

LOOKING FOR BOBBY

by

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A Thesis
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Looking for Bobby

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 family, of course, but especially to Robert Lester Jackson.

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ABSTRACT

LOOKING FOR BOBBY

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George Mason University, 2013

Thesis Director: Associate Professor Courtney Brkic

This thesis project is a narrative about the year after my 31-year-old nephew, Bobby, died in a car accident in March 2008. It begins on the day we've learned of the accident, with my sister, Linda, relaying to me the last conversation she had with her son, and builds toward a climactic scene where Linda, a chain-smoker, undergoes surgery to remove a lump in her breast. It's a moment when my family is faced with the possibility we may lose two people in one year. The working title *Looking for Bobby* is a nod toward hide and go seek, a game we played as kids, and the odd habit I have of, even now, looking for him in crowds or cars when I'm sitting in traffic. My story will examine universal themes of grief, guilt, religion, mysticism and family dynamics.

CHAPTER ONE

Two friends walked west, back over the Blue Heron Bridge, toward home. The late summer sun clawed at the early morning sky, leaving streaks of pink and red, the horizon a fiery opal. They were smiling, pumping their arms, walking the curve of the bridge back down to Earth. That's why they didn't see him at first, the part-time life guard, drunk, barreling, swerving. There was nowhere to go. He struck them both, the force of it pushing one woman from the bridge. She fell 200 feet into the Intracoastal Waterway. The other woman died on the asphalt, her last breathes the stink of his tires, her hands held by shocked onlookers.

They were dead three hours by the time I walked into the newsroom that Sunday. I was hung over, had been up until 4 a.m. at a party called The White Trash Bash, was still sporting a flaming NASCAR tattoo on my belly, despite a young man's efforts the night before to lick it off. I'd be alone several hours before back-up arrived, and I liked the quiet, needed the quiet. I had an extra large coffee, purchased from a gas station around the corner. I scanned the morning's headlines for any story needing a follow up. Then I opened a file on my computer called cop calls and began dialing. We were supposed to make the calls three times per shift. The chore fell into a comforting rhythm. "Hi , this is Kelly from the Post. Anything going on? Any rapes, murders, robberies, mayhem? Nothing? Thank you."

We called every law enforcement agency from Orlando to Miami, including the Florida Highway Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Calling the entire list took about 20 minutes, sometimes felt like a waste of time. Dispatchers never tell you anything. So what you learn to listen for is a hesitation just before they say the word, “no.” It’s a small intake of breathe, an otherwise honest person steeling themselves for a lie.

“Riviera Beach Police Department.”

“Hi, this is Kelly from the Post. Anything going on?”

Hesitation. I reached for a pen. “I’ll transfer you to the PIO,” the dispatcher said. I jotted down these notes: Two women. Late 40s or 50s. 6 a.m. Hit and run. One fell from bridge into Intracoastal. Recovered by fisherman. One dead on bridge.

I grabbed a fresh notepad, a long and narrow one, easy to hold, and pushed it into the back pocket of my jeans. In my 10 years as a newspaper reporter, I’d found notepads in sight make people nervous. What I liked to do was ask a few easy questions, get someone talking, then ask if I could “just jot down a few things.” I drove to the scene and parked on the bridge, short of the chalk marks. Arrows showed the direction the car was headed. Xs showed where the women were struck. I was in luck. The investigator was still there. I smiled as I approached.

I saw my first body when I was 25. I was working in Winter Haven, Florida. An old man with Alzheimer’s wandered away from home, fell in a lake, and drown. I got there before investigators covered him with a sheet. I remember his black shoes pointed heavenward, his white shirt, blue pants. The second body I ever saw belonged to a man

who shot his pregnant, teenage girlfriend because she wanted to break up with him, then drove to a nearby park, and shot himself. When I pulled up, he was covered in a sheet, the red from his self-inflicted wound an almost perfect circle on the white – like a Japanese flag.

I moved to Pennsylvania, covered the stabbing of a young nurse whose husband held a knife under the covers and waited for her to fall asleep. He told the judge at his sentencing hearing, “I wanted her to be with the angels, because she’s too good for this world.” I listened to the testimony of a 16-year-old girl gang-raped by four friends at a party, forced to move from town because the community blamed her when they went to jail, then was kicked out of the Catholic school where her parents enrolled her because school leaders didn’t want the distraction. I spoke with a widow who’d gone insane after her husband, a truck driver, was shot to death by a 20-year-old gunman for \$12 in his shirt pocket. The killer went to prison for life. He’s 34 now.

I came back to Florida, where an 18-year-old girl with a butterfly tattoo was found tangled in the brambles, near a canal, in a part of South Florida called The Acreage. A 12-year-old boy, drummer in a middle school band, was killed by a hit and run driver while walking home from school. When I got to his house, his mother had his drumsticks in the shape of the cross, holding them to her heart.

The investigator at the bridge gave me the women’s names, and I tracked down their families. I walked into their homes, asked for photos of the dead, asked politely even though I knew I wouldn’t leave without them. Readers like to see faces.

One woman had a grown son, barrel-chested, strong, his face vacant, crushed. He looked at me, tried to make sense of my questions. Police had already been at his house, told him the news. I was an aftershock. He spoke to me outside his small duplex, in a barren yard. His eyes were distant, looking for something no longer on earth.

“Do you have a picture of your mother?”

He walked into the duplex and came out a moment later holding an eight by ten of his mother in a brightly-printed top. She was boarding a cruise ship, standing behind a blue and white life preserver. He’d put it in a white, wicker frame.

“Thank you,” I said. “I promise I’ll bring this back.”

He wiped his eyes and waved at me as I climbed back into my car.

This was my job. I believed in it. I believed in giving the grieving a chance to say wonderful things about family members struck down in some traumatic way. I believed in journalism, I believed it was the best job in the world. I believed in ferreting out the truth. I worked long days and drank all night with handsome rogues with wild, unkempt curls who called me by my last name. “Wolfe, let’s go get a beer.”

No matter the drinking buddy, we always had the same conversation. “We’re right to be journalists,” he’d start, waving a cigarette in my face to emphasize a point.

“Journalists sit on a floor covered in needles and talk to crack addicts – just to find out what being a crack addict is like.” I’d nod and add my thoughts. “Other people are circling the edges of life, afraid to dive in. We are down in it. Covered up with it.” The later the hour, the more grandiose our statements, the more our job went from profession to calling to mystical directive whispered by God himself. “We’re not just people,” he’d

say. “We’re windows, windows into the lives of people who need our help. Cheers! Hey! Anybody got a smoke?! I’m out.”

