KEEPER OF THE GATE

by

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Keeper of the Gate

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

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my daughters, Danniell and Nicole, they are our future.
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I would like to thank my husband, Patrick, who always shared moments of deep reflection and analysis that on my own wouldn’t have been as meaningful or nearly as insightful. My wonderful and patient professors at George Mason University for their guidance and inspiration. For the women in my family who, without them, I would not be. And finally, to my mother who instilled in me a will to always persevere.
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ABSTRACT

KEEPER OF THE GATE

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George Mason University, 2008
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This thesis explores the story of five generations of women who are westerners from Idaho; they are independent, self-reliant, and living in a landscape that throughout the generations remained rugged and precarious. In this family history I explore the role of the Mormon faith, and the way it underlies the actual legacy, and attempt to clarify why and how some choices were made that otherwise may not have been. This thesis explores what heritage is passed on from mothers to their daughters. Essentially, there are three fundamental questions I attempt to answer in this thesis: first, what is the legacy and who are the participants; second, why has this legacy continued; and third, can the information I acquire in answering the first two questions alter the course of this legacy for future generations of women.
Landscapes

*The physical landscape is baffling in its ability to transcend whatever we would make of it. It is as subtle in its expression as turns of the mind, and larger than our grasp; and yet it is still knowable. The mind, full of curiosity and analysis, disassembles a landscape and then reassembles the pieces – the nod of a flower, the color of the night sky, the murmur of an animal – trying to fathom its geography. At the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement.*

- *Arctic Dreams, Barry Lopez.*

I believed I could change her life; that together our lives would be better. But I overestimated my ability, and worse I underestimated the impact women she never met would have on all our lives. She was born prematurely and unable to breathe on her own for several days and then she developed jaundice. At birth, she weighed 5lbs 6 ½ ounces, but in days her weight quickly dropped to under five pounds. Her hair was short and dark. Her eyes were black as soot, and in those first few moments of life her skin was pink and rosy. As she grew, the beauty I saw in her changed from a girlish cuteness – her rounded face with long brown hair, her smile and those probing brown eyes – to that of a shy young woman on the verge of greatness. Over the last few years that shyness turned into detachment. She changed her long chestnut brown hair to blond, to light brown, dark auburn and now a black that darkens everything about her. The sparkle in her chocolate brown eyes no longer shows innocence, but experiences I want to believe she knows nothing about.
When we’re together people tell us we look like sisters. Danniell is 5’1” and I’m 5’2” and we’re both of a slender build – barely breaking 100 pounds. She’s 18 - I’m 33; and, I am her mother. When people say we look like sisters, I used to get angry. I wanted people to know I was her mother, and that I was a good mother regardless of my age. As we both aged and each of us struggled to find our own identities, I’ve discovered that being a mother can be one of the cruelest jobs in the world. It is filled with love, happiness, anger, and hurt. We’re supposed to love our children unconditionally, but what happens if we can’t? What happens when the need to control our children’s destiny overpowers our ability to allow them to become who they are? Invariably, who they want to be is not who we want them to be. Parents always have such aspirations and hope for their children, and sometimes they let them down.

On my maternal side, four generations of women married at 16 and became mothers shortly thereafter. I have spent nearly all of Danniell’s life trying to prevent her and her younger sister Nicole from sharing this legacy. I believed this legacy would come to an end with my generation. I naively believed that if I changed certain standards of my life, and imparted new and higher expectations to my daughters about how they should live their lives, then maybe their choices had the potential to lead them in a different direction. But I’m no longer so sure. My own mother recognized that she didn’t want me to make the same mistakes she made, but I still made them. Yet, I am the first to recognize that with this legacy of young marriage comes a history of unrest and defiance between the mothers and daughters in our family. A defiance and unrest that has lived on, but never been spoken about once it started with my great-grandmother Chloe.
Remington. In the short time she lived, she passed this legacy on to her daughter, my grandmother Mayme Pease, who passed it on to her daughter, my mother Melody Egbert, who silently handed it to me.

As I finish my last year of graduate school and look back on the years I worked so diligently to obtain my degrees, I realize that education wasn’t the key to ending our legacy. At first, the solution seemed so simple: finish high school and go to college. I did just that. I finished high school early and eventually earned my bachelor’s degree and then went on to graduate school where I was fortunate enough to spend my first two years tutoring and teaching writing to college freshman. But even as I did these things, the legacy was still hiding in wait, secretly beneath the surface. While college for me was both empowering and liberating, it was not enough to change what was inevitably in store for my own daughters.

Still, the hardest fact to admit to my family, let alone strangers, is that Danniell’s birth was not an accident. Most people probably can’t fathom a 14-year old girl choosing to become pregnant, but that’s what I did. Now, at 33, I’ve been a mother for more than half of my life, and being a mother is all I know. It is the defining component of my identity; it is so much a part of my psyche that the mere suggestion I failed that role brings me to my knees.

I remember the moment of Danniell’s birth as if it were yesterday. The nurse coaxed me to *push* at the precise moment, and I resisted, crying out, “I can’t, I’m tired. I can’t do this anymore.” The nurse stood to the side of me placed her palms on my
stomach, pressing downward, and tried to push Danniell from my body with her own hands. Time seemed to stop at that moment. The drugs mixed with my adrenaline and allowed my mind to let go of the pain, the pressure and the moment. My sixteen year-old boyfriend, Scott, sat in the chair next to the door and placed his head between his legs. There was so much blood, so many smells, so many people. It was then Danniell came into my life, and I knew that her life had to be different from the lives of the women who’d come before her. I saw her for only a second, covered in our blood and the amniotic fluid that she had lived in for thirty-five weeks. When the nurses took her they washed away all the visible connections we once shared. Today, I search frantically for something to pull her back to me, something to maintain that lifeline I once provided her while she was inside my body. Now there’s just space and a void I’m not sure will ever be filled. I believed I could be a better mother than my mother. I believed I would love her more than my mother loved me. I was committed to making her life better than mine. Eighteen years later, I question less my mother’s love for me, and question more my own ability to love and accept my daughter as unconditionally as I believed I once would. At 18, the girl I gave birth to is not the innocent and caring girl I wanted her to be. The first time I held Danniell she was three days old. My arms outstretched, her fragile body resting in the palms of my hands; her legs and arms were boney, her torso lacked that natural baby fat most babies are born with, and from her head, nose, chest, and feet, tubes and monitor cords dangled. The heels of her feet were red and scabbed from constant needle pricks to monitor her jaundice.
Danniell was the second smallest baby in the intensive care unit (ICU). She looked full-term compared to the three-pound baby girl next to her. Every day I went to the ICU to see and talk to Danniell, hoping that would be the day I could finally hold her next to my chest, not just in the palms of my hands while the nurses changed her bedding. The baby girl who was smaller than her was never visited by her parents, and they weren’t teenagers. Danniell was frail and sickly when we brought her home a week and a half after her birth. At the time I thought my constant attendance to her bedside proved I was a good mother, but now I’m afraid those first few days that meant so much to me represent nothing to my daughter.

She cried for what seemed like endless hours, day and night, and I never felt I learned to comfort her cries. I was tired from the lack of sleep, learning to be a teenage mother, and balancing schoolwork and friends. I wanted to be a good mother, I needed to believe I was a good mother, but I wasn’t even sure how to be an average mother. I felt completely helpless and unable to stop her cries the first six months of her life.

That same helpless feeling returned the summer of 2005 when Danniell was fifteen. I had been divorced from the girls’ father for nearly seven years. He was living in Southern Utah with his current wife and their four daughters, and I was living in Northern Virginia with my new husband Patrick, Danniell, and her sister Nicole. I met my second husband Patrick while I was obtaining my undergraduate degree and he was attending law school, two years after my divorce from Scott. Patrick’s support and strength have been instrumental in my continued trek forward in creating a better life for my daughters.
I foolishly believed that letting their father be involved in their lives, even if it was only minimal, they would be better off. I had chosen, when I left him, to try and make up for the father he wasn’t. I believed I could make up for his downfalls, and that by letting them see their father they wouldn’t have that desperate longing that I once had. I had never been more wrong about my decision, and even now, I’m amazed at the level of damage he inflicted on us all. That summer in 2005, while Danniell and Nicole were at their father’s for summer visitation, I made my usual every other day phone call to check on the girls, and it was then that Danniell, only 15, demanded her independence from me. From 2,000 miles away, behind the protection of a telephone, she said she wasn’t coming home. She was staying to live with her father; a man who continues to be all but non-existent in her life. She wanted me to know that she knew everything about the divorce, and that it was all my fault.

On July 23, 2005, only days after that call, I made the first journey, of several, from Northern Virginia to Southern Utah to bring my two daughters home. I decided to cut Scott’s summer visitation short. In the seven years following our divorce we rarely followed the visitation schedule outlined in our Divorce Decree. Some years Scott felt he couldn’t handle the girls, or he didn’t have money for them to visit, or for him to come and pick them up. Oftentimes when the girls did go see him, he wouldn’t take time off while they were there, and he left them home alone – something I never did.

The Divorce Decree awarded me primary residential custody. Scott was awarded visitation every other Christmas, Thanksgiving and Spring Break – which he never took; as well as visitation from the time they were out of school in June through the last
weekend in June. The girls were supposed to return home for the month of July, and then
go back to their father’s from the beginning of August until the weekend before school
started. When we originally drafted these arrangements Scott and I were both living in
Idaho, but in the five months it took to finally get him to sign the divorce decree he
returned back to Southern Utah where his family lived; which was another reason we
never followed the Divorce Decree. His move to Utah occurred four years before my own
move to Northern Virginia.

Danniell’s desire to leave began the unraveling of a life I had constructed in order
to protect my daughters from the choices and mistakes that the women in my family had
been making for generations. As the plane flew across the country I looked at the horizon
somewhere over the Midwestern states. Through the breaking of clouds I could see the
browns and grays of the landscape, endless and shapeless like a mixture of watercolors
blending. I searched hard to see the mountains somewhere in the distance, but they were
still too far away. I had always found reassurance in the ruggedness, the jetting peaks,
and the voluptuous curves of the Rocky Mountain and Wasatch Mountain range. Those
unforgiving hulks have been the source of comfort and humility to the women in my
family for five generations. The flattened landscape below me revealed no boundaries,
much like the complete unknown that lay ahead at the end of my destination. I longed for
the ability to control the world around me, the way those mountains rose high above
everything else in the landscape, as if nothing could stop them.
I have always been drawn to the snow capped peaks and rugged glaciers of North America. I’ve grown up surrounded by high peaks and elevations that define the communities and set boundaries. I lived for eight years near Zion’s National Park and there were several times I remember hearing about people falling from Angel’s Landing, one of the highest peaks in the park. I remember the warnings of rainstorms and the river rising so rapidly it would trap people in the narrow canyons of the park, making escaping and survival sometimes impossible. I learned that in this landscape, survival and success comes only to the strong, pragmatic people capable of distinguishing the slightest variations in an environment that demands control and respect.

From the moment I was old enough to make my own decisions, my ability to be in control dominated every choice I made. When Danniell was born I began standing watch; shaping my life – every choice and decision I made were in an attempt to shed our family legacy. For the last eighteen years I’ve been guardian of the gate. A gate I can’t allow either of my own daughters to pass through; yet, their passage may be beyond my control. Although Danniell didn’t marry or become pregnant at 16, that isn’t enough; she still appears to harbor that pessimistic resignation towards life that all the women in my family succumbed to. She’s making poor choices about her future, she’s selling her own potential short, and most devastating are her self-destructive tendencies. Her behavior and the choices she made while in Utah were demonstrative of her resolve to be so self-destructive.
When I arrived at the Salt Lake International Airport, that July afternoon, my mother and stepfather were waiting for me. From there, we drove the five and half hours to Southern Utah where my daughters were staying with their father. My parents were always ready and willing to stand beside me in these strange battles. As if it were part of their family obligation. I knew I could count on them for both their strength and ability to remain in control when things got out of control.

At 7:00 a.m. the next morning my mother, stepfather and I waited one block from my ex-husband’s home for a police officer to assist us in a civil stand-by. My stepfather, in his worn-out oil-stained jeans, paced outside of his pickup truck, smoking a cigarette. He would occasionally smooth his mustache down, adjust his cap and through the tinting in his eyeglasses I could see he was anxious. In the cab of the truck, my mother and I attempted small talk until the police officer arrived to meet us.

When the officer approached the truck and I saw his name badge, Francis, my heart sank. Before I left Northern Virginia I had contacted the police department in Southern Utah to make sure I had all of the necessary paperwork when I showed up at my ex-husband’s home. I spoke with Officer Francis when I made that initial call and he was adamant that I wait and see what happened; he was not in favor of me showing up unannounced and taking my girls. He tried to persuade me to wait and see if the girls came home on the flight we had already purchased since that was only a few weeks away. I left him with the impression that I might take his advice, but now here I was a block away from Scott’s house. Officer Francis was younger and thinner than I had
pictured him based on his voice; he was a slender guy in his mid-thirties with a shaved head, a pair of “Top Gun” sunglasses covering his eyes.

I gave him a copy of my Divorce Decree and reminded him of the conversation we had two days ago. Quickly, he remembered who I was.

“We had an agreement. Scott would have the girls from the beginning of July through the 8th of August. But I’m here to pick them up pursuant to my divorce decree.” I said to Francis. I knew that Francis couldn’t honor the verbal agreement we made that altered our Divorce Decree, but he could enforce the Divorce Decree which indicated that the girls should be with me for the month of July and not with their father. Scott wasn’t supposed to have them again until August.

“Then, it’s like I told you on the phone, why not wait until the 8th of August, it’s only a couple of weeks away?”

“Because, he’s not going to put them both on the plane. He’s telling the oldest she can stay, and the youngest can’t fly by herself.”

“Ma’am, it’s really hard to enforce agreements that you make, all we can do is enforce the order,” he said as he rolled the papers I’d given him.

Francis and I went back and forth for several minutes, until he ultimately agreed to do the civil stand-by. I knew before I left Virginia that this officer’s sympathy would be crucial to whether or not my girls left with me. If I were unable to return home with them that day, it would take legal action by a court in Utah for me to get them back. Francis agreed to the civil stand-by, but informed me that if my ex-husband refused to release the girls into my custody he wouldn’t make Scott give the girls to me. I agreed.
I had been to Scott’s home five years ago when he was renting the basement apartment. Now, he was buying that same house, paying the owner directly because he couldn’t qualify for a mortgage. He still owed me more than $5,000 for his share of our community debt that I was forced to pay because he wouldn’t. He was required to provide medical insurance for the girls and pay 60% of all uncovered medical expenses, but he did neither. I had to have the State of Idaho garnish the measly $300 a month child support he’d been ordered to pay because he wouldn’t pay it on his own.

Parked in front was an older model white Chevy truck with a trailer and parts of another older model truck on the bed of the trailer. There were two driveways, one on each side of the house. I didn’t know which of the vehicles were his and which belonged to the people who rented their basement. Because of my own experiences, and what my daughters have told me, I know that most of Scott’s cars aren’t registered or insured, and the ones that are aren’t reliable and none have air conditioning. The temperatures in Southern Utah typically rise above 110°F during the summer months, and even a breeze from a car window feels suffocating.

The trees and shrubbery in the yard were overgrown and the lawn dead, except for the trampled weeds. Francis and I approached the front porch, where several electric scooters and mini-bikes were resting against the house. Spider webs were in every corner, collecting small bugs, dried leaves and dust. To the left of the door was a yellow velvet soft cushion recliner covered with stains.

Danniell opened the door and glared at me with such force I felt it in the pit of my stomach. Her dark brown hair was disheveled, her eyes circled with dark make-up, and
she was dressed in spaghetti string tank-tops and dark baggy fleece pants several sizes too big. She simply stood in the doorway staring at me. I wanted to hug her, to tell her how much I loved her, and I wanted to know that she still loved me. I wanted to tell her she was wrong about being angry at me, that I was the one parent who had always given and sacrificed. I loved her more than anyone-- I always would.

“Is your dad home,” I asked.

“He’s sleeping.” She hardly acknowledged Francis’ presence, and continued with her glare at me. “Why are you here,” she asked.

“You need to go get your dad,” Francis said to her.

“He’s sleeping,” she responded with her eyes fixed on me.

“Then you need to wake him up and tell him we’re here,” he said again.

“Why are you doing this mom,” she whined.

“Danniell, go get your father,” I said.

Minutes passed as we stood in the doorway. Francis and I both listened to the noises within the house. The front door remained open and the youngest of my ex’s four daughters, a two-year old, came to the door. Her blond hair was rustled from sleeping, her dark brown eyes wide-awake, her face slightly dirty, her smile curious about who we were and why we were there. She had on a saggy, urine filled diaper, and black marks, from what appeared to be a magic marker, covered her arms, belly and legs. Her feet were dirty.

The walls of the entryway were no longer white, but gray with children’s smudge prints. The carpet in the entryway, and from what I could see of the hallway, was covered
with dark black stains. To the left of the door was a pile of more than ten pairs of shoes that ranged in size from toddler to adult.

Danniell passed by the front door several more times without acknowledging us. Francis rang the doorbell again, calling out for Leta, Scott’s wife.

When Leta came to the door her own long blonde hair was more stringy and disheveled than her daughter’s. She had on eye glasses and a blue silky turquoise pajama pant-set. She stood taller than both of us from the ledge of the doorway. At her side was my eleven year old daughter Nicole, wearing a dirty t-shirt and pair of shorts. She didn’t come out past the doorway to greet me or hug me, she just looked at me puzzled and frustrated. I knew why she wouldn’t talk to me. I had told her just days before I wouldn’t come and get her, even though I knew her father wasn’t going to send them back home. I told her I would let her finish the two weeks of visitation with her father and that she could spend this time with her sister. I had been dishonest with her that’s why she was angry, but only because I knew I couldn’t alert her father or Danniell that I was coming. Danniell would not have been there if she knew I was coming for her and her sister.

Francis asked about Scott, and Leta informed us that she couldn’t wake him; he was having a diabetic reaction. Francis asked if he needed an ambulance, but she declined. She wanted us to give them another 15-20 minutes to allow the sugar to bring him out of his reaction. But I knew she was lying. I was married to Scott for seven years, and when he did have diabetic reactions it never took more than five minutes to bring him out of them. While we were married, his reactions were few and far between. It seemed
convenient that the morning I showed up, unannounced, Scott would have a diabetic reaction. Leta seemed amused by what was happening.

I let her know that I was there to pick up my girls, pursuant to my Divorce Decree. She resisted, wanting to fight with me about the legalities of what I was doing. But, Francis let her know that Scott needed to come to the door to settle the matter.

When Leta walked away, Nicole followed and we heard more rustling and watched their twin four-year old daughters, almost mirror images of the two-year old, approach the doorway with the same brown eyes, rounded faces and blonde disheveled hair. They appeared neither afraid nor surprised that there was a police officer at their door. We were like a routine visitor. A dog barked from the backyard, and a louder more boisterous bark came from within the house. Within a few minutes, a black Great Dane came around the corner and walked toward us.

I told Francis that the dog in the back was part wolf.

“Hey, Lydia,” Francis yelled into the house.

“It’s Leta,” I said.

“I don’t care right now what her name is.”

I looked around, trying not to feel ashamed for having corrected him. Not sure what else to say, I tried, “I bet you must go through a lot of gas.”

“Usually I don’t have to leave my car running for 40 minutes,” he responded.

Danniell came out, walked past both Francis and me without speaking, and headed straight towards my mother. She now had on a dark black sweater and though I
hadn’t noticed earlier through the dark make-up, I could see that she had a black eye. At 10:00 a.m. the temperature was already over 90 degrees.

“I had to get a restraining order against my ex after we separated. He tried to kill himself. He was returning the girls several hours late and carrying around a thirty-ought-six gun.”

Francis wanted to know if Scott had ever threatened me. Never verbally, I told him. Then, he wanted to know if he had any guns. I’m sure, I answered, but I had no idea how many or what kinds.

I wanted Francis to know what he was dealing with. Scott’s own refusal to come to the door demonstrated to Francis that my ex was not the kind of person who willing cooperated, particularly with the police. Francis poked his head into the entryway and listened to the noises within. He stepped off the front porch, walked around to the right side of the house and peered over the chain link fence. When he returned he rang the doorbell again, and Danniell walked back by.

“Hey Danneill,” he said, “You need to go get your father or Leta right now.”

She kept walking and said nothing. I was embarrassed that my daughter showed this officer so much disrespect. I had been thinking about every movement I made, every word I said.

We heard water, possibly the shower, running. Finally, Nicole walked by. She still didn’t come to the door to greet me, she just looked hurt and somewhat afraid. At eleven years old, she was almost as big as her fifteen year old sister.

“Nicole, you need to go get your father and Leta NOW,” I said to her.
When she disappeared down the hallway I could hear her voice elevated as she said to them, “You guys they want you there now.”

Francis dropped his shoulders slightly, and his voice became more personable. “I’ve got two kids. Their mother has custody of them and she lives in Salt Lake,” I looked at him and smiled in sympathy. He continued on, “My girlfriend’s ex-husband lives in Las Vegas and he’s not supposed to take her kids out of the State because he doesn’t return them. It’s hard on the kids. That’s why you’ve got to stick to the Divorce Decree.”

Scott, bare foot, shuffled his feet as he slowly walked to the door with Leta close behind. Danniell peered out around one corner of the hall entryway, and Nicole from the other. His hair was wet. He wore a t-shirt, knee-length camouflage shorts, and both of his hands were in his front pockets.

“Please take your hands out of your pockets. Do you have anything in them?” Francis asked.

“No.” He pulled his hands out, raised them, palms up and started to shove them back in his pockets.

“Take your hands out of your pockets and keep them out. I don’t appreciate having to stand here and wait almost an hour for you to come to the door.”

Leta tried to interject, but before she could say anything Francis told her to go back inside, that this didn’t involve her. I wanted to cheer, to jump up and down, give her a “take that,” but I stood there and smiled only to myself.

“I’m diabetic and they was havin trouble wakin me.”
“But you showered first, when you knew we were out here waiting,” Francis responded.

“Ya, I’m gonna shower first. I had orange juice all over my face and down the front of me.” He raised his right hand, brought it to his chin and ran it down his scruffy goatee, and then down the front of his small chest.

I stood up a little straighter, puffing my chest out as my ex stood within reaching distance. In spite of my own small build, I felt taller and stronger, and I wondered about his health. Francis looked at me, and waited for me to talk.

“I’m here to pick up the girls pursuant to our Divorce Decree.”

“She’s trespassing and I want her off my property. She can stand in the street where she belongs.”

“Scott, you and I both know what this here Order says.” Francis waved the rolled up papers toward him. “What are you going to do about it?”

“I want her off my property. She’s trespassing. I want her arrested for trespassing.” His voice became louder and he moved, slightly away from the front door, more toward us.

“Look Scott, whether she stands here on your porch or out in the street, you need to decide what you’re going to do,” Francis said to him.

Scott turned and moved toward the front door, but Francs stopped him. “Where are you going?”

“I’m goin inside to talk to my kids.”
“No Scott, you’re not. This doesn’t involve them. This is between you and your ex wife and according to this Order she has custody of them.”

“I want her off my property,” he yelled.

So I went to the end of his property at the edge of the street and waited. I could see several small faces peering out of a bedroom window. After several more minutes, Francis came out and said that Scott needed thirty minutes to get the girls packed and ready.

I was afraid that Danniell would try and run, or that Scott would hide her from me, but I had no choice. Francis agreed to meet us back at Scott’s house in thirty minutes. We left to fill the truck up with gas, and in those thirty minutes I was filled with fear and anxiety that couldn’t be calmed. I wanted to immediately rush back to their house and have it surrounded on all sides to ensure that Danniell wouldn’t try and run, or that they wouldn’t hide her.

When we returned, the girls’ bags were packed. Scott said little and showed no emotion as he brought their bags out. When Nicole came out with her backpack, blankets and stuffed-animals, she cried. Danniell had on a black knit cap, a large black sweatshirt, black leather fingerless gloves, and fleece sweatpants that dragged on the ground as she walked toward the truck. She carried her backpack over one shoulder and glared at me so fiercely that everyone saw. Neither of the girls looked like they had showered for several days.

Leta sobbed openly when she brought the remaining bags out.
They’re not your children, you have your own, why do you want mine so badly I wanted to say. But I silently took each bag as it came to me and passed them on to my stepfather who placed them in the back of the truck bed. This was a small victory for me, but this wasn’t about a battle with Leta or Scott. This was about my ability to maintain control over what was happening to my daughters.

Francis approached me after we had the final bag. “Try and remember that it’s better if we have some kind of official Order from this State, otherwise there’s not much we can do. Although you may be trying to help, it’s really best to stick to the Divorce Decree.”

I agreed, and reached to shake his hand.

“Are you going to be able to handle her? How long will your parents be with you?”

“I hope so. They’ll be with us until Salt Lake, then we’ll stay the night and catch a 6:30 a.m. flight out and head back to Virginia. I’m prepared for the worst.”

But I wasn’t prepared for the worst. I thought I’d come home and Danniell would show some defiance for a week or two and then she would go back to being Dannie. She didn’t. Her desire to leave was only fueled further by her father continuing to tell her he was going to take me back to court, and that he’d get custody of her so she could live with him. They were just more of his lies and empty promises. He didn’t have the money to take me back to court, and frankly I didn’t believe he really had the energy or desire to have her living there with him.
Over the next four weeks Danniell continued fighting with everyone, distancing herself further from each of us, and hating me more with each passing day. Her father kept leading her on, making her believe he’d talked to an attorney and that he was going to file for custody of her, he just had to come up with the money. It was always about money – how we had none, how much he and his new family struggled. Because school was only a few weeks away from starting I caved in. If Danniell went to her father’s house mid-year, she’d be even worse off than if she went now, at the end of the summer. If she went now, she’d start the new school year in Utah at the same time as all of the other kids. I was trying to eliminate the disruption and upheaval she had already experienced attending a new school every two years.

While Nicole cried when she left her father’s, and she had said little to me our entire flight back to Virginia, once we were home she settled back into a routine. She asked me why I brought them home early, especially after I told her I wouldn’t, and I told her. Nicole’s struggles to understand weren’t just about me picking her and her sister up early from visitation with their dad. Unfortunately, Nicole was fighting her own battles with her emotionless sister that I couldn’t understand. Nicole spent many nights crying, begging her sister to stay, but Danniell refused to even show her sister any sympathy.

As soon as we returned home, I got Danniell in to see a counselor. But it was too late, years too late. While Nicole had experienced many emotional outbreaks and I had gotten her into counseling early, Danniell had always kept her emotions close and hidden, leading me to believe she was fine. I was unable to see her personal pain, and in my ignorance I failed her long before this moment.
I tried, every day, to get Danniell to open up and talk with me, but she refused. She has that impenetrable silence, like her father, where she just stares right on through me when I try talking with her.

“I want to live with Dad, and go to Hurricane High.”

“Why,” I asked.

“Because I fit in better. I like the more laid back lifestyle.” Her responses all lacked emotion. They were flat and thoughtless. She sounded like she simply didn’t care where she was, so long as she wasn’t in Virginia with me. She couldn’t see the consequences that awaited her. But I was worn down from fighting with her. I began to see that if she stayed, she’d only hate me more, she’d hate herself. In the end, that’s why I gave in. I wasn’t just worried about the new school year, I was worried about what was happening to our relationship. I was worried about her hating me and that hate becoming a reason for her to hurt herself.

“Fine. If you want to live with your father then you both have to sign a contract before you can go.”

She looked at me cautiously, and said, “Okay.”

I hand-wrote a letter to Scott; first attempting to capture the love I felt for Danniell and the desperation that I couldn’t stop her wanting to leave, and then I gave him nine conditions for Danniell to live with him. First, that if Danniell got into any kind of trouble with the law she would return home and then be placed in a military school and Scott and I would split the expense equally. Second, if she was found drinking, doing any illegal or prescription drugs she would come home and be placed in a military school.
Third, if her grades fell below C’s she would come home and be placed in a military school. Fourth, Scott had to purchase her airline ticket, and it had to be a direct flight. Fifth, I wouldn’t release Danniell to her father until the agreement had been signed and sent back to me. Sixth, if Scott didn’t sign the agreement and decided to modify instead, I would then file for modification in Virginia, not Idaho where the original Divorce Decree had been filed – forcing him to travel to Virginia to deal with the suit. Seventh, I only agreed to Danniell living with her father, no one else. Eighth, Danniell needed to continue seeing a counselor while at her father’s. The ninth and final was that if we couldn’t come to an agreement as to where Danniell would live she would attend a military school. Looking back, I realize that this meaningless contract I drafted was my feeble attempt to maintain control, if only on paper, when the world around me was spinning wildly out of control. I could see in Danniell’s response to me that I wasn’t going to change her mind; she wanted out and she would find a way.

