passenger seat, no nurses, no doctors, no midwives, no fellow mothers, and only my father, speeding and trying to wipe clean the windshield?

Whatever her thoughts, my mother finally told my father they weren't going to make it to the hospital, that she needed to push, and she needed to push now. And as the car sped across the Susquehanna River on the Harvey Taylor bridge, my father reached across the seat, placed his hand between my mother's legs, and felt my head cresting. He understood the situation was, quite seriously, out of his control.

“Connie, you’re sitting on the baby!” he cried—a line that’s never grown old in my family.

Forget the road. Forget the hour.

My father pulled over quickly on Second Street in Harrisburg, lodging the Volkswagon at an odd angle on the small shoulder, and delivered me, making sure to clean out my mouth and nose and smack my bottom until I cried, until my lungs filled with that first, freezing rush of new air. The clock read 5:30 a.m.

When they arrived at the hospital, they carried a blue and whimpering baby. My umbilical cord was still attached to my mother, who had tucked me under her nightgown, pressed me tightly against her own cold skin, rubbed me, discovered I was a girl, rocked and rocked my little body against her own, until we reached the hospital’s emergency entrance. The doctors gave me a four on the Apgar scale and deemed me an unsterile birth, relegating me to an entirely separate room, away from my mother and from the other newborn babies. This, of course, was simply *not* acceptable to my parents, who fought and complained until my bassinet was left for good in my mother’s birthing suite.

Once the nurse’s heard the full, dramatic tale of my birth in the front seat of an old car, they told my parents they should contact the Volkswagon company and share their incredible story—I can see the headline now, “Blue Baby Born Above River in Volkswagon Bug!” Somehow, and I don’t remember if it was my parents who actually made the call or some other interested party, Volkswagon did find out about me entering the world on one of their passenger seats and sent my parents a \$100 congratulatory bond.

When I turned 18 and cashed in all the bonds my grandparents had given me at Easter, Christmas, and birthdays throughout the years, I kept that \$100 Volkswagon bond as a memento of a moment I never could nor will remember.

My parents gave me my middle name—Hannah—from the river above which I first entered the world. My father said they added the extra “h” on the end so I could spell it forwards and backwards and joked that if I’d been a boy they would have named me Harvey Taylor.

I laughed when he told me this—I always, always laughed.

When I asked my parents to tell me my birth story separately, my father always became the hero, my rescuer, the first momentous person in my life. He morphed into the doctor who delivered me. His hands were the first laid against my newborn body, the first gentle and rough caress. His voice echoed as my first sound. And he remained this way—my victor, my earliest and most consistent shoulder on which to place my weary head, the one man, the only man, who ever truly adored, doted on, supported, and loved me.

In his version, he saved me.

And he had to—because he felt responsible. He felt, even if he never said it, that he’d put my mother and me in great danger that cold January morning. I wondered if he thought during the frightening drive, *maybe I am killing this baby, maybe I am doing the wrong thing*. But in the end, he walked out of the hospital the morning I was born without even a spot of blood on his dress shirt and tie and headed straight for the office, proud, excited, thinking, *I saved my baby, my baby girl*.

In his version, my mother must be the weakened woman, the one who could not bring me into this world on her own, for him to wear such a crown.

In my version, though, my mother blazed, formidable, lunar. A lady of courage.

On that morning, she was resolute, a mother who already understood the wants and needs of her unknown child. She was also a wife who characteristically tried to appease her husband—not arguing when he said they had more time, not yelling at him to drive faster—until, finally, she took her stand, and be damned if he or anyone tried to stop her from what felt most natural and right.

In my version, in those last minutes before my birth, in our last, most intimate moment together, my mother did for me what she continued to do—and what I have continued to try to understand—throughout my entire life.

She pushed, then covered my skin with kisses.

She pushed, then cooed.

She pushed, then healed the cracks, the breaks, in my foundation.

She pushed strong and hard, quietly and relentlessly, lovingly, until I sighed, softened, gave up the fight, and placed myself, once again, in her arms.

When my parents pulled up in front of my apartment building, I stood outside waiting for them, my cheeks flushed with the morning's high humidity and with excitement. I waved from the top step of my building's entrance and as I hurried down the stairs, my father hurried out the driver's side of the car, wearing an ear-to-ear smile

despite his tired eyes. For a moment, I felt badly they weren't able to sleep in, all because I couldn't book a later brunch reservation.

“Good morning, birthday girl!” my father exclaimed, as I stepped into his hug. He gave me a firm pat on the back at the end of his embrace, as he always does, and then said, “Such a beautiful morning! Can you believe this weather?”

“Yep, go figure, the gods align on the morning of my birthday to give me the warmest day since September. Me, the woman who hates humidity and heat,” I replied, sarcastically.

My father gave me a look that said, “Don't be negative. Be appreciative,” and was probably about to say as much to me, when my mother rolled down the window and called to me from the front seat of the car, “Good morning, sweetheart! Happy birthday!”