I think about those conversations now and wonder how I didn’t know I was watching life from the cheap seats, writing about it later, telling other people’s stories in clean copy, ten newspaper inches. Shit, I wasn’t even a crime reporter. They called me general assignment. In addition to covering crime, I’d also covered courts, local politics, and equestrian show jumping. No joke.

I asked the library to run criminal background checks on both women, just in case, which was our newspaper’s rule. I began pecking out the first few paragraphs of my story. The library got back to me. One woman was clean. The other had been arrested several times in her teens and 20s for selling drugs. This, we could have overlooked. But her last arrest happened in 1994, for selling cocaine.

I thought of truth as granite, stable, admirable, principled. But that night truth failed me. I looked at that police report as if I were looking into a funhouse mirror. I realized then truth depended on which way I stood, how I held my gaze. Newspaper reporters make saints of the dead all of the time. But her record was lengthy – 30 years worth of arrests. If I didn’t disclose it, I could embarrass the paper. I remember the case of a columnist at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* who ran a feature story about a “hugger” who ran around giving everyone hugs. The reporter didn’t run a background check, and the paper was publically humiliated when a reader wrote in to say the hugger had been arrested for molesting kids. An industry blogger ran the story under the headline, “I guess not everyone likes to be hugged.”

My head throbbed. I was tired, hung over. I couldn't think straight.

I didn't want to write it. But what if someone called in the morning and said I neglected to report this woman was a cokehead and a drug dealer? I stared at the list of charges. What about the parents of the people she'd sold drugs to? Was I being fair to them if I didn't report it? What about the son I'd spoken to in the yard. What would he think? I put my head in my hands. I didn't want the decision to be mine.

I took the list to my metro editor, a woman who'd self-published a book of bad poetry we'd all memorized and dramatized behind her back. She was against running the charges, and I felt my shoulders collapse in relief. Then she hesitated. "Wait, let me just run this by the ME." Our managing editor was a short, slender man who wore tidy blue oxford shirts and khaki pants; spoke with a charming Mississippi dialect and tended to make stars out of male reporters, rather than females. He liked to slap these boys, as he called them, on the back and say "good job." Perhaps that's why I was eager to please him just then. I wanted a chance at newsroom stardom too, a chance to show that I was a team player, a good reporter. The metro editor returned to her desk.

"ME said run the charges."

"What?"

"I know," she said, then shook her head. "Look, Kelly, just put in a short line, toward the bottom, and never mention it again."

I nodded in agreement, felt sick, wished I hadn't said anything, convinced myself I had to tell the truth, had to tell the whole story. I wasn't the one who sold drugs, was I? It wasn't my job to erase the mistakes of the dead.

I wrote, “According to court documents, (she) had some brushes with the law in the 1960s and 1970s. She had a clean record for about 20 years, then was arrested in 1994 on a charge of selling cocaine.” My screen went black after I sent the story. The metro editor said I did a good job. I went home.

The next day I was hated throughout our coverage area. The paper was inundated with calls and e-mails. The church where the women attended started a letter-writing campaign. The ME asked another reporter to go back into the community and re-write the story, making the bridge crossers saints. I read my colleague’s story in the next day’s paper. I was still conflicted. What was printed there was palatable, but hardly true.

I was once in a short earthquake in Virginia. I remember sitting at my computer, and feeling the world shake beneath me. I didn’t move. My neighbors ran outside, knew instinctively how to avoid being crushed. I heard them calling to each other. I barely looked up from my computer screen, just waited for it to be over, believed once the shaking stopped, everything would go back to normal, be as it was, didn’t believe any real harm would come to me. Later, we learned that little earthquake cracked the Washington Monument.

I tell you this because I want to explain how the bridge walkers changed me, but at the same time didn’t. It was something I kept in my back pocket, like my notepad. My belief in truth had a tiny crack. But I still loved my job.

Which was why, months later, when my editor asked me to get a photo of a teen killed the night before in a traffic accident, I said of course I’d do it. A toothy school

picture, doe-eyes against swirly blue background, ignites pathos, sends checks hurling toward grieving parents, sends readers to our Website, clicking on our stories.

But the mother wouldn't give it up.

"I already told you no, you can't have a photo," the mother said, the second time I asked.

What was I supposed to do? Hold a gun to her head?

I began making my way down the list of other family members, calling aunts, uncles and cousins until I came to a confused, rattled grandmother, heartbroken, raspy with age. Yes, she had a photo she'd loan me, she said. I gathered my things. My phone rang. It was my editor.

"Don't worry, I got the photo," I said.

"No you don't." she said.

"I just talked to the grandmother."

"Yeah and the mother just called me and said, 'Don't you dare go to my mother's house.'"

The story would be less because I failed to do my job. I went home, went swimming in the condo pool, drank some wine, went to sleep.

The next day, my cell phone rang at 7 a.m. and woke me up. It would be work, I knew. I let the phone ring and ring, knew the minute I answered it the day would be set in motion, and I'd spend hours standing on the side of the road, or outside an otherwise normal-looking house, waiting for investigators to hand out information about a traffic

accident, a murder, or a brutal attack. I didn't want to start the news cycle. I wanted a few more minutes in my bed. Another crash. Another death. Another photo. Another mother.

I got up at 7:14 a.m. on March 18, 2008. I found my phone. Saw the number that called was not work. It was my mother. My mouth went dry. I dialed her number, and waited an eternity for us to be connected. She answered.

"I don't know how to tell you this," she said. "Bobby was in a car accident last night. And he didn't make it."

"What?" I said. Then went blind. Bobby was my nephew, only three years younger than me, more like a brother, really.

I screamed no and Mom told me to get a hold of myself. I kept screaming "No! No! No!" But my own shrieks sounded far away, muffled by a roaring in my ears. I heard Mom's voice beneath the shrieking and the roaring and I was surprised to discover the phone still held tight to my ear.

"Kelly. Kelly. Kelly!"

I grabbed a fistful of pillow to anchor me.

"What?" I shrieked again.

We were quiet for a long time. The roar subsided.

"I'm here," I said.

"He sideswiped another car, over corrected, and hit a tree. The truck flipped. There was someone in the truck with him. That boy was airlifted out. He's still in surgery."

"Bobby didn't make it?"

“No,” Mom said.

“Why didn’t Bobby make it?”

Mom didn’t answer. Instead she said, “There’s going to be a lot of people. I don’t know what to get.”

“What to get?” I said.