The one thing I did decide was that Danniell would have to write why she wanted to go live with her father – in her own words. This would be something concrete that she would have, and hopefully would remind her that I never wanted her to leave. She was the one who wanted to leave, she wanted the choices she was making, and her father was encouraging her to make these life changes. She wrote:

The reasons for wanting to live w/ my dad…

- I fit in better down there. I’m tired of this place (VA). I love the laid back atmosphere down there in UT and I can’t deal with this stressful lifestyle in VA.
- I’m tired of not getting to see my dad, stepmom, halfsisters, or any of that side of the family for six months, or even up to a year at a time. I’m close to them all and I want to live there so I can see them everyday.
I’ve made new friends. Alex is my new best and closest friend. She is a girl. Becca and Tiff are also nice. I got to help Just and J.D. show Becca around since she is new. Hanging out w/Justin and J.D. is never boring. I also got to meet up and go out w/Jason a couple of times.

I can actually go out and do things. Here in VA I can’t because everyone is always saying how I’ll get kidnapped or raped or anything like that. There I am aware of these things and keep an eye out, but there really isn’t much of a worry, It being such a small town. (That being another reason I want to live there.)

If I’m going to always be in the way here I should go there. Step out and allow peace. At least there I’m not always depressed & stressed out like I am here in VA.

Down there I feel more useful. I am able to watch my sisters when needed and I also help clean the house, sometimes. Just that feeling of responsibility and being able to help makes me feel great. I love watching my sisters and would be wiling to watch them any day. Sam is starting school, with Lizzy and Jackie shortly behind. I want to be there for that and be there to help them with whatever they need.

I do understand to consequences to my actions. I do realize there will be things I will probably not have, but I am willing to chance that and even give it up. Personally, I think I found a better place for me. A place where I am almost always happy. I do understand the consequences to my actions.

The childish responses in Danniell’s hand-written letter began the end of my control over Danniell’s day to day safety. For her, everything was only about the moment and nothing about the future, or even the long-lasting consequences this decision would have on her sister and their relationship. On August 12, 2005, what I believed was potentially the last night Danniell would ever live with me, she boxed the items she couldn’t take, stuffed her suitcases full of the things she wanted, and threw away every card, letter and token I had given her over the years. All at once, I felt like she was so easily throwing away the last fifteen years of her life and memories with me. I struggled to understand what I had done to cause this kind of hate. She had made up her mind she wanted to live with her father, and I knew by the empty, emotionless look in her dark brown eyes that I couldn’t keep her. I lay in bed, overwhelmed by the uncertainty and
pain that I had less than a day left with my daughter. After this day, what became of our relationship, the relationship she had with her sister and Patrick, would no longer be in my hands, and I was scared as hell. In those moments as her departure became more imminent I believed that if I just loved her more deeply I could pull her back to me. But I had never been more wrong.

She still had three more years of high school. And based on every dream I ever had, every plan I ever made, those years were supposed to be spent with me. I wanted to teach her to drive, to be there the day she got her driver’s license; to meet her first boyfriend, tease them about their first date; and to be there when she walked across the stage for her high school graduation. But the possibility that those moments would happen, let alone me being a part of them, was becoming more of a dream than I could have ever realized. The dreams, the goals, the future I wanted for Danniell weren’t the same as she wanted for herself.

I knew she wasn’t going to change her mind; she was, after all, like the women before her – determined. I left my bed, went to her room and climbed in bed next to her. At first, my tears came slowly and silently, running down my cheeks wetting her pillows. Then as breathing became more difficult I could no longer hold back the tears. I took her hand.

I’ve heard that written into the glaciers of Southeast Alaska and parts of Canada rest the history of past weather changes and these give clues to the future trends in the earth’s climate. These glaciers have formed over the last 12.5 million years at high
elevations and at frigid temperatures where winter snowfalls exceed annual melting. The snow packs deepen, transforming the oldest layers into glacial ice. Each year of new snow pack places pressure on the existing layers of snow and ice creating ice fields. These ice fields flow down the valleys and mountain slopes to lower elevations creating glaciers. Because glaciers form in higher elevations, they are naturally forced downward. The ice always pursues the path of least resistance. The ice closest to the bedrock is weighted under intense pressure and conforms itself to the shape and structure of the bedrock. It is the upper 150 feet of ice that lacks this intense pressure allowing it to form crevasses and move more freely. The erosive power of glacial flow changes the landscape, scraping soil and rocks from the landscape that attempt to channel its uncontainable flow. If hidden in the glaciers of Alaska the history of past weather changes can give clues to what future weather changes might be, then just maybe the past histories and decisions made by the women who came before me might provide some sort of clues about the path my daughters may be destined for.

In those remaining hours lying next to Danniell, I wanted to plead with her to stay, to convince her that she didn’t really want to leave, but Danniell was never a girl full of emotion for her family, or anyone else for that matter. The truth was, and I knew it, she wanted to leave. Nothing I said or did would make her want to stay with me. I had to come to terms with that fact quickly, or her leaving was going to kill me. I tried to memorize the way her hands felt in mine; her fingers slender and bony, her hands smaller than my own, not yet a woman’s, but no longer a child’s. I breathed in the scent from her
hair – the smell of Herbal Essence shampoo, and the sweet musty oil of teenage sweat – praying I would never forget that smell. I squeezed her hand frequently, and sometimes she squeezed back giving me hope.

I thought by letting her live with her father I would teach her a lesson; that she would see what he was really like and want to come back home with me. But that wasn’t what happened. In the four months Danniel lived with her father in 2005, she had 55 absences from classes and more than 35 tardies. She was arrested for minor possession of alcohol, minor consumption, truancy, obstructing a police officer, and placed in juvenile detention. In the course of four months, she went from a straight “A” student who had attended a private college prep school in Northern Virginia and played on the soccer team, to a girl who was wildly out of control of both her actions and her emotions.

What I have always feared more than anything is lack of control, and I am realizing that I never truly had control over my daughters’ futures. For all my conscious acknowledgement of our family legacy, I fear I will not have stopped or altered it, that there will always be a part of our family legacy that lives on; the one part I have sought to destroy – the part that lives on in Danniel through her poor choices and self-destructive behavior.

There are more than 100,000 glaciers that survive in Alaska, and they have left an imposing imprint on the landscape. With each glacial retreat they carved away rocks, creating sharp ridges and fiords, they’ve caused waters in glacial lakes to rise, flooded seacoasts, and continue to affect human settlement, subsistence, and animal migrations.
While there are clues from the past that shed light on today’s glaciers, their future survival is still uncertain. The glaciers carved the unique characteristics into the landscape as part of the natural process of life. Could it be that each of the women who’ve shared in this legacy impacted the generation who followed, without malice or will, but through an ignorance that was innate because of their own life circumstances?

Danniell broke the first three components of the contract I made her and Scott sign, and I didn’t immediately remove her from her father’s home and place her in a military school. I kept trying to make her accountable for her actions and the choices she was making. I kept waiting for her to ask for my help. I continued to believe I could have control from 2,000 miles away, when I had none. I believed my love for her was enough. And I kept waiting for her to tell me she wanted to come home, but she never did.
In 1918 my great grandmother Chloe Remington lost her life during the great influenza epidemic. She was 22, the mother of four young children; and with her began a four-generation legacy of women marrying at sixteen and becoming mothers soon after. We are women who come from uneducated working class families. We are women with secrets we keep from our mothers, from our daughters, and from the outside world. We are women who pride ourselves as fiercely independent, but in reality we are dependent upon the men we choose. I am the first in four generations to consciously attempt breaking the pessimistic resignation that has become our family legacy. And while I’ve tried, I wonder if Danniell is the last. Will this legacy end with her.

Chloe was born to Alice and Noble Remington August 20, 1896 in Pleasant Grove, Utah. She was the youngest of their six children, and was four years old in 1900 when her father deserted their family. Noble, his parents, and siblings had come to Utah from Illinois; ironically, similar to the historic journey taken by the fathers of the religion Noble would join: A religion that would become the backdrop against which so much of our history played out. In 1847 when Brigham Young led the early Mormon pioneers west, they were searching for a place outside the confines and controls of the United States government to grow and live out their faith. They came west in covered wagons,
on horseback, and on foot pushing handcarts. They had been persecuted, tarred, feathered, jailed, murdered and run out of four different states: New York, Ohio, Missouri and Illinois.

There is no record about Noble and the year he arrived in Utah, but in July 1880 he married Alice and nine months later the first of seven children was born. Their fourth child would only live for three months, and there would be a fifteen year span from the first child to the last. After eight years of marriage Noble converted to Mormonism, most likely to satisfy Alice and her family who were devout Mormons. Being Mormon requires an unquestionable devotion and a solemn pledge of obedience to God, fidelity in marriage, and commitment of all worldly possession and personal talents to God. After Noble and Alice had been married for 20 years, he broke his covenant to the Lord, abandoned the religion, his wife, and six children.

In my quest for answers, I discovered there were two different stories told by Noble and Alice’s descendants that attempted to explain why Noble left his wife and children. The Mormon faith is one that is full of secrets, and is a faith where the members generally don’t question those in authority – they simply follow their leaders obediently. Searching for answers from members of a faith such as this is never an easy task. While Mormons control the largest genealogical archive in the world, their concentration is on the family tree – who married whom, when, who their parents’ parents were, how many children they had, and who their children married. Their family trees are intricate and detailed with dates of birth, dates of marriages, divorces, and deaths, but the life stories revealed are minimal at best. Genealogy is part of theology for Mormons, as this detailed
accounting of family members throughout the generations allows them the ability to
bestow upon deceased family members the possibility for salvation. The baptism of the
deceased allows them a choice in the afterlife to either accept or reject the Mormon’s
Christ and that kingdom.

The one story about Noble’s departure was told by the lineage of Noble and
Alice’s sons who stayed behind in Utah, after Alice remarried and moved to Idaho. A
great grandson shared with me that Noble missed his parents and siblings so much he
decided to return to Illinois to be with them. Immediately I questioned the fact that Noble
had been married to Alice for twenty years. What would make him suddenly miss his
parents or siblings so much that he would be compelled to leave his wife and children?
But more than that, I already knew that all of his family had left Illinois together, and as
they traveled west, his siblings ended up staying in Colorado and his parents in Oregon.
Noble was the only one in his family to remain in Utah as they headed west. There were
no longer any of his immediate family living in Illinois. The other curious detail to this
story is that Noble died alone of an unknown illness in Michigan, within a year of leaving
Utah, where no known family members lived. Even the grandson who shared this story,
and who has the original death certificate, doesn’t really know why Noble left his wife
and children.

The other version is told by the grandchildren of Alice who lived in Rockland, the
small farming community in Idaho comprised mostly of Mormons, where Alice moved
after she remarried, and where our legacy grew and flourished into what we live with
today. This is the landscape of my lineage, the place where our story and our lives gave
birth. This version is told by those who knew only Alice. They maintain that Noble had done something so awful, so horrific, that he just left, and no one would talk about what he’d done. Whatever the reason, it died with the people who may have known and was eventually forgotten. I can only speculate about what Noble could have done that would prevent everyone from talking about it; small towns typically foster gossip, and legendary exploits live on for many generations. But this version might be closer to the truth. Maybe Alice was so ashamed of something Noble had done that she wouldn’t reveal to people why he really left, which is quite possibly why there are no stories of substance to explain his abandonment of his family.

Either way, Chloe learned from her father’s abandonment that husbands and fathers don’t stay with their families, and that women keep the family together. Noble’s abandonment was the beginning of a long line of broken homes and broken women devoted to weak men.

After Noble left, Alice supported herself and the six children nearly a year before marrying Daniel “Dennis” White. Dennis was Mormon, a fact that mattered very much to Alice and her parents, and he was also fourteen years younger. Alice was 40 years old, and would have three more children with Dennis. In the fall of 1906 when Chloe was ten, Alice and Dennis moved their two boys, Chloe and two of her older sisters, from Ogden, Utah to Rockland, Idaho. The other children from Noble and Alice’s marriage, who were older, remained in Utah. Alice, Dennis and the children spent their first winter living in a tent on a dry farm up near East Fork where they farmed 240 acres. They, like the other pioneers in the valley, were dry farmers raising winter wheat as their primary crop.
Dry farming is an especially difficult type of farming done without irrigation, usually in a place where rainfall is less than 20 inches a year. It involves raising a drought-resistant crop, one that would mature in late spring or fall. In order for these crops to make the best use of a limited water supply, the soil must be maintained by loosening it so the water will more easily absorb into the land, and weeding must be done religiously so that the moisture can be better utilized. The risk of failure in dry farming is much higher than traditional farming. This type of farming would be an admirable profession for early Mormon pioneers. The harder they worked and the more they sacrificed, the closer they were to God. This belief was fostered because of the extensive persecution and destruction of Mormon communities by non-Mormons throughout the religion’s history. It is their duty to sacrifice, to give, to devote their life to God. Mormons believe they are the chosen people and gentiles, non-Mormons, are destined for purgatory or hell.

After surviving the first winter Alice and Dennis purchased their own land and constructed a two-room log house. The construction consisted of a dirt roof made of quaking aspen poles which were placed over the log trusses, then flags or cattails were tied into bundles and layered on the poles with dirt then placed over the thatching. Years later, they added a large log kitchen and living quarters onto the other rooms. Alice and Dennis chose Rockland, in part, because their oldest son was a very sickly child and wasn’t expected to live very long, and they believed that living in a higher climate might help. There was also a very strong Mormon community already established in Rockland, and Alice and Dennis knew that they would quickly and eagerly be welcomed into it.
Historically, each community established by the Mormons had a strong political, social, cultural, and economical tie to the faith. These predominately Mormon communities are intrinsically isolated, segregating Mormons from non-Mormons, which is one reason for the anti-Mormonism mobs that forced Mormons out of the eastern states to the Salt Lake area in Utah, which at the time was owned by Mexico, where they would build their Zion.

The first pioneers to settle in the Rockland Valley arrived there in 1876, and named by the Mormon settlers in 1879 for Rock Creek and the rocky surrounds. These Mormon pioneers had been directed by their prophet, Brigham Young, at a general conference in 1870 to colonize land in the Idaho Territory. The land had plenty of water and excellent soil for farming. The valley was covered with bunch grass and wild hay, as well as several small creeks with sparkling clear mountain spring water that wound their way through the valley bottoms. The windswept valley is surrounded on the south, east and west by prominent mountains that roll like ocean waves in the distance. Though day to day survival off the land was trying, the community flourished.

Once the women in our family arrived in Idaho we would never leave it for any period of significant length. In each generation of the women who followed, we would all travel, sometimes even live, outside the boundaries of our home state, but each of us always returned. The rural frontier landscape of Idaho always seems to pull us back. The unforgiving winters, the hot, dry summers, the high mountain lakes and meandering rivers are constant and reliable. They permeate our psyche and become ingrained in the
way we see ourselves: as western women able to survive in a difficult landscape that is both powerful and beautiful at the same time.

When Chloe married my great grandfather George she was only 16, something that wasn’t altogether uncommon in the west in 1913. Chloe’s mother had been 18 when she married Chloe’s father. Chloe, like her mother, was married in the Mormon temple. She would be sealed to George, as the Mormon’s believed, for time and all eternity. By marrying in the temple, not only would George and Chloe be sealed together for time and eternity, but so too would any children they had. Their marriage in the temple required them to populate the earth thereby giving the opportunity for mortal birth to preexisting souls waiting to be born; this is a core component of the Mormon faith. In a culture that earnestly believes, and teaches coed seminary classes, that families are forever, temple marriage is a critical step to securing the highest status in the celestial kingdom – the highest level of the Mormon’s three-tiered heaven. It is unknown if Chloe was as persistent in wanting to marry as my grandmother, my mother and I would later be, but I believe there was an unacknowledged force pulling her in that direction. Maybe it was our religion, or maybe she simply wanted to create her own family. I can’t help but wonder if this desire to marry, that we all shared, is rooted in the subconscious of our minds because of the faith we were all surrounded by and raised in. Without marriage, and through the priesthood of a husband, there is no way for a woman to get to heaven. Mormon women grow up being told by church leaders that fathers preside over their families “in love and righteousness and are to provide the necessities of life and
protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.” The women in my family have always been surrounded by other Mormon families whose family units were strong, constant and reliable; their fathers were leaders and involved in the community, with their families and with the church; mothers stayed home and tended to their children’s needs and the needs of neighbors and other church members; siblings made the right choices and loved and supported each other. The bonds of those families appeared, on the surface, to be impenetrable. Because those were the types of families we were surrounded by, it was more difficult for us to accept our own families with fathers who were always absent physically or mentally, and whose love for us we always questioned. Still, the ideal of the perfect family was ingrained in us, and we became desperate. At the earliest opportunity, we left our own flawed families, hoping to start a new, perfect one. Maybe that’s what Chloe was trying to do.

There are few stories about my great grandmother and for years I have wondered how she lived for 22 years and nothing of substance that relates specifically to her life remains. I have two pictures of Chloe, miscellaneous postcards she had written to others or received from siblings – her daughter, my grandmother – Mayme’s memories from a four year old perspective, and a legacy she couldn’t have possibly known she’d started. I long for vignettes from her life as a young woman. I wonder about the dreams and desires she might have had. I wonder how similar to her my grandmother, my mother, and me are. The women who followed all shared a pessimistic resignation to the choices they made and their own life experiences. I even see the same resistance and resignation in my own daughters. I know that the women all wanted a better life, but we all allowed
ourselves to quickly become trapped at an early age by the poor choices we made because of the situations we forced ourselves into. Then our lives became just about survival, we didn’t have time or the opportunity to think about changing our expectations, let alone considering we had the ability to make our children’s futures better. My own daughters are on the threshold of determining their own expectations for their futures, and I have been searching the past for answers – in the hopes that those answers may prevent them from following the same path of poor choices. I struggle to find these answers because I believe that by merely having daughters I have exposed a fifth generation to this legacy. And both of my daughters are vulnerable. There is no-one left living who knew Chloe and no stories of her life remain. I can only imagine the kind of young woman she may have been from the common personality traits of the women who followed her. I imagine her to be very stubborn and strong-willed, and yet easily swayed by the belief that a man’s love and the creation of a family were the only way to experience ultimate happiness.

Our family has only two pictures of Chloe, one by herself and one with her husband. Not much is known about the circumstances of these pictures, except that my great grandfather George had to beg and plead with Chloe to have them taken. My mother and I, and my daughters, share her dislike of having our picture taken. Sometimes I can’t help but wonder if we are afraid that a picture will capture and reveal the secrets we conceal from each other. In both, Chloe wears a light colored hat with a large bowl-like brim where I can see the tips of a satin bow and small flowers peeking over the edge. Because the pictures are black and white, it appears her dress is light, possibly cream or
pastel, with eyelet around the sleeves and probably made of cotton which was the fabric most commonly used at the time. Around her neck is a choker with what appears to be pearls, each spaced about an inch apart from the other. Her hands are gloved, but I can only see that in the picture of her and my great grandfather George. She doesn’t smile, and in her eyes there is a resistance I recognize in the pictures of other women in our family. I look at the pictures and I see a woman who is strong, independent and beautiful, yet tragic because not only can I see Chloe’s unfulfilled potential, but the unfulfilled potential of all of the women who followed her. Her hair was dark and I wonder if it was a brown highlighted with the same red that my grandmother, my mother, my daughters, and I all share. Her facial features are soft and rounded. Her eyes appear to be a dark color, but I can’t be certain, and no one remembers the color of her eyes. Her lips are small, slightly full, with the distinct heart-shape tips forming on her upper lip.

In the second picture, my great grandfather George stands at her side, and he wears a felt cowboy hat from the early 1900’s, a pin-striped suite, a crisp white shirt and a tie. He appears tall and dignified. His own face is more oval and less rounded than Chloe’s. His ears stick out, like mine, and even though he is standing at an angle I can see both of his ears. His eyes appear more translucent than his wife’s and I wonder if they are blue or green, the same as my mother’s and mine. His lips are full, but lack the curves and dimensions that Chloe’s lips have. I don’t know how soon before her death those pictures were taken, but she was young and appeared healthy. I’m sure that by this time, Chloe had given birth to three of her four children. In the five and a half years Chloe and
George were married, they had four children: Mayme – my grandmother, Albert, Agnes and Helen.

My grandmother Mayme was their first child, and she was born in a four room log house that had a dirt roof. The log house, which had been the winter home for George’s parents, was shaped like an L. His family had been among the first families to settle the Rockland Valley. Chloe might have given birth to all of her children in the bedroom of the old log house. And although there are no stories about Mayme’s birth, I know her younger sister Agnes was born more than a month early, and they kept her on the wood stove in a small wooden box to keep her warm. I heard this story as a young girl, and even today I continue hearing it from distant family members. During the winter months of their early years on the farm, many of the neighboring families moved into the town of Rockland, while their family remained on the farm. During the summer months, the other families lived the five miles south of town on Dry Hollow Road where they farmed.

I recently returned to that old family farm. Dry Hollow Road is still an old dirt road, and remnants of the family farm that belonged to my great grandfather George reside on the landscape like old scars from a fire long gone. Little has changed in nearly 100 years; it is as if the place has been preserved in time – waiting for the moment when I would return and claim the legacy that has become us. There are three newer grain elevators across the street, and several miles further up the road new farm machinery and a newer home with a different family inhabits the land. On the 240 acres that George farmed, just off the dirt and gravel of the road, are four abandoned buildings. Three of the buildings are considerably older than the main house, and I’m sure that Chloe had been
inside each of them, as had each generation of women who followed; the log sides of
their structure were worn and dry rotting from the force of the elements and the effects of
time; all of the doors and windows were missing. The buildings are ghostly, and despite
the many holes, they eerily hold the secrets of our family, quietly in the cracks and
crevices that have aged and weathered through time. The smallest of the three log
buildings is only 10x12; this was once the home of my paternal great great grandparents.
I stare at them all and wonder what it would have been like for them to live in a small box
without any windows and only a single door. How imprisoned I would have felt living in
a box without windows; surrounded on all sides by solid wooden logs stacked and sealed
together. The secrets of our family are hidden behind those thick logs, piled one on top of
the other, the only way to escape, to see and be part of the outside world was through that
small door.

The other two log buildings, though longer and wider, were also once homes that
belonged to my great grandfather George and his brother. But those homes had long since
been converted to chicken coups and sheds that could hold the horses and other farm
equipment. The weeds and the sagebrush had grown several feet around the home and
other buildings, making it difficult to navigate close to any of the old buildings.
Everything was dead; grays, browns, and faded yellows covered the landscape. The only
life and color was the blue sky and crisp white clouds that silently rolled overhead. The
wind whips through this valley, and nearby a steel door to an old grain storage bin
slammed open and close. Metal clanking and banging so loudly that it jolted me each
time the pieces of metal met. I wrapped my jacket tighter around me, and realized I
couldn’t even begin to imagine the conflicting freedom and confinement of living on this land and in this small religious community. Today the land is no longer farmed, and the family who now owns the land is paid by the federal government not to farm the land, as if to return it to its natural condition before our family arrived.

Chloe spent the last days of her life on this family farm. I imagine her in the small log home that would one day house the horses, cows, and chickens; and in those last few days the sweat matting her brown wavy hair to the sides of her face, her body shivering underneath several blankets. On October 3rd, 1918, before her own death, Chloe lost the baby she had just given birth to. She still would have been too weak to do little more than watch her neighbors and family walk single-file past the two wooden chairs supporting the small wooden box where baby Helen’s body rested. Helen lived for only one day. The room smelled of birth, death and sickness. In October, the air would have been cool and dry; winter was on its way. Few words would have been spoken by anyone, just somberness in the air that permeated the emotions of everyone who entered. I’m sure they weren’t the first, or the last, family in the Rockland Valley who succumbed to the flu epidemic. Every family was touched by death. But for Chloe what was supposed to be the beginning of new life and the growth of her family became the ending of everything.

Chloe died October 8, 1918, a month that would come to be known as “the cruelest month,” taking more than 195,000 lives across the United States alone. The 1918 flu epidemic didn’t just take the weak and the sick, it took the young, the strong and the healthy, and it took them quickly. Some people would show signs of the illness in the morning and be dead by evening. Death from this flu was cruel and violent. People’s
bodies would turn blue and black, they would cough up blood, their lungs would fill with fluid and they would drown in their own mucous. Because the landscape of Idaho geographically isolates the communities, there is a much higher population of rural communities than there are urban communities. The smaller communities in Idaho were hit hard by this epidemic. Some towns were nearly decimated.
The Light Faded Out

The neighbors had all come to pay their respect. Though Mayme was only four years old at the time, the death and funeral of her baby sister Helen in her parents’ bedroom was something she would always vividly remember. When a boy from the farm two miles down the road took his turn to view baby Helen, Mayme watched. Slowly, he slid the rubber soles of his boots across the wooden floor and approached the chairs. He paused just long enough to reach his arm in and poke Helen’s small face before running out of the room. Mayme later wrote that she “so wanted to fight him for touching our Baby. Knowing me and my temperament, if I wanted to fight him, I no doubt did, right there.”

I only remember my grandmother through the eyes of a young girl, and she was always a spunky lady who never backed down to anyone. I imagine her, at four years old, telling that boy who was older than her that he shouldn’t have touched their baby. Her brow furrowed, her lips pursed together, her hair a ruffled mess, and a fierce glare in her eyes that would have frightened any boy.

Mayme waited next to her brother Albert and sister Agnes at their mother’s bedside for the last of the visitors to leave. The neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Curl, from up on the mountain stayed to help the family. George’s parent’s property was the only house close by, and their home was nearly a mile up the road. The Curl’s home was more than
five miles further up the dirt road past George’s parents’, beyond where the rolling
foothills of the mountain began. George and Mr. Curl lowered the top of the wooden box
covering Helen, and carried it to the buggy. Mayme and Albert were probably able to go
along with the men to the Rockland Cemetery, but their little sister Agnes would have
been told she had to stay behind with the women.

Five days after Helen died, Mayme was again visited by death and called to her
mother’s bedside for the last time. Her little sister Agnes rushed back and forth, running
her hands along the linens on their mother’s bed, stumbling on her nightgown. Mayme
stood at the foot of her mother’s bed; she would have smelled the dry, musty soil from
the sod roof as she watched her mother’s pale face force a slight smile. What Mayme
never forgot that day was a light from the window that made a reflection in her mother’s
eyes, and slowly that light faded out and her mother was gone. In what probably seemed
like an instant, her mother was gone from her life. I’ve wondered about the loss of
connection and love between a mother and her daughter, especially when that loss comes
so unexpectedly. The abrupt end to that relationship has been perpetuated for generations;
the end just came later in life for the rest of us. I struggle to grasp what kind of damage
this death, the loss of a mother, caused for all of us. Was my grandmother unable to learn
some fundamental love that a mother passes on to her daughter, therefore she didn’t
know how to instill that love and faith in her own daughter – and as each generation
came, the gap grew larger.
Mayme and Albert understood, but little Agnes climbed on the bed and wrapped herself around their mother, not knowing that she was dead. Within five days, Mayme had lost a sister and her mother, but that was just the beginning of loss for Mayme.

After Chloe was dead, the kids were asked to leave the room so Mrs. Curl and their Aunt Annie could prepare Chloe for burial. My grandmother and her brother Albert might have taken little Agnes outside. Loss was already heavy in the air. With the epidemic hitting the small community hard, my grandmother probably feared losing those left in her family; but she couldn’t have understood just how real those fears were.

While they were outside, a neighbor girl, who was several years older than Mayme, came by to see if Mayme wanted to play. The girl convinced Mayme to spy on Mrs. Curl and her Aunt. The bedroom door was oak, handmade by her grandfather when the house was built, and there were small cracks between the boards where the girls could peek through. For the first and last time, Mayme saw her mother’s naked body, stiffened, as the women bathed her and moved her into the coffin. Later, Mayme said she couldn’t remember a funeral, but was sure there must have been one held at the Mormon Church in Rockland. There were so many deaths from the flu that I’m sure the reason my grandmother can’t remember her mother’s funeral is because there wasn’t one. Too many people were dying too quickly to hold funerals for all of them. Most people who died were lucky just to be buried quickly and in a coffin. In many places there were mass burials to keep up with the deaths and prevent the bodies from piling up in homes and churches.
When my grandmother was older, after all her children were grown and raising their own families, she often dreamt of her mother in a coffin. Sometimes her mother was in a cistern under the floorboards in a house where she lived and she could pull up the floorboards and raise the coffin up and look at her. There were other dreams where her mother’s coffin was hidden in a secret mine and Mayme would run through a great number of trees and brush, along a small river, and travel for miles alone so that she could see her mother. In all her dreams, Mayme was the only one who knew where her mother was. She had to be very careful that no one else saw her or knew where she was going. It was as though a part of her knew that inside her dreams was the only place where she could still have her mother.