I crawled into the backseat and instantly saw the small, ornately wrapped box sitting on the car floor. Although I was turning 27, I was also as easily excitable when it came to presents as a 7-year-old child. I squealed and clapped my hands and asked if I had to wait until we got to breakfast to open my birthday gift. My parents exchanged an amused smile as I pulled my mother's carefully tied and twisted bow off the box and tore into the wrapping paper. They gave me a digital camera, which I had asked for and was disappointed not to receive at Christmas, and I immediately thanked them profusely, giddily, gushing over its shiny redness and snapping photos of my mother's cheek, my father's neck, my glowing face, the people outside the car windows as my father drove slowly down Connecticut Avenue. The road was unusually crowded for an early Sunday

morning, so I gave my father brief directions for a shortcut. I loved when I had an excuse to show them I had mapped the city in my memory.

When I first moved to Washington, D.C., my parents were terrified to let me loose in an unfamiliar place where I knew absolutely no one except my roommate, who happened to be one of my closest high school friends. I'd never lived in a city before and never moved to a place where I had no prior connections, contacts, or friends. Even when I went to college, my sister Sarah was already there waiting for me, along with an entire team of girls who I'd met and shared laughs and drinks with long before I stepped foot on campus as a UMass student. I look back now at how quickly I decided to move, how sudden and rash and un-researched the decision was to my pragmatic parents, and I can't help but thank them for loosening their grip, biting their lips, giving me abridged advice that excluded their fears, their worries, their sadness at seeing me go, considering I spent nearly five months after I graduated college living at Stoneyway with them.

During those months, I became their focus again, their constant companions, the iron that smoothed the lingering wrinkles in their relationship, the child who had left and returned home to them. College quickly slipped away, and Pennsylvania took me in its arms. I drove the back roads with my windows down and my voice louder than the music on my car stereo. I helped my father tend the garden. I visited antique shops with my mother. We ate brunch together each Sunday morning, trading sections of the newspaper and bites of pancakes and bacon. Most nights, we ate dinner together, too, and then walked "the lower 40," my father's term for our backyard.

On those walks, the ice and olives in my mother's dry martini rattled, and my quiet father stopped every now and then to point out which plants were doing well, which shrubs needed watered, which bulbs needed moved to other, sunnier spots in the yard. My parents oftentimes seemed peaceful but sad, as though they were wandering through a garden of the past, each flowerbed signifying a moment when they'd squatted together, knees pressed into the sun-warmed earth, and worked the soil of their young relationship and family. That yard, such a source of pride for both my parents, strangely reflected their best and worst moments—it flourished in their early years, and then ran wild and became diseased and finally, slowly, began to die from my parents' sorrow and absence.

Once, during our nightly meandering, my mother remarked how my favorite tree, the hawthorne, was dying and my, what a shame. I'd coined this tree "Hawthy" when I was younger and had taken to addressing the myriad flowers, trees and bushes by name. My parents, ever amused at antics such as these, had acquiesced to this admittedly odd practice of their daughter's and referred to the tree ever since as my Hawthy. That night, my mother, her words slurring a little, her body leaning tiredly into me, pointed up at the hawthorne's gnarled, dry branches and said, wistfully, "Maybe it's a sign."

I wanted to ask her, "A sign of what?", but inside, I knew.

Just as K.C.'s death marked the passing of one more element of a life and a time that was no longer, this tree's death marked yet another end in my parent's garden, in my family's past. I patted my mother's back, smiling a little at her exaggerated despondency, and suggested we go back inside and have some dessert.

Later that night, in my journal from that summer, I wrote, *“I think Hawthory’s death is a sign of age, of life’s brevity, of time’s quick elapse. Maybe it’s a reflection of my mother’s own wilting edges, her darkened and dry limbs, her thirsty and parched roots. Maybe it’s a sign that Stoneyway really has, finally, gone under. But, in some strange way, I don’t mind the death of that tree, my hawthorne, not nearly as much as I thought I’d mind it. No, when my mother said this, when she pointed at my tree, I simply looked northward, followed the line of her arm and wavering finger, surveyed the thin and gray branches, death hanging from them like autumn foliage. A new season, that’s all it is, I told myself, a shedding of skin. I squeezed the basket of baby zucchinis, acorn squash and tomatoes close against my ribs and curled my toes around the long blades of grass beneath my bare feet, and thought, ‘It is a quiet life I live,’ and the late-August evening answered, in a whisper, in a shudder of walnut leaves and black-eyed Susans, ‘Yes, but you like it,’ and I smiled back and began the slow, lazy walk back to the house.”*

Those few months at home reintroduced me to this “quiet life,” a period during which time seemed to stand still, in which I slipped comfortably into my parent’s work-eat-sleep adult routine, in which I spent many, many hours driving alone in my car or reading and writing at coffee shops and bookstores or sitting in the silent rooms of Stoneyway. So far removed from the noise and chaos of my former college life, I quickly fell out of touch with collegiate classmates and teammates and wondered whether I’d stay in Pennsylvania for good, even though restlessness hung in my doorway, hopeful.