“I think we should just get pizza. There’s a place down the road that sells four, one-topping pizzas for \$20. What do you think?”

“What?”

“Pizza,” Mom said.

“Pizza?”

“What should I get on it? I like pepperoni, but I know you don’t eat meat.”

“What?”

“For the funeral?”

“What?”

After we hung up, I got dressed, put on make-up, and went to work. I told my editor what happened, asked her not to send me on any accidents that day, and she said, “Kelly, what are you doing here?”

“Because I didn’t know what else to do.”

(Tell them I don’t like to be called Bobby. I want to be called Robert. I can’t. I’ve always thought of you as Bobby.)

A year earlier, Bobby and I stood on the deck of my sister's pool. We wore bathing suits. Bobby's chest was bare. He wore two silver Crucifixes around his neck. They glinted in the slivers of sunlight that filtered through the great oaks. I wore a purple bathing suit top and a pair of grey shorts. We both had freckled shoulders, tiny footprints, childhoods spent in the Florida sun. We held beers snuggled into my sister's ancient, stained koozies. Bobby's read, "Since I used up all my sick days, I have to call in dead."

We were celebrating Bobby's daughter, Briannah, who turned five. All parties look alike in this family, whether it's a kid's birthday party or a silver anniversary. Everyone wears a bathing suit to my sister, Linda's, house, where we splash around in the pool, get sunburned, and wear wet, wriggling children on our backs until it's time to eat. Then there's cake, presents, more splashing, more wet, wriggling children and finally, when your head is pounding from all the chaos and you feel like you cannot grab one more kid and toss them wide-eyed and screaming into the deep end, it's time to go home.

Bobby was telling me a story about going on a gambling cruise with his girlfriend and another couple. There had been much revelry, a bar, a warm, Florida night, the rolling of the boat, and some minor luck at slots.

"Then my girl asks me to take her to Mons," Bobby said, using the nickname for Mons Venus, one of the raunchiest strip joints in Tampa. I watched Bobby's green eyes wink and smile behind wire-rimmed glasses. He was bent, whispering in my face, waving a lit cigarette to emphasize a point. He'd been taller than me for more than a decade, but I still couldn't get used to it. We were huddled together like the conspiratorial children we once were, only now he was 30, and I was 33.

“So, I knew what these girls wanted, these girls wanted to get freaky.”

“Bobby!”

We both jumped. My father strolled toward us.

“Yeah, Grandpa?”

“How’s work going?” Dad said, easing his way into our conversation.

“Ah,” Bobby said. “It’s going.”

Bobby grinned and turned toward my Dad, who worked construction as a young man. They liked to talk about foremen, architects, plumbers and the rest of the world that didn’t know nothing.

I watched them for a minute. I’d been jealous of Bobby all my life. He was my parent’s first grandchild, the boy they didn’t get when I was born, a natural comedian, an easy grin, scrawny and freckle-faced, a boy who believed, when no one was looking, he could turn into the Incredible Hulk. He’d roll up his pants, pull off his shirt, point his bony chest at us, “Am I turning green?” He liked to play sports and games, was a good sport, understood early the value of fun. I hated games because I believed losing was a permanent stamp. I was not a funny child. I was quiet, anxious; an insomniac, a migraine sufferer, sensitive like a burn victim. My mother would look at me, shake her head, and ask, “Why are you such a weird kid?” Bobby made my parents laugh. I made them worry. Bobby was easy. I was hard. Bobby remained easy. I was learning, after 30 years, not to be so hard.

Childhood is a surreal institution. We’re all at once a caged, wild animal and a very old person, unable to care for ourselves, unable to control our rage, our jealousies,

watching love dolled out to others, wondering if the love will ever dry up, if we'll get enough. My mother the workaholic, who never cooked except on holidays, once made Bobby a grilled cheese sandwich at 9 p.m. I remember sitting there open-mouthed when she delivered it hot to him and asked, "Good?" "Perfect," he answered. I understand now what it must have been like for my folks, to have their grandson for a whole weekend, the thrill of it, the consuming desire to spoil him, to watch that freckled face break open, laugh. I was the eighth child. They had seven others. "There's just something about a grandbaby," I once heard my father say.

Which is why on that day, that day by the pool, when Dad interrupted us, I'd wanted to tell Bobby how sorry I was for being a bad aunt when he was little, for abandoning him. I wanted to tell him I'd been there, I saw it, saw everything, and it wasn't his fault. I'd meant to tell him I thought he was a great father, and a fine person and that I was so lucky to have him, both as my nephew and my brother. But I didn't tell him these things because Dad interrupted us, and then later it seemed silly to tell him, as if we were on some Lifetime network movie and Bobby was about to give me a kidney. I didn't tell him because I feared it would sound as if something bad were about to happen to him. I didn't tell him because I feared my sincerity would sound stupid, and he'd tease me, and I'd be again the grim, serious kid while he got to be the funny one.

I don't know where this story truly begins. There are beginnings, and drafts of beginnings and echoes of beginnings. I wrote that and heard Bobby say, *There can only be one beginning, Kell. That's why they call it a be-ginn-ing.* Shut up, you aren't so great

at getting started yourself. *No, endings are more my thing.* I didn't answer, just shook my head to clear his voice. *Not funny yet?* No, Bob, not funny yet. Not at all. *This is going to work out, Kell, don't worry. What better subject is there to write about than me?*

My mom would tell you this story starts with her marriage to my Dad, in 1971. My father had five children he'd been raising on his own –Jimmy, Johnny, Theresa, Tammie, and Scherry. My mother came with Randy and Linda. I was born two years later, a ruddy, pink eraser with a bent ear -- born to tie the whole shebang together.

“You are everybody's sister,” my father said.

We lived in a three bedroom, two bath house on the corner of Gamble drive and Wolf Road in Pine Hills, near Orlando. We ate Lucky Charms and chocolate Pop Tarts in the morning and spaghetti, tacos and tuna salad at night. We governed ourselves like a small, developing country, with random guerilla attacks, bartering, bribing and theft. Linda chased Johnny into the bathroom, threatened to rip his eyeballs out with her long fingernails. He fought back using a can of hairspray and a lighter – a homemade flame thrower. My brothers and sisters took turns climbing onto the roof and diving into the pool. My father once came home from work and found a teenage girl dancing on our black, wrought iron, dining room table. (Our dining room was decorated in what I now call Early Spanish Bordello. Smart Ass, my Mom says.)