Mayme’s father, George, took the loss of his wife hard. He was left with three small children all under the age of four. He believed he wasn’t capable of raising the kids by himself and farming their land. Unlike Chloe’s mom Alice, who, when her husband left her with six children, was able to care for them and herself, George gave the children to his and Chloe’s parents to raise. He then left Rockland and headed north to Ashton, Idaho where he “took to drinking” for a while. Mayme felt like the period her father was gone seemed like a long time, but later recalled that given other stories she’d heard and events that happened, he may have only been gone for a few months. Regardless, he left his children when they needed love and security most, following the death of their mother and baby sister, and no matter how short or long his absence was there is no doubt that it hurt Mayme, perhaps more than she was ever willing to admit.
Chloe’s mom Alice and her stepfather Dennis took Agnes to live with them, and Mayme and Albert went to live with George’s parents. Throughout the years after Chloe’s death Mayme would live in many homes, some were family and others only friends.

After Chloe and baby Helen died, another picture was taken of my great-grandfather and the three remaining children. I imagine this picture was taken before he left the kids with family members. Maybe he had the photo taken so he would have it to look at when he got lonely. Maybe he wasn’t planning on coming back and that picture was his way of capturing and holding on to what was left of his family and the life he once had.

In this picture their eyes are all dark and heavy. The girls’ features are like their mother’s, and Albert’s like his father’s. In their eyes I see uncertainty and sadness. My great grandfather wears a dark suite in this picture, another crisp white cotton shirt and a bow tie. But what is most striking is that as well dressed as they all appear, my great grandfather wears his old worn-out work boots. I don’t know if dress shoes were a luxury he couldn’t afford, or if he simply didn’t think about it. Maybe because he was consumed by the loss of his wife and young child he put on his work boots, like he did every day, as if this day were no different than any other. This picture remains, and along with the few others, they give me insight into a world and people I can only visualize and bring to life in my own mind. These pictures are tangible, in which the exact details of the moment have been captured and saved for me. And this one moment cannot be altered or
forgotten over time they way memories often are. Memories fade and always morph into what we need them to be emotionally, not necessarily what really happened.

My mother recently shared with me some postcards that once belonged to Chloe. Most of the cards are correspondence with her sisters or female cousins who lived in Utah, but there was one postcard that always perplexed my mother. Originally she believed it had been written in another language, however, Chloe’s named was signed at the bottom. Years passed, and every now and then my mother would remember the postcard and wonder about it. It wasn’t until I started asking my mother questions about my great grandmother and trying to find stories or mementos from Chloe’s life when she pulled the old postcard out once again with an idea. She began to wonder if Chloe had written the card in some sort of code. My mother was right. She figured out that Chloe had used the alphabet backwards to create her secret code. Chloe’s own granddaughter, my mother, had insight into the way a grandmother she never knew thought. The card was a love note to George before they were married. The card is faded, worn and yellowed around the edges from time. On the front is written “Golden Days of Love” and there is an American flag and a man on a chase lounge with a young woman’s arms around his neck and her hands caressing his chin. Once my mother had broken Chloe’s secret code, she figured out what Chloe had written:

To my dearest sweetheart
Gee but I am lonesome
so I thought I would send
you this card I wish my
dream had been true when you
come down Sunday I will tell you
what I am going to do I will be
glad when Sunday comes so I can
see you again
from your
dear Chloie W.

There is no punctuation or capitalization and she wrote in cursive. Especially
interesting is that Chloe signed her name differently than it has ever appeared on any
legal document I have come across for her. Even on her tombstone her name is spelled
Chloe. I don’t know if she changed the spelling of her name to be different, or if the way
it was spelled in all of the other places is wrong. I’ll never know. What I’ve come to love
the most about this postcard is the romance and secrecy I read from the words she wrote
in code. This tiny faded postcard is nearly 100 years old, and it offers first-hand insight
into my great grandmother while she was a young girl with dreams and so in love. This
postcard has outlasted everyone who ever knew her, it has outlasted every story and
every memory. While I may never know the depths of her dreams, I’m permitted for one
moment to enter her thoughts; her need to be secretive and the sense of longing weigh on
my mind. The memories and the stories of her life faded so easily as time passed, and as
people who once knew her died.

These pictures and postcards are the few things remaining from Chloe’s life
which are tangible, and by holding them in my hands my memory doesn’t work as hard
to imagine what things must have been like for all of them. Looking at them, I can’t help
but wonder if Chloe chose George, based on her own limited memory of her father.
Though she couldn’t have known how young she herself would die, did Chloe see in
George a weakness that was similar to that of her own father? She lost her father when
she was just four years old, the same age at which her daughter Mayme would lose her
mother and father. The effect this would have on each of these women may have been insurmountable. Chloe was old enough to remember her father leaving, just as my grandmother was old enough to remember the death of her mother and subsequent loss of her family.

It is easy for me to look back in time and see these men as weak and unable to provide emotional stability to their family. But I also recognize that each generation of women who followed married the same type of mentally and emotionally weak men and I believe this was because we only had the examples of our own fathers. How could we choose strong men, who were supportive partners to their wives and attentive to their children? We may have been surrounded by strong patriarchal fathers in the Mormon communities we were raised, but after Chloe’s death each of the women who followed never again fully participated in church doctrine. Each generation had varying degrees of submission to the Mormon faith: teaching a primary class, having our children blessed, or even allowing them to be baptized. But we refused to conform to church doctrine that a man ruled over the home, that the only way a woman could achieve salvation was through her attachment and marriage to a man in a temple ceremony, and most contemptibly that church doctrine should never be questioned – that if we prayed and believed enough the answers would come.

There were times growing up that I tried in earnest to follow church doctrine and I was certain I did believe and pray enough, and yet there was also a part of me that never stopped asking questions. I never acquiesced to the religious zealots the Mormon culture is full of; so I, like my predecessors, chose the other extreme – weak men.
After George left, Mayme and Albert lived with George’s parents, his sister Annie, and his brother Dave. The homes owned by George’s father and brother Dave were made of clapboard and had shingles on top. Each of the homes only had two rooms apiece. George’s home only had boards across the top of the roof, and the inside ceiling was made of a cloth similar to unbleached muslin but without seams. The farms George, Dave, and their father owned were just outside of Rockland, and they were each within a few miles of the other, helping to keep the family close.

When George returned after his breakdown, he came back to the farm he’d lived and worked on while married to Chloe, but his children continued to live with his and Chloe’s parents and he stayed in the house alone and went back to farming the land. While living with their paternal grandparents, Mayme and Albert were only a few miles from their father’s farm, and their younger sister Agnes was more than five miles away living in town with their maternal grandparents. Mayme and Albert rarely saw Agnes. The three siblings became more like distant relatives than brother and sisters.

On the few occasions when Chloe’s older sisters came to Rockland from Utah to visit Alice, Mayme’s father would take her and Albert to Alice and Dennis’ home. During those years separated from Agnes, these visits were the few times Mayme and Albert were able to see their little sister. The visits were so infrequent that by the time Agnes started school she rushed home her first day so excited that she’d met a boy with the same last name as hers; that boy was her brother Albert, but she had seen him so few times that she couldn’t remember that he was her brother. My grandmother’s sons tell this story with humor and yet the disconnection saddens me.
Mayme remembered those years living with her paternal grandparents like an adventure. Their home was lit by a kerosene lantern on the nights when the moon wasn’t bright enough to light the way. Her aunt and uncle sang them to sleep with songs such as Juanita, Red Wing and My Bonnie. All plumbing was outside, and the water on her grandfather’s farm was pumped from a very deep well by a tall galvanized steel windmill. This was different than the windmill on her father’s farm that was made of wood, and where the water came from a small underground creek. Windmills were a good source of energy because in Rockland and its surrounding valleys wind always blows.

The water on Mayme’s grandfather’s farm was pumped from the windmill into a big oblong cement tank for the horses and cows, and through a long hose into a cement cistern inside of the yard for household use. No matter how hot the weather was outside, the water inside the cistern was always cold. The cistern had a rounded top with a pipe for the pitcher pump that came through the cement. There was a trap door so a ladder could be placed inside so someone could take down a broom and clean it out each season before being filled with fresh water.

The home was heated with wood, which was also used to cook the meals. Usually, the wood was hauled from the mountains by a team of two men, horses, and a wagon. The men would leave early in the morning, right after breakfast, and almost always took an entire day for just one load of wood. Mayme and Albert were tasked with the chore of carrying the chopped wood inside and taking a bucket out to the woodpile to gather chips and bark for the woodbox.
Mayme and Albert spent much of their free time watching the men work the fields with the family draft horses. The horses were necessary for both transportation and heavy farm work. Draft horses were chosen because of their strength, stamina, and their patient temperaments. They are large animals, weighing over 1,500 pounds and sometimes six feet tall. For fun, Mayme and Albert pretended to work the fields with their own team of stick horses. Mayme watched and studied the horses; she knew the temperaments and personalities of both the work and saddle horses.

Growing up, George’s father absolutely refused to let Mayme help with the dishes, they were done by the other women, her grandmother and aunt. He told her that he’d rather set them on the floor and let the cats lick them clean before having her help with dishes. His interest in encouraging Mayme to break away from traditional roles for women both surprises and pleases me. I’m sure rejecting work that other women in the house were required to do excited and intrigued Mayme. The only time she was able to help set the table was if her grandfather wasn’t around. As the years passed on and Mayme looked back, she believed the outside chores she and Albert did were only meant to keep them out of trouble. I don’t know why her grandfather felt this way, or what he wanted for his granddaughter, but he revealed to Mayme a glimpse of a strong caring man who wanted something else for his granddaughter. He saw something, strength or determination, in my grandmother, and his persistence in Mayme doing other things around the farm represented the possibility that she could do anything on her own. Maybe these experiences with her grandfather fostered in her that stubborn independence that
came to define her. Regardless, there was a brief moment in Mayme’s life when a man
was strong, loving, and encouraging.

Mayme’s grandfather was a spunky fellow with only a left hand. He lost his right
hand in 1907 when he was greasing the thrasher and his hand was caught and crushed in
the machine. He learned to eat and write with his left hand. Mayme always remembered
that there wasn’t anything anyone else could do with two hands that he couldn’t do with
one. His strength was inspirational. Mayme loved and admired her paternal grandfather.
At the time, she probably knew little if anything about her mother’s father Noble. I don’t
know if, as she grew older, she asked questions, or if she ever looked at the history of
Chloe’s parents. Even though her father hadn’t entirely abandoned her and her siblings
after their mother’s death, there were similarities between Noble and George. Maybe she
couldn’t see them, maybe I’m the only one who has stopped to think about how these
men were similarly weak. And maybe I can only see this because I have the benefit of
time. I can look to the past and see the similarities generation after generation. I can look
at these men and compare how my mother’s father – a man I never knew – and my own
father are similar, and more importantly how my first husband is so much like my own
father. I can see that over the years, throughout the generations, the men we married were
all similarly weak and sometimes cowards.

As the years went on, Mayme and Albert were sometimes able to stay with their father
for several days at a time. George would be up early, frying bacon and eggs and making
biscuits. Those memories never faded and were happy for her. One of the things she
remembered most was traveling with her father in the early morning hours to start
farming, or helping the neighbors finish up their work after his was completed. For the rest of Mayme’s life, every time she saw a pale pink sky sunrise that turned to a deep orange-red and faded out, she thought of those early morning rides in the buggy with her father.

During the years following their mother’s death, Albert stayed at their father’s farm more often than Mayme. She believed that together, her and Albert would have gotten into more mischief than one little boy riding a horse along side his father. These experiences and the knowledge that Albert stayed with their father probably eventually intensified the longing for her father’s love; a longing that in a few short years would eventually force her to fulfill that love somewhere else.

My grandmother tried convincing herself she was fine with her father’s choices, and maybe she was. But looking back, I can see her father’s choice bothered her more than she would say. Mayme made excuses for why her father wasn’t able to be the man she needed him to be, even my mother made excuses for her grandfather’s failures. Sometimes making excuses is easier than seeing the truth. I know, because I made the same excuses for my own father and Danniell continues to make the same excuses for her father.

George consumed himself with farming and isolating himself from his children rather than deal with the fact that his wife was dead and he was now a single father of three young children. This isolation and separation went on for seven years then George married a woman who was only 13 years older than Mayme. By that time, Mayme was no longer a little girl needing a mother’s attentive affection, and she’d grown accustomed
to her father’s lack of involvement in her day to day life. She probably never stopped longing for the love of her dead mother. She did stop waiting for that love and attention from her father.

October 9, 1920, two years after her mother died, Mayme lost the paternal grandmother that she’d been living with. Some time prior to her grandmother’s death, her grandmother had gone to the doctor for a sore on her hand that kept growing larger and larger. The doctor told her she needed to have her hand amputated to stop the growth of cancer, but she refused.

After Mayme’s grandmother died her grandfather never lived on the farm again, and George took over farming both Dave’s and his father’s farms. Now he was farming all three of the family farms. As each woman in George’s life died, he immersed himself more into farming the land. After her grandmother’s death, Mayme was sent to Rockland to board with a friend of the family. Her grandfather also moved to Rockland. After his wife’s death, Mayme’s grandfather got himself a Boly faced horse team, and she would travel around the community with him in his buggy selling church books and McNess products (similar to Watkins and Avon). During the years following Mayme’s grandmother’s death, Mayme and Albert were separated and each living with different families or friends; this separation isolated Mayme even more from those she loved and longed to be with.

The death of her grandmother and the shuffling around from home to home that followed may have been the pivotal point that sealed all our fates. Could Mayme’s life have been different if she’d been able to stay with her grandfather, at least until she were 55.
18? How much damage did the continued shuffling and transitioning from one home and one family to another cause? What kind of impact might the continued attention and guidance of the strong, caring man that her grandfather was have had on Mayme? There are always the what ifs; what if Mayme’s father left and never saw her again or he was no longer involved in her life, what if I had never seen my father again after he left. But the biggest what if for me continues to be: what if Scott was completely out of the picture, instead of his continued halfway in and halfway out? How different might all of our lives have been? There is the possibility that my daughters’ lives could have been dramatically different without the unpredictability of Scott’s involvement in their day to day lives? I fear, this is the point in our lives where my vigilance standing watch at the gate failed. I let him in, I let in the legacy. I gave fuel to the already smoldering fire.

In 1925 Mayme’s life changed again. Her Aunt Annie met and was courted by a man with two small children who had lost his wife and another child. Her Aunt Annie once told her that Mayme seemed like a sister to her, but Mayme always felt that her aunt was more like a mother than a sister. When Annie married this man and moved away, Mayme felt this loss deeply. It seemed that the women she loved and came to rely on were either dying or leaving, and the men in her life were even less reliable, they simply abandoned her.

After Annie married, Mayme occasionally spent time with her and the new family. One Easter weekend Mayme spent with her Aunt Annie nearly killed her. Mayme and her cousins wanted to take the horses out to ride, and Mayme was so much in love with the larger field horse: he was black with a star on his forehead and had one white
hind foot, and he was also the size of a Clydesdale. Her uncle told her the horse was broke to ride, and since she wanted to ride him so badly her uncle saddled him up.

Mayme rode the field horse and her new cousins rode one of the older bay horses. After the girls had ridden a short distance from the farm, the old bay kicked the back of his hind quarters and one of the girls was thrown to the ground. The horse didn’t have a saddle, and there was no place to climb back on. Mayme got off of her horse to help her cousin and when Mayme attempted to get back on her own horse, her foot slipped through the stirrup, panicking the horse. The frightened horse took off dragging Mayme behind him.

Mayme was drug for more than a mile, through fields and rocks, and broken barbed wire fences. She had a hoof print on her face, but never knew if the horse just kicked her or if she had been stepped on. Her body was cut, she was bleeding and bruised and nearly all of her clothes had been stripped from her body. Mayme was taken to the American Falls hospital, and she later wondered how she got there. The only road to American Falls was more than thirteen miles of narrow and windy stretches, and her family didn’t have a car. In fact, very few people owned cars in Rockland during this time.

Once at the hospital, Mayme was packed in ice for several days to keep the swelling and fever down. The doctors told her family that she wouldn’t live. She was unconscious for ten days, and during this time she kept calling for her mother; a longing that continued to dominate her subconscious. Once the doctors realized she would live, they said she’d never walk again. One leg had been pulled out six inches longer than the
other. They also said she wouldn’t be able to have children. Mayme couldn’t remember how long she was in the hospital, but remembered the day her father came to bring her home back to the farm she wore a pink kimono and house slippers home that she couldn’t remember putting on. Her face and body were still covered with scabs and new scars. It was difficult for her to walk very easily on her own: her head was bent to one side, her spine was shaped like an “S” and she couldn’t bend her left arm to touch herself on that shoulder.

Mayme hadn’t been home for very long before she was back out with the horses. One night, in the early evening hours, one of the saddle horses got lose. Mayme, dressed in her nightgown and the pink kimono robe from the hospital, saw one of the horses dragging a rope behind her, and since no one else was around Mayme followed the horse. She watched her cross the bridge over the creek, but Mayme kept her distance. She continually talked to the horse until finally the horse let her close enough to grab hold of the rope. Mayme knew well the old saying that if a horse throws you, you have to get right back on or you’ll always be afraid. The horse had wandered quite a distance from the barn, and because Mayme had ridden this saddle horse before she decided she would ride her back to the farm. She coaxed the horse close to an old fence and climbed on, but the horse spooked and bucked her off. Luckily, she held on to the rope, and even though she fell under the horse’s feet she wasn’t stepped on. She said, “The only thing hurt was my ego. I walked and led the horse back to the barn and tied her up.” This was the grandmother I knew: someone who was stubborn, a fighter, and a survivor. I’ve always loved these two stories. I relate to her will to survive. I’ve felt it running through my own
veins. I’ve felt that sheer stubborn determination to prove others wrong when they’ve said I couldn’t do something. Those traits I have I know come from her.

Maybe this was the beginning of what would become a long series of events Mayme would survive. If she weren’t the kind of woman who wasn’t afraid to get back on the horse, she wouldn’t have been the kind of woman to survive the bad luck that would continue to befall her for many years to come.

Several weeks after Mayme had been home from the hospital she contracted measles and she was kept in a dark room for two weeks. Unable to do anything, she stayed in bed waiting. But she didn’t know what she was waiting for. To her good fortune, after she recovered from measles, an osteopath, something similar to a naturopath or an early chiropractor, traveling through the area had heard about Mayme and her recent ordeal. He agreed to treat her, coming every day to massage and pull, and push on her spine and legs. He was able to pull her non-injured leg out so that it was the same length as the now elongated injured leg. He was also able to straighten her “S” shaped spine. Even though he left before he completed all of her treatments, Mayme was able to touch her shoulder and finally hold her head straight again.

Mayme was shuffled around from home to home during the seven years her father remained single. Each time she moved, and with each death, she seemed to long more for some semblance of family and home; for something stable and constant. She became more reckless in the choices she made the older she became. But with her recklessness there was also a fearlessness and courage that seemed uncontainable. She spent many
years of her life watching those she loved die, and even worse, distance themselves from her.

As a young girl I looked to my grandmother as a role model for strength and courage. I never looked deeper into the consequences of her actions; all I wanted to see was the one woman whom I believed would always be there to love me and keep me safe. But now, as a mother of two daughters seeking to break a damning legacy, I struggle to distance myself from my grandmother’s reckless abandoned ways of living. I can’t be so reckless and careless. In a sad way, what helped my grandmother survive was also what destroyed her.
In my quest for answers I'm continually reminded that my sense of place and ties to the landscape are based on my own experiences within these regions. And although the women in my family have shared a legacy in this rugged region, just as our perception and awareness about this legacy aren’t the same – our connections to the land, while they’ve defined us, they have also been varied.

In 1929, Mayme married Earl Leroy. He called her *babe* and she felt he carried her around on a satin pillow. Mostly, I only heard him referred to as Roy, and although he isn’t my grandfather, I feel closer to this man than I do my own grandfather. He was nearly nine years older than Mayme, and after they married she left Rockland and her family to live several hundred miles west in Weiser, Idaho where Roy’s family was living. The landscape there is high desert; at a lower elevation than Rockland, Weiser lacks the mountains and streams of Rockland, and receives substantially less snowfall.

Much about Mayme’s life was changing: she moved from a familiar landscape, she left her father, her stepmother, siblings, and the community that raised her. All mention of her grandfather fades from her stories. She was now surrounded by Roy’s family who were all but strangers to her. But moving around and living with strangers was something Mayme knew well. All she thought about was being with Roy, and after they fell in love nothing else mattered but being together. Leaving Rockland and her
family couldn’t have been all that hard; for seven years she was raised by friends and other family members, seeing her siblings very little.

Sadly, Mayme’s relationship with Roy’s family was trying, at best. Roy had been their favorite son, and his sisters always believed that Mayme stole their brother from them. Though Mayme never spoke poorly of his family, they freely spoke critically of her. Roy’s family had once been slave owners in the south and when they traveled west they carried with them their belief of entitlement and superiority. As Baptist, they also weren’t happy their son married a Mormon girl. But none of that mattered to the young couple. Regardless of Roy’s family’s feelings or beliefs he loved Mayme, and not age, religion, family, or distance would keep them apart.

They were together for nearly four years before they had any children. I don’t know if they tried for years and were unable to conceive, if there were pregnancies and losses, or they simply chose to wait, but their first son was born in 1933 while they were living in Weiser. Mayme and Roy worked on a small farm earning one dollar per day. In addition to their wage, they were provided a small log cabin to live in while they worked on the farm. This was during The Great Depression and work and food were hard to find for everyone. Roy and Mayme were lucky though, they were able to supplement their meager food supply with wild honey and local wild game. There were small birds and deer Roy sometimes killed for additional food.

One year when the game had been scarce, Roy shot an owl. It looked young and fat, so they decided to cook it. Mayme boiled the owl and it looked and smelled good, but when she stirred in the noodles, the silver pealed off the silver plated spoon. This scared
them both so much that they decided to feed it to the cat instead. Roy never again shot another owl.

Within two years came the birth of their second son. These were good years for Mayme. She and Roy had two healthy boys, they spent their time together laughing and joking with each other, and enjoying the outdoors fishing and hunting. Her life with Roy was stable and his presence strong and constant. While their physical home may have fluctuated, the family she was surrounded were her own, and their presence was constant.

They moved again, this time further north to Riggins, Idaho, where Roy began working for the Civilian Conservation Corporation who was building a road along the Salmon River. The town of Riggins lies deep in the canyons where the Salmon River and Little Salmon River meet. The region is full of rivers, streams, mountain lakes, alpine meadows, and forests. The rugged mountains located in this region will not be ignored; they swell voluptuously high above the canyon bottoms. Immediately, your eyes are drawn upward to their rounded and curved peaks. With an elevation of only 1,800 feet in the canyon bottoms, the temperatures and seasons are generally mild, and the land is always a varied shade of green and while in Riggins, Mayme and Roy’s home was a tent with a wood floor. While there were trying times financially, they continued to have many good years together here.

In 1938, Roy picked up a job as a hoist operator with the Golden Anchor Mine, a gold producing mine, so they moved again. The mine was isolated, located 35 miles southeast of Riggins and about 50 miles by road north of McCall. Cars were only able to get in three months of the year and during the winters they shipped all cars out. Their first
winter the mail came in by dog sled, and the snow was more than ten feet deep in the surrounding valley. Roy was now making more money than he ever had at any of the other jobs, and the work at the mine was consistent and reliable, particularly at a time when the preceding years of The Great Depression had been filled with so much struggle and despair. They thought their luck had changed.

With the new job came the ability to afford a few luxuries, like a new radio and a 1940 Hudson. Within a year of that move their third son was born. At the time, women were required to spend ten full, 24 hour days in the hospital. Because her son was born after 1:00 a.m. Mayme talked the nurse into changing the time of her son’s birth to before midnight so that she could go home the following weekend with her husband. If she had been unable to change his birth date she would have been forced to stay at the hospital until the following weekend when Roy would have been able to come get her. Mayme kept this secret from her son until a few years before her death when she finally told him the date he was really born and why she’d lied about his actual birth date. This little lie exemplifies to me the secrets a mother keeps from her children. It reminds me that I’m not the only mother in our family history to keep secrets from my children, and I wonder even more what secrets my mother keeps from me.

For the last several years I have diligently tried to uncover answers, examining stories from the lives of my great grandmother, my grandmother and my mother. I am told the same stories over and over, and although I love these stories, what I really desire to know is what each of these women thought and dreamed about. I wonder if there are secrets the storytellers withhold in an attempt to keep their own secrets safe? In my
search, I’ve discovered more about my grandmother as a young woman looking at the many pictures throughout the years of her life, and from the details not told in a particular story. I see happiness, sadness, and desperation in my grandmother’s eyes, in her stance, the way she held her shoulders high or rigidly held her arms at her side. I know the stories I have been told are jaded by the storyteller, but these pictures capture a moment of truth through the eyes of the photographed. The pictures freeze the landscape in time, places that even today are still rural and mountainous. Her home – run down, the paint peeling, sometimes no more than a shack; the clothes she wore – dresses that covered her legs to mid-shin with short and long-sleeved tops, and sometimes a pair of pants, a blouse and jacket. Memories fade in time, and I can’t help but question how warped they become from the storytellers viewpoint. A picture may fade in time, but the details never change.

There is a noticeable change in my grandmother’s eyes, in her facial features, in her stance, in pictures taken before and after 1941; before, she is relaxed and content – after, she is anxious and worried. On January 7, 1941, her life forever changed after Roy was killed instantly when his body became entangled in the hoist apparatus more than 500 feet below ground of the mine. All the losses of her young life culminated in this tragedy. Once Roy’s remains were removed from the mine shaft they were hauled several miles by sled before being transferred to a truck that returned his body to Weiser where his family was living. Not only had Mayme lost her husband, but Roy’s family, his mother in particular, blamed Mayme for the death of their son. Roy was only 36 and Mayme only 27; they had been married for nearly nine years, and now Mayme had three
young boys all under the age of eight to raise alone. Given her history of death and loss, it’s possible she believed she had brought on Roy’s death and maybe she too began blaming herself. Abruptly, all stability and support she finally had in her life with Roy was once again taken from her. Her life with Roy had been everything she ever needed it to be. She believed he was her soul mate; Roy loved and treated her better than any man ever would again, and together with their three boys, they were happy. Roy’s sudden death was the catalyst that pulled Mayme back into the family pattern of making bad choices. She must have felt like happiness and stability never lasted very long, and that companionship and stability were only temporary. Happiness in Mayme’s life was always within reaching distance, but never seemed accessible for any length of time. Again, I can’t help but wonder how all of our lives might have turned out differently if Roy had not been killed.

Years later, I read in my grandmother’s eulogy that she left her three boys with Roy’s family for a couple of months to gather herself, but I didn’t believe my grandmother would have abandoned her boys just to pull herself together. Those boys were all she had left of her life with Roy, and letting them go, even temporarily, would mean losing him all over again. She was strong and fiercely independent; that is how I know my grandmother. Even though she lost the love of her life and great uncertainty about their future survival filled her mind, she wasn’t about to make the same mistake her father made, this I’m certain. But believing that I knew how my grandmother responded after the death of Roy wasn’t enough. I needed answers. I needed to know the truth. The
depths of Mayme’s strength and the choices she made during the times of loss mattered most if I had any hope of finding answers and helping my own daughters.

I left my home in Boise and drove two hundred miles to Rockland, where my grandmother’s last living sibling still resides. Ethel is my grandmother’s half sister, and whenever I see Ethel, in her I see reflections of my grandmother. Their faces both have that same rounded shape and in each of their eyes I find kindness and safety. During this visit Ethel shared with me, and on several other occasions, the story of when she was a young girl and she was watching Mayme and Roy when they were in the watershed together. She was standing on a stool looking out the window trying to see what the two of them were doing when her foot slipped and she fell off the stool and hit her chin. She never said what Mayme and Roy were doing, and I have not asked. As inquisitive as I have been and as many questions as I’ve asked, this is one question where I don’t know that the answer matters. I just want Ethel to share her stories with me, and maybe I’d rather imagine on my own what, as young lovers hiding in an old watershed, they were doing.