I wrote in my journal that summer how “I don’t want to lose myself to this hushed, uneventful life.” Most nights passed edgy and anxious, fitful dreams interrupting

my sleep and waking me, confused, disoriented. I spent weekends feeling dreadfully alone and confused and stuck as I heard stories from college roommates already living in Boston and New York and getting on with their lives. And although I enjoyed the peace and safety of home, the wonderful meals and the responsibility-free lifestyle, five months of “the quiet life” was all I could take. I was desperate to be around people my own age again, to feel busy and active and challenged. So, when my high school friend, Brittany, asked if I wanted to move to Washington with her, my response was an instant “yes,” although I had no job contacts or prospects and knew absolutely no one in and nothing about D.C.

But, I didn’t care. Eager to explore, hopeful for love and adventure, I descended on Washington with few expectations but plenty of ambition and awe. Museums, music, martini bars and wine bars, coffee lounges, clubs, monuments, motorcades—each corner of the city shined new and unfamiliar. Even the narrow side streets of my residential northwest neighborhood, home to diplomats and lawyers and lawmakers, intrigued me. I wanted to lose myself in the city’s pulse and people.

As my parents and I drove down Connecticut Avenue and into the very pulse and people I craved when I moved here more than four years ago, I marveled, as I oftentimes did when friends or family visited me, how Washington became my home, *my city*, how I learned the streets, the shortcuts, the back roads, especially since, during my first year, Washington and I battled.

The city demanded everything, but gave little. I needed friends to call for happy hour, for a movie date, for a quick trip to see the new exhibit at the Smithsonian, but I

quickly realized friends weren't nearly so easy to acquire as they had been in college, when I strode on campus with a band of teammates at my back. Washington offered up pages and pages of "entertainment" in the *Post's* free express paper, and yet I had no one with whom to enjoy any of it. And so, in that first year, strangely enough, I lived another version of the quiet life—pounding my heels into the Golds Gym treadmill on Friday nights, walking aimlessly through uncharted neighborhoods on Saturday afternoons and then cooking sad imitations of my mother's recipes and setting the table for one, and reading the *Washington Post* and drinking strong coffee at Politics & Prose come Sunday morning. I would call my parents each Sunday evening, sometimes sooner, to discuss what I'd read, what I'd seen. Some weekends, not a single person heard my voice except my mother and father.

To stave off true isolation, I decided to throw myself into whatever social activity I could find. Despite my oath to never jump into a pool again, I joined a local master's water polo team, albeit, a predominately gay/lesbian team, but my newfound teammates embraced me—and my straightness and strong shot—warmly, encouragingly. At the end of my first practice, several of them approached me, reintroduced themselves, clapped a hand on my back, and told me I should definitely come back the following week. Which I did, of course. One cold March Saturday, a few weeks after I'd joined the team, Molly, a 30-something teammate who'd taken me under her wing, called in the late afternoon and asked me to join her and a few friends for homemade soup and bread and conversation that evening, if I had no other plans. My excitement, my unshakable joy, at the invitation shook through me in tremors. After arriving home that night, my stomach full from the

hearty lentil soup, spicy tomato bisque, poached pears, and peasants bread, I sat on the hardwood floor of my bedroom, the apartment empty and silent, and cried as I chronicled the night in my journal. Finally, a friend, someone who thought of me, who wanted my company—I was so grateful.

Other friends followed, due in large part to Emily, a close college friend who moved to D.C. nearly a year after I did and started working at Advisory Board, a company known for its contingency of young employees. Emily introduced me to the circle of peers—the fellow early-20-somethings searching for fun, excitement, fulfillment and adventure—I’d fiercely sought and craved during that first lonely year. Suddenly, happy hour e-mails hit my in box on Tuesday afternoons, and by lunchtime on Friday, my weekend plans ranged from bar crawls to shopping trips to brunch dates to museum visits. Alone, the city had overwhelmed me. Armed with a comrade or two, I was brazen. And the harder I hit D.C.—with my newfound friends and credit card—the softer the city became, until, eventually, I realized it was home, the place I knew best, the place I’d learned my way around, all by myself, with no sisters’ or parents’ help or guidance.

My mother and father might have been wary when I first left, and sometimes, I wondered what they thought of my regular Friday and Saturday night calls during that first year, a sure sign their youngest child sat alone while they listened together. But eventually, I could tell the life I made in this marbled city, the friendships, the routines and the niches I carved out for myself, pleased them. Stories existed of exhibits I’d seen, restaurants I’d tried, and museums I’d visited, and this calmed their anxieties, their worries that I wasn’t “getting out there.” I had settled—and close to home, too.

Most of all, though, my parents could finally see I had planted some roots. And, in seeing that, they said, “We are proud of you, my love.”

As the car dipped under Dupont Circle, I turned the camera on myself and snapped a quick picture of my happy, smiling, birthday face.

The Tabbard Inn’s dining room hummed with warmth greater than the humid January air outside. My father pulled his navy blue wool sweater over his head then smoothed his thinning hair, and I noticed suddenly his haircut. I told him, with a coy smile, it looked good. He grinned triumphantly, relieved I’d finally said something, and remarked how he can always count on me to notice when he gets a trim.