Dad bought a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk every night. Jimmy brought home a bar torn from some juke joint and put it on our back porch. I almost died from salmonella my first year after, it was assumed, I'd found something nasty on the floor and popped it in my mouth. Johnny wore his long, black hair half way down his back, tucked

behind his ears, and when he got ready for a date he would come out of the bathroom stinking of Old Spice and say, “Savoir faire is everywhere.”

And Linda got pregnant. She was a sophomore in high school. She said she remembered the instant Bobby was conceived. Mom asked her if she wanted to have an abortion. Linda said no. She married Robert, Bobby’s father, in a church wedding. Linda wore a pretty, ivory gown with a long train bought at a consignment store for \$25. Her three bridesmaids wore aqua-blue bridesmaid dresses with matching, floppy hats. The reception was a white cake, punch, and pink and green candied almonds in the church hall. I did not know at the time that Bobby was on the way, already the size of a thumb, swimming around under second-hand lace. For those that knew, he was as present as the steeple that rose above us, high into the sky.

Maybe, my mother says, late at night, just to me. Maybe if she hadn’t married my father things would have been different for Linda. Maybe, is the implication, Linda wouldn’t have gotten lost in all the chaos. Maybe she wouldn’t have gotten pregnant. Mom whispers this to me, because it is a secret, and she reveals it like she might an old family heirloom. It’s a fragile thought. I listen, and never say that if she hadn’t married Dad, I wouldn’t exist. Does Mom realize this? Am I so great a part of her life she can’t imagine life without me? Or is it, given the chance, she’d so easily choose Linda over me; and not just Linda’s life over mine, but Linda’s welfare over my existence? I choose to believe Mom simply can’t picture life without me, and that’s why her ruminations seem so black and white. No matter that, when I was a baby, Linda accidentally swung my head into a door jam, giving rise to a purple bump, the size of two fists. “We should

have taken you to the hospital,” Mom said. “Why didn’t you?” I asked. “Because Linda already felt so bad, she was so scared. I didn’t want her to feel worse.”

I think about it, and decide what’s more true is that I’m not in the above equation at all. Mom is saying she’d sacrifice her own happiness for my sister’s. We all wonder about our lives, had we chosen another path. But I’d like to know, when she’s picturing the path she didn’t walk, the path without my father, does she ever miss us?

I left work and drove to Linda’s house. I sat next to her on her beige couch. There was a tumbler of vodka in front of her. Next to it, a cigarette burned in an ashtray.

“I’m drinking and smoking and I don’t care what anyone says,” she said.

“No one is going to say anything,” I answered, my eyes closed, arms wrapped around her middle. Linda hadn’t smoked in months, since a cancer scare last year. She’d been on a business trip in Baltimore when her husband called with the news.

“He said ‘Bobby’s been in an accident,’ and then he didn’t say anything else. I kept waiting for him to tell me which hospital Bobby was in. It didn’t occur to me.”

She didn’t finish the sentence, and instead took a drag off her cigarette.

“I told Dan, ‘I have to go. I have to get home.’”

Smoke escaped her lips, as if her insides were on fire. I nodded, despite the fact nodding suggests understanding, and I didn’t understand.

“The woman at the ticket counter, at the airport, she’s looking at me.” Linda took a drink.

“It’s 6 a.m. and I could barely stand up and I just keep telling her, “I have to get home. I have to get home.’ And this lady is looking at me. She asks ‘What’s wrong?’ and, Kelly, I couldn’t say it. So, I told her I was fine.”

Linda said the ticket clerk stared at her, went back to click clacking manicured nails on a keyboard, and finally produced a boarding pass. “She said ‘Have a nice flight.’”

It was a two hour plane ride. Flight attendants hovered. “They kept asking ‘Can I get you anything?’”

Drag.

“The guy next to me asked to be moved.”

Bobby’s landlord sold the house he’d rented, and he’d temporarily moved in with Linda and her husband, Dan. She gave him what we call the game room. It has its own kitchen and bathroom. He got a job at a nearby auto body shop. When he interviewed he told his boss, “I’ll work an honest day’s work, I won’t steal from you, and I won’t screw your old lady.”

“Sunday, he was here, Kelly, he was right here.” My sister patted the seat of the couch where we sat.

“We watched *Joe Dirt* on TV, and for dinner we grilled steaks, and it was such a nice day.”

Drag. Swig.

“Monday morning I was packing for my trip, and I heard the front door slam. I knew Bobby was leaving for work.”

Drag. Swig.

“Then I heard the door open again and I heard Bobby call me, I heard him say, ‘Mom!’ And I said ‘Yeah, son.’ He said, ‘be safe.’ And I said ‘I will.’”

Drag. Swig.

“Then I heard him call me again. ‘Mom!’ I said, ‘Yeah, Bobby?’ He said ‘I love you.’ And I said ‘I love you, too, Son.’”

Drag. Swig.

“Then he said ‘Good-bye, Mom.’”

After Bobby died, I decided I’d put our memories in order, play them back, in the obsessive way I do things, which was exactly opposite of the way he would do things. I decided I needed to map out our lives, decode our mistakes, make sense of how he could be here one minute and gone the next, the turning of a page. That fast. If I could make sense of it, perhaps I could be at peace with it. That’s what I did as a newspaper reporter, I dug and dug and dug until the story made sense, appeared the next day in black and white with a grainy photo and a tidy jump.

I told Linda I would’ve taken his place in that truck and she said she knew I would. “We all would,” she said. When I catch myself ruminating, and I’m always ruminating, I hear Bobby say, *Stop being crazy. Just think of all the good things. That’s what I’d do if I were you.* And I’d wonder how he could be happy with all those holes in our lives, the good times like stepping stones across a fast-running river.

He was missing two front teeth the day we found the small orange snake in the backyard. His mouth was a line of concentration, his thin, freckled arms reaching, the afternoon he played catch with me and my Dad. He rolled his eyes at me the year I got boobs, and he walked in on me changing, and I screamed and made him leave. He had a scar on right his thumb where another kid slammed his hand in the door at day care. He started wearing his hair short and I said, "You look just like Justin Timberlake!"

Bobby fought his way into this world, almost died before he was born. Linda had Eclampsia, which causes pregnant women to have seizures. Her husband drove her to our house, instead of straight to the hospital, forever tattooing my mother's memory with her daughter writhing, despondent, bloody from chewing through her tongue. "I'll never forget," Mom still says. "I'll never forget." Doctors made Robert, then 18, choose between his wife and baby. He chose Linda. Then Bobby emerged, a big, healthy, round-headed baby with toes shaped like rectangles, squared off at the ends. Linda collapsed, exhausted, sick, confused, 16-years-old.