I asked Ethel if what was written in Mayme’s eulogy was true: had Mayme left the boys with Roy’s family after his death? Ethel was adamant, absolutely not – Mayme never left the boys with anyone. She loved them too much and she was too strong. And while that was the answer I wanted and needed, her two surviving sons remember vividly having spent a considerable amount of time with their father’s family. If my grandmother was no better than the men before her – her father and maternal grandfather – who left their children, then how could she be the matriarch, the pillar of strength that I had seen
and still needed her to be. There are life lessons my mother has taught me, but those came later in my life after my grandmother was gone. I remember my grandmother most as a little girl; she was always the woman who provided the love and guidance I needed. My memories of my mother during my younger years are now nearly non-existent. I’m only able to remember a few specific stories and events. And, without her pictures, I wonder if I’d ever remember what she really looked like. It is possible that the strong connection I have to my grandmother has made me biased towards my own mother over the years, and maybe that has clouded my search for truth. Is it possible for me to see my grandmother and my mother for who they really were and are? Maybe it is only possible for me to see these two women as I need them to be. My search for answers revealed that after Roy’s death my grandmother made a series of bad choices when it came to her relationships with men; choices that sadden me. She became reckless in her choices and that wild abandonment that had sustained her growing up, was also what destroyed her as a grown woman. I saw my grandmother in a way I had never imagined, and for the first time understood that she contributed significantly in perpetuating this legacy of self destruction. Perhaps this new insight I had recently discovered and began to feel about my grandmother was similar to something my own mother had always seen in her mother, and is unwilling to admit. Even I don’t want to admit it, but I know I must – for my own daughters’ sakes.

For years after the death of Roy, Mayme struggled emotionally and financially. She had only a ninth grade education and no marketable experience, which made
supporting herself and the boys more than challenging. Mayme used the small amount of insurance money she received from Roy’s death, and made a down payment on a ten acre farm outside of Weiser so she would be closer to Roy’s family. She might have believed the boys should be closer to their father’s family to learn more about who their father was. I’ve wondered if his family told her she should keep the boys close to them, that she owed them that much after killing their son. I’ve also wondered if my grandmother thought living near Roy’s family might make her feel as close to Roy as could possibly ever be. After her and the boys moved into the small home on the ten acre farm she discovered the seller had neglected to tell her that the only water with the place was a hand operated domestic well. The seller also neglected to give her the necessary water rights for irrigation water from the Snake River. In order to farm the land as she had planned, she would not only need the water rights, but a very expensive pump to pull water for irrigation from the Snake River which ran on one side of the ten acres. She managed to stay on the farm for more than a year before selling it and moving back to Rockland.
In his book Arctic Dreams, Barry Lopez wrote that man, “having taken on his own destiny… must now think with critical intelligence about where to defer. He must learn restraint.” His analysis relates to the survival and preservation of the landscape, but this analysis also applies to the emotional survival and preservation of the women I come from. Mayme, in many ways, was still struggling to master her own destiny, she was forced to defer to a man for her own survival. She had only a ninth grade education and lived in an environment where farming and manual labor were the main sources for earning a living. They were also predominantly a man’s occupation. Mayme always believed the boys needed a father, and that she needed a husband for economic survival. Following Roy’s death, Mayme married and divorced, in all, seven times. Each relationship would be shorter and worse than the previous, and in her eyes no man would ever measure up to the man Roy was.

Mayme’s second marriage was to a man named John. There are gaps in the story and timelines I’ve been given. I’ve wondered if she met John while she was struggling to make a living on the farm she purchased after Roy’s death. Because Weiser is so close to the Oregon border, logically it would seem she must have met him while in Weiser. John lived across the border in Oregon where he owned land. Others saw him as a quiet man, but to Mayme he was both physically and verbally abusive. Mayme’s time with John was
short and she left him without getting a divorce, returning with the boys to Rockland. I’ve not been able to find out if she simply didn’t have the money to file for divorce and her fear of him was so strong that she saw her only option as leaving, or if her decision to leave John without a divorce was the beginning of her propensity to run from difficult situations rather than face them head on. This running from problems is another part of our legacy. In fact, it has been a strong characteristic in Danniell’s behavior. Like my grandmother, rather than face the difficult situation she’s placed herself in, she chooses to either pretend it’s not happening or she just walks away.

America was thick in the middle of World War II after Mayme left John. On a trip from Rockland to Pocatello, the closest city in any direction for several hundred miles, Mayme and her sister picked up a hitchhiker on their way back to Rockland. Today, all anyone can remember is that his nickname was Sunny. Though Mayme didn’t know it at the time, he was AWOL from the Army. I’m told he was a good looking young man and that he lived with Mayme and the boys for part of spring and the summer. When someone in the small community discovered he was a deserter they contacted the army and turned him in. He was taken away and placed in a military prison in California. He hadn’t been gone very long when Mayme realized she was pregnant. Because she was still not divorced from John she returned to Oregon to live with him, but she only stayed with him for six weeks when he realized the child she carried wasn’t his. Mayme was so afraid of John and what he might do to her for this act of infidelity that she left with the boys and hid for six weeks in Twin Falls, a city over a hundred miles west of Rockland, in a cabin.
at a Tourist camp. The abuse from John stopped, and with the realization that she had conceived a child with another man he quickly divorced her.

Mayme decided she wanted to be with Sunny, the father of her unborn child, so she moved to California. Once there, she was able to convince the military prison officials into allowing her and Sunny to get married while he was in prison so her child wouldn’t be born out of wedlock. After their marriage, there were times during the night, with her three boys in the back seat of the 1940 Hudson, she would sneak letters to Sunny, crawling on the ground each time the spotlight shone in her direction. While he was in prison, she gave birth to the daughter she and Roy had always wanted. The little girl was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. Mayme named her Chloe after her mother and buried her in California. She never again saw this daughter’s grave. Sunny was transferred to another military prison in Montana, and Mayme decided again to follow him. I don’t know why she continued to wait for Sunny, or why she stayed married to him. Ultimately, she didn’t stay in Montana very long before finally returning to Rockland. Sometime between her departure from Montana and after her arrival in Rockland, she divorced Sunny. Another failed marriage, another escape and her return to the community and landscape of her birth.

Once back in Rockland she met and married Lee, who was a carpenter. He had land and money, but lacked character. Before long, he started talking poorly about Mayme to others in the community, and after Mayme’s oldest son caught him beating her up, her son took matters into his own hands. He beat up Lee, and that was the end of that marriage.
The next man she married was Mike, a redhead who was unable to do anything without his mother’s permission. Mayme tired quickly of Mike’s neediness and bondage to his mother and then left him and finally divorced him. She must have had her eyes on someone else, because on the day she divorced Mike, Mayme asked the judge if he also did marriages, and when he agreed she asked him to wait for just one moment. Mayme left for a brief moment and returned with Wally and then asked the judge to marry them. Mayme’s last two marriages were to the same man, Wallace Egbert – my mother’s father, and Mayme spent the remainder of her life in Pocatello, a town about 30 miles south of Rockland.

My grandmother kept each of her marriage licenses for many years; my mother had even held each of them in her hands. But, after my grandmother’s death my mother could only find two – the one from her marriage to Roy and the one from her second marriage to Wally. I grew up with my mother always telling me she didn’t want to be married as many times as her mother. And for my mother, I believed it bothered her that her mother had been married so many times. But I’m more bothered by the reckless behavior and choices of men my grandmother and mother made than the number of men my grandmother was married to.

At 40 years old, Mayme solidified the pattern set by her foremothers, not because she married another weak man who was incapable of being a stable father or husband, but because she had a daughter with him. With Wally, who lacked the strength and stability that Roy and her paternal grandfather had given her, Mayme gave birth to my mother Melody on August 26, 1954. Mayme and Wally married in December of 1953, and
Melody was born in August 1954, and for years my grandmother told my mother she was
born a month premature. Mayme may have been ashamed that my mother had been
conceived out of wedlock, as had her other daughter, but I don’t think my grandmother
put too much weight on what others thought. In fact, based on her behavior, her choices
and actions demonstrate rebelliousness against the community and any sense of behaving
as her faith would have expected of her. She continued to involve herself with men who
didn’t meet the church standards. Mayme was making choices that while she may not
have been proud of she made them nonetheless. And yet with that said I believe she did
care what her own children thought, and that she wanted to protect them. There are
overlaps in dates and times between relationships ending and starting.

Wally was 46 when Melody was born, and during Mayme’s pregnancy she and
Wally divorced when he let his friends convince him that he was too old to have fathered
the baby. Melody was almost two years old when Mayme and Wally married for the
second time. Mayme never forgave Wally for saying the baby she carried wasn’t his. And
yet given her behavior, I don’t see why this surprises her. From their second marriage
together on, their relationship was never easy. She knew she needed a father for her
daughter, and that she would be unable to support the child on her own. The one thing
that Mayme did get from Wally was the daughter she’d always wanted, something that
mattered more to her than the quality of their relationship, or even her own ability to
provide for this daughter. She sometimes told my mother she was her little miracle, and,
ofentimes, called my mother her little afterthought because she was so much older than
the other mothers. Mayme loved her daughter and believed in many ways my mother was
a miracle. My grandmother always told my mother that people couldn’t live in the past and that they lived with the choices they made, making the best of them. And my mother always tried to share that philosophy with me, but I could never buy into it. I always clung to the past, I always felt like I was paying for past choices and decisions all of us made. What I wish they both would have recognized was that while you can’t live in the past you must learn from it; that the past generations and their choices infect and wound future generations’ ability for a more promising future. And, sometimes making the best of the bad choices you made is not enough – why is it necessary to even make those bad choices

Mayme and Wally’s relationship was distant for the remainder of Wally’s life. They never shared a bedroom, and it seems they stayed together more out of dependence than affection: Mayme couldn’t support Melody and Wally believed he couldn’t get anyone else. Wally had cataracts and glaucoma, as well as a heart condition which forced him to retire early from the Union Pacific Railroad. By the time Melody was sixteen her father had already had several heart attacks, leaving him debilitated enough that Mayme could no longer take care of him so she placed him in a nursing home. After 17 years of marriage, Wally died from pneumonia he developed after having been left in a bathroom because the nurse was tired of taking him back and forth from his bed to the bathroom. When Wally died, all of her older children were married and Melody was the only child left at home. Mayme never married again. At this point in her life, after all of the failed marriages, the rebellious behavior and destructive choices, there must have been a sense
of resolution. The young Mayme, who had weathered so much, was not the same as the older Mayme seasoned from experience.

I remember my grandmother most for her independence: an independence that didn’t come until after the many marriages to men who treated her poorly, the death and loss of loved ones, and an ultimate resignation to life events she couldn’t change. She lived alone with her many cats, sometimes there were more than twenty at a time living in and out of her house. She always put cat food outside for the stray cats so they wouldn’t go hungry. She also had two dogs that belonged to my brother and me. Her home was small; it was the home she’d shared with Wally and my mother, and the home I spent the most time in for the first eight years of my life. When you entered her home, the front room was a covered front porch with big windows and the small entryway was filled with houseplants. The living and dining room were one small room divided by a couch, and the kitchen was so small that four people barely fit into it at the same time. There was only one bathroom in the home, and one bedroom upstairs. Downstairs at the bottom of the steps was an old cellar with a wooden door and a dirt floor, and two more small bedrooms. The linoleum throughout the house was faded and cracked, the carpet was old and worn out and the walls were yellow and stained from cat urine.

Mayme spent her free time tending to her yard, growing large patches of bright and beautiful bearded iris with soft flowing petals. She had a raspberry patch, an apricot tree, and rhubarb. Going to my grandmother’s house was always an adventure; between the flower gardens and the fruit trees, there was always a place for my brother and me to play hide and seek.
Looking back on my grandmother’s life from the perspective of a grown woman trying to save her own children from our legacy, I am both strengthened and saddened. I no longer have the ability to see my grandmother as simply a strong matriarch who would always protect me. I must see her for who she was: a woman whose self-destructive rebellious choices sustained a legacy I desperately want to destroy.
I’ve always loved rocks. My grandmother attended rock shows and once had a large collection herself. She kept many of her rocks placed in small, clear plastic bags, stapled at the top, and a small white piece of paper with the scientific name of each typed using her old manual typewriter that I still have, and then stapled to the bag. My mother and I still have many of these rocks. Rock collecting is an interest we’ve shared throughout the generations; as my own girls began to walk they too were both immediately drawn to rocks. Each of my daughters has, at various times, hidden old shoe boxes underneath their beds filled with collected rocks. During the summers when they would visit their dad I would always clean their rooms. I would take out bags of trash, old papers, and broken toys, but I never threw out their rock collections. Sometimes I wondered why they had chosen a rock that seemed ordinary and plain to me. Even when Danniel gathered all of her belongings to live with her father and she left her rocks behind, neither of us could throw them away.

My mother keeps her rocks in a small wooden box, tucked away with other tokens and treasures. Her interest in rocks has remained constant over the years and she now makes jewelry with large bright colorful rocks. She can’t get enough, and when she shares the new pieces of jewelry she’s made from the unique shapes and colors of stones she exudes happiness.
Of the three main rock types, the one that interests me the most is the colorful, layered sedimentary rocks. Sedimentary rocks form as deposits of other rocks or once-living organisms accumulate over the years; a horizontal layering occurs where thousands of years of eroded earth builds up on atop of each other. The weight and pressure of these layers squeezes the moisture from the lowest layers and the compressed layers become sedimentary rocks. Unlike igneous and metamorphic rocks, sedimentary rocks form at temperatures and pressures that do not destroy the remains of plants, animals, and fossils, and these layers provide clues as to the climatic history of the Earth. Looking through sedimentary rocks is always like being on a treasure hunt; you never know what you’ll find hidden within the layers. Sandstone, limestone, shale, conglomerate, and gypsum are all types of sedimentary rocks. Conglomerate rocks interest me the most. They are rounded from rolling and acquire larger piece of sediment like sand and quartz pebbles, and often, pressure alone cannot hold the rock together. Conglomerate rocks are often found along beaches, rivers, and glaciers where water and ice drop them.

Unraveling and understanding this legacy I am a part of is like rolling a conglomerate rock around in my hand. There are so many pieces and parts from so many places, and over the last hundred years a lot has been cemented together and yet the rock as a whole is fragile and vulnerable to the outside elements. It is the larger pieces and the bright quartz pebbles that I want to pluck from the larger whole, but even as bright and beautiful as the quartz pieces are, I know they are only so beautiful in contrast to the sandstone flecks they are merged within. This legacy, I’m discovering is complicated, and a simple x+y=z equation will not provide me with the answers I seek. The entirety of
our history enfolds itself around me emotionally, and in writing my mother’s story I realize I am also part of her history, our shared history, and that I too am part of the problem.

My mother, like the other women in this legacy, privately retains the weight of her life experiences, and there are scars that no matter how deeply I probe I may never know their cause. I now realize I was wrong to believe my mother didn’t love me, and foolish to believe I would love my own daughters more than I believed my mother loved me, and foolish to believe I could be a better mother than her. I’m foolish because I couldn’t see that my mother, like her mother and grandmother, did the best she was capable of given the opportunities available to her and the woman she ultimately is. I’m sure my mother believed she’d be a better mother, and I’m sure she believes she did a good job. As a child I wanted more attention and affection from her, and it is only as a grown woman that I finally recognize my own deep personal need to forgive her inability to be those things. I need to forgive her because I still need and long for her love and approval. Like that little girl I once was, I’m still willing to take whatever love she is capable of giving – even if that leaves me longing for more. For me, some of my mother’s love is better than none. Attempting to know my mother and understand her choices is the only way I can understand who I am, where I’ve come from, and whether or not there is hope for my daughters and any daughters they might have.

The fact that my grandmother married six different men was something that always bothered my mother. My mother’s not certain when she first learned about her mother’s many marriages, but spending the time with my grandmother that I did growing
up, I remember my grandmother, her sisters and sister-in-laws sitting around smoking and drinking their iced-tea or whiskey talking about the men, and reminiscing on times they were out at the local bars drinking until all hours of the night and the way the husbands complained or became downright angry because of their behavior. I don’t remember my grandmother visibly ashamed of having been married six times, but there were moments my mother saw shame in her mother’s eyes. My mother can remember seeing the many marriage certificates that belonged to my grandmother, but after my grandmother died not one of them could be found. And given the fact that my grandmother destroyed almost all of her marriage licenses, then there must have been some truth to her shame. In a conversation between my mother and her mother, a brief instant when they shared something intimate, my mother swore she wouldn’t be married as many times as her mother, and that she wouldn’t marry a man just so her children would have a father. This promise became my mother’s mantra, almost as a resistance that she wouldn’t be like her own mother, that she would be different. I’ve wondered if my mother saw a behavior or pattern in her own mother’s choices that she didn’t want to replicate, but she still hadn’t entirely realized the full implications of the developing legacy that she too would pass on to me.

My mother believed in marrying the man you first gave yourself to, and then spending your life with that man. To her, that romance was possible, but in reality it was unrealistic, especially given our family history. At the time, my mother could only see the two options: you married once and made it work, or like her mother, life becomes a series of endless bad marriages so your children have a father. My mother, like my
grandmother, understood that her survival and ability to live comfortably in the mountainous rural communities of Idaho was dependent upon a man. My grandmother knew no other way of life, and her ignorance was a large part of my mother’s ignorance. My grandmother never had more than an eighth grade education. There was never any emphasis on the fact that with an education a woman has just as much of an ability to provide for herself as she could relying on a man. With an education comes confidence and an awareness of options and choices beyond the small communities in which we were raised.

This romantic belief in love and marrying the first many you gave yourself to was probably fueled further by my mother’s knowledge of how much her mother loved her first husband, and how unhappy she was with my mother’s father. Unfortunately, my mother grew up knowing the only reason her mother and father were married was so that she would have a father. Love became an idealized notion she longed to feel. Even after six bad marriages, my grandmother still believed that a bad father for her child was better than no father at all and she refused to recognize the damage being done to her own daughter.

In the small one or two bedroom homes my mother lived in with her parents over the years, she nearly always shared sleeping space with her mother. Sometimes my mother and her mother slept on the couch in the living room and my grandfather had the only bedroom in the home. When my grandmother finally moved into the house on Washington Street in Pocatello, the home my mother grew up in, there was one bedroom upstairs off the kitchen and two bedrooms downstairs. My grandfather slept in the
bedroom upstairs, and for many years my mother and grandmother shared one of the bedrooms downstairs. The room they shared was small and the floor cold cement, it smelled musty and old. On the left side of the room was my grandmother’s twin size bed and on the right side was my mother’s.

When my mother was 10, her mother finally relented and let her have her own room, but there was always the threat that if she couldn’t keep it clean she’d have to give it up. My mother said her mother was “afraid to let her go.” Letting my mother grow up and become independent meant further isolation and loneliness for my grandmother. My mother, in many ways, was her mother’s only companion. Eventually, my grandmother stopped sleeping in the bedroom next to my mother’s and she began sleeping on the couch upstairs; her husband still resting on the other side of the perfectly wallpapered living room wall. For my mother, normalcy was parents who had never shared a bed let alone slept in the same room, and constant fighting and bickering.
Waiting Anxiously

My grandmother told my mother that when she was a little girl and their dog had puppies my grandmother was forced to kill a litter of their dog’s puppies so my grandfather wouldn’t find out. As each puppy was born she broke its neck, carefully laying to the side while she waited for the next. When I first heard this story I immediately hated my grandfather, and wanted my mother to do the same, but she was calm and emotionless with her feelings toward him. But I was also angry at my grandmother. How could someone so gentle and kind, who loved animals the way she did, be so cold and heartless. My grandmother always had many cats in her home and she was never cruel to them. In fact, she bought extra food for stray animals, so after feeding her own animals she could still feed the neighborhood strays. My grandmother would only have killed those puppies because she was afraid. What my grandmother was afraid of even my mother does not know, or will not say.

My grandfather was a drinker, not always a drunk, but my mother has said he wasn’t nice when he drank. Those were the times he yelled, and sometimes threatened my grandmother. My mother remembers the cops bringing her father home on occasion, and sometimes him sleeping outside in his car. Then one day he just quit drinking. My mother is not sure what prompted it, whether it was a fight or a threat or something else, but he just stopped.
My mother always knew her mother loved her. All of the daughters in this legacy may have recognized their mothers’ love, yet each of the daughters wants so desperately to separate themselves from their mothers that they have been ignorant of the pain and heartache they inflicted on their mothers. Like all of the women in this legacy, we longed more for the love of our fathers who always showed more indifference and little affection towards each of us.

Sitting in my mother’s kitchen late one night on one of my visits home, I asked her the few questions I believed were safe and would allow her to share something about her father and their relationship.

With a hot cup of chai tea, steam swirling out of the glass, I asked, “What kind of relationship did you have?”

She pushes down the ice in her tall whiskey and water then licks her finger. “Probably it would have been considered distant, especially after I was six or so. I don’t know that I could say we ever had a close relationship.”

I have to stop and think about how I want to phrase my next question. “Do you think your relationship with your father was abnormal? By abnormal I mean did the two of you have much interaction?”

She tilts her head, closes her eyes and I can see she’s really thinking about my questions.

“Abnormal as compared to other families? Maybe compared to some, but not to others. As I said, I think I probably had more interaction to age six. I can’t recall any
meaningful conversations with my dad. My relationship with my dad was what I was used to. So no, it never felt abnormal.”

We were silent. I sighed and waited for her to tell me more, if willing, and all she said was, “I have regretted a number of times not knowing him better and not being nicer to him.”

I wanted to ask her what she meant, not being nicer, but I know better. I could not ask my mother this question. And even if I did, I wouldn’t get the answer even if she herself knew the answer herself. I was grateful she shared what she had. Her responses always leave me frustrated and confused. There is an absence of emotion, loss or anger. I wonder why this is, what caused it, and more importantly can she be healed? Can any of us be healed from the wounds that were ignorantly inflicted upon us by our mothers, and that we continue to impose upon our daughters? I wonder if the distance in their relationship was imposed by my mother, forced by her mother, or preferred by her father, or all of the above. How much easier my search would be if the answers from my mother came easier or more openly, but this is one of many subjects my mother and I don’t discuss. I’d like more reflective and insightful responses. I think we would both like to be more open, but we don’t know how, we don’t know where to start. We’re afraid to reveal the secrets we’ve kept so hidden. I’d like to be open-minded to my mother’s life experiences, but we don’t have that kind of relationship. Right now she is not ready to know and accept what has happened in my life, and maybe I’m not ready to hear and accept her perception of our lives together.
Maybe that is how Danniell feels toward me. I know I am not ready to know all of
the things she experienced while living with her father, or that she experienced living on
her own. With the knowledge of Danniell’s experiences also comes the realization that I
don’t have control over her safety or her future success – she’s the only one who has that
control. And control for me always meant safety; if I was in control then no-one could
hurt me and I’ve perpetuated that belief and need for control when it comes to protecting
my own daughters. Realizing that I don’t have control, in many ways, means I have failed
them. My control couldn’t protect them, in fact in only pushed Danniell further away
from me.

I am lucky and excited that there are some memories and stories my mother is
willing to share. Like the time when she was six years old and would wait on the front
steps for her father to come home from work. I can see her sitting on the cement steps,
her blond hair a bob cut, in a cotton dress her mother made for her. Her mother was
always making her new dresses. She waited, anxiously tapping her feet, her elbows
resting on her knees, her chin in the palms of her hands. Once he arrived, he slowly
staggered towards her as she ran with such excitement and anticipation to him that she
nearly couldn’t contain herself. He was finally home and she knew that sometimes in his
lunchbox there would be leftovers he would let her have. I wonder if he knew how much
this excited his daughter and if sometimes he intentionally saved something for her to
find. But this excited little girl I’ve imagined is not the mother I now know. Based on this
story, I know she was excited to see her father and they were once close and her longing
for his love and attention is never more obvious. In this story she is happy and carefree. I have watched my own daughters struggle for the same emotional attention from their father. And I keep coming back to the conclusion that the generations of women I come from have all longed for and needed this love from their fathers. We have needed it so much that too often we were desperate to be loved by any man.

We foolishly created our identity through the eyes of our father’s absence. Mostly because of the Mormon faith we come from and the small Mormon communities where we always lived. My grandmother taught primary school classes on Sunday, but mostly our involvement in the church was nearly nonexistent, we were always surrounded by family members, neighbors, teachers, and coworkers who were devout Mormons. It is a faith where those not married are given an inferior spiritual status, particularly women. A woman’s ability to be rewarded in the afterlife comes only through her husband’s priesthood. In a faith where families are supposed to be forever, where the men are supposed to be leaders of the family, head of the household, we can only exist and become something important through men. And that identity and self-worth started with our fathers. But our fathers and the husbands we chose continually failed to be the leaders our faith said they were supposed to be. And this failure created distrust not only in our faith, but in men. Partially because of this faith and partially because of ignorance, my grandmother perpetuated the belief that we needed a man for survival. As a young girl I desperately tried to bring myself into the good graces of the Mormon traditions. While my immediate family did not attend church, I did. I was baptized only a year later than the standard age of eight. I attended church regularly with neighbors, friends, anyone who
would take me, and every month I bore my obligatory testimony. I professed my belief that the church was true and that I believed in the Profit Joseph Smith, and that I loved my mother and father and my brother. I tried to follow the guidelines of the church and I believed that because my parents didn’t that they failed me. What saddened me was that there was nothing for us to turn to, that the women who came before me saw Mormonism or no religion at all as our only choices. Their ignorance left me longing.

My mother loved to sit on her father’s lap and brush his hair, but this angered her mother. Though I have no evidence, I want to believe my grandmother had a valid reason for why she felt such anger and animosity towards her husband. Instinctively I wonder if her anger was less about his initial rejection that my mother was his daughter, and that it was more about something inappropriate he might have said or done that concerned my grandmother. I’ve asked my mother why she believed her mother tried to physically keep her away from her father. She admitted that she too had thought about this before, but there was nothing she could remember from her father that was untoward, just that her mother and father fought a lot. I don’t know if my mother holds secrets about her father, a man I never met, or if my mother genuinely doesn’t know or can’t remember the reasons for my grandmother’s actions.

I did ask my grandmother’s half sister Ethel about my grandfather, and she said that my grandmother never trusted him with my mother. Ethel said my grandmother always told my mother to keep her dress down around her father. My grandmother once told Ethel “she was afraid that Wally was going to molest Melody.” Why would my
grandmother feel this way toward a man, and yet remain married to him? How could she be afraid that her husband, the father of her daughter, might intentionally molest or do something inappropriate to her daughter, and not take my mother away from him? If my grandmother truly believed that, and yet she remained married to my grandfather, then how could my grandmother be the strong and protective matriarch I believed she was? How could she fail her daughter—my mother—how could she fail me?

But Ethel believes that Wally had never done anything inappropriate, and she never knew why my grandmother was so worried. And even though my mother never knew why her parents never shared a bed, she did tell me she believed that whatever reason they didn’t share a bed may have been the same reason my grandmother didn’t want my grandfather to have my mother’s affection. This is as much as my mother would share, and it only confuses me. She makes it sound like her own mother was jealous of her, but who was she jealous of—her husband or her daughter?

Doesn’t my mother want to know the answers to these questions? Does she already know the answers, but just doesn’t want to talk about them with me? I need my mother to open up, to search her past, to reflect and inquire, but she won’t and I can’t make her. I am simply forced to imagine, to watch from the window—looking in from the outside only allowed in when the lights are on, and then inferring what I can based on the choices and behaviors I see.

My mother wants and needs to believe that the memory of her father is not tarnished by the realities of who he was. It is important for her to hold on to the belief that all of her memories of her father aren’t bad. Even though their relationship may not
have been close, sometimes when you love someone, regardless of how bad they really are, holding on to only happy memories softens the pain of the bad memories, the memories and events that don’t ever make sense. And sometimes we have so much disdain for a person that we don’t want to remember anything good about them. Maybe my mother is afraid of this, and doesn’t want to feel that way about her own father. Maybe that’s what my own daughters fear: that if they admit what their father is, then they will have nothing.

My mother needs to remember going on Sunday drives with her mother and father, and the way it felt when her mother insisted on driving because her father liked to admire the scenery rather than paying attention to the road; and they way her mother preferred to drive because she wanted to be in control. And my mother needs to remember that her father played several musical instruments, and that he was very talented and crafty, and had a shop where he spent much of his free time, and that sometimes he let her build things with him. He is, after all, her father and she is part of him, and no matter what occurred between them or even between her parents she wanted and needed his love. I can relate to her longing.