Once the waitress took our order—pancakes for me, an omelet for my mother, scallops and eggs for my father—we settled back in our seats and began talking. I told them about my recent, all-consuming frustrations at work, with my boss, with all the job responsibilities suddenly crowding my already over-crowded plate. They clicked their tongues, stirred their coffee, and told me I should treat each task as a great learning experience. Essentially, stop whining.

My parents, two of the most hard-working people I’d ever known, never had much sympathy for work-related complaints. In their minds, a job was a job, plain and simple, and I should be grateful to be employed and have money to pay rent at the start of

each month. Such practical parents, such patient reminders to let go off negative thoughts, to move on, to come in and say something worthwhile or else get out.

My mother, an ardent Edna St. Vincent Millay fan, can recite several Millay poems from memory, but the one my father has learned as well speaks to this idea of getting on with things. It goes:

*“Well come in then, or else get out.”*

*But in the door she stands,*

*And bites her lip,*

*And twists her hands,*

*And looks upon me trouble-eyed,*

*“Mother,” she says,*

*“I can’t decide. I can’t decide.”*

The poem is written with “mother” in it, but growing up, when he’d recite it to us, my father would insert “father” instead, causing me to giggle and my mother to say, “Joe!”, before reminding us how the poem *really* was written.

But, my father, in so many little ways, constantly inserted “father” into all aspects of my life, so much so that my friends were constantly saying how lucky I was to have such a close relationship with him, to have a father who was so involved, so in tune with my friends, my favorite coffee shop, my favorite musician and artist and poet. When he knew I’d become a Gustav Klimt fan, he bought me pillows decorated with woven portions of Klimt paintings and a journal with a Klimt cover and even a fiction novel based on portions of Klimt’s real life. When he knew I wanted to learn the same Stephen

Crane poems he'd recited to me all my life, he searched long and hard for a copy of Crane's early work. This past Christmas, I gave him a detailed list of five or six books I wanted, but only in one, brief, passing conversation did I mention how I wanted to buy and read *Atonement* before I saw the newly released movie. The first book I opened Christmas morning was Ian McKellen's bestseller, and my father positively beamed when I exclaimed, "I can't believe you remembered!"

Even the silliest of personal preferences were given due attention. If I said I liked a certain brand of cereal, I'd find a box of it when I'd return home to Pennsylvania for school breaks. In college, I told him how much I loved these little, sugary-sour, apple-flavored chewy candies, which my father then started buying by the bagful. He'd send me bags of the green apples, as I called them, in care packages or he'd leave a bag or two on my pillow when I'd arrive home for a quick weekend visit. When I discovered a new, favorite coffee lounge in Washington, D.C., my father's next visit included a trip to Tryst, where he and I sat at a large, communal table and ordered big mugs of coffee and Belgian waffles and bagels and lox and looked over the syllabus and reading lists for my new graduate school classes.

My father was eager to show me he paid attention, he was listening. He was eager to know my newest likes and dislikes, from politics to movies to music. He was adorably and persistently eager to please.

He was, always, eager to know *me*.

And I—I was always eager to understand him.

By the time our food arrived, I was elbow-deep in explaining one of my dear friend's problems with her boyfriend, who also happened to be the father of her new, four-month-old daughter named Madelyn. I told them how I felt so powerless as her friend, especially because part of me wanted to slap some sense into her and say, "Wake up, he's a jerk, leave him already," while another part of me recognized this man was the love of her life, the father of her child, the companion she thought she'd grow old with. I wanted to be supportive but also brutally honest—what a delicate balance to strike with a grieving friend.

My father listened, nodding, asking a quick question here and there, staying fairly quiet, as he usually does whenever it's clear I'm telling an important story and seeking a little advice. My mother, on the other hand, was quick to interrupt, to shake her head in disapproval, to purse her lips in a scowl. She judged, both my friend's decisions and my thoughts and reactions to those decisions. For being such a remarkably open-minded woman when it comes to exploring new cities, new books, new recipes and cultures and creative endeavors, my mother's close-mindedness when it comes to people is maddening.

"You should just tell her that you don't know how to be a friend to her right now and move on," she stated matter-of-factly and impatiently, as though she didn't quite understand what all the fuss was about. "You have too many things on your plate to be nursing unhealthy friendships. Megan's made some poor choices, and she's the only one who can sort out what to do next."

Megan just happened to be the very friend who supported and talked me through some of my darkest, saddest moments since I was 18 years old and a freshman in college, so to have my mother disregard our friendship so casually and quickly infuriated me. I collapsed in on myself, looking only at my plate and shutting down like I always did whenever I felt I wasn't being listened to or understood. I hated my mother's ability to deflate me, completely and suddenly—her sharp opinions had the thrust of the longest and deadliest of swords.

“You don't just throw away friendships because one person is going through a rough patch or because a person is struggling,” I said quietly.