"The nurse asked if I wanted to see my baby," she said. "I said no. I was sick. Just wanted to sleep. But they showed him to me anyway. The nurse held him up. And there he was. Perfect."

Linda was kept in a dark room without visitors so she wouldn't seizure again. When Mom was allowed in, she found her daughter skeletal, dark, hollow eyes, long, red hair knotted after days of thrashing and sweating. She convinced Linda to let her comb it. Mom started at the ends, and fought every knot until Linda's hair was smooth. A year later, Linda's marriage dissolved, and she and Bobby moved in with us at the house on

Gamble Drive. Bobby called me his sister, Kawdy. We were a club of two, season tickets to the kids' table.

Two years later, Linda moved out, married her second husband, John. (She would eventually have three). John had two sons a few years older than Bobby. Bobby was miserable, the two boys hated him, John yelled at him, and John's mother whipped him like a dog. My parents moved to a double-wide trailer on five-acres and raised baby cows and vegetables an hour's drive from my brothers and sisters. I was alone, so much so that the echo of it still sounds in my ears. "We're both in jail," Bobby once said, when we were much older, and our lives weren't working out as we'd planned. We're both in jail. We're both. We are. We.

Linda's marriage to John didn't last. My sister, still a lab technician, searched for an apartment she could afford on her own. Bobby, then ten, wrote in a Mother's Day card, "Mom, I don't care if we ever find an apartment. I love you."

I moved off the five acres when I went to college. My parents later sold the land and moved to a retirement village nearby. Sometimes, Mom and I drive by our old place, and comment on any updates the new owners have made. Over the years, they've bulldozed daddy's poolside bar, where he used to make Bobby and me virgin strawberry daiquiris, where we celebrated Bobby's birthday the year he was so into He-Man and Castle Grey Skull. They filled in the swimming pool, scene of Marco Polo and cannonballs, where Bobby wore happily ridiculous plastic goggles and two triangle-shaped, bright orange water wings that kept him afloat until he was old enough to swim.

Lately, the new owners have constructed a three-story tower on the back of the house, where my old room used to look out over the pool. My sister calls it Rapunzel's tower, and that's what it looks like, a tower from a fairy tale. The last time we cruised by, Mom pulled her foot off the gas so we could take a long look. I wondered what they see from that room up there.

CHAPTER TWO

Linda said, “Bobby’s in the game room.” We stood in her kitchen. I was pouring a glass of wine. She’d mixed another vodka drink. Bobby had been dead 21 hours. Mom and I were spending the night.

“What?” I said.

“Bobby’s in the game room.”

“Linda,” Mom said, “Bobby’s not in there. It’s just his stuff.”

Linda shook her head. “No.”

“Come on,” Mom led Linda back to the living room, where we’d been watching television.

But I lingered, wanted to believe. What if Bobby was in the game room? What if this was all a big misunderstanding? I walked to the game room, ripped open the door, and flipped on the light. I could smell Bobby. There were cigarette butts in an ashtray. His leather jacket hung on a chair, as if he had just breezed in and slung it there. Could he be hiding? Like when we were kids? Or like that time we lost him in the supermarket?

Back then, I marched the length of the Save-A-Lot, finally finding Bobby in the cereal aisle, his arms stretched around a large, heavy box of toy soldiers. It was the D-Day invasion, which now makes me laugh. What fun! Let’s play D-Day invasion! A

silver-haired woman with glasses attached to a chain put a hand on his back. “Do you see her down there?” she asked.

“Bobby!” I said. “We’ve been looking all over for you!” I said this dramatically, showing off.

“Who are you?” the woman asked.

“I’m his aunt. We lost him in the deli.”

The woman laughed. “How are you his aunt?”

“I’ve been his aunt since I was three,” I said.

I grabbed one end of Bobby’s box, and together we went to find my mother.

“Bobby,” I asked the jacket, the cigarette butts, the piles of clothes, the air.

“Where are you?”

I checked the bathroom, pulled back the shower curtain, opened the sliding glass door and looked out onto the pool deck, where we’d stood, that day Dad interrupted us. He felt so near. Perhaps, if I waited, he would walk in. He’d laugh about it. “*There are people out there saying I’m dead!*” I started back to the living room, then turned, leaned against the doorframe, and looked back, my finger on the light switch. I waited for him to come out of hiding. *You give that easy, Kell?* When he didn’t, I turned off the light.

We came home from the grocery store. Mom unpacked the groceries. We kneeled on the floor and dumped the D-Day Invasion out on burnt orange carpeting. We began segregating the soldiers by color.

“Who do you want to be,” I asked. “Grey or green?”

“I want to be the good guys because the good guys always win.” Bobby said.

“Then I have to be the bad guys? That’s not fair. Let’s just call it grey or green.”

“I want to be the good guys because the good guys always win.” Bobby repeated.

“Bobby! That’s not fair!” I was hysterical with the injustice of it.

Couldn’t we both be good guys, I argued. That wouldn’t work, he said.

Both sides can’t be good. But this is pretend, I said.

No, he insisted. One side had to be bad. We agreed to take turns winning, each being good every other time. We sat on our knees and made bomb noises with our mouths, re-writing history. Every other time, Hitler was a good guy who took over the world.

In his life, my father had been a plasterer, a used car salesman, a deer pee salesman, but had finally found his calling working at the one funeral home in town. He liked dressing up, wearing a suit, comforting grieving families, caring for the dead. It was his job to fetch bodies from hospitals and Hospices, to dress them, comb their hair, fix their lipstick. He believed it was valuable work, to help people say good-bye, to bring people peace.

The funeral home let Dad pick Bobby up from the hospital. He slid the zipper back on the black bag to take a look, to make sure.

“Did he look the same?” I asked.

Dad nodded. “I would have known him.”

I was fingering a sandwich bag that held a pair of glasses with brown, plastic frames. I pulled the bag close to my face, studied the glasses as if they were a jewel. They were entirely intact, one tiny drop of blood at the top of the right lens.

“These aren’t Bobby’s. He wore wireframes.” I said.

“He broke the wireframes,” Mom said from her chair across the room.

I sat across the kitchen table from my father and watched him work a crossword puzzle. Dad looked up at me.

“You OK Kell?”

“No.”

When I was a baby, my father’s youngest brother was shot in a bar as he walked to the men’s room. My uncle wasn’t a part of the argument that spurred the gunfire, but he was killed in it. Dad just happened to cruise into the parking lot moments later. He got there in time to see his brother bleeding on the floor, his brains easing out of his head. My father had been angry when it happened, he’d threatened to hunt down the man who did it and put him in the ground. My mother pleaded with him. “You’ll go to prison and leave me with seven children and a new baby.”