This view of my mothers is no different than the way I once saw my father, and the way Danniell continues to see her father. Even after Danniell lived with her father and her once stable world was turned upside down, she neither blames her father for what happened or has any ill-feelings toward him; at least none that she’ll openly admit to anyone. The difference is that I seem to be the only one who has stopped accepting this behavior and stopped making excuses for these men, and even the women for that matter.
The answers are never easily found when you are a family with secrets. And maybe there is simply no reason for my grandmother’s actions, and that the reason there are no answers is because there is nothing to be answered. I know my mother’s childhood wasn’t easy, and my mother learned at a very young age that her parents had no respect for each other. As a young girl my mother decided that worse than having no respect for your spouse was staying together unhappily and without love just for the sake of children. My mother tried explaining to me the reasons she left my father when I was a little girl. She often told me that even when she was a young girl growing up she vowed to herself that she would never stay with a man just so her children would have a father. She believed that wasn’t a good enough reason to stay with a man.

My mother keeps her emotions close; she is more serious and distant than she is joking and affectionate. Sometimes I feel she’s been too hardened by life, and I have longed for her to be different. Not that I want a different mother, my mother taught me to be strong and independent, but I wish my mother were different. I wish she had been more like the happy carefree girl waiting for her father and taking his lunchbox that I imagined her to be.
Memories

Growing up believing her parents “hated each other’s guts” created a tension and animosity that silently affected the way my mother felt about herself: she was shy and lacked confidence. But what my mother remembers most from her childhood, more than the bitterness and lack of love between her parents, is death. My grandmother took my mother to so many funerals when my mother was a young girl that to this day they are each a vivid part of her memory. Before my mother was even a teenager she had attended, of just close relatives alone, at least seven funerals. Did my grandmother ever think about the effect of exposing her daughter to so much death, so often, at such a young age? My grandmother herself was accustomed to death, even as a young girl, to her, going to funerals was just a part of life. But my mother vividly remembers gut wrenching grief at every funeral. “Even if you didn’t really know the person, you couldn’t help but cry because of the deceased’s family member’s grief. Even the bright and colorful flowers didn’t help, at times it seemed as though the funerals were never going to end. Once the funeral service occurred, they went to the cemetery where more people talked and the crying continued, then back to the church or somewhere to eat and talk some more.” Death, misery and unhappiness lingered continually. Even if my grandmother was comfortable with death herself, she should she have considered what effect this would have on her own daughter.
Several of the funerals she attended were those of close family members. My mother’s oldest brother lost one of his daughters in a house fire when my mother was only about six years old. Her niece was less than three years old, and when the house started on fire her niece was so afraid she hid behind the couch and each time her father came in calling her name and looking for her she wouldn’t answer or come out from her hiding place. My mother was only a little girl, and the funeral was for the daughter of her favorite brother. This funeral would be the beginning of some of the hardest funerals my mother would have to attend.

I’ve wondered if this funeral and the loss of my grandmother’s granddaughter reminded her of the year she lost her sister and mother. Did my grandmother think about the continued loss and death, did it trouble her, or did she simply accept it as part of life? Maybe she took my mother to all these funerals to remind herself that life continues. Maybe she found consolation in my mother’s company and failed to understand just how hard it was for a young child to see and understand death.

From my mother’s memories, there is an absence of her father in these events. My mother only talks about her and her mother attending, never her father. Why was my mother always my grandmother’s companion and support, that was my grandfather’s role.

Her father had many health problems: cataracts and glaucoma, as well as a heart condition that forced him to retire early from the Union Pacific Railroad. By the time my mother was sixteen her father had already had several heart attacks, leaving him
debilitated enough that her mother could no longer care for him on her own. For the last few years of his life, my grandmother placed him in a nursing home. When my mother was 17 her father died from pneumonia he developed after having been left in a bathroom because the nurse was tired of taking him back and forth. How could this event not have affected my mother? Yet she simply tells me this story like all of the others: without emotion. Maybe when she remembers this story, this is where she wishes she had been nicer, maybe that’s her way of telling me she felt sorry about what their relationship was; even though she had no more control of their relationship than she did of her parents’.

When my mother entered junior high, she spent less time home with her mother and more time with the second oldest of her brothers and his family: who was the same brother who’d lost the daughter in the house fire. My mother was with them nearly every weekend, and sometimes several weeks at a time during the summer months. Her brother had four kids, three of which were close in age to my mother. Her brother and his wife were affectionate and openly expressed how in love with each other they were. At such an impressionable age, and after years of growing up in a home without affection, seeing this relationship full of love and passion probably fueled my mother’s belief that she could marry one man and spend her life with him. Their relationship became exactly what my mother wanted; it became her ideal, her goal.

But these years were difficult and lonely for my grandmother. She longed to have my mother nearby, and this longing only seemed to push my mother further away. I know the pain and distress my grandmother must have felt, I have felt the same distress and longing in my relationship with Danniell. I can’t make sense of Danniell’s need to
distance and separate herself from me. I always believed that if I loved my daughters and
gave them all I could physically and emotionally then they would return that love, and
our relationship would be close. But as they grew older their relationship, and love it
seemed, grew further apart. And like my mother with her mother, the further apart my
daughters try to separate themselves from me, the harder they try to establish a
relationship with a boy.

The summer before my mother entered the seventh grade, when she was 12, she
met my father, John, whose family lived down the street from her brother. My mother
cared less about her mother’s feelings, and more about her own need to be with John.
This need to be with John and have a relationship with him, began to control all of the
choices and decisions my mother made. My mother was blind to the pain she put her
mother through. It wasn’t until after her mother died and my mother was reading a
journal of her mother’s that she realized how badly she’d hurt her mother during those
years. She read in one of the passages that her mother was so hurt by my mother that she
just wanted to die. My mother was surprised and hurt by what she did to her mother, and
yet she so easily chalks it up to life, her being a kid – therefore she wasn’t expected to
care. Even with Danniell the excuse – that she’s just a kid is one my mother uses. And
though I pushed my mother away, I’ve always believed I was justified in doing so. I
wasn’t acting out simply because I was a dumb kid. I had been hurt by my mother. So
when Danniell pushes me away I’m surprised and hurt, I expected more from her.
My mother has been keeping a journal for more than twenty years now, and once when I was about thirteen I found her journals. While she was at work, I snuck into her bedroom and picked through the old notebooks, randomly selecting one and began reading. While I was captivated to be learning the secrets of my mother’s life that she had never shared with me, I also couldn’t understand or relate to the depths of her pain. The stories I read were about my father and her relationship with him. For several days in a row after she’d leave for work I’d sneak into the darkness of her room to read deeper into the depths of this pain. At the time, I wondered if this pain related to the times when I was a young girl and my mother locked herself in the bedroom and from the outside I could hear her uncontrollable sobbing. I would stand at her door, knocking and begging for her to come out, pleading for her to tell me what was wrong, but she never would.

Somehow she discovered I’d been in her room reading her journals, I think my brother told on me. She was very angry with me and told me that a day would come after she was dead and gone when my brother and I would be able to read all of them. Every now and then when we are trying to recall the timeline of when something happened or what else was going on during a specific time, she’ll scour through her journals and share only what she’s willing – reminding me that there are things she’s written I won’t agree with, but that I have to remember they are her thoughts, her memories, and her feelings.

But I want to know her thoughts and her feelings right now, I don’t want to wait until she’s dead and gone to understand why she made the choices she did, to know the hidden fears and dreams that she’s afraid to share.
And I hope she remembers that she has said those things to me when she reads what I am writing. I hope she understands this is my quest for answers to save my daughters from our past and to give them a future that frees them from our legacy. These are my memories and my life experiences, and these stories are my interpretation of the lives of the women who came before me.
My mother met my father John during the years she began spending as much time as possible at her brother’s house. John’s family lived down the road from her brother, and quickly my mother became friends with all of the children in his family (there were five boys and two girls). For my mother, the fact that none of them went to her school, that she was someone they knew nothing about, allowed her to be whomever she wanted. My mother met my father the summer before she started 7th grade. She was desperate to have a boy like her. The girls at her school who had boys who liked them had always been mean to her, picking on her and teasing her. There were boys at her school she liked, but they had no interest in her.

My mother often felt out of place because her mother was so much older than the other mothers. Once, in the fourth grade when her mother came to pick her up at school her classmates came running up to her, telling her that her grandmother was there to pick her up. My mother was devastated. Having older unaffectionate parents and being the only child in the home led my mother down a path of insecurity, instability, and vulnerability.

My mother was 12 when she met my father, and for the first four years their relationship was innocent. When my father first kissed my mother, they were out in the back pasture at his home on a horse, a sorrel Pinto stallion they called “Patches.”
grass in the field was high, the night sky was dark, and the moon was full. Her memory of that first kiss is fond, and one of the few happy memories she had with John.

The first kiss on the horse under the full moon lured my mother further into believing that John was charismatic and charming. She now had John’s attention and for the first time she felt loved by a man. Her relationship with John gave my mother a confidence like she’d never felt before. She felt important and desired, like she mattered to someone other than her mother. My mother loved my father as only a 16 year old girl desperate for love could, and when she was afraid she was going to lose my father to another girl – who happened to be one of her brother’s daughters, my mother felt like she had to have sex with him in order to keep him. She had always told him she wanted to be a virgin when she got married – that was important to her, but that didn’t matter to him. “The deed was done, I cried and nothing was ever the same again,” she said.

For many years my mother believed John was her one true love, her soul mate. But I don’t think my father ever felt the same way toward her. While he was going out with her he dated other girls at the school he attended, and he never told my mother. When my mother told her mother she was pregnant she said she wasn’t surprised, she had already guessed, but my grandmother was hurt. I wonder if she was hurt because she saw that her daughter was already headed down the same path of bad relationships and limited opportunities and she was disappointed in herself, or if she was simply disappointed because she expected more from her daughter. At the time, the youngest of my grandmother’s sons wanted my mother to move to Colorado and live with him and his family so that he could marry her off to a nice career soldier.
When I heard this story initially, I felt she should have married a soldier and
gotten away from my father for stability. It is instinctive for me to believe that my uncle
knew best – the patriarchal dominance of the Mormon faith tells me that it’s so. But I’m
quickly brought back to the awareness that my mother must have felt incredibly trapped
and believed that her future rested only in the man she ultimately chose: my father or her
brother’s idea of a military man. My mother’s ignorance, and her mothers’, prevented her
from seeing any other possible options. She was unable to see that she could be
independent and successful on her own – she didn’t need a man to make decisions about
her future and she didn’t need a man to be happy. To my mother, John was the right
choice because he was her choice – not a selection made by someone else. My mother
was already more similar to her own mother than she realized. Each of them haphazardly
became involved with men in many ways to spite those around them, to prove that they
were in control. When in reality, their lack of awareness about the other choices available
hampered their ability to succeed. What frustrates me is that I was just as blind and made
the same mistake when I married my daughter’s father.

When my mother told John her brother’s plan, John became upset and didn’t want
her to leave. Even though he didn’t want her to leave, he still didn’t want to change his
plans and marry her. He was in a summer program where underprivileged high school
students get the chance to take classes at the local college while staying on campus
dorms. John was happy running around with other girls, and marrying my mother meant a
commitment and loss of his freedom. After my grandmother and John’s mother talked, it
was then that John’s mother told him he was going to marry my mother. In July of my mother’s junior year of high school she married John, and a few short months later in October she gave birth to my brother Bill.

Immediately after my mother and John married, they moved in with my mother’s parents. My mother and father shared the same room my mother fought so desperately to have when she was ten years old. Their room was next to the same room my mother shared for so many years with her mother.

The night my mother went into labor she awoke to a large wet spot and when she told John, he was nonresponsive. This lack of response, this apathetic behavior towards my mother and her needs, was just the beginning. She went upstairs and woke her mother. My mother had no idea what was happening, and my grandmother had to figure out that my mother’s contractions were only five minutes a part. At the time, my grandmother had been unable to pay the phone bill and their phone had been shut off, so John was forced to walk several blocks down the street and use a pay phone to call the doctor before they could take her to the hospital.

The years following my brother’s birth were trying at best. My mother returned to school the following year, but the kids in her class were all younger and she struggled with the fact that John wasn’t at school with her and she felt alone. It was simply too hard for her to focus on studying with a baby and worrying about what John was doing while she was away at school. John was working at a nearby potato processing plant so she thought she’d try working with him, but she was too young and couldn’t make it there
either. She was forced to take a job as a maid at the local Holiday Inn. She had been out of school for several years, but she did earn a GED.

The year my mother turned 21, the brother she’d spent so much time with growing up was killed in a motorcycle accident. The day it happened, John and his mother showed up to collect my mother.

John simply said to my mother, “You need to leave.”

“Why?” she asked.

“You just need to leave, come on,” he said.

“I’m not leaving until you tell me why,” she said. But she knew something was wrong.

“Your brother is dead, he was killed in an accident,” he said.

My mother was in shock, and her first reaction was that it was the youngest of her brothers who was still in the military stationed in Germany. To this day, she can’t remember if she realized it was her favorite brother before or after she got to her mother’s home. The night before, my mother, her mother, her brother and his wife had all been at the ladies pool league practice, and after the practice her brother and his wife played a game. From the corner table, with her back against the wall, my mother watched her brother and his wife. At one point in the game, her brother and his wife met at the end of the table and they kissed, they were always affectionate like that. And my mother thought to herself: what would her brother’s wife do without him. And now her brother was gone, and she wondered why she thought that, and for many years she blamed herself.
This brother was more like a father to my mother than her own father had ever been, and she took his death hard. Although death is eminent in everyone’s life, in the three generations of women who preceded me, there seems to have been an overwhelming burden of loss of very close family at too young an age. How much does this type of loss affect the psyche of the growing and developing mind? Did these women live their lives carelessly, believing that there was no permanence? And if they allowed themselves to become close enough to those they loved, did they believe that they would just lose them? Being surrounded by so much loss, these women became impatient in their desire to find a man to spend their life with; this impatience to grow up is something that we all share. I feel like we’ve all been consumed by the idea that if we didn’t get involved in a “long-term” relationship as quickly as we could then the chance might be lost and never come again. That impatience, the feeling that nothing is permanent, was passed down from generation to generation, and even I’m guilty of passing it on to my daughters. I recognize now this fallacy in our thinking. I wish I could take that feeling away from my daughters. If only they could see that we were wrong, that the choices we all made were wrong, and that if they make the same poor choices then our legacy continues to survive. That their own futures become limited. But my daughters, like the women before them, are so young and seemingly incapable of recognizing the need for patience and reflection into the decisions we make before we act on them. If they’re not careful, their children will be carriers of this legacy. They must be careful. My mother was pregnant with me when her brother was killed, and the grief she carried in her heart she shared with me in her womb.
When I first began my research for this project, I remembered reading “The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir” by Linda Hogan. In this book she writes about historical and emotional pain being passed down through the generations. What interested me most was her discussion that it “as if the memory of the mother is inherited by the child, as if such a thing is learned, and remembered by the body, even if unspoken in words. It is as if the stories of the mothers are written into the child’s beginnings.” Recently I came across research that indicates during pregnancy there is a sort of cell-trafficking that occurs between the fetal and maternal cells. Children carry with them their mother’s cells, and also within the mother there remains, sometimes forever, the cells of the children she carried. This research is seeking to understand the impact that lingering cells have on the mother: do they help, hurt, or merely linger doing nothing at all. But knowing this now, I understand the implications of what Linda Hogan was trying to say. The truth of the matter is that some family legacies continue not because of economical or social aspects, but because they are biological and passed to the next generation without knowledge or thought and simply through the act of creation and giving life. But what I hope and need to believe is that if I can explain this legacy and help my daughters to see the truth of our family history before they become mothers themselves, and then because they have a different understanding and awareness, that our legacy will stop with their generation.

My mother wanted another child after my brother’s birth, and it took her four years before she was finally able to convince John. It was only a couple of weeks after my birth, my mother discovered John was cheating on her, with a girl several years
younger than him, as he had done when they were dating, and as he had been the entire time she was pregnant. She finally decided she’d had enough. She was leaving him. It took her nearly a year, but she saved enough money, with the help of the maids she worked with buying her groceries, to file for divorce.

The five years she spent married to John were five years of fighting, lies, and misery. Those were also years of not having money to pay the bills, because John couldn’t keep a decent job, each time he had a good job he got fired for not showing up to work for days on end. John also had to go hunting with his father, whenever his father called, or his father would tell him he was pussy whipped. Those years were also spent with John going out to the bars or to parties with his friends, then not coming home until three or four in the morning, if he even came home at all. Those years were spent with John disappearing and never bothering to say “I’m leaving.” And those five years were spent with John always trying to convince my mother it was someone else’s fault.

My mother did get back together with John several times after their divorce and he always tried to pressure her into remarrying him, but she told him unless he could prove things would be different, she wasn’t going to marry him again. During one of John’s many second chances, my mother was going camping with her mother, his mother, one of his sisters, and a sister-in-law, she told him if his family really mattered then he should be there with them. He did come, but so did his girlfriend, and she brought a gun. His girlfriend had decided she was going to kill my brother and me so that she could have my father once and for all. John couldn’t calm her or change her mind: and I doubt he was man enough to try. It was John’s mother who convinced his girlfriend that
killing his children was not the way to get John and that she needed to leave. John was blind to the pain he caused to all of the women in his life: my mother, his many girlfriends, me – his daughter. He brought a long a girl who’s willing to kill his children so that she could have him to herself, and he wouldn’t have been able to save us if his mother hadn’t been there. Just thinking that my brother’s and my life could have been over in that one emotional moment shows me just how weak of a man my father really was. But it also shows me the level of emotional abuse my mother faced during her time with John.

John never changed, so in late 1978, when I was only three, my mother left John for good. The last time they lived together and had been separated because of a fight, my mother was living at her mother’s house when John called her. He told her he had a gun and was going to kill himself because she was leaving him. My mother pleaded with him, trying to talk him out of it when she heard a loud bang and then silence. She started yelling his name and he finally said, “What.” John had lit off a firecracker. She was furious, even today when she tells the story I can sense the anger in her voice. Maybe she finally realized just how bad of a liar and a manipulator he was. And that was the last time my mother and father ever lived together.

Growing up I had always believed my mother hated John, and given the responses I sometimes got from her when he was the subject of conversation I was surprised to find that she expressed she didn’t still hate him. She just disliked him for what he did to her, my brother, and me, but normally she just didn’t think about him. I understand that not
hating and not thinking about him was years in the making, and yet I wonder how much she does still hate him. John was a charmer and could charm anyone. He once even charmed me when I was a grown woman with his professed love and sorrow for having missed out on my life. But John was also a liar who lied about everything, even when he didn’t have to. He lied so much he believed his own lies. He would tell my mother that she was crazy, and that if she ever left him he would tell everyone she was crazy, and he would not let her have the kids.

For my mother, the five years following John were years she spent trying to make up for the loss of her youth, they were years gaining independence and freedom. For my brother and me, those years were spent with my mother’s mother. My mother worked and played pool in leagues, she bowled in leagues, she danced and she tried to forget. Maybe she tried to change the direction her life had gone, maybe she didn’t care and for the first time she wanted to just live her life for herself and no one else.

My mother had been divorced and on her own for five years when she met my stepfather Bruce. He was driving truck and going through a divorce himself. They met at the Green Triangle – a country-western bar. That night Bruce had asked several girls to dance and been turned down, he decided when he saw my mother that he would ask her to dance and if she said no he was going home.. But she said yes and they danced until the bar closed. She gave him her number and he called whenever he was traveling through.

At the time my mother was living in a duplex with my brother and me and one of her friends was her roommate. Bruce came and went, and quickly he was around more
often than he was gone. When they married we moved from Pocatello where my
grandmother lived, to Rockford, which was about 20 minutes away.
Lies

By the time I came into my mother’s life there was little left of her marriage to my father. Still, as a small girl, I kept the only picture that was taken of my family: John, my mother – both in their early twenties, my brother - six, me - three. I’ve always thought my father was handsome. He sat beside my mother, with my brother and me nestled beside them. We all smiled, and in those same smile lines that formed like the sides of a broken circle framing my father’s lips, I see the same lines my brother and I both share. His hair was dark and thick, his eyes dark brown just like my brother’s. He was young and strong, and by looking at his clean cut appearance it was easy to believe he was a good man.

Even today, at 33 years old, I struggle to define John’s place in my life. From the time he and my mother divorced to when I was 19 and gave birth to my second child, I had seen my father less than a dozen or so times. Growing up, he randomly appeared for visits that were always unexpected by my mother, my grandmother, my brother and me. And those visits were always filled with “I’m sorry,” and “I really loved your mother,” and him crying because he said he missed us so much. I believed his apologies and tears, and for many years I felt it was my duty to share those apologies with my mother.

When my brother and I were small children and I was still in diapers, there was only one occasion when my father chose to take us for an overnight visitation. When he
brought us back to my mother, our clothes were filthy, my diaper was dirty, our noses were running, and he had only fed us fruit and candy. But that is a memory I don’t have, that is a story my mother shared. It is a story that today I do not doubt the validity, but there was a time when I believed he wouldn’t have been so irresponsible with us, and that surely there had been other overnight visits, even when I knew there hadn’t. I remember being five and John picking us up for a family reunion. Like every visit we had together, he repeatedly told me how much he loved us, that I looked so much like my mother, and that he still loved her. But most importantly, that he was sorry for all the mistakes he’d made, the divorce was his fault and he didn’t blame my mother for leaving him. As soon as he dropped us off at our grandmother’s after that visit, I waited excitedly for my mother to pick us up, on those same cement steps and front door where my mother once waited for her father to return home from work. I had so much good news to tell her. But when I shared this news of my father’s remorse, I couldn’t understand why my mother was angry and yelling at me. I had only told her how sorry he was, and that he still loved her. Why didn’t she forgive him and what had I done so horrible to deserve her rage? But I didn’t know then all of the things John had done to my mother.

What John gave me was a few memories where I believed his apologies and regret. I believed that even though he was absent from my life he loved me. There were moments in my life when I believed he was the only one who could save me. So when my brother and I occasionally received cards and presents from him, I cherished each gift because I never knew when another might come. The memories of those few visits together always became less clear as several years would pass between his visits, but
those cards he’d signed his name and written love Dad, and the pink stuffed rabbit with the musical box, the pine jewelry box, the locket from Disneyland, were all tangible. I wouldn’t forget the tangible and concrete the way memories of his voice faded, the warmth of his arms wrapped around me disappeared, and the way he whispered softly as he hugged me good-bye always faded.

John provided my mother with no financial support for my brother and me, and the five years before my mother remarried we were only able to survive because of being on welfare. My mother worked nights trying to support the three of us, and the nights she wasn’t working she spent them playing on pool leagues, bowling leagues, and dancing in the western bars until they closed with her friends. Because my mother spent so much time working and making up for the youth and freedom she felt she missed because of John, my brother and I spent most of our time with my mother’s mother. It never mattered where we lived; my brother and I always attended the elementary school two blocks from my grandmother’s house. I can remember having lived in several different apartments, trailers, or old homes, and at least my mother saw the importance of consistency and didn’t want to keep moving us from school to school. The majority of my memories, up to first grade, are filled with the presence of my grandmother. Her hair was gray, short with large curls, fine and wispy like mine. I still remember the way her head bobbed up and down anytime she really concentrated. But throughout the years it has been a struggle to remember vividly her features, the sound of her voice, her scent or the warmth of a hug as she whispered she loved me.
Until my mother remarried my stepfather when I was eight years old, I’ve always felt that those first eight years of my life my mother was all but absent. Those were the years she was on a hiatus from motherhood. I believe because she married so young and her relationship with John nearly destroyed her that she spent more time trying to make up for the youth she felt she lost than trying to be a mother to my brother and me. I also now understand that as a new, young mother my mother was weighed down and tasked with caring for a little boy, her fist born, who ultimately faced serious life threatening medical problems. My brother was born with vesicoureteral reflux; a condition that allows urine in the bladder to flow back into the kidneys and over time causes damage and scaring to the kidneys. And had my mother been older, and a little more educated she may have been able to prevent the level of damage that was ultimately caused to my brother by waiting, and that knowledge has always troubled her.

John’s presence and involvement in my brother’s and my life was always sporadic, even as an adult. During my first marriage, after having given birth to my second daughter, I sought out my father’s presence in my life. I was in my early twenties when I contacted his mother and let her know I was looking for him. Once we were reunited, I quickly realized then that many of the things my mother said about him were true.

John spent the first twenty years of my life becoming an addict to alcohol and drugs, and was in and out of rehab. In fact, shortly after I contacted him, he went into rehab again. I discovered he had married multiple times and had other children. I have a
half-brother and a half-sister I barely know. When I first reconnected with him, both of his other children were young. My half sister was five – Danniell’s age and the half brother was seven. Today, I’ve heard they have followed the same path as their father.

My father seemed so eager and had so much to share with me. He shared that when I was younger he had cancer and was close to death, but that when he called my mother she didn’t believe him. Listening to him, I didn’t believe him either. I wasn’t ready to trust him. My mother had refused to tell us, and now I was glad for not having known. He told me he loved me – he always had. He told me he was sorry for not having been there. I wanted to believe him, and I found that his love and apologies were easier to believe than his near death experience with cancer. They were easier to believe because I had been so desperate for these things for so many years.

I tried to make him part of my life, but he still didn’t know how to be the father I needed him to be. He said he’d visit, call, and write, but he was soon back to disappearing. He’d promise to show up at a certain day or time, and that time, that day, would come and go with no visit and no call from him. I had grown up with this behavior and while I was accustomed to it, I was not going to let my daughters experience the same emotional torture. They already had a grandfather in my stepfather. He was constant and reliable, and they knew they could count on him. My mother always told my brother and me that she was sure our father loved us the only way he knew how. Maybe he did, and maybe he tried the best he could, but his way of loving wasn’t enough for me, so I decided to stop calling and writing him. What he offered wasn’t enough for the pain
that came along with it. I let him know he’d hurt me and disappointed me and I wasn’t going to let him do that to my daughters.

Many years after I had made my decision not to include John in my life, in any capacity, my mother convinced me to be a better person and invite him to my college graduation. I don’t know why my mother felt so compelled for me to do this. Maybe it was because of my stepfather’s children and the many years he tried to be involved in their lives and they rejected him. Neither of us figured he would come, so I reluctantly invited him. I had worked so hard for the last three and half years to earn a college degree. Prior to enrolling in college, I divorced Scott, and for the first time in my life was independent and living on my own – just the girls and me. I was working for a law firm and making enough money to live on my own, they paid for the insurance for me and the girls, but I decided that wasn’t enough. I’d always wanted to go to college. I’d dreamed about college for as long as I could remember, so when I applied and was accepted full-time at the University of Idaho I had no other choice but to quit my job in Pocatello and move the girls and myself more than 560 miles in northern Idaho to Moscow. The move was a complexity of liberation and fear – we didn’t know anyone, and my parents thought I was foolish quitting a good job as a legal assistant with good insurance just to go to school. They wanted me to stay in Pocatello and go to school and Idaho State University part-time so that I could keep my job and continue working full-time. I couldn’t, I didn’t have the patience. I knew that if I was accepted at the University of Idaho it was an opportunity that I couldn’t pass up. I was at a moment in my life where so much seemed
possible, and I’ve always been an all or nothing kind of girl, and when I wanted something I wanted to achieve it as quickly as possible. I desperately wanted a college degree.

When I began my academic career I was a political science major and I was headed for law school. I had been telling family, friends, and prospective employers since I was a little girl that I was going to be a lawyer. But when I started school and started taking the political science classes I hated them. After taking a writing class, I was reminded how much I loved writing. I took a literature class and was immediately captivated by the language and writing and wondered how I could have missed so many years of reading the great literary works that everyone else around me seemed to already know so much about that I was only just discovering.

During my second semester I met Patrick, who is now my second husband. It was about this same time I realized I didn’t want to be a lawyer. I was working at the law school and I saw the commitment and time these students were making to earn their degree, and the sacrifice it was for their families if they had children. For the first time in my girls’ lives I was home with them after school, we were spending more time together, traveling and camping and fishing. Finally I was able to be that mother I’d always needed to be. I realized I didn’t have to be a lawyer, regardless of the fact that I’d been telling everyone for years that’s what I was going to school to become. For the first time, I realized I could change my mind, and I could become whatever I wanted. I was certain about one thing – I grew up watching my parents hating their jobs and feeling stuck in a job they hated because they had a family to support and I was not going to make that
same mistake. I knew I had to support my girls, but I also believed it was important that I enjoyed what I did for a living. So I changed my major to English with a writing emphasis and a minor in Native American studies. I could teach high school or college – I had so much to share. But when I told my parents or anyone else they were disappointed. There was nothing glamorous about an English degree. They were convinced I made this decision because of Patrick and it took me years to convince them I made this choice on my own because I was pursuing what I loved. Even today, they struggle to understand my love of writing. But because I paid for my own education I was the only one who had a say in my decision. This was my life and my future – the choices I made weren’t just about me, they were also about opening a new world, a new way of thinking, for my daughters.