And as I said that, I couldn't help but see the irony in the statement, considering the history of my parent's relationship. What if my mother had simply given up on my father and on their marriage, tossed him away with such carelessness, such callousness? What if she hadn't stood by my father throughout all those years in which they were both struggling, personally, professionally, and with each other? I was angry and wanted to say these things, but my father quickly came to my defense—or, rather, to Megan's defense—and agreed with me, saying he thought I was making the right decision in trying to be a good listener and a good friend.

And my mother, taking his cue, stayed silent for a moment, then patted my hand lightly and said something like, “Well, I hope everything works out for Megan, dear.”

Only, things never do really “work out.” I wanted to tell her this. Minor problems morph into major disasters. Sadness melts into debilitating depression. Stress resurfaces in the form of stomach ulcers.

No, we don't work things out.

Things work *us* out until we're sweaty and sore, until we've twisted and re-twisted ourselves into knots, which we do, finally, given enough time and patience, unravel, only to discover we are made of thicker, stronger thread than we'd realized.

My mother could attest to this. She even wrote a poem saying as much in May 2006, although when I found it, she told me it was "practice dialogue"—whatever that means. At the time, I don't remember if I asked her whether the lines had to do with my father. But, I've become more and more convinced this poem couldn't be about anything other than how my father broke my mother's heart and how, throughout the last few years, she worked through mending the pieces and, in doing so, wrote a new definition for love—and maybe even a new definition of herself.

The poem reads:

*"So everything changed?"*

*"Yes. Well, not everything. But everything I thought mattered."*

*"And then?"*

*"And then nothing. At least, for awhile, nothing."*

*"How long, this nothing?"*

*"I don't remember. It was awhile."*

*"And then?"*

*"And then, what? And then, well, I started to feel again."*

*"Feel love."*

*"No, not love."*

*“So, what?”*

*“So, well, feel hope. Or, at the very least, that I was alive, and as long as I was alive, that I at least mattered.”*

*“To who? I mean, mattered to who?”*

*“I don’t know. Maybe just to me.”*

When we left the Tabbard Inn, our stomachs were full, and our skin was damp from the hot dining room and steaming plates of food. We wanted to walk off our big, heavy breakfasts, but my mother also wanted to show my father the bishop’s garden at the National Cathedral. And so, we climbed back into the car, rolled down the windows, and started the drive back up into northwest Washington, taking Massachusetts this time, so my mother could get her fill of the embassies.

As my father wove in and out of the growing Sunday traffic, we reminisced about previous visits, during which my mother, Judi and I once saw an extravagantly dressed wedding party leaving an embassy. On a different visit, my mother made an impromptu, “Let’s go exploring!” right-hand turn onto a steep, narrow and windy street, on which we discovered a home with a large, balloon-clad “Open House—Come Inside!” sign staked in the front yard. My mother, a former real estate agent, spent more than 10 years hosting and going to open houses, so, much to my embarrassment, she pulled over, parked the car, and dragged me out of it. We toured the house getting lost in the maze of different rooms and levels, remarking on the incredible view of Rock Creek Park, noting the

intricate tiling in the master bathroom, envisioning the hoards of children who'd played in the large, in-ground pool in back.

After we left, my mother and I talked about the strangeness of open houses—you are given such an intimate yet empty look into the former residents' lives. You are able to imagine, briefly, you know who they were, how they lived. You see the holes in the walls and paint the pictures hung there. My mother and I laughed as I told my father about how we'd stopped at this particular house and how the real estate agent must have thought we were so odd, this disheveled and lost mother-and-daughter pair who obviously had no interest or ability to buy such an expensive home.

When we reached the National Cathedral, my father parked on Wisconsin Avenue, and he and I followed my mother's lead down the driveway to the bishop's garden, exchanging little smiles between the two of us as my mother shared her albeit limited knowledge of the garden's origins and history. The streets and sidewalks were loud and crowded, but this garden's paths were deserted, other than the birds perched above and the two or three black squirrels leaping among the low-hanging tree branches. I pulled out my new camera and snapped a few quick pictures of their small, dark faces.

In my parent's garden, my father puts out peanuts for his squirrels, who have become fat and lazy over the years, thanks to these hearty offerings. One squirrel in particular, who my father named Sammy, has returned season after season, his fluffy broom of a tail thin in comparison to his round belly. My father also leaves great handfuls of bird food, corn, sunflower seeds and suet for the robins, cardinals, blue jays, sparrows, wood peckers, doves, mockingbirds, whip-or-whills, finches, and other birds passing

through on their way south. He tries to shoot at the starlings—“Dirty birds,” he calls them—with my grandfather’s old rifle, which I used to admire in frightened wonder whenever I held it, gingerly, always surprised at its weight and my fear. As a child, sometimes I helped my father feed the birds, going into the dank summer house and using the dented, metal coffee tin to scoop the feed from the garbage bin in which my father stored it into small buckets. Once full, we’d then carry the buckets to the feeders, which stood right behind the house, in plain view from the kitchen window. We’d first fill the feeders, which sat atop a rather odd-looking semblance of large stones, pieces of slate, and logs of wood my father had put together. And then we’d sprinkle what was left in our buckets onto the little rock ledges and alcoves. I liked thinking about the birds finding these somewhat hidden treats at the end of a long, tiring day.