Dad closed his crossword puzzle book.

“How did you make it when your brother died? Because, I got to tell you, Dad, I don’t see the other side of this.”

My Dad doesn’t talk much. I waited while he gathered his thoughts.

“I don’t know,” he said.

I watched his face, waited.

“What happened was, when my father died, the two of us were so close, so, so close, and I would not leave the hospital. I stayed at his bedside the whole time.

One time he fell asleep, and I sat there watching him, and I knew it was near the end. And when he woke up he asked me, ‘Buddy, how tall you think Jesus is?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know, Dad, I imagine he’s about average size.’ And he said, ‘Oh no, he’s huge, so huge I was like a little child standing next to him, I had to reach way up to hold his hand.’”

I waited for Dad to finish. He fumbled with his crossword book, didn’t look at me.

“Later that day he died.” Then Dad looked me in the eye. “I believe Jesus came to get my father.”

He paused.

“So when my brother died, I figured he was walking hand in hand with that big old Jesus.”

I nodded, again feigning understanding.

Dad opened up his crossword puzzle book and went back to work. I knew our conversation was over.

I walked back to my place on the couch and turned on the television. I wanted to be comforted by my father’s story. But I wasn’t. I really didn’t care if Bobby was walking hand in hand with Jesus or taking Playmates from behind in the grotto of the Playboy mansion – which was really much more his idea of Heaven. I wanted him here with me, with us.

I wouldn't call us a religious family. Generally, we're faithful and kind. Generally, we're law-abiding and thoughtful. We celebrate all the Christian holidays. My Dad used to sing in a gospel quartet, and when he did we were often in churches, sometimes eating fried chicken and potato salad off paper plates in those barren church halls. But other than that, excluding weddings and funerals, I think I've been to church with my parents about three times. We don't like to get up early and be somewhere on Sundays. We get bored while we're there. I used to hate Sunday School, because they didn't care for questions, many of which still linger in my mind. What does it mean Jesus died for our sins? Because we're still sinning. What was the point of his dying on the cross? To become a martyr? Was it better to become a martyr or spend the next forty years preaching and healing people? Why do we say the Bible is the word of God when it was written by men? Mom and I are critical of the Bible, because of its portrayal of women. Don't even get my Mom started, "Mary Magdalene was a disciple just like the men, but they couldn't handle it, so they made her a whore!" But we do believe in God, or a higher power, or whatever you want to call it. We do pray. We do hope we're not alone with all our questions.

A person like Bobby would most certainly go to Heaven, I thought, as I reclined on the couch one arm thrown over my eyes. More than anyone I knew, he found joy in small things, he loved being alive, he loved his family, he loved his friends, his dogs, he loved being a Dad. More than anyone else I knew, Bobby lived a humble, happy life. But

then again, Bobby also loved beer, weed and strippers. If there really is a St. Peter at the gates of Heaven, what would he say to Bobby?

The phone rang. To this day, I hate a ringing phone.

It was Linda. She said she remembered going to one of Dad's concerts when she was pregnant with Bobby. When Dad sang *Peace in the Valley*, her son began to kick. Now she wanted *Peace in the Valley* for the funeral. Would Dad find it? Sure, sure, he said, and hung up.

Dad pulled from God knows where a dusty shoebox of old, unlabeled cassette tapes and set to work, looking for the song. I laid on the couch with my arm over my eyes and listened to him click buttons, listened to the whirl of fast forwarding, the sputter of rewinding, and snippets of old songs I hadn't heard since Dad sang with *The Florida Harmonizers*, which played a circuit of Baptist churches in and around Orlando in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Hours passed. Click. Rewind. Click. Fast forward. The walls of my parent's mobile home began to breathe, to collapse in on me. I lifted my arm and peeked at my Dad. He frowned at the cassette player. Click. Rewind. Click. Fast forward. He couldn't find the song. I watched his face, and knew his head was more dark and cramped-than the trailer where I sat. His daughter gave him a very important job, and he was letting her down. He couldn't find the song. Click. Rewind. Click. Fast Forward. This was bad. I suggested we download the Elvis version from iTunes.

"It's not the song, Kelly," Mom snapped. "It's your father singing it that makes it special."

I didn't speak again. Instead, I concentrated on staying motionless while the trailer shivered with two dozen more songs about how Jesus is about to come down and save us all. If only, if only, if only. Then Dad turned off the cassette player, a final, defeated, click. My father took the box back where he found it. He moved with his head down, hesitant strides, and I prayed I wouldn't cry because that wouldn't help a goddamn thing.

The air smelled of living things, perfumed petals, hearty stems, black dirt. We poked around until a woman appeared at a chest-high counter that separated us from her. Behind her, there was a doorway, and when I looked through the doorway I saw hundreds and hundreds of flowers crowded into white, five-gallon buckets. The woman was tall, broad-shouldered, wide. She stood with her hands on her hips, watched us with vacant, disinterested, brown eyes. She wore a white apron over a T-shirt and jeans. "Can I help you?"

My mother waved her hand over the potted plants in the front of the store.

"Are these plants fake?" she asked.

"Yep," the woman said, speaking slow, as if taking her time with each letter.

"Cept for the ones that are real."

I turned and looked at Mom, willed her eyes to meet my own. I wanted to laugh, to repeat, 'Cept for the ones that are real. But she didn't turn to look at me, and I joined my sister flipping through a yellowed photo album that contained photographs of

pyramid-shaped arrangements, the ones with the most carnations costing the least amount of money.

A second woman walked through the doorway. "May I help you?"

This woman was short, with round, bright, curious eyes.

"We're planning a funeral," Mom said.

"Look through these books."

She plopped before us three large binders full of photographs. Each one was labeled, "funeral" in black block letters.

Linda picked up the first one and began flipping through the pages. "Jeez," she said. "A lot of people die."

It seemed then like we were putting one foot in front of the other, and when all these chores were complete, and we went back to our normal lives, Bobby would come back. How could we be here, in a flower shop, if Bobby were dead? How could people buy Coca-Cola at 7-11 if Bobby were dead? How could cars line up at a red light? How could restaurants make you wait to be seated? If Bobby were truly dead, surely, surely, the world would stop turning, air would go crisp and icy cold, the sky would turn starless and black, and we would all perish.

"I've got a wedding tomorrow," the woman said. "Are you going to want roses?"