When it came time for graduation, I did as my mother suggested and invited John. He did come to my graduation. And when I walked into the auditorium for the graduation ceremony he was the first person and only family member I saw. I couldn’t see the girls, Patrick, my brother, or my parents. John stood at the front edge of the banisters, first in line, and I was afraid and angry that he was the only person I could see. He wasn’t even supposed to be there. Where were my daughters? He smiled so big and with tears in his eyes, I wasn’t sure how to feel.

To complicate my emotions more, after the graduation ceremony he was the only person I could find. Thousands of people exited the auditorium and headed over to the Student Union Building for the reception. We stood together, and waited, searching for
the others. But when it became apparent we weren’t going to find them, we walked to the reception together. I didn’t know what to say. I hugged him and thanked him for coming. He told me he’d missed too many important things in our lives and nothing could have kept him away. Even today I’m not sure what all of this is supposed to mean. The simple fact of the matter is that, although he may have been remorseful, he is who is and that will never change.

He seemed so small next to me, his dark brown hair almost gone, his face gaunt, his skin pale; he trembled the way my brother did when he was cold, and he kept clutching his chest. I was afraid he’d collapse while we were walking. It seemed that each time I saw him over the previous years he was less and less like the memory etched in my mind from that family picture from long ago. I didn’t know whether I should feel guilt, sorrow, or remorse for my decision as an adult to exclude him from my life. He stayed around for only a few minutes, making small talk with my brother, the girls, and my parents. There was the first, and possible the last, time he met Patrick. When he said he had to got, he was supposed to meet up with his brothers at the opposite end of the state to go hunting, I did what I thought I had already done; when he walked out of that room to leave I hugged him for the last time. I didn’t want anymore surprise visits, guilt for his sorrow, or for my own inability to accept him for who he is: A man who is my father and a man who through his lies perpetuates the legacy I’m so desperately trying to break.

For so many years growing up I longed for him. He was supposed to be the man who would protect me from all others – at least that’s what I believed in my own mind. I dreamed him into being my protector and rescuer. When the reality of what he really was
sunk in, I was both saddened by my losses and freed from the burden of waiting and wanting something that would never come.
Half Wild

I remember my grandmother’s home better than any apartment, trailer, or home I ever lived in with my mother. When I was five or six years old I attempted, bit by bit, to move out of my mother’s home and into my grandmother’s. Every visit to my grandmother’s I would pack extra toys and clothes in the brown paper bags we used to carry our things, and I would secretly leave a few of the things behind when we returned home. One day my mother confronted me on the number of my things accumulating at my grandmother’s. My response was simple and direct, “I’m moving in with granma.” My mother quickly put me in my place. She forced me to repack all of my prized possessions and return them to the apartment I shared with her and my brother. I would not be moving in with my grandmother, we lived with her. I’ve wondered if this hurt her, or made her angry. Was she ever jealous of the love I had for her mother that I didn’t have for her? Regardless of what she may have felt, she didn’t find another person to take care of us when she was busy. She had no one else she could depend on, and for this I was thankful.

At my grandmother’s, I slept on the couch in her living room, the same place she once slept while my grandfather was still alive and my mother was a young girl still living at home. My grandmother was always close by, her bed on the other side of the wall –where I slept. I can still close my eyes and feel the comfort and peace of those
mornings waking up on her couch. In the far left corner of her living room was a long couch covered by a red, white and blue crocheted blanket thick with cat hair. This couch divided the living room from the dining room, creating a walkway from one half of the room to the other. Even combined both rooms were small, maybe only 15x20. To the right of the front door was a cracked white vinyl reclining chair covered with another crocheted blanket: this one red, white and black. A gray and white half-wild Siamese tomcat always rested on the back, as if this were his chair. His left ear was torn and the right eye would no longer open. His solid body was covered with short hair matted around the scruff of his neck. Part of his tail had been chopped off, but none of us knew how. He just came to us that way. He was Tigger the Tomcat. There were many half-wild cats that came and went as predictable as the seasons. Each year the momma cats would have litters of kittens and each year some would die and others would survive, adding to the ever growing population.

Pushed in the far right corner of the dining room, next to the windows, was the table: a yellow, imitation marble, and three metal chairs. The bottom edges of the once white sheer curtains brushed the tabletop. On the other side of the room, just opposite the table, was a dresser. The wood sticky and reeking from cat urine: one of the many tomcats that came and went. The dresser was piled high with papers: Reader’s Digests, TV Guides, the local newspaper and unopened mail. And next to the dresser by the kitchen doorway were two fish tanks in a black metal stand, one a top the other. The fish often changed, but mostly she had bright colorful Guppies with fan-like fins that fluttered in the water, and black Mollies. There were several years where she kept a large black
Oscar. It was larger than my child-sized hand. During the summer we captured flies and earth worms to feed the fish.

Each morning, the sun rays shining through the sheer curtains always woke me. In the early summer, every window in the living-room area would be open and the front and back doors ajar so that the cool morning air swished and pulled throughout the house. I often woke to hear the hum of the lawn mower and the smell of fresh cut lawn as the breeze carried in the aroma. I would remain in bed as long as I could, pulling the blankets up near my neck trying to keep the cool air from my skin. I always used the two pink blankets with maroon ribbon edging, and my brother always used the light blue blankets with the navy ribbon binding. Inevitably, one of my grandmother’s many cats would somehow force me out of bed – one way or another. Tigger was cuddly for a half-wild cat. I often awoke to a large wet-spot on my blanket, where he had suckled it, like a little kitten, leaving it wet for me to rest my arm in. Other times I would awake to him, or one of the many cats, kneading their claws into the blankets, piercing my legs and feet with their claws.

My grandmother always awoke hours before me, and when I’d finally rise there would be a blue plastic cup with apple, grape, or tomato juice and a plastic bowl for my cereal waiting on the table. She had usually already eaten, but sometimes she would wait for me, or wake me up with “rise and shine daddy shot a bear” and together we would share our juice and cereal. Some mornings when she waited for me, it was the cool air blowing through the open windows mixed with smoke from her cigarette that woke me in the morning.
Outside, her yard was an oasis of flowers, trees – even fruit trees, roses, raspberry patches, rhubarb, and though it was small I always felt like I was on an adventure when I played outside. White, purple, and yellow Bearded Iris lined her driveway, and at the end of the driveway was the raspberry patch where we always picked fresh raspberries. Some nights for dessert she would rinse them in cool water, gently place them in one of her plastic bowls, sprinkle sugar on them, and pour just enough milk to cover the tops of the berries, and put them in the fridge to wait for the sugar to dissolve. Waiting for them was always the hardest, my mouth would water and I’d be filled with anticipation for the sweet and tart creamy taste.

In the back yard was a large oak more than twenty years old, it shaded her house and the neighbors. Just behind that big oak was the old dilapidated shed where my grandfather made his crafts and tinkered around. But now that he was gone, my grandmother used the shed to store her lawnmower and other yard tools. The outside boards were all gray, rotting and weathered from time and lack of care and attention. Nearly all of the glass in the windows was broken and many of the windows were boarded over. The floors on the inside were wet and dry-rotted from the moisture, and under the weight of a child’s body the floorboards cracked and broke. Outside to the right of the front door was a pile of decades-worth of tree trimmings. The pile was as tall as the shed itself. My brother and I were not supposed to play in the shed, so we always made a game of finding ways in without getting caught. Sometimes it worked and we got in unnoticed, and the times my grandmother caught us our time playing outside was done for the day. Inside the shed we always found odds and ends from old projects left behind
from a man neither of us ever knew. Many of the items were plaster or tin and had Braille lettering we couldn’t understand. Our grandfather was like a ghost who haunted the rooms of the old moist shed, and from the remnants of things we found we tried to imagine who he was and what he might have been making. I imagined that one day he just stopped coming out to the shop and slowly the dust piled up and his treasures were then left for us to find and recreate the life he left behind.

Close to the back door of the house was an apricot tree with perfect branches for climbing and sitting with my feet dangling. Along the side of the house there were Butter Cups with soft yellow petals, and when I pulled the petals they filled my hands like weightless velvet coins. In the furthest back corner of her yard beyond the shed, closest to the alley, was the rhubarb patch. It grew like a weed with enormous fan-like leaves. The rhubarb stems were long and deep reds and bright greens with leaves larger than our heads. My brother and I would pull the stems at their pink bases, the large leaves fanning in the wind, and we would whip each other with them. Sometimes I would break off a piece of rhubarb, take it in the house, rinse it off, taking my grandmother’s salt shaker outside to sit on her back steps tearing off chunks of the bitter, sour, salty treat.

When my mother married Bruce, my stepfather, and we moved from Pocatello to Blackfoot which was about 30 miles north, those long extended stays with my grandmother came to an end. Instantly I hated him for taking me from my grandmother. And more troubling to me was that for the first time in eight years there was a man I
barely knew telling me what to do, trying to be the father I’d never had. When my mother and Bruce married, they went to Las Vegas for their honeymoon and left us with his sister and her family because she had children my brother’s and my age. I cried and fought with everyone, and worried myself to the point I got diarrhea and was throwing up. I pleaded for them to take me to my grandmother’s, and they relented. I think they just wanted to be done with the drama I was creating. Once I got to her house I was fine. Immediately I felt relaxed and the nerves in my stomach were calmed.

Within a year after their marriage my mother gave birth to another girl, and for the first few months we continued to live in Blackfoot, more than 30 miles from my grandmother, only seeing her on rare occasions. Then my parents decided, because of work, to move us from Idaho to Southern Utah, more than 450 miles away. I would never again live close to my grandmother. Our occasional visits dwindled to once a year visits during our summer vacation. Each summer my brother and I took turns visiting, and I always insisted on going first. My grandmother and I wrote each other often and talked on the phone as much as we could afford. Each letter was like gold. And after reading it several times I would tuck them away in special box, often getting them out to read over and over when I missed her most. I cried often and longed to be near her.

During one of my summer visits with my grandmother I stood on her couch and loudly and angrily expressed my frustration and disdain for my mother and Bruce.

“I don’t want to go!” I cried.

“Come on now, be gramma’s big girl. Your mom misses you, she needs your help at home.”
“I hate him, don’t you know I hate him,” I would yell.

“Now, Selena, you don’t mean that. He’s a good man and loves your mother.” My grandmother’s hands would be resting on her hips, and her head unconsciously bobbing. My shoulders slumped forward and my brown stringy hair covered my eyes. My jeans always too short and my cotton shirts too tight.

“I don’t want to go granma, he’s mean, you don’t know but he is.” I cried.

“Honey, try and be gramma’s big girl,” she would plead again.

I was never able to convince her that I was right and she was wrong, and even now I can remember how strongly I felt. My grandmother had always been my source of safety and comfort, and I’m sure I hated my stepfather even more for taking me from her. She was the one person who was always constant and reliable, and that regularity and reliability slipped away after we moved to Utah.

Even as an adult when I took my children to southern Utah for summer visitation with their father, a sinking feeling washed over me. I want to turn the car around and quickly leave: home to Idaho. Southern Utah is dry. The dirt is red and orange with large sandstone mountains. Fire and blood. Death and dried up life. No change in seasons, no rejuvenation of life in the spring, no ending of life in the fall. Only hot and dry, cold and more dry. The predominantly sandstone and clay landscape has been eroded by wind and rain over the last several centuries creating a world of arches, caves, mesas and peaks that are layered with varying shades of reds, browns, and purples. The landscape borders vast spaces of isolation and emptiness next to incredible rising peaks and mesas that are
immense and intimidating and dramatic in color. There are areas with deep canyons where the landscape suddenly opens up revealing large crevices six feet wide, miles long with depths unknown. The cliffs, buttes, mesas, and canyons come and go without predictability or reason. Because the landscape is clay and sandstone it is forever changing and never constant. The desert climate is constant though: dry hot days over 100 degrees and cool evenings. Rarely does it snow and when it does it melts so quickly you barely noticed it even snowed.

Whereas the landscape in southeastern Idaho is green, the mountains high and create a shelter around the Pocatello valley. The seasons change with prediction and reliability: rainy springs, warm summers, cool falls and winters filled with snow. The landscape is mountainous, browns and lush evergreens, and filled with wildlife.

Once we moved to Utah, I was forced to keep secrets from my grandmother, secrets that I wish I could have shared, secrets that by keeping them from her I felt ashamed, and realized that even she could no longer protect me.
We had been living in Southern Utah for two years. I was ten years old when a neighbor man who lived several blocks down the street began following me home everyday after school. When the other children were around he made conversations with each of them, and though we all thought it strange he hung around us, he wasn’t like the other grown-ups we knew. We had seen him riding his bicycle around, and he was always following us and talking to us like we were his peers. He must not have worked, and while we all knew which house he lived in at the end of our street, we never saw him at school or church. I can not remember how old he was. I know he wasn’t in school and anyone who was no longer in school seemed old to me. He may have been in his twenties or thirties, I don’t know. The other thing that made him stand out was his dark skin and the nappiness of his short black hair, in a rural dominant white Mormon community. This made him different and interesting to all of us.

The day I let him in the house my brother hadn’t walked home with me, and more than twenty years later I still wish I hadn’t let him in. He said he wanted to see where all of the rooms were, mostly where my room was. He sat on my bed, and I sat next to him because he asked me to. I was afraid, but not really sure what I was supposed to do. He was an adult and I was supposed to be respectful and obedient towards adults. Time stopped and somehow I became lost inside myself. I don’t remember how I got from my
bed to the floor, or who took my clothes off. I imagine I must have removed them myself, but I’m not certain. I have tried very hard over the years to remember the exact details of this event, but I cannot pull those memories from the depths of the place where I mentally hid myself. I can remember him placing his mouth on my budding breasts and quickly and sloppily his mouth moved to my naked and exposed vagina. Those are the details that I always remembered vividly, and those were the details that for years I so desperately wanted to forget. It was his sloppiness and the sliminess in his words as he said to me “concentrate baby, concentrate baby” that would echo in my mind for years even though I didn’t know what he meant. I couldn’t understand what I was supposed to concentrate on, and it wasn’t until after I’d given birth to my first child that I figured out he was performing oral sex, and even then I wouldn’t tell anyone the things he’d said to me until late in my 20’s.

He was reaching for his own pants when we both heard a knock at the front door. We both jumped. He stopped touching me and I was jolted from that place I had been hiding. I quickly put on my clothes and he hid down the steps to the basement by the back door. It was my aunt. I can’t remember what it was she wanted, but I do remember that I was convinced she could see that I was dirty and bad, and she knew I was going to be in trouble for what I had let happen. She only stayed for a few minutes and I was both relieved and afraid when she left. Once my aunt left, this grown man with his head lowered and a baseball cap covering the nap of his hair crept out the back door like a teenager trying to avoid being caught by the adults.
I locked myself in the bathroom and scrubbed my body in places I was now ashamed to touch. I scrubbed until the skin became so red it hurt to touch and I could rub him away no more.

Everyday for the week that followed, when the school bell rang at three o’clock and I crossed the corner where the four-way stop signs were, he was waiting. But on the days when my brother was there and walked home with me, this man kept walking. I tried to pretend that I was still the same as all the other kids, but I wasn’t. I tried to pretend that it wasn’t me he wanted, but I knew I was the one he’d singled out. I didn’t just feel dirty, I started to believe I was and that he knew it too that’s why he followed me. He tried to bribe me with money, and told me that I couldn’t tell. I took his money and felt even worse for taking it. But in my immature way I thought by taking his money I was hurting him. Then after a Valentine’s Day party at school where all of the girls dressed up - I wore a white summer dress, he followed me home again. And once more my brother wasn’t with me. I was alone, and yet again I let him inside. But this time I stayed in the living room and quickly sat on the couch by the front door and wouldn’t budge. I refused to let myself go to that place where I couldn’t be found, to that place where I couldn’t remember or feel anything, to that place where I no longer was.

“Don’t you want to wear something else,” he said.

“No.” I pulled my cat closer to my chest. At twenty pounds, the cat was heavy in my scrawny arms.

“Yes, maybe you want to wear something else,” he said again as the dark skin of his arm reached for mine.
With a quick moving lash, the cat scratched his arm before I could even pull away.

He jerked his arm back towards his chest, wiping small droplets of blood, and looked at me.

I put my face up close to my cat, inhaling his long fur and said, “I’m going to tell.”

“I’ll just deny it,” he said.

Then he did something that both surprised and empowered me, he pleaded with me not to tell. He told me he’d never see his daughter again, that his wife would leave him, but the hate I now had for him and myself had grown. I wanted to tell. I needed to tell.

The exchange of pleading and anger and words between us didn’t last long. Maybe from fear or maybe from frustration, but he finally got up and left without any more of a confrontation than the exchange of words we’d just had. As he left the tears rolled down my cheeks, and I quickly locked the door. I waited for only a few minutes before I called my mother at work.

“You need to come home, something has happened.” I cried as I told her what this man had done. I cried when I told my stepfather. I cried again when I told the police officer. I cried when I told the judge, the lawyers, and every other person in the courtroom saw my tears.

I sat in the witness stand, my mother seated in a folding chair to my left. I answered the questions I was asked, to the best any ten year old is capable, and in those
moments sitting anxiously I attempted to stare down the man who had violated me and erased my belief in the trustworthiness of men.

He was convicted of this molestation, but I found out later there had been other girls who had been too afraid to testify, so he was never charged for the violations against them. I was the first and only girl brave enough to come forward, and this too gave me back a small part of strength and belief that I was capable of protecting myself, and I wasn’t entirely to blame for what happened. He was sentenced to spend time in prison. How much time and where he was sentenced to spend that time I am not certain, and I have never really cared.

What troubled me most was that my mother told me I couldn’t tell my grandmother what this man had done to me. She would worry herself sick. I thought my mother was ashamed of me, and that I too should be ashamed. My mother told me I was lucky – I could have been raped. I know that while there was truth in her statement, I also know that I never forgave my mother for not understanding the depths of my pain from what this man had taken from me. I may not have been raped, but I was violated nonetheless, and something was taken from me that would take me several decades to get back. Eventually, the tears from what this man had done to my body diminished. The tears stopped, because in time the pressure of a moment and the events that hurt you as a child mold themselves into something else. Something unreal – a memory. Something to let go and forget. They are only intangible events and not concrete. Events and happenings are all things I could forget. Things I would choose to forget. I didn’t have to remember the details, and while it took me years to learn that they weren’t important, that
most of all I didn’t want that event to become me. I learned living in that small Southern Utah town that what happened to me was big news that warranted lots of gossip. In fifth grade there were classmates who discovered what had happened and they, along with their parents, treated me different. In my eyes and their eyes I wasn’t the same girl as I was before.

We moved from that house we rented within a few months after the trial was over. My parents bought their first home together and because this new house was so much bigger, my mother began constantly working on convincing my grandmother to come live with us in Utah. It wasn’t until her health started to deteriorate and her ability to care for herself became nearly impossible that my grandmother finally relented.

We had an extra room that we readied for her arrival. Finally, we would be together again. For me this was perfect, everything I had ever dreamed. Selfishly I was relieved; she would be there to protect me. I could finally share my day to day life with her again. But for her this move was devastating. Living with us in Utah meant giving up her home in Idaho, her cats, and what mattered most, her independence.

The morning my parents were to move my grandmother, they left early in the morning and returned mid-afternoon, too soon to have made the drive from Southern Utah to Idaho and back.

“She’s gone. She died before we could get there,” my mother said. They had received the call before they ever left Utah.

I opened my mouth but no words came out. Only tears and a lump in my throat so big and tight I felt like I was choking.
“Where is she? She can’t be dead. You promised you’d bring granma back. You lied. I hate you for bringing me here. If we were in Idaho she wouldn’t have died.” I ran and didn’t stop until they quit following me and I reached the creek.

Standing next to the creek, the sky turned gray and the light from the sun faded away. The thunder rolled and bumped, crackling in the sky. The rain poured down, and in a few minutes my stringy brown hair clung to my face. My tears and the rain merged and became indistinguishable from one another. After my grandmother’s death there were no more summer escapes. I was forced to remain in Utah, year round, until the moment I could make my own escape.
I’ve never hated a physical place the way I hated the house my parents’ rented during my fourth and fifth grade years. The house was built in the 1950’s, possibly earlier. The outside had large pecan trees that seemed to endlessly drop nuts all over the sidewalk and our yard. There were large pine bushes on both sides of the front steps that acted as a barrier to keep the outside world from seeing what went on inside. The rooms were large, the walls plaster that chipped off in chunks whenever I tried to hang anything on the walls. The basement was unfinished and rock and sand frequently crumbled from those walls. Those are the details I remember. Mostly, I remember that the place made me feel helpless, powerless and like a victim. That was the house where I was molested. And after being molested, that was the house my stepfather asked me to play strip-poker with him, while he talked on the phone with someone, possibly my mother. That was the house my stepfather told me to lie in the bed next to him, but I could only have on my underpants. I came home early from school, after pulling the fire alarm and my stepfather was home from work sick that day. Nothing happened beyond me lying in the bed next to him, but it was after those events that he always wanted me to sit in his reclining chair with him, and he would touch me. He would rub his fingers barely touching my vagina, almost like it might just have been an accident; always near bedtime when I wore my pajamas, and always through my clothes. In that house, one of the times my stepfather
tried to quit smoking I mouthed off to him and he wrapped a dishtowel around my neck. And in those moments he wrapped the dishtowel around my neck, I thought I might just die. That was the house where nothing was safe; my memories, my body, my future. That was the house where everything about who I was changed. He used to call me little girl and I hated him for saying it, I hated him for everything, I hated him so badly.

My hate for my stepfather began when he took me from my grandmother, and then for trying to be the father I never had. He had never been inappropriate with me until after I was molested, and what hurts more than his inappropriateness with me is that when he found out I had been molested he was enraged. He wanted to go and kill the man. He was ready to hunt him down and kill him with his bare hands, and it took a lot for my mother to calm him down. In the short time that followed, I felt a love and respect for him – that maybe he just might be okay, that just maybe he might protect me. But those feelings came crashing down hard. When he began being inappropriate I became convinced that I was damaged, there was no hope for a normal life – there was no man who could be trusted. So much pain, so much hatred, so much confusion filled my mind. I became bitter and angry – defiant against all that my parents wanted, and all I began to think about was getting out.

My mother used to become angry with me when I refused to sit with my stepfather. She couldn’t understand why I didn’t want to sit in his reclining chair with him, or why I was so cold and distant to both of them. But a part of me felt she wouldn’t believe me anyway, and that it didn’t matter, and I couldn’t tell her the details of what happened – I was too ashamed. I believe I carried some of the guilt. I had nearly
convinced myself that maybe there was something wrong with me that I deserved what was happening. After I was molested, she told me many times I was lucky; it could have been worse and that I didn’t have a reason to be so depressed and angry all the time. She told me she wanted her daughter back, the one that man who molested me took from her. How could I give her back that girl when I couldn’t even remember who I was before that incident? That girl had long since left me. I did know enough to understand that what happened to me could have been worse, but the minimizing of what I had lost and the apparent casual dismissal by my mother were incomprehensible. What was left of my innocence and naïve faith in the goodness of people was gone forever. I questioned everyone’s motives for kindness and was suspicious of every man. And yet, as a mother, I wonder if my own mother truly believed she was helping me move past the event. Maybe she too felt powerless and helpless, and that was all she believed she could do to help me let go and move on.

I knew what would happen if I told my mother what her own husband was doing to me, and I believed she would hate me forever. She had told me many times that I was trying to ruin this marriage too. At the time, I wondered what she meant by this marriage too? She only made me more angry and defiant. I never understood how I played a role in ruining her first marriage? I was only three when my mother and John divorced. I struggled to understand what I might have done to make my father want to leave. How could he have hated me so much he felt like he had to leave us? How could I have driven him away when, for so many years, I wanted him so desperately? My mother said it was my fault enough that I began to carry the blame and responsibility. With my mother and
stepfather, at first it was my defiant behavior, my hateful response to everything they said or did, my rejection of my stepfather, that she blamed me for pushing them apart. She would become enraged with my behavior, calling me a selfish bitch or a little witch. Then, in a moment when she must have been so angry at me that the only way she could make me feel the pain and guilt she must have been feeling herself, she said that my father left because I was a girl. I would never be able to change my gender. Maybe she was right. Because of my mother and my own fears I kept my secret. I kept it so close and so deep inside that I became that secret. I became angry and felt dirty and ashamed, and I hated myself and my life. Everything I had fought so hard not to become – I gave into those feelings and they became me.
In the fifth grade, a boy in my class and I used to see who could pull the fire alarm handle down the furthest without it actually going off. Nearly every day at our afternoon recess a small group of kids gathered near the fire alarm closest to the side doors by the playground and our classroom. We were always neck in neck; neither of us had yet to pull it down far enough it might actually go off; we always chickened out. Until one day I was either no longer afraid or my luck had run out, and when the alarm went off I knew I was going to be in big trouble. We scattered in every possible direction. At first none of the teachers or the principal knew who pulled the alarm, but one of the kids who had been watching us ratted me out. My fifth grade teacher stood up for me though; telling the principal I was a good kid and he was sure it was an accident, I wouldn’t do something like that on purpose. My fifth grade teacher was also the father of the boy I had had a crush on for several years. But that boy, like the others, would only ever like me as a friend. I would never be the type of girl he would go for. He knew I’d been molested, most of the kids at school knew, their parents knew, the teachers knew. I was marked, it was a small town. While many didn’t really know the actual details, they believed it to have been an immoral and dirty event that I was involved in. Because they were Mormon and their families seemed so together and in order, so perfect, the dysfunction in my own family seemed that much more pronounced. My mother and stepfather both worked odd
hours and they rarely spent any time doing family activities with us. They both drank coffee and alcohol and my stepfather smoked – all things that are against church doctrine. Specifically, the Mormon church relies on what they call The Words of Wisdom as guiding principles and morals that must be adhered to in order for their members to attend the temple ceremonies. The Words of Wisdom were an 1833 revelation by Joseph Smith, the church's founder. The main principles are chastity, abstinence from tobacco, caffeine, alcohol, and any drug substances.

I had to tell my parents about pulling the fire alarm before the school called them. My mother was out of town with my brother Bill for one of his many medical appointments. Bill's kidney failure required that he make frequent, sometimes monthly, five hour drives to his doctor in Salt Lake City for monitoring. Slowly, my brother had been losing the functioning of what remained of his one partially working kidney. My stepfather was home sick that day and he just laughed it off. He let me stay home sick from school the next day. I was so relieved. I thought his response was so cool. But that feeling didn’t last long. No matter how I try, I can’t seem to remember the events orderly as they happened. Like the girl who learned early how to mentally leave her own body, I once again escaped to a place where I could be seen but mentally I could not feel. My mind has meshed these events together into one moment that I’d rather not remember. Maybe shutting down mentally and emotionally made living with my stepfather and mother easier. Maybe it made forgiving him easier. Maybe that’s just what the mind does in order to survive.
I transitioned from a 5th grade student who was rarely in trouble and receiving good grades to a junior high student shoplifting, skipping school, failing classes, drinking, and hanging out with kids who smoked, drank, and did drugs. I was defiant in school; refusing to participate in PE. I never dressed out and absolutely refused to shower in front of the other girls. I was too afraid they might see my shame, my dirtiness. So instead, I failed PE every year in junior high. In a small way it was a feeling of control – they couldn’t make me dress and undress and they couldn’t make me participate. I was choosing to fail.

My seventh grade year was when everything between my parents and I changed. There would be no going back, and what ever direction we moved in our relationship would be heavily weighted on me.

I was in the bathroom taking a bath one day when I heard something and looked over at the door to see a small mirror sliding under the door. Initially, I thought it was my brother so I yelled at him to go away and leave me alone. After a few seconds the mirror was gone. I sat in the cold water: confused, afraid, angry. I was going to kick my brother’s ass for doing this. I didn’t think he was being funny – especially when he wouldn’t answer me when I yelled back at him. But I had a sinking feeling that this wasn’t my brother. I threw a towel down in front of the door and dressed quickly. When I opened the door and yelled for my brother he was nowhere to be found. My stepfather immediately came out of his bedroom, which was down the hall from the bathroom, and handed me a note. I took the note and my things downstairs to my room, closed my door and sat on my bed to read the note. I could feel my heartbeat quicken – a rush of
adrenaline accelerating through my veins. I knew this note had to do with the mirror. He had written that he was sorry for what he had done, and would I please forgive him.