When my father’s travels increased dramatically in those last high school years of mine, I took to feeding the birds, his birds. In the winter, I’d trudge out to the feeders, seeds spilling as the buckets hit my calves, my gloves smeared with cornmeal dust. I’d clear away the snow, brush clean all the little ledges and alcoves my father had so carefully created, and then fill and pour and sprinkle the bird food just as he’d shown me so many years ago. And then I’d hurry back to the summer house to return the buckets and scoops to their rightful place—my father couldn’t stand when things weren’t put back where you found them—and make sure the garbage bins with the bags of food were closed tightly, in the event mice were looking for a winter’s snack, and then I’d rush inside the warm house, my cheeks burning from the cold. It usually took a few minutes, but eventually one brave bird would be the first to swoop in to the feeders, hop and tweet

nervously, before settling to nibble and pick at what I'd laid out. I would stand at the sink, staring out the kitchen window, watching the flurry of wings and suet and snow, missing my father, and praying for my own chance to finally take flight.

As my parents and I walked through the entrance gate of the bishop's garden, the birds became loud and excited, flitting nervously from branch to branch, unsure what to make of the unexpected intrusion. Since it was only early January, nothing was in bloom, and even the perennial bushes had a pallor look, as though the laughably mild Washington winter was taking a brutal toll. But, although we had no roses to smell, no vibrant colors to admire, I appreciated the garden's lovely peacefulness, its barren tree limbs, its age. I liked that I was strolling through it today, of all days, my birthday.

I trailed behind my parents, watching them, smiling. My father kept bending to read the identification cards stuck into the soil, calling out to my mother when he found a plant of particular interest. My mother was more excited to show me little spots she'd discovered on her last visit to the garden with Judi and to point out odd, old statues or plaques. We wandered up and down the narrow stone paths, ducking our heads beneath low branches and laughing at the outrageously loud church bells that seemed never to stop ringing. My father snapped a picture of my mother and me standing in front of a small fountain, then my mother took a picture of my father and me, my arms wrapped tightly around his neck, the morning's sunshine reflecting in our glasses.

We were alone, the garden all ours.

I was 27. And happy—because my parents seemed happy, too.

As I watched my mother and father move through the shrubbery and greens, I thought about how many flowerbeds I have walked alongside with my parents, from Busch Gardens in Virginia to Amherst College’s gardens in Massachusetts to a water polo teammate’s backyard haven in California to a newly planted, barely abloom rose garden on Nantucket.

My mother and father came to visit me there the summer after my junior year in college, when I was staying with a friend whose parents had recently built a home on the island. One of the first places I took my parents once they arrived was Siasconset, which is an area of the island known for its lush, pink roses, carefully pruned front-yard gardens, and houses both remarkably tiny and ridiculously large. We drove through the little neighborhood slowly, stopped at the Siasconset market for ice cream, took a picture or two, until my parents gave their evaluation: they thought the little side streets, houses and landscapes were charming, beautiful, interesting—much the way I saw my parents.

Although they disapproved of how expensive the island was, of my time there, of my living situation, they still insisted on going shopping with me in the quaint, Main Street shops, where my mother bought me a Vera Bradley bag and my father treated me to a handmade necklace. One night, they also insisted on cooking for my friend and her family, a “thank you for your hospitality” feast of scallops, shrimp, pasta, zucchini and tomatoes with a deliciously light, creamy sauce, paired with thick, crusty bread and my

mother's famous feta bruschetta. That Nantucket visit, a little less than a year since their Concord weekend trip, marked another sign of their continued efforts at companionship, at living the couple life, at supporting me as a unified front and fed my earnest efforts to understand them as a husband and wife again.

For their last night on the island, they treated me to an expensive dinner at the White Elephant, a well-known and upscale restaurant. We sat outside, overlooking the Nantucket Harbor, a light breeze moving the tablecloth and my linen skirt, enjoying the clear sky, listening to the boats shifting and settling in the water. We watched patrons come and go and talked about my upcoming senior year at college, about my thoughts of where I'd go next, what I wanted to do with my life.

I had few answers, but they still listened. I was slowly realizing they *wanted* to listen, after so many years of hearing little but the cracks in their own hearts. They saw me growing, changing, struggling to define myself, and wanted to hear about it.

There on that White Elephant patio, I finally had their full attention.

And although my mother worried about my long-term career path and my father stressed about my near-term financial situation, my eagerness to share my own concerns, bare my insecurities, and admit my greatest fears for the future encouraged my parents' unified acceptance of the woman I was becoming.

When we each decided we'd had enough of the church bells, the shrill bird calls, and the growing humidity, we climbed back into the car and headed to Whole Foods, my

parents insisting on treating me to a few bags of groceries. We grabbed a cart and slowly began making our way through the crowded store, my mother helping me pick out a few pieces of fresh celery root, then parsnips, then bags of apples, carrots, grapes and potatoes. My father wandered ahead of us to look at the wine. I held onto my mother's sleeve gently, letting her pull me along.