"No," Linda said. I looked at her, astonished she could be so easy going. Then realized, it didn't matter. "Just no pink," she said. "He wouldn't want pink."

"No pink," the woman repeated, and scrawled a note on an order slip.

Linda turned to walk back through the door with the bell. We jangled our way outside.

“I think he’ll like that,” Mom said.

I sat in the back seat and meditated on the business transaction. Pick out flowers. Here are some examples. Make them like these. Follow the path of those that came before you. Here’s the credit card. Swipe. Thanks.

Why do we even send flowers to a funeral? What do flowers do? What I really wanted to do was burn something down, something big and important, and scream into the black smoke that rose into the sky. Would Bobby sit at his own funeral, alongside my sister, and whisper into her hair, “Thank you, no pink?”

Linda sat on her beige couch and flipped through a large catalogue of urns. I sat on the floor by her feet. She sipped a vodka drink and pointed every once in a while at an engraved box.

“How about this one?”

“That’s nice,” I said.

She pointed at half a dozen similar boxes. I said they were nice, too. I listened to the ice rattle in her glass as she brought it to her lips.

“This one,” she said. “It looks like him.”

It was an oak box, about 12 by 6, a little lighter brown than the glasses in the sandwich bag at Mom’s. It looked sturdy, unfussy, immobile, strong.

“It does look like him,” I said.

. “Kelly, look at this.”

I looked where Linda pointed. It was an option for Bobby’s box. If you paid extra, you could get a carving with three seagulls flying away, along with the words, “Going home.” It would go above Bobby’s name and the dates 1976-2008.

“He would like that,” Linda said.

I agreed.

I awoke at 3 in my sister’s guest bedroom, heard my mother sniffing next to me, felt her lift her hand to wipe the tears from her face. Shit. It’s like that the first few weeks, it’s your first thought, always a surprise, as if your real life is a bad dream and you sleep in an inky vacation.

I found Mom in the dark and tried to hug her with one arm.

“I’m sorry I woke you up,” she said.

“Don’t be stupid,” I said.

“I was thinking about the time when Bobby was just a scrawny little thing,” Mom said. “He was running around the house naked, and I was chasing him, trying to make him stop, and I said ‘Bobby, come back here, you can’t run through the house naked.’ And he said ‘What? Are you afraid Kelly is going to see my big one?’”

She laughed. Then started to cry again.

“I’m going to miss that little booger.”

“Oh Mom,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

Bobby was the only grandchild my parents had who would call just to chat. My father once showed up at Thanksgiving wearing dangly, rhinestone clip-on earrings after Bobby pierced his ears. A week before the accident, Mom, Linda, Bobby and Briannah went to the fair. I called Mom later that night and she came to the phone, breathless, still radiating fun.

“We had such a good time,” she said. “Bobby was carrying Briannah on his shoulders. On his shoulders!” She said it as if Bobby had just split the atom.

Mom and Bobby were soul mates. They made each other laugh, communicated with winks, seemed to agree on everything. I was jealous. Mom and I try so hard to get along. We love each other madly, but drive each other mad. This dynamic was worse when Bobby came to visit. They were allies. I was an outsider.

Mom took me and Bobby to the mall when I was 13. He rode shotgun on the way home, but was turned around in his seat so he could talk to me. He was 10. Mom and Bobby had been bored, waiting for me to finish trying on clothes at one of those cheap boutiques that sells poorly-constructed clothes to poor teenage girls.

“When you came out of the dressing room, you had this big bulge on one side of your butt,” Bobby said.

Mom cracked up; I thought we’d swerve off the road.

“Stop being mean!” I said. I was frizzy hair, braces and bad skin. But I believed a Lycra miniskirt would turn me into Madonna. When I’d modeled it for Mom and Bobby, they’d both doubled over in laughter.

“I’m not being mean,” Bobby answered. “I’m just telling you the truth.”

I stared out the window, watched rural Florida blur into a Monet.

“Turn around, Bobby,” Mom said. He did. I saw them look at each other and smile.

Mom and Bobby communicated without talking. Even if I screamed, I didn’t know how to make myself heard, especially with Mom.

Mom likes to tell this story about the first time I saw snow. I was 8. We stopped at a gas station in North Carolina where there was snow in the median between the tanks.

“Kelly! There’s snow on the ground! Make a snowball!”

I cringed. I didn’t want everyone at the gas station to know I’d never seen snow. And I didn’t want to play in dirty snow. Instead of jumping out of the car with joy, I writhed, mortified in the back seat.

“What is wrong with you,” Mom said, annoyed now. She’d driven 12 hours to show me snow and I wouldn’t touch it. “What kind of a kid doesn’t get out of the car to make a snowball?”

It’s one of her favorite stories, a perfect illustration of what a great mother she was and what a difficult, ungrateful child I was. Still, I think now, who plays with dirty snow at a gas station?

Bobby would have eaten the snow and made them laugh. The story would have been about how naughty he was, how funny, how they did everything to stop him, how a crowd formed to watch the scrawny Florida kid eat dirty snow, how they all made new, best friends, how they tried again and again to make him stop, except they were just laughing too damn hard.

Two careers, three degrees, and I've never once felt as satisfied with life as Bobby seemed to be all the time. No wonder Mom adored him. He was like a Jackson Pollack painting, seemingly random but really purposeful. *So now I'm like art? Who the fuck is Jackson Pollack? You're killing me with this shit, Kell.* He knew he wanted a family of his own when he was still in nursery school. When his mother told him he couldn't get pregnant and have babies he cried for a day. Once, at daycare, I watched him stand all by himself in the center of the room, hold his arms out like a propeller, and turn in circles, his face pointed at the ceiling, smiling as if he'd just discovered strippers and weed.

I'm good at faking happiness. I'm good at making people laugh, at deflecting comments I find hurtful, at having a quiver of zingers ready. It's easier, I've learned, to be the last drunk, shoeless woman on the dance floor than the woman never invited. But I've never once been as at ease as Bobby seemed to be all the time. When I drink coffee, I wonder if I should be drinking green tea, when I drink green tea, I miss my coffee, when I'm eating a low-carb diet, I worry I'm eating too many hormones, when I eat vegetarian I worry I'm eating too many carbs. Bobby found a restaurant that sold burritos the size of nine-month-old infants and ate there every day.

Linda asked Bobby to renovate her guest bathroom. She bought a truckload of stuff at Lowe's. Bobby turned her house into downtown Baghdad. Linda got pissed, told him to step it up. So, Bobby called in back-up: an army of tattooed buddies with one syllable names who carried tools and cigarettes. Linda came home from work one day to find a toddler wandering around the living room, his little fist jammed into his mouth.