Before the words even had a chance to sink in, I went back upstairs and walked out the front door. I don’t know where he was, but he didn’t try stopping me from leaving – he knew. I walked five blocks to my friend’s house, told them what happened and asked if I could call my mother at work. I felt like I was reliving the same phone call I made when I was molested by my neighbor all over again. Only the consequences of this phone call would be more life changing for everyone in our family. Once I said the words out loud to my mother this would no longer be about what was happening to me, it became about what was happening to our family. And this time I couldn’t tell my mother the details over the phone. I knew she would be mad. She would be angry at me. I told her as little as possible, before she finally understood that she had to immediately come home. When she arrived to pick me up, she didn’t even get out of her car.

I know my mother was angry and there was a lot of yelling and crying in our house. I know my mother made my stepfather get rid of all the Playboy magazines he had, but I don’t remember what was said between the three of us. My mother decided we needed family counseling, at least the three of us. So the three of us went for our first visit, and after that I was the only one who continued seeing the counselor. In the beginning I was angry that I had done nothing wrong and I was being punished and having to go every week to see this counselor. I know they stopped going to counseling and I imagine the visits just became about me because they believed they were having behavior problems with me. I was verbally defiant, skipping school, rejecting my
stepfather, and generally very obstinate. They couldn’t, or refused to, see that they played a role in my behavior. Even today when we talk about me seeing that counselor, we don’t talk about what precipitated the initial visit. My mother was convinced that I was only acting out because of having been molested. She refused to see that her absence and lack of involvement and interest in my emotional and physical needs made her complicit in my acting out. They couldn’t see that because of the things my stepfather had done, in addition to already having been molested, I didn’t feel safe, I didn’t’ trust men, and I became consumed with getting out. I began to believe that I was the only person who could ensure my own safety. I believed that if I were on my own I would be safe and therefore happy.

Initially I struggled with the counselor – after all that had happened to me, how could my parents be so blind as to expect me to open up and trust a male counselor? But slowly, I began to trust him. In time I stopped feeling so dirty, and stopped feeling like I was the one who had done something wrong. He helped me see that in order for anyone else to love me, I first had to love myself. He helped me see that there wasn’t any way I, only a child myself, could be responsible for the actions of an adult. For Christmas he made me a tape that had some inspirational and popular songs on it, and he gave me card where he wrote that I was special. During the months that I saw him, he gave me hope that not all men were going to hurt me, that not all men let you down, and that even a man who knew what had happened to me wouldn’t always see me as damaged – there was more to me than the events I was a victim to. I looked at him and the letters that followed his name, the office where he worked, the job he seemed to love, and I knew
there was more to just existing. I’d occasionally read an article about his involvement in the community or see pictures of him running in marathons. He only reaffirmed my desire for an education. Sadly, the visits became less frequent until they stopped altogether.

My mother told me that some day I would understand why she didn’t leave my stepfather. Her children were going to grow up and leave her, but her spouse was someone she would spend the rest of her life with and she didn’t want to be alone. I think she was afraid. My mother’s insecurities and her own inability to truly trust men plagued her. My stepfather certainly treated my mother better than my biological father. My stepfather came home every night, he helped her around the house, he seemed affectionate and rarely did they fight. While my stepfather hadn’t betrayed my mother by cheating on her – I believed he had betrayed her in the worse possible way. And yet all she knew about was the mirror; that was all she could handle – this I knew. She wasn’t willing to believe there could have been more. What hurts is that my mother so easily gave up my world for him. My mother was only willing to see that which she was confronted with – the possibility that there could be more, that he could have done anything more serious to me was too devastating for my mother to handle. What my mother needed emotionally was more important than my safety. My mother and I never discuss her betrayal; in fact, she all but denies anything every happened. And to this day, even I pretend it’s not something that’s relevant. What I believe I did was sacrifice my own emotional needs for my mother’s happiness. But at this point in my life, I realize that
my mother’s happiness was never conditioned on me not telling her the things her husband had done to me; my mother’s happiness was lost somewhere in a warped component of our shared past – the shared past of the last four generations of women on my maternal side. Even though she’d promised she’d never marry a man for her children, she committed the worse possible offense – she stayed with a man who hurt her daughter, because she was too afraid of being alone, of not being loved and wanted. My mother’s needs superseded everything.
Courage

During my eighth grade year I met Scott. He had been friends with my brother, but initially I never paid much attention to him. He was two years older and always in trouble with the law. What made me pay the most attention to Scott was the fact that he knew I had been molested and he didn’t care. I told him everything, and for the first time I felt I had completely freed that girl who’d been hiding away from the world. One of the times when Scott and I were talking, he told me one of his older brothers was in jail the same time as the man who molested me, and his brother was one of the guys who beat him up. My mother told me that the man who molested me was beat up while he was in jail awaiting his trial, but I hadn’t yet shared this detail with Scott. My mother worked at the jail as a Corrections Officer/Dispatcher at the time, and the man bragged to other inmates that he’d done things to the daughter of the jailer who drove the red Firebird, and because the other inmates liked my mother they beat him up.

Initially, Scott and I just hung out. When he skipped classes at the high school he’d come to the junior high and I’d skip classes with him. On the weekends, late in the evenings when the sun went down, we were out with our friends in the Utah desert, building camp fires and partying. We often drank ourselves into oblivion and Scott and the other kids would smoke pot. In all of the times I watched Scott and my friends smoke pot, I only watched. I was too afraid to try it for fear that I would lose control. I drank,
and often way too much of things too strong, but I never drank so much I gave up control. Alcohol only numbed me, and I thought I was still in control drinking. I believed pot gave people a false sense of control, and made them less aware of their emotions and surroundings. I didn’t trust anyone enough to give them control over my physical or mental safety, not even Scott or our friends.

When Scott and I became more serious I devised a plan. I had to get out. I wouldn’t have to live under my stepfather’s rules or the absence of my mother’s love. I would have my own rules and create my own home; a home that was happy, and most importantly safe physically and emotionally. At 14 I got pregnant on purpose, though nobody but Scott knew at the time that it was intentional. I wanted out, and saw it as my only option. I hadn’t considered that I was only 14 and couldn’t legally work until I was 16, and I still had to graduate high school; all things I believed I would do. I hadn’t considered that even if Scott and I married, like I’d planned, he didn’t have a job and therefore how could we pay for the necessities? Where would we live? All I thought about was escaping.

When I told my mother and stepfather I was pregnant, they asked me what I was going to do. I sat silently in the back of the red Firebird as we drove around. I already knew what I was going to do, but I wasn’t ready to tell them. In fact, 18 years later and I still haven’t told them. They told me that the decision to keep my baby or adopt her was mine. My stepfather was adamant that abortion wasn’t an option – and I had never even considered it. They had no idea that I already knew how much I wanted this baby. I would love her in all the ways I had never been loved, and I knew this baby would love
me too. They both made it clear that they were not going to raise her. And whatever
decision I made I would live with. I was to be held responsible for my actions. But what
was first and foremost on my mind was getting out, not all of the responsibility that
comes with having a baby. I just wanted out. I was sure I would love my baby, and I
would never put a man before her. She would feel safe and grow up in happy home.
Today I realize that in so many ways I failed her before I even knew I was failing her,
just as my mother failed me. And what hurts the most is that I always chose her. I’ve
always loved and wanted her, and yet now she doesn’t seem to want or care about me.

I thought I could be home-schooled and quickly found out that if I wanted an
education I had to go to school. I had no choice so I went. Scott struggled and was barely
able to graduate, and didn’t get his first job until he was eighteen – after he graduated. At
times, it seemed that his graduating and working, all things he needed to do for my plan
to work, were so difficult and nearly impossible for him to do. All the while, he never
gave up stealing. Now that I had a child, and the future wasn’t just about me, Scott being
in trouble with the law was no longer so attractive. I desperately needed to believe that he
wanted something more. I needed to believe that he wanted to walk away from his old
life and create a new life with me and his daughter as much as I wanted it. I wanted it so
much that I was blind. I was still so afraid that no one else would be able to love me
because of my past, and yet Scott accepted me regardless. After Danniell was born, Scott
and I continued to live at each of our own parents’ homes; with Danniell living with me
until Scott graduated and we could then get married.
At fourteen and still living at home with only a four month old baby, her incessant crying at 1:00 a.m. and my mom in the hospital with a collapsed lung, I was frustrated. None of the doctors knew what caused my mother’s lung to collapse and we didn’t know how long she would be in the hospital. I felt alone with a baby I loved and wanted to care for but didn’t know how to comfort. When we brought Danniell home from the hospital and she was kept under special lights for jaundice and she had to be turned from front to back and back again hourly. My mother and I slept in the spare bedroom upstairs – the same bedroom that was going to be my grandmother’s room, and my mother helped me take care of Danniell. Today, I understand that her ties to Danniell are probably stronger than most grandmothers’ ties to their grandchildren because she helped care for Danniell so much during the first 18 months of her life. Together we turned her, fed her, changed her, and weighed her diapers, tracking them in a log book for the doctors. When I compare the young mother I was then to the mother I am now, I recognize my struggles and lack of patience were related to my immaturity, and that regardless of how much I believed I loved Danniell, my ability to connect with a new baby when my own body was still physically and mentally maturing was truly limited. And while I loved her, mentally I wasn’t prepared for the selfless devotion and patience it takes to be a mother. My patience was short and I’m sure Danniell sensed my frustration; so she cried more and often stiffened her little body when I held her. Sometimes I just wanted her to shut up and let me sleep. I remember needing sleep so badly, and it seemed that each night all she did was cry. I knew her belly hurt from colic, but I was so tired and had school the next day.
Why didn’t she understand that? I wondered how in the hell everyone else in the house could sleep through this.

One of the nights my mother was in the hospital I came upstairs from the bedroom Danniell and I shared, put her on the end of the couch, pressed up next to the arm, and I lay down on the other end. I placed the pillow over my ears. I couldn’t take anymore of her screaming and crying. She didn’t want me to comfort her. Finally, through her cries and my own, I fell asleep.

I heard his voice breaking through into my dreams. It was my stepfather and he was holding Danniell in his arms. She was finally quiet.

“She needs to be put in her crib, she’s asleep,” he said.

“How’d you get her to stop crying?” I asked.

“I came home from the hospital and she was screaming and you were asleep. She just wanted to be held,” he said.

How could she let him, of all people, comfort her and put her to sleep? I wondered what was wrong with me? Even then, I desperately wanted to know why she didn’t connect with me? I took her downstairs, put her in her crib and got into my own bed.

After Danniell was born I lived at home for another eighteen months. As soon as I turned sixteen I got a job as a maid and started saving money to move from Utah. My parents said I could get married when Scott graduated and I turned sixteen. So we did.
When I was sixteen I left Utah for good, and returned to Idaho. I took Scott, a small town southern Utah Mormon boy, away from his family to a place he had never been, all so that I could start my life over. I was going back home to Idaho where all of my memories with my grandmother were, where the snow fell in the winter and there was the distinct and reliable change in seasons. I never stopped longing for the reliability and familiarity of the rounded mountains of southeast Idaho, the green and brown landscape in the spring and summer and the yellow and browns in the fall and winter. The seasons each came and went with regularity and reliability. The reds and purples of the sandstone plateaus of Utah would soon only be a memory – one I could let go of. The heat and lack of seasonal changes would just be one more part of my past that I wanted to forget.

Because of Scott’s extensive criminal juvenile record I thought moving to Idaho would also be a chance for him to start over. I believed that, like me, he too wanted to prove something to the world. But I was only thinking about freeing myself, and was blind to Scott and the fact that he was who he was – I would never be able to change him or make him want more out of life than what he had in Southern Utah. Even after we moved to Idaho, I stayed in high school and was able to graduate early my senior year while also working nights and weekends.

After moving to Idaho, Scott finally ended up getting a job working nights stocking a local grocery store and I worked days, pulling us further and further apart. He lost several jobs over the years for stealing, and yet with each job loss I pretended it wasn’t his fault, and continued trying to convince myself that he wanted something more. When I was eighteen and pregnant with our second daughter I was close to leaving him,
but I didn’t think that I could support myself, a four-year old, and a new baby. I threatened to leave him if he didn’t seek counseling for his problem, but he knew I wasn’t serious enough to leave. “You’ll never leave me,” he used to say.

In October 1997, I finally had the courage to tell Scott I didn’t want to be married to him anymore. Even though he had recently relented to marriage counseling, his commitment was only temporary. He let me know that he wasn’t going to pay someone to tell him to be nice to his wife. Marriage counseling hadn’t worked and I wanted out. While I thought it would be good for the girls to stay together until after the holidays, Scott said that if there wasn’t hope for us to be together it wasn’t worth him staying. The days lingered on, and he pleaded and I held my ground, this time I made up my mind and I wasn’t relenting. Scott tried to kill himself, in our home with myself and both of our daughters present. He cut the phone lines, and injected several bottles of insulin into his body.


While Scott was in the hospital I called his parents and when his father answered the phone, I said, “Scott tried to kill himself. You need to...”, but he hung up the phone before I could finish my sentence. Then I called his sister and told her what Scott had done, and finally his parents came. But Scott refused to go back to Utah with them, instead he moved in with a co-worker. I stayed with the girls in the home that we’d just recently purchased. But Scott would show up randomly to pick up some of his
belongings, and instead of leaving he would linger around picking fights with me, and break down crying in front of the girls. Because he was still an owner in the property the police couldn’t make him leave. And because Scott wouldn’t stop harassing me, my stepfather informed me that I either move out of my own home and in with my parents, or he would move in with the girls and me.

I was out by the weekend. The girls and my things were crammed into a 12x12 storage unit along with all of my mother’s spare bedroom and sewing room accessories so that there would be a room for the girls and me. My parents’ five bedroom home was already filled with my sister, my brother, and my step-sister. The girls and I used their bunk bed and we took the downstairs bedroom that used to be the old sewing room. The room was small, maybe 8x8 and on one wall a small 2x3 window that let in only minimal light. The ceiling hung low and the duct work from the furnace lowered the ceiling in front of the closet and door even more. The carpet was brown and yellow shag from the 1970s, and I felt like I had lost so much by moving back home, and yet at the same time freed myself from all that held me down while married to Scott. At least the girls and I were lucky enough to have our own bathroom.

I left Scott’s illegal activities and I left his inability to love me like I was a person with dreams and not simply his property or another one of his toys. But at first I wasn’t sure what kind of life I left him for. I was now living back at home with my parents and I hadn’t lived at home since I was 16, I was then 22. I also had two daughters of my own, and while my stepfather had never done anything else to me after the mirror incident, I wasn’t going to be blind to my own daughters’ safety. I was a grown woman and there
was little, if anything, he could do to hurt me – but I knew I had to protect my daughters.

I could not fail them the way my mother failed me.
Invincibility and Hope

It was the week before Christmas and we had been living with my parents for two months. The atmosphere in the house was different than I’d ever experienced. There was a remarkably strange peace and calm between everyone, and considering how many adults were living together, we all got along quite well. My stepfather’s gift to my mother was a carat diamond for each ear. He loved to buy her jewelry. She decided it would be good for me to go with my stepfather to the mall to pick them up. Because this was my first Christmas home since I left at 16, I didn’t know how to feel: relief, anxiety, and memories of insecurities and questions of safety lingered. Were my children safe? I had forgiven this man, but I still did not entirely trust him.

The 18 months I lived at home after Danniell’s birth, my mother and stepfather had been there to help me with the struggles of being a teenager mother. When I reached my limits of patience with Danniell and my mother wasn’t home, my stepfather was there to help me with Danniell. When I was married to Scott and suffered from debilitating migraines and couldn’t get Scott out of bed to take me to the hospital, my mother would come sit with the girls and my stepfather would take me to the emergency room. When the doctors would give me a shot of Demerol or some other narcotic to knock me out, I trusted and relied on my stepfather completely. And when I was pregnant with Nicole, and Scott had lost another job for stealing (this time money from the cash register), it was
my stepfather who sat with me in the parking lot at my work telling me that he supported any decision I made. He believed in me and even if leaving was difficult for me, he had faith that I would be okay. He believed that I was capable of anything I put my mind to because he had seen my determination, and even though he believed in me, I still did not believe in myself.

The jeweler retrieved the earrings he had selected for my mother. While my stepfather and the salesman made small talk I wandered off, running my hands on the tops of the clear glass cases. Everything sparkled. Rings, bracelets, earrings, and necklaces. My eyes sparkled with Emeralds, Sapphires, Amethysts.

Cases full of diamonds – sparkling clarity – my birthstone, a stone I’ve always loved. Diamond is composed of carbon – an element that is the basis of all life and can be found in the atmosphere, the sun the stars and many planets. In its varied forms, carbon can be one of the softest naturally occurring substances and one of the hardest. Diamond is the hardest natural substance in the world. As a young girl, I believed that because diamond was my birthstone I was indestructible. Throughout history, diamond has represented both purity and invincibility, and has been a symbol of royalty and everlasting love.

There were more cases of Pearls and Opals. It was the opal case that caught my attention, specifically an opal cross. The cross was gold with each arm of the cross a tear dropped shaped opal reaching out, and a small diamond in the center. I was looking into a rainbow of fire and lightning rolling in a sea of green. The history of opals stretch back to
before the days of Christ, and to the Romans, an opal represented purity and hope. The Australian Aborigines believed that the Creator took the colors of the rainbow and put them into the stone creating the opal. To them, the opal was believed to bring love, luck, peace, and happiness.

“Do you want me to take it out? Would you like to try it on?” the jeweler asked.

“No. No thank you. I can’t afford it,” I said.

He looked at me, smiled, encouraging me to say yes.

“No thank you,” I said again. My stepfather had paid for the diamonds and we left.

Christmas day came and all of the gifts were opened, except for one gift hidden in the tree. My mother pulled it out and handed it to me. She must have hidden it because she knew exactly where to find it. Almost as quickly as the small package touched my hands, I had it opened.

It was the opal cross I had been admiring at the jewelry store. A look of bewilderment on my face caused my mother to respond.

“Your Dad came right home and wanted me to go back with him and get this for you. He saw you looking at it and knew you wanted it.”

I was speechless for many moments and began to cry from both happiness and sadness. He took my mother with him, and together they bought that opal cross I had admired and longed for. And I’m convinced that he wanted to buy that necklace out of kindness, not from regret or bribery to make me let go or forget the past – too many years had passed between us for those events to still be an issue. What I want to believe was
that this cross was given to me as a token of peace and hope from my parents to me. I believe that my parents could see that their daughter had survived so many things and as her life continued to change she never stopped working for something better. Maybe this cross was a truce, a recognition that things had transpired between us that none of us wanted to talk about, and that no matter what happened between the three of us, I still loved them, and they loved me. I never gave up believing that we could be a family and I realized that I needed and wanted their love, their acceptance, their support, their approval, and their praises.

And when I think about this cross, and the unspoken feelings and events between my parents and me, I think about Danniell and I wonder where I went wrong, where I failed her, at what point did she decide that her life would be better, happier, or more fulfilled without me in it? I wonder if some day she too will find peace and forgive me for the choices I’ve made that have hurt her, just as I have forgiven my mother for the choices she made that hurt me.

My stepfather has hurt me, but he loves me and I know that he is sorry. I forgive him. I have the choice to either accept or reject. The decision is mine and mine alone to make. But he is forever in my life, my children’s lives. He stays with my mother. Hating him will not bring my grandmother back. Hating him will not change the past. It won’t change the relationship between my mother and me. Hating him will not undo what cannot be undone. And yet, I want to stop pretending that there are events and secrets our family will never talk about. I don’t want to pretend events never happened when they did or that the secrets haven’t been more damaging than anyone will acknowledge. I just
want both my parents, together, to recognize or acknowledge to me that they both know what really happened and that they were a part of my pain. That’s all I want

Years after having returned home, after my divorce, and after moving out on my own again to earn my college degree, I’d called home one evening to check on my stepfather who recently had surgery.

“How are you feeling, Dad?” I asked.

“I am still so tired, this is the first time I’ve been cut on,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yah. I don’t hurt anymore, just worn down.”

We made small talk about his recent surgery. And I talked with him about how hard it was for the girls and me to put our new puppy to sleep. Even though the puppy was sick and would only get worse, in the few short months we had the puppy the loss of our puppy was emotional difficult for the girls and me. Quickly, she had become a trusted companion in all of our lives. Emotionally I went back and forth from feeling like a monster to a humanitarian, and the most wrenching part of this event was choosing the day that her life would end. Somehow it didn’t seem right. I believed that my duty as a pet-owner negated that I stay with her as the vet injected her with the lethal solution that would end her pain and her life. I held her in my arms, tears blurring my vision until all I saw was her form. The life slipped away from her so quickly and quietly that I couldn’t believe it really happened. Her once lively little body went limp and lifeless, and hung in my quivering arms. I was unable to immediately turn her over to our vet, even after he
said, “she’s gone now.” My cries turned into deep sobs and all I could say was, “take care of her.”

My stepfather listened as I shared those moments again with him. He said, “I like dogs too you know. I don’t hate them.”

“‘I know,” I said. Growing up my stepfather always resisted us getting cats or dogs, and I’m sure it was partially because he didn’t want our house to end up like my grandmothers with all the cats, dogs, and the fish.

“It’s just that, on the farm, I was the one who had to kill the animals when there was something wrong with them. Trade-off for using Dad’s gun I guess.” His voice trailed off.

“That doesn’t seem very fair, why’d you have to do it?” I asked.

“Because no one else could, and I didn’t want the animals to suffer.”

“I still don’t think that’s fair.”

“I wouldn’t do it now. Now, I’d just take em’ to the vet.”

“Ya, I know Dad.”

“Anyway,” he cleared his throat and the conversation was over.

“I hope you get feeling better soon. Take it easy and enjoy your time off.”

In that moment I was sad. I know that he too is human; he has emotions and feelings just like I do, and I wonder if I have hurt him too.
He Was Resting

He walks everywhere. His sneakers covered with dust and street grime. His jeans are worn and he almost always wears a long-sleeved faded western shirt. His shoulders curve inward toward his chest, and most of the time he walks with his head slightly lowered – like he’s ready to come face to face with anyone who might challenge him. He often grows a beard and mustache; ungroomed, his whiskers a tangled mess of fine silken brown and grey thread. The town he walks is small, only about 55,000 people. It is Pocatello, the town we were both born in, the town where he still lives. He walks everywhere in wind, rain, snow, heat, and freezing cold. And by appearances, he’s not the kind of person I would stop for and offer a ride to where he might need to go. But he is my brother, and when I think about him walking and I think about the way others must see him, the way I would see him if I didn’t know him, I am ashamed of the way I feel.

At 37 he looks more like 55, his skin wrinkled with blemishes and more like leather than skin. Whenever I see him, I desperately want him to shave the scruffy facial hair behind which he hides the scars on his face. I want to buy him jeans that don’t have holes in the knees, but he doesn’t want me to, he tells me they are his church pants “there are holy pants.” He smiles, his brown eyes squinting nearly closed and his yellow teeth show through his proud smile for the joke he’s told. I can’t help but smile too.
I’ve always loved my brother and felt he was the one constant, the person who had been through it all with me. When I was a small girl I mimicked everything he did, to the point he couldn’t stand me. When I was in kindergarten and he was in first grade, for the second time, when our mother would drop us off in front of the school and I always insisted on a hug and a kiss from him before I’d let him go to class. He hated it, but I felt triumphant.

The day my brother had his aneurism was a moment in time where everything that ever was ceased to be, and everything that was ahead of us would be nothing like any of us expected, especially for my brother. That event changed our lives more than the two kidney transplants he has received, and more than the thirty some odd years he’s spent dealing with kidney failure. It has been eleven years since that day, and what my brother struggles with the most is that in his own mind he knows who he was and what he was capable of doing, but he can’t always articulate the thoughts in his mind, he can’t always remember the things said to him, and physically he’ll only continue to deteriorate.

By the time I’d arrived at the hospital, the neurosurgeon had already written my brother off. His bed manner was cold and heartless. He had performed these kinds of surgeries too many times. He had seen people with the medical problems similar to my brother’s, and they almost always never survived. Why should his expectations for my brother have been any different? My brother’s blood pressure was 190/120 when my parents brought him to the hospital, and his stability was further complicated because
they couldn’t bring his blood pressure down. He began jumbling words, calling the television a dog, squinting at my mother and me like we were strangers.

Whatever reasons behind the neurosurgeon’s feelings, I hated him for telling us to prepare for the worst; that if my brother came out of the surgery he would be on a respirator, maybe even paralyzed.

But he didn’t know my brother. I knew that once I saw my brother’s curly mahogany hair and the way his ears lifted when he smiled, things would be fine: they always were.

They wheeled my brother in on a long hospital bed, both retaining bars up. He looked feeble, several white blankets and sheets piled on him, hair muddled. His eyes no longer brown, each just an immense black pupil. The hospital gown draped over his body revealing the skin on his chest. The calves of his legs pale, blue veined, with dark hair. Cotton booties covered his feet.

I blinked back tears, swallowed hard, an act to disguise my fear.

“Hey, Bill.”

“Hey.” His voice quivered.

“What do you think you’re doin’ here?” I leaned against the bed to steady myself, palms sweating, knees weakening.

Pulling the IV tube, he grabbed his head, tears on his cheeks. “It hurts, make it stop.”
I reached for his hand—cold and limp, like the kitten that died in my hands months back. I rubbed his dry hand, applying mild pressure, hoping to warm it and give him back life.

Standing by and watching my brother so close to death left me feeling more helpless than I had ever felt. My brother was diagnosed with renal failure at seven years old, and our mother was told he would need a kidney transplant. The vesicoureteral reflux; a condition that allows urine in the bladder to flow back into the kidneys and over time causes damage and scaring to the kidneys, my brother was born with started showing the damage to his kidneys when he was four, by the time I was born. Because his kidneys had never worked properly, the ends of his bones started to curl up and stunted his growth. Through grade school, junior and senior high, I was taller than my brother. I have never known my brother any other way. This helplessness brought me pain because I knew that as much as I believed in my brother’s strength and amazing ability to always surprise his doctor, there was nothing I could do but hold his hand.

When my brother was eight and I was barely five he taught me how to ride a bike.

“Hold on Selena. Keep pedaling, I won’t let go,” he said.

My four-foot body shaking with anticipation, the bicycle almost too big for me, but Bill was behind me and won’t let go.

“Selena, you’re doing it, you’re riding on your own,” he said.
In my excitement I began trembling. The front wheel wobbled and I lost control crashing into the neighbor’s garage. I lay on the ground for a few minutes crying. Bill ran to me and hugged me.

“I knew you could do it Selena. I told you,” Bill said.

After four hours of surgery the neurosurgeon met my mother in the hallway and for the first time since that morning her shoulders lifted. The few moments they stood whispering felt like hours. She turned to us and said, “Bill made it through the surgery. He’s not on a respirator, and has strength in his extremities. His blood pressure is down. The doctor’s impressed, and said we’ll be able to see him when he gets out of recovery.”

For the first time in hours, it didn’t hurt to breathe. I let it out, slow, methodical. Inhaling smells of burnt rubber from the vacuum working down the hall. Hearing the shuffle of feet sliding across the indoor-outdoor carpet in the hallway, and the occasional small talk between nurses. The warmth of the lamp in the surgery waiting lounge comforting me. I prepared to go home. I would come back in a couple of hours.

At the time I left, I didn’t know that within the next 72 hours my brother would experience grand mal seizures, his body uncontrollably convulsing, the nurses frantically demanding the neurosurgeon respond to the Code Blue. I didn’t know that his heart would stop, he would die and be resuscitated. They would tie his wrists to the bed to stop him from pulling the tubes from his head and nose. I didn’t know a nurse would tell us his brain had swollen and been pushed down into the base of his neck only to have another CAT reveal that the grand mal seizures were because he didn’t have enough
dilatin—his seizure medicine. I didn’t know that when my brother was able to speak he would look me in the eyes and tell me I wasn’t his sister. He remembered me only as a little girl. Everyone in his life would become a stranger to him.

All I knew was that he was resting, and wasn’t asking us to shoot him anymore. I once again felt hope, and believed again that the fighter in brother could survive anything.