I used to love grocery store trips when it was just my mother and me. In the car, we would sing silly songs or talk in strange accents or try to out-whistle each other, one of us collapsing in giggles after only a few moments. My mother always reached for my hand as we walked through the parking lot, as though I was still five years old and in danger of dashing off or getting struck by a car. Sometimes, her hand-holding embarrassed me—when you're 15, swinging clasped palms with your graying mother isn't exactly "cool." But, I couldn't bring myself to pull away—I didn't want to hurt her feelings, to leave her empty-handed.

Inside, I'd grab a cart and then watch my mother leave it parked in the middle of the produce section while she went and gathered all the fruits and vegetables she needed, coming back to the cart only when her arms were full and then walking off again. My mother never dawdled—she hated grocery shopping, so she wanted to get in and get right back out again as quickly as possible—and moving without the cart was faster than pushing it, stopping, pushing it, stopping. When I started doing my own shopping in college, I found myself repeating this pattern, and my friends teased me for being "that person" who left my cart in everyone else's way, my open purse sitting in it in plain

view. And then I was reminded I am, and always will be, my mother's daughter, even in these small, quirky ways.

As she and I strolled up and down the Whole Foods aisles though, we took our time. My father reappeared with six wine bottles and thought aloud the various dishes my mother could make that would complement these various bottles of "*viño*." I stood between the two of them, listening to their easy banter, their menu planning for supper that evening, marveling even then that they talked this way together and wished, for a brief moment, that I was going back to Stoneyway with them to eat and drink and sit around the old kitchen table telling stories and talking politics.

I was newly 27 but suddenly felt strangely young and homesick. I leaned against my mother and sighed.

Our last stop in the grocery store was the bakery section, where my father tried to buy me a small birthday cake, since my mother hadn't had a chance to bake and because, according to my father, "You just can't have a birthday without a cake!" We settled on one large slice of carrot cake and one equally large slice of a white coconut cake, headed to the checkout and then headed back to my apartment.

My parents helped make that apartment what it was—comfortable, classy, well-decorated and well-furnished. One Oriental rug came from the floors of Stoneyway, another from an antique dealer outside Frederick, Maryland. The orange, camel-back sofa—which my mother insisted was "salmon"—was taken from my father's office and placed in the center of my small living room. The mahogany desk was my grandmother's, the one piece of her furniture I received after her death, the one material piece of her I

have left. My kitchen table was the very table my parents sat at when my father was in graduate school at Yale, nearly 35 years ago. The dresser was a large, heavy, cherry bureau my parents gave to me when I was twelve and in desperate need of a dresser with drawers, considering the one I had at the time was missing two. And my “coffee table”—really, a long, rectangular trunk—had been home to ice skates, jump ropes, gloves, mittens, basketballs, softballs, and mitts when my sisters and I were children. As a surprise, my father sanded it down and lined it with cedar, my mother painted it, and they gave it to me on one of their first visits down to Washington, D.C., in early 2004.

Even the paintings on my walls were my mother’s early work—one, a rendition of a photo of my sisters and me at a friend’s picnic in the mid-1980s, and the other, a scene of a small town, a scene from a post card my mother found and liked. On the dresser, I propped up a cross-stitch sampler my mother finished in 1986, with the little saying, “The sun descending in the west, the evening star does shine, the birds are quiet in their nests, and I must seek for mine,” amid the alphabet letters, flowers and unidentifiable shapes and designs. One wall of my dining room was nearly filled with a framed, faded print of an old “Herb and Ailment Cross Reference Chart,” which my parents had hanging in Stoneyway’s kitchen for nearly two decades.

All of it—minus my few college pictures, my journals, my clothes, my magazines—was theirs, was from them, was of their life.

I’ve spent 27 years trying to impress and satisfy my parents, trying to please, to amuse, to stay safely below the radar and yet still slightly above, just enough so they’d notice me and tout my accomplishments to friends and colleagues. As a freshman in high

school, I completely abandoned an entire set of friends simply because my mother didn't approve of them—all she had to do was give me stern, disapproving stares when I'd mention their names, and within a few weeks, I'd forgotten their phone numbers. During my first spring semester at UMass, I downloaded and filled out a transfer application to Brown University, not because I disliked UMass, but because I knew my mother thought it beneath my scholastic potential. I wanted to be as brilliant as she had been at Vassar, as my father had been at Yale, and because my mother doubted that possibility at UMass, I did, too. I was already happy, yes, but I constantly wondered if I was happy “enough” in my parents' estimation.

Quite simply, I sought my mother's approval and my father's blessing in nearly each and every decision I made.

They were my touchstone, my mirror—and, sometimes, I saw the starkest and scariest reflection of myself in them. On their best days, I was radiant. And on their worst days, I was a shadow of the adored child I wanted to be in their eyes. I constantly worried I wouldn't meet their expectations, that I'd fail to be the strong, brave and true daughter they'd hoped to raise. I feared telling them decisions and actions I knew would garner their fierce disapproval. I felt I would forever be apologetic for all the hurt we'd each felt, even if I hadn't caused any of it. Most days though, I hated that I felt, no matter how hard I tried, that I'd never done enough, that I wasn't as satisfying as I could be.