Growing up my mother, brother, and I lived many places: apartments, trailer parks, old dilapidated houses. While we lived at The Grove Apartments in Pocatello, my brother and I shared great adventures, riding our bikes throughout the empty hills that surrounded the apartments, exploring the dumpsters for lost treasures, and pretending that we were bigger and smarter than we really were. Bill and I once secretly followed three boys who we saw with a black teddy bear. The tallest boy had a bottle in his hand and the boy next to him had a stick. From tree to tree, and bush to bush, we followed them; down the street, through an alley, until they stopped. The smallest boy had been carrying the teddy bear. The tallest boy yanked it from him, throwing it on the ground. He stomped on the bear smearing it into the ground. The smallest boy began to cry and ran off. The tallest boy opened the bottle dumping the contents onto the bear. The remaining two boys then took turns jumping on the bear. I couldn’t take it any longer and ran out to stop them. “Stop what you’re doing, or I’ll beat you up,” I screamed. The tallest boy laughed until my brother came up and pushed him to the ground. The other boy ran away and I scooped the bear into my arms. It was covered in cologne,
and I was too. Bill grabbed my arm and we took off running, not stopping until we reached our apartment door.

A few years ago when I was home during Christmas’s, my brother told me that he wanted to try and go to college, to make something of his life. I told him he already had. He was a better person and had done more with his life than I ever could. He had survived two kidney transplants and a brain aneurysm. And, he volunteered everyday for eight hours preparing and distributing food commodity boxes to those in need; he had finally moved out on his own once again, to a place where he looked after the elderly; and was volunteering to be a mentor to a five-year old boy. My brother still believes in the good of all people, and he’s more forgiving than I could ever be. So when he tells me that he wants to get married and have children, I want to tell him that he will, even though he probably won’t. I want to tell him that love is enough and that he deserves it more than I do. I want to tell him that he is the kind of person I would stop and offer a ride to, and not just because he is my brother. Because when I see him walking I think about the way others see him, the way I would see him if I didn’t know him, I don’t want to be ashamed that I judged him by the way he looks without ever giving him the chance to let me know the fighter and bighearted man that he is. I want to open my heart like he can, and I want to believe good does prevail over bad and that things aren’t always what you see.
The last few months married to Scott were a sort of chaotic coming about of the woman I wanted to be. For the first time in my life I was engulfed in passion and a keen awareness of the power of my own body. As my marriage to Scott continued falling apart, I became intimately involved with my boss. From the moment my boss was a part of my life nothing in me would ever be the same. I should have been afraid, but at 22 I wanted and needed this man like I would never need or want another. To him, I gave all emotional and physical control, for the first and only time. I gave and received the most confused levels of love, heartache, and joy I would ever know.

The first time my boss kissed me he placed his hands on my shoulders. Gently pressing his lips to my forehead, he pulled my body close to his. “I hate to see you this way,” he whispered. I stiffened, afraid and yet intrigued, I placed my arms around his waist. All I could say was, “I have to go.” And I left. This was the summer of 1997 and I was only 22. The next day he was apologetic, but I hadn’t wanted him to be sorry. He was the first man to show any interest in me. Scott and I had been married for seven years. They had been tumultuous years filled with him losing jobs for stealing, him needing to spend more time with his friends riding dirt bikes and snowmobiles than with his family. They were often lonely years where I felt trapped in a cruel dream. I wanted a nice car, a nice home, a good job, and an education, but Scott was simply content just
getting by. They were years where each of us began to lead separate lives. He worked nights and I worked days, and during the nights he was away, I often received calls from girls telling me they wanted to let me know it was nice “fucking” my husband. And even when my own gynecologist asked me if I was sure I was in a monogamous relationship because of all of the infections I was getting, I still didn’t’ want to believe Scott would be unfaithful. He had been the first man, though only a boy himself at the time, to kiss me. He was the only man I’d ever loved, ever kissed, or ever had sex with. I wanted and needed to believe we were committed to each other.

I married when I was sixteen and by that time our first daughter was nearly two years old. At nineteen I gave birth to our second daughter. We were married for seven years. Scott was short, barely taller than my own 5’2” frame, and his dirty blond hair was fine like a baby’s and often hung over his forehead like a curtain hiding his brown eyes. My husband continually lost jobs at grocery and convenience stores because of his addiction to stealing. He would go months unemployed, sometimes taking odd jobs as a handy-man. When I married Scott at 16, I was foolish enough to believe that he wanted to change his life as much as I wanted him to. In truth, Scott’s juvenile record for stealing had more misdemeanors and felonies than most adults’ records, and his addiction to stealing was stronger than any desire he had for me or our children. When I was finally ready to leave Scott he begrudgingly agreed to see a marriage counselor. In the end, after six months of marriage counseling, my husband confessed, “I’m not going to pay someone to tell me to be nice to my wife.”
I had worked at the law firm for two years, and I was still convinced that I wanted to be an attorney. My boss was an attorney; six feet tall, thinning hair, and blue eyes that captivated me. He was 46 that summer he kissed me, and we were both married. It was so easy to fall for this man’s interest in me. He was charming, sophisticated, educated – all of the things Scott was not, and all of the things I desperately wanted. I let myself believe that what I was doing wasn’t wrong. I wanted to believe it was okay to feel the passion of being wanted by a man, even if that man wasn’t my husband.

That first year for Christmas my boss gave me red snowshoes with a poem he had written about snowshoeing and letting go of my troubles. By this time I had been separated from my husband for three months, but I wouldn’t be divorced for three more. My boss saw more about my marriage than I myself could see at the time, and I think he was more afraid for me than I was for myself. When our relationship started, with that first kiss on my forehead, I thought I knew what I was getting myself into.

The first time he took me snowshoeing we traveled north of Inkom, the town just west of Pocatello. It has been said that the name Inkom comes from a variant of “Indian Ink-um ‘come ahead.’” We traveled towards the Portneuf Mountains, down Old Bannock Highway to a private drive which led us to the trailhead of Robbers Roost Creek, this became the place we snowshoed most. Historically, this was a place where travelers were robbed at gunpoint, and this region also served as a hiding place for robbers because they couldn’t be tracked through the lava rocks and recesses of the canyon.
The last time we were at Robbers Roost together the sky was clear, and through the darkness of the morning hours it was a deep blue speckled with silvery stars. The snow fell the entire night, leaving behind nearly twelve inches. The clouds appeared to have fallen from the sky resting themselves on the mountains, the creek, and the trees. As we walked down the path, the branches fell inwards, creating an archway over the trail. The air was crisp. Each breath I took froze, mid-way through my nose and lungs. I reached for his gloved hand and side-by-side we walked away from the trailhead.

With each step I flipped snow from the back of my snowshoes into the hood of my jacket. His eyes were always on me, and every time I looked at him he was smiling. When the sun rose over the mountains everything sparkled. In the distance, I heard the rolling and purring of passing cars on snow and ice-covered roads, mixed with a soft peaceful trickling of water pushing through ice in the stream below the trail. We came upon the remains of a deer, and glimpsed a coyote as he stopped to look at us before running. Several times I slowed my pace and stopped to run my fingers through the snow, and lie in its softness. He waited and watched, and never rushed me to keep up with him. We moved at a pace that drew me inward. I knew that when he was out snowshoeing on his own he didn’t meander the way we did. The reflection of the sun made the snow look like thousands of crystals had been scattered at my feet.

I spent the entire seven years of my marriage making excuses for why my husband spent his free time in the wilderness on his motorcycles and snowmobiles with friends rather than me: he needed the time away; he didn’t want to take our daughters and
there wasn’t anyone to watch them. In reality, I didn’t want to be with my husband on his motorcycles or snowmobiles any more than he wanted me there. With each job Scott lost, the longer he would remain unemployed between jobs while I worked and struggled to keep us fed, the house and car paid for, and the more bitter and resentful towards him I became.

As we walked, a heavy gray overcast enclosed the blue sky, and a breeze chilled the air. At a resting point high on the edge of the mountain we stopped. He slid off his snowshoes, and with his large boots packed down the top layers of snow making a small alcove to lay the space blanket for us. He sat his daypack down and I slid down in front of him sliding off my own snowshoes. We pressed our bodies close and began to kiss. It was only a matter of minutes before we had removed enough layers of our clothes to entangle our bodies into one.

“I love you,” he said, and each time after sex he would apologize. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have, but I want you so badly.” I let him apologize; admittedly, I too wanted these moments. We tried many times over the three years of our relationship to maintain just our friendship, but the physical connection was always too strong and we were weak for one another. When our relationship began, he didn’t immediately tell me he loved me, but he was the first of us to say it. It was several months later before I told him I loved him too. At first, I was simply mesmerized by the passion of our interactions together. The passion was one I had never known, and I couldn’t understand how someone could excite both my body and mind. And more than the feelings I felt, I couldn’t understand
what this man saw and loved in me. We came from different worlds that I believed could never mesh.

The first time we had sex we met at a hotel room in another town, in another state. That was the month before I told my husband I was leaving him. I paid cash for the room, and my boss paid me back when he arrived. That was our routine for nearly a year. He never stayed the night, but I almost always remained at the hotel alone. After sex, several hours would pass before he would slowly pull away from me. I wanted to plead with him to stay, but knew that he wouldn’t. “I can’t stay, I’ve got to go,” he said. He would lean forward, press his lips to my forehead and whisper, “I love you. Don’t stay here by yourself. Go home.” But he didn’t understand that there was little to go home to. It was with him that I felt alive and free. I felt invincible and powerful. In that same town, in that same state was also the last time and place we would have sex. Where the sex started it ended.

After we dressed, a few feet from the space blanket he brushed away the snow and pine needles until he reached soil. I watched him break dead branches and gather loose pine needles, strike a match, and quickly there was smoke. He piled on more branches and blew into the stack until the smoke turned into flames.

I watched the red, orange, and blue of the flames, and felt the snow melt from my boots evaporating the wetness from my pant legs. He sat down behind me, pulling me close trying to warm me. When he was physically closest to me, emotionally I hurt the
most. I wanted more than these moments in nature. I wanted more than dinners and travels to other states so he wouldn’t be recognized. I wanted him, committed to me as I had become committed to him. My divorce had long since been finalized; I couldn’t even date other men because I felt I was being unfaithful to this man who always returned home to his wife. And those times when we were physically together I think he felt the best. He had a friend and a companion who shared his passions, his love of nature; someone who made him feel young and alive. I believed he made the fire to warm me, but came to realize that each time we were snowshoeing, hiking, fishing, or camping, he built a small fire. And he built those fires not to warm me, but to cover the scent of me on his body with smoke so his wife wouldn’t know he had been with me.

The first time we camped together he took me to the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness to Sleeping Deer Pass. From a distance the mountains look like a resting deer. Before our first camping trip he purchased a tent and two sleeping bags for my daughters and me; hiding them in my car during the middle of the workday to find after I left the office. He wanted me to take my girls camping, on my own. “You have that spark, that love for nature and you need to share it with your girls,” he would tell me.

I couldn’t understand what he saw in an uneducated woman with two small children whose world consisted of having only lived in small Idaho towns. He wasn’t from Idaho; he wasn’t even from the west. He was an easterner. Slowly, I let him convince me I was beautiful and desirable. He called me Sunshine and took me to the wilderness of Idaho, Montana and to Banff, Canada; places I never would have gone on
my own. And after I left my husband I took my daughters camping. Together, the girls and I began regularly to travel and camp throughout Idaho and other states. We fished, we camped, we explored. There was so much to see and to share with them, and traveling just the three of us gave me more confidence in my ability to do anything.

In the Frank Church Wilderness, the mountains build and shape themselves around the narrow dirt roads. Pine trees double and triple in number, becoming a thick textured green where one tree is indistinguishable from another. Beyond the pass, the road was narrow, like it had been etched into the mountainside with a shovel. The canyons on either side of the trailhead to Sleeping Deer plummet more than 3,000 feet below. The road is rocky, and in some places the slopes of the canyon are unstable shale rocks.

I wondered if he were to see my naïveté through my smile, would we fall over the edge where no one would ever find us.

“I’ve been on this road when a truck was coming out. Some spots you back up half a mile before there’s room for both vehicles,” he said. “I came with my son in late July. Snowdrifts still covered parts of the road. We had to dig a path.” he smiled and laughed. “He got nervous when I ploughed right through the drifts.”

I stared ahead, feigning a smile of relief for his experience, and fear of my own inexperience. I pulled myself closer to the door handle. The sweat from my thighs pressed against the leather and stuck to the door. This was fun for him. What it was for me I wasn’t certain.
Before the bend to the trailhead of Sleeping Deer were the remnants of a forest fire. The smell of damp burnt soil still intermingled with ashes. A few Whitebark pines and Douglas-firs remained, sporadically marked by black scars and gouges. Most of the Lodgepole pines were burned completely, leaving only stubs of charcoal. At the base of the burnt pines bright green sprouts of young trees mix with non-native spotted knapweed. Some pines will return to their pre-fire condition, some will always display bark crusted with black scars, and some are gone forever.

We were alone in the mountains, among the trees, near the high alpine lakes, and those were the moments where nothing else mattered. I didn’t think about my divorce, my children, his wife or his children. We thought nothing of our responsibilities to others; we lived in the moment sharing our passions. It was easy to think of only myself in those moments. I believed I was finally free from my ex-husband and the previous six months with his three suicide attempts now behind me. My ex-husband and his girlfriend had left Idaho and returned to Utah where he was from. She was pregnant, and I believed Scott would finally let me go.

At the Sleeping Deer trailhead the elevation is 9,300 feet, and from there nothing can be seen but the curvatures of mountains and valleys covered by black shadows. The sky transforms from blue to hazy silver, like the sky before a thunderstorm.

“So, what do you think?” He sat on the chair he’d taken from the jeep, smiled, and waited for my response. He was calm and patient. He comforted and protected me,
and was never overbearing or pushy. I wanted to be with him in the wilderness; I began to want more than the occasional physical companionship. I wanted to be the only woman in his life. I wanted to be the one he went home to each night, not the woman he shared only his passions with.

I marveled at the scenery: the trees, the mountains, and the fact that I could look any direction and see nothing but wilderness. The only road was the road we came in on. There were no other signs of life, not a trace of another human, just a gentle breeze. “It’s beautiful.”

We drove a few miles back down the narrow road to a site just off the roadside, tucked into the trees. We unloaded the gear, and after setting up camp we hiked through the pines and sage, up and down hills until dusk when the air became crisp.

“I’ve applied to the University of Idaho for fall semester next year.” I watched him intently, praying he’d say Don’t go. But he didn’t.

“Oh.” He looked at the ground and turned away.

“I wasn’t going to say anything until I knew I was in. If I get in it’s meant to be; if not, I guess I’ll keep working.”

His voice didn’t break or falter. “I know you’ll get in. I should’ve expected it. You told me when I hired you years ago you wanted to go to school. At least I got the time with you I did.”

I wanted to scream, but couldn’t. I wanted to tell him I wouldn’t be his mistress. The truth was, more than anything I wanted him to love me the way I believed I loved him. He had a standard response when I questioned him about our future: “I don’t know
what will happen, I can’t tell the future. My kids need me. If I left, it would destroy them.”

I wanted to believe he was sacrificing our love for the sake of his family. I didn’t want to acknowledge that I was the one sacrificing, he was just taking risks, and love meant something different to each of us. Only now, nearly nine years after our relationship ended, as my own daughters grow into teenager and young adult can I see what he feared about the damage that would come to his children from breaking up his home. His wife was a good mother and a good woman, committed to their marriage and their children. The risk of losing his children and creating upheaval in their lives was a high probability; and love and passion in his life weren’t reasons enough to change all of their lives. My marriage and my spouse were different than his; but in the end my children’s lives were disrupted and upset by divorce, just as he feared his would be. While I left my husband for the sake of surviving and giving my daughters some semblance of a normal life, in the end who their father is and the childish choices he made affected them more than I could ever have realized.

When we returned to the campsite, I pulled my chair close to watch him build the fire. His hands were large, smooth and nothing like the rough, labored, mechanic hands of the men I knew. He wasn’t a blue collar worker. He worked with his mind and not his hands. His hands made him seem more fragile and I wondered how he was able to make me feel safe isolated in the wilderness. He stacked five and six-inch twigs, one across the other, then tossed on pine needles. The loose needles caught fire quickly, burning the
smaller twigs beneath. He angled the larger branches, like a tee-pee, over the flames, but he never once looked at me.

“I tried to get her to come with me on hikes and outings after we moved to Idaho, but she doesn’t enjoy nature the way I do. She doesn’t enjoy it at all. She never went with me again. Once the kids were older I took them with me camping. She stayed home.”

“You can’t keep living like this. Your kids are almost grown. Then what will you do?”

When he spoke of nature a spark ignited in him and the excitement became contagious to everyone around him. So much so, that I began calling him *my live wire*.

He didn’t respond he simply changed the subject. “I carry my father’s ashes with me in my daypack. I went home to Pennsylvania and watched him die in the hospital. I don’t want to die that way.” He cleared his throat. “You’re a good mother and your girls are lucky to have you.”

I watched the flames and said nothing. When the wood was burned and the hot coals nearly cooled, we went to bed. We shared an oversized sleeping bag. He pressed himself close, pushing me against the seam of the sleeping bag. I could smell the smoke from the fire on his skin as I pressed my head against his chest. The night air was cool and damp. I lowered myself deeper into the sleeping bag absorbing the heat and warmth from our bodies. The moon was full, and throughout the evening and early morning hours the moon brought light to the darkness. The quiet was heavy, and I didn’t sleep at all.

The next day he was excited and enthusiastic again. He told me he’d come visit, make weekend trips, that it would all be okay.
Nothing about our relationship was okay I wanted to scream. I told him that if he would ask me to stay I would, all he had to do was ask. But he never did. He told me that wouldn’t be fair.

I wanted to run, to escape the helpless feeling of loving a man so deeply while never knowing what it felt like to be fully loved back by him, but there was nowhere to go. I traded one loveless and passionless relationship for a relationship full of love and passion where I felt free and powerful but still so alone.

In late June of 1999, one year after our first camping trip, we spent our last weekend together camping in the Lost River Range. At the crest, this range is over 10,000 feet and in several areas the peaks rise over 11,000 feet. The range is over 100 miles long, and is situated between the Pahsimeroi and Little Lost Rivers, the Little and Big Lost rivers for which it was named. For my birthday, a few months earlier, he had given me a fly rod and reel to fish the creeks of Idaho when we camped and hiked together. Before I left for school he gave me a carrying case to protect the rod when I traveled. He hoped I would remember him every time I used the snowshoes, the tent, and the fly rod, but it wasn’t the gifts that would forever etch him into my memory.

The mountains in the Lost River Range have the highest peaks in Idaho. Borah Peak at 12,663 feet and Leatherman Peak at 12,228 feet are the highest of nine peaks that rise over 12,000 feet. We were going to climb Borah Peak together when he turned 50, but that time came and went unfulfilled for both of us.
We traveled north down Pass Creek to Double Springs Pass, then took a right on Horseheaven Pass. After about seven miles, we reached a junction: to the left the Pahseimeroi Valley, to the right the rough and rugged dirt and rock road to Merriam and Pass Lakes. The elevation rises and falls quickly in this mountain range. We crossed the west fork of the Pahsimeroi River, following the east fork where he had led me to the middle of nowhere once again. The only signs of life were the remnants of black charcoal logs of old camp fires from last season that had weathered the winter, and an outhouse with only two walls.

Setting up camp and taking it down became the routine. “What do you think will happen to us?” I asked.

He flattened the tarp, took the tent poles from the bag, and spread the tent over the tarp. “Here. Slide the pole through the loops. Latch the clasps to the pole,” he pointed.

I fixed the corner where I was standing, and in unison we moved across to the opposite corners. Together we slid the tent through the loops, raising it up above my head, then latched the clasps to the pole.

He walked back to the jeep and got the rest of the sleeping gear and handed me our bags.

“I don’t know, I can’t tell the future,” was the answer he always gave. This was a safe answer; if he said he didn’t know then maybe he thought he wouldn’t be the one to decide which relationship would end. For several years he spent two weekends a month with me, sometimes more. And each weekend we were together, neither of us talked about what was going to happen once I left for school.
The drive in and setting up camp consumed all of the daylight hours. He headed west and I headed east to gather wood for the night’s fire.

I gathered long skinny sticks and smaller pieces of pine, the sap sticking to my hands. I walked further down along the river. The rushing, rolling water was loud, like a thousand cars driving by all at once. The water was frigid and running with such force, I wanted to let it pull me inward. I stepped back. Twigs, sticks, pebbles and rocks tumbled and turned in the tumultuous water. A little part of me wanted to know what I would feel jumping into the river and letting it take me where it would, but I could see that it was only at this point where the river flowed with such tenacity. Although we didn’t talk about what would happen to us, I knew that physically moving away would allow me to emotionally let go of the intense passion we shared.

He returned to camp before me and built the fire for our meal. He set up the gas stove to heat water for tea. When the fire created hot coals, he wrapped the halibut he brought along in foil and placed it in the coals to cook.

In this valley next to the highest mountains in Idaho the winds blow, and it was there next to that fire that I thought about staying. In the mountains of Idaho time stood still and nothing but the moment mattered – not even that in the end we may not be together. I grasped the cup tightly in my hands and watched the steam rise, swirling away with the wind. I watched spark after spark of red floating away disappearing into the black night. We sat next to the fire until we burned all the wood we had gathered and talked about everything we possibly could, without talking about anything we needed to.
The flames turned to red-hot coals, and the coals cooled to a flicker of light where little heat remained, and then faded to ashes.
The Call

As the hours turned into days, the days meshed into months, and months disappeared into years, my hope that Danniell would return home and that our life might be as it once was has faded into a resignation that some losses are forever. I’ve spent nearly all of my life believing that if I could just maintain control: control of who I was with, what I did, where I lived, control over every choice and decision that affected my daughters that they would be safe; we would all be safe, and mostly that their lives wouldn’t be filled with so much pain and heartache. But, losing Danniell made me realize that I don’t control as much as I believed I could. Yet I’m still hopeful that the mystery and secrecy of the landscape that binds us to each other and this legacy will also set us free.

The most resilient element of our legacy isn’t being young wives and mothers, or even the defiance of the daughters towards their mothers; it is the silent self destruction and false sense of control under the guise of self choice and independence. I passed this legacy on to Danniell, and possibly even Nicole, long before I ever knew about the longstanding hold. As good of mother as I wanted to be, and believed I was, a 14 year old mother is only capable of so much. When I brought Danniell into this world I carried my own baggage and that of the women before me, and I foolishly believed she would set me free. When in reality, my selfish need to escape sealed Danniell’s emotional fate to the
same as her foremothers. By the time I realized the full ramifications of our shared past it was too late for Danniell; and sadly, she too has become an active participant in our legacy, and all I have to hope is that my recognition came in time for Nicole.

I sit silently, overpowered by the complexities of our history, as I’ve watched Danniell transform from a curious young girl, a freshman in high school, full of potential to become anything her heart might desire, to a young woman, a high school dropout, lost and confused dancing in bars – living with neither her mother nor her father, but with a drug dealer. I’ve attempted to rescue her from her situations, from herself, and from our legacy, but she is now 18 and her life’s success, failures, happiness, and sadness are entirely her own.

Most of the time, I silently keep my sadness and fears for her safety, for our future, in the depths of my heart. In some ways it is my long standing need to maintain control over my emotions – I must remain composed and together like this loss hasn’t taken a part of me that will never be returned. And when the tears come, I find a place alone where no one can see my pain – I am in control. I must maintain control, because I am so afraid, afraid that as each year passes I will lose more of the good memories with Danniell. Will I forget the small toddler she once was, her dark brown disheveled hair as she leaned into the Christmas tree to blow the silver tinsel? Will I forget the bubbly, carefree first grader getting detention for knocking on other classroom doors and running away? Will I forget that eight year old girl who was so afraid and worried for her father, wondering who would take care of him if I divorced him? Will I forget that happy carefree adolescent who was so charismatic, charming her teachers, parents, and priests?
I fear that I just might. Memories are so tenuous, and I wonder if my grandmother felt the same desperation to hang on to what once was, that I now feel, when she lost her mother, and when she felt my mother slipping further away from her. I wonder if the pain I feel toward Danniell is similar to the pain my grandmother felt toward my mother – or the pain my mother felt toward me. I will always remember with visceral pain the moment I took Danniell to the airport to go live with her father August 13, 2005; leaving her to catch the plane by herself. Continually, I looked back over my shoulder, my heart being pulled from my chest, forcing myself to move each leg forward because if I let myself I would have rushed back and scooped her into my arms begging her to change her mind. That was the moment when she, the little Danniell I loved so much, would be forever gone.

I love Danniell as only a mother can love her child; and yet I’m so afraid that I’ll never love her unconditionally – there are conditions to my love. While I feel desperate to hang on to Danniell, I recognize that the only role I want to play in her life is as her mother. I expect respect and courtesy, and she is careless with my love, with her sister’s love – she is careless with herself. I’m angered at myself, wondering how I can forgive my mother for breaking my heart, for putting her own emotional needs before my own safety and emotional well-being when I can’t even forgive my daughter for the pain she’s caused? Maybe I have never truly forgiven my mother I’ve simply come to accept her for who she is, and maybe some day I too will come to accept Danniell for who she is.

I’ve come to recognize there is the constant struggle between letting go and holding on. The call I had been waiting three years for finally came. Though it had been
four months since I had spoken with Danniell, and those moths had been filled with fear and worry about where she was living and who she was living with and what she was doing to her body or letting be done, I knew the reason behind her call. She was pregnant. My failure had been solidified. Danniell’s fate had been sealed the moment she left to live with her father, and maybe it was sealed the moment she was born. There would be no turning back. I’d seen the destruction, the tell-tell signs I had exhibited myself: the desperate need to escape, to be loved by a man (whom for us was all too often immature and childish). I thought I was escaping my family, the neglect, the abuse, but what I now realize is that I was trying to escape the unknown. I was running from something I couldn’t identify, but like the women before Danniell, all she did was run not from, but straight toward the heart of our shared past.

In the end, all I have is hope that an awareness of our legacy might inform my own daughters of their family history before they commit their unborn daughters to the same fate. In my ignorance, I committed my daughters to this legacy, and now prevention and elimination is in their hands. If knowing about our family history, the religious culture that dictated so much about what we thought and believed about ourselves and needing to be strong women, and this rugged, sometimes unforgiving, western landscape can’t set my daughters unborn daughters free, then we may always be destined to travel this path. I pray that Danniell does not give birth to a daughter. And regardless of her child’s gender, or whether she chooses to keep this baby or adopt it, I pray that every day she’ll talk to her unborn child and tell her about the women before her. I pray that she will speak patiently, intently, and softly; that she’ll tell her baby life can be different – it
should be different and that Danniell herself will finally believe it. I pray that she starts now.

The women on my maternal side all share uniqueness in the names we were given: Chloe, Mayme, Melody and Selena. I’m told my name comes from the Greek: Goddess of the moon. It is unique like the wildflowers blooming in my garden – similar at first glance and unique only upon deeper inspection. It is the river rolling. Cold and desolate at times, like the moon my name is Goddess over, but with the power to control the ebb and flow of ocean tides. But I did not share that legacy with my daughters; I gave them more common names: Danniell and Nicole. Naming our daughters something unique and different was part of our need to demonstrate our independence and control.

I now know I can not control what happens to any of us. I must resign myself to the realization that I don’t have control, I never did. When so much of your life has been about control, control for survival and success, letting go feels more like resignation than the freeing awareness it should be. I am conscious of our past, and most importantly letting go of this long standing need to prove I am a strong woman, capable of making my own choices, and controlling my own life. In the last five generations, I’m sure we’ve proven we are strong women capable of surviving unspeakable heartbreak; but in order to move forward, I am at the point where I have to trust, where I have to let go, and where a strong man is a good thing.

When I travel the rural mountains of Southeast Idaho, headed for Soda Springs to manage the Writing Idaho series, the drive is peaceful and quiet. For the first time in months I find myself slowing down, the curves and winding rural road lulling me into
contemplation, comforting me. The mountains in springtime are green and lush wrapping around me physically and mentally. I’ve tried so desperately to push this place, and my memories away, and yet as much as I’ve pushed, the landscape always pulls me back. And as it pulls me back I breathe a sigh of relief. Relief that I don’t have to resist; it is okay to give in, to let go, to feel safe. Always, when I find myself deep in the isolation of the rivers, lakes, rolling hills, and mountains, and glaciers of the western terrain I am free and humbled that in nature I am so small – my life, our lives, only a moment, a piece in a larger picture to which I am only a player, not the director.
WORKS CONSULTED


CURRICULUM VITAE

Selena Grace received her Bachelor of Arts in English, with a writing emphasis from Boise State University in 2002, and she will have earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, with a non-fiction emphasis upon the completion of this thesis. She is currently residing in Idaho, the landscape of her birth, with her husband and children.