I find it amusing now to think back on that apartment, to stand in its center and look around, every room echoing my parents, their fingerprints larger than mine in the very space I called my own. That apartment was outfitted in their old life, simply because

it was easier, safer, to adopt what they'd given rather than go searching on my own. After all, what better way to please them? Their furniture had become my furniture, their books my books, their past my past. For all the distance I had wanted to put between them and me, between their mistakes and my own, between the hurt and the misunderstanding and the months and memories we chose to leave untouched, that apartment was merely an extension of Stoneyway, of my mother's antique collection, of my father's clutter, of the quiet, dusty life I thought I'd escaped by moving to a city 100 miles away.

Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that my parents so enjoyed the years I spent in the Frontenac on Connecticut Avenue. They always said they liked knowing I was safe, comfortable, that I had nice things—their things.

Really, I think they liked knowing I was, still, in some small way, living among them.

The one thing that apartment never had, though, was enough seating.

I dragged a chair from my dining room into my living room, so my parents could sit together on the couch, since it really only sat two people comfortably. I brought in plates and forks, too, so we could dig into the two slices of cake we'd bought. I didn't have any candles, but my mother and father insisted on singing "Happy Birthday" to me, quietly, a little off-key. And there we sat, just the three of us, in my small, warm apartment, eating carrot cake off the plates my mother handed down to me, celebrating my 27th year.

I felt tremendously loved, and I was grateful I had them—both of them—with me that day.

After cake, I read them a few poems from a new collection I'd bought and then showed my mother a book of Sharon Olds' poetry, since we'd just been talking about her most recent work in *The New Yorker*. My father flipped through my used copy of E.B. White's short stories and tried to entertain my cat, who sat aside from us, perplexed at these new visitors, this intrusion in his space. Outside, the sun had begun to drift behind clouds, darkening the windows, making the day seem later, older. We—my parents and I—were each later in years then, older in spirit, wizened by age and acceptance.

Within a half an hour, my mother and father rose from the orange sofa, stretched, yawned, patted my shoulders, said it was time to leave. I made sure they knew their way out, hugged them tightly, feeling as though I was about to cry, and thanked them again and again for the visit, the brunch, the camera, the groceries, the cake, their love.

I kissed my mother's cheek. I pressed my nose into my father's neck. I waved good-bye from my doorway, and then they were gone. Another visit, over as quickly as it'd begun.

Once I'd finished washing the cake plates and putting away the last of the groceries, I decided to go for a walk, since an hour or two of daylight was still left in the afternoon, the sun playing peek-a-boo behind the clouds. Come April, I'd be out almost nightly for a walk, so what a lovely birthday treat to roam the sidewalks now, mid-winter, early January. My sneakers on, my earphones in, I strode out my front door, keys swinging.

Nearly 10 years had passed since that other morning I'd left home, car keys in hand, my gait slow, my head heavy with hurt and confusion. Nearly 10 years is a lifetime—in that decade, my grandmother died. Both my sisters married. I graduated college. My first nephew was born. I left Pennsylvania for Washington, D.C. I fell in love, and a man fell in love with me, and hearts cracked from blows of experience and disappointment. I started graduate school. My sister finished law school. My father turned 60. I drove cross-country and finally saw Montana's mountains.

My parents celebrated their 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

In that decade, I learned to live alone. I learned my parents as new people. I learned myself as a young woman. I learned the club of self-criticism and self-doubt delivers the harshest blows. I learned I cannot heal old hurts—I can just try, and hope, to forgive. I learned to have scars.

As I walked down Connecticut Avenue, the January sunshine a gentle, warm stroke against my cheeks, I thought how good it felt to see my parents that morning and how, in years past, a visit with them could have rendered me completely and emotionally exhausted, could have left me cursing off love and marriage and commitment for good. I thought of my father's sweet attentiveness to my mother, their happiness in celebrating my day, their willingness to place me in the center of their lives again, if only for a few hours.

I walked for more than an hour, my heart pounding, feeling closer to my mother and father than I had in years, feeling closer to myself, their beloved daughter, than I had in a decade.

And as I crossed over Connecticut Avenue to make my way back to my apartment, back to my quiet living room, my quiet life, I looked northward and whispered a prayer to the blue-white sky, to the stillness, that my parents make it to Stoneyway safely.

With that prayer, with those few earnest words, I breathed a “thank you” that my mother and father were driving home, together.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Marique H. Newell graduated from the University of Massachusetts in 2003 with a bachelor's degree in journalism and a second major in English and went on to work as an editorial assistant, staff writer, associate editor and managing editor for various non-profit associations in the Metro Washington area. In May 2008, she received her graduate degree in English with a concentration in professional writing and editing from George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. After living for nearly five years in Washington, D.C., Ms. Newell now resides in Boston.