"Whose baby is this?" she screamed.

Her voice was drowned out by a drill.

“Whose baby is this?” she shouted again.

“Mike’s,” Bobby screamed back.

“Get this baby out of here!” Linda yelled.

Years later, I asked Linda, “Remember that time they had the baby in the middle of a construction site?”

“I was so pissed at him that day,” she said. “They didn’t bring any food for that baby and he was hungry. So, not only am I paying my son to renovate my bathroom, but now I’m cooking.”

“What’s the big deal,” Mom said. “They were just baby-sitting.”

Linda is an engineer at Lockheed Martin. After having Bobby, she got her G.E.D., then worked in an insurance office during the day and waited tables at Pizza Hut at night. Mom, who worked in Human Resources at Lockheed Martin, back when it was Martin Marietta, found her a job as a lab technician. Linda started at the company at 18, emptying trash cans and cleaning up after the engineers. She loved her work, became consumed by it, took every opportunity offered, rose up through the ranks, worked her way up and became an engineer. More than three decades later, she’s won awards worldwide for her work to solve a significant circuit board problem called Tin Whiskers. I tease her about this. “Are you *still* working on Tin Whiskers?”

Linda and I understand each other’s ambition, although she’s had more luck in the sciences that I have in the arts. Linda and I can communicate without talking. I look at her, watch her eyes tired and burned out, or alive with solutions, and know what kind of

day she's had. We both have a heavy compass buried in our guts, the needle stuck permanently on north, no choice but to strive. This is why Bobby made her nuts. This, I learned after we were adults, was the reason he was jealous of me. "Why can't you be more like Kelly," Bobby mimicked his mother saying. All those years I'd made straight As, he heard about it. The year I got my scholarship to college, he heard about it. When I was in graduate school, and Linda offered to give me her old computer, Bobby said, "Why does Kelly get everything?" I didn't realize then, as I do now, that he'd been hurt because giving me her old computer was like a badge, a sign of approval, a belief I was going to be someone who needed a computer. "He should have it," I said. Linda gave him the computer, and bought for me a refurbished one that worked just fine.

I'd come home for Thanksgiving one year when Bobby and I found ourselves in the game room alone. In a family as large as ours, time alone is rare. I was working for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Bobby was on house arrest for "possession of cannabis."

"I don't know what I'm doing with my life, Kell," he said, then bent his head, rubbed his crown.

I opened my mouth to speak.

"Please don't," he said, when he heard my jaw open. "Please don't talk to me about college, and education. I just don't want to hear it."

I closed my mouth. He looked back up at me.

"That's just not me, you know?"

I nodded, stayed silent.

“You non-smokers don’t know what it’s like to be a smoker.” I knew he meant weed, not cigarettes.

He paused between each sentence, as if waiting for me to interrupt him.

“It’s really not that bad for you, you know.”

I nodded.

He shrugged.

“I’ve got everything I ever wanted in life,” he said. “I got friends, a girlfriend who loves me, a baby.”

I nodded.

He pointed at his chest, “I mean, I’m a father.” He grinned.

“You’ve got a lot more than most people,” I said.

“That’s right,” he said, nodded, took a drag off his cigarette. “That’s right.”

CHAPTER THREE

Mom waved a scrap of gray paper in my direction. The end free of her fingers flapped impotently, like a bird with a broken wing.

“This,” she said, “This is just bad journalism.”

I didn’t say anything. I knew from experience how people blamed newspapers. I thought about the bridge walkers, the mother who didn’t want us to have her son’s photo. When I looked at Mom’s scrap of paper, I didn’t see lies, I saw ambivalence. Bobby’s death was a news brief, a one paragraph description of his accident ran third in a laundry list of tragedies and public meeting announcements. A 31-year-old man, Robert L. Jackson, died late Monday after hitting a tree. The details were sparse, but true.

“What about the other boy in the car?” Technically, Bobby’s friend was a man, but that’s not what mom said.

I thought someone would call about Bobby, and I’d prepared myself to say all the things the family spokesman is supposed to say. “He was a wonderful father. We can’t believe he’s gone. Our family will never be the same.” I wanted the chance to say publically what I’d never said privately. But Bobby wasn’t newsworthy. I was haunted by that. I imagined them talking over Bobby’s accident in the newsroom. He was 31, a bit too old to be tragic. He hadn’t been an heir to a fortune, an entrepreneur or a wunderkind.

I remember speaking to the sister of an 18-year-old man killed in a motorcycle accident. The family didn't want to talk to me. "Can't you tell me what you loved about him," I urged. "I really want to write about who he was."

"If I don't talk to you, it won't be in the paper, right?"

"No, if you don't talk to me, it will still be in the paper, I just won't be able to write much about what he was like."

"Why does it have to be in the paper," the girl asked.

Why wouldn't you want the world to know, I thought.

At the end of my shift, I wrote a news brief for her brother, the motorcycle rider. I've wondered if his sister was relieved or disappointed when she saw it. Did she regret, after I'd made his life so small, not talking, putting flesh on the bare bones of fact? Or was she angry at me, like my mother was angry.

I'd spent almost \$40,000 in graduate school to learn how to seek the truth, outmaneuver confusion, like untangling Christmas lights. Lay all the evidence out on the floor. What makes sense? What are the facts? Where are the colorful quotes? When did I first hesitate? Did I meander off my path with the bridge walkers? Or when I saw Bobby's life boiled down to one inch of newsprint? I felt betrayed, and I know that isn't reasonable. I expected answers, but of course there weren't any. I started to think about how little I actually knew about every story I ever told. How easy it had once been to pick out the logic and leave the rest, an unwanted heap, discarded because it was the grey area, a hammock stretched between what was true and what was not.

Perhaps reading that news brief was like another small earthquake, leaving another small crack. Truth had less meaning, less comfort. Years later, planning a poetry lecture, I ran across something William Carlos Williams wrote: "It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day from what is found there." I read it over and over, more than a dozen times. It worried me like a hangnail. Everything in Bobby's news brief had been true, and yet I died a little, from lack of what was found there.

If I hadn't been nearly insane with grief over the death of my nephew, I'd want to kill my mother. We stood side by side, our faces warmed by the fried chicken display in Wal-Mart, and she couldn't decide whether to buy spicy or plain wings for his funeral. Mom likes to bring chicken wings to people's houses, no matter the occasion, because she doesn't have to cook anything and they come arranged on a disposable tray she won't have to hunt down and carry home dirty. Plus, she likes to keep track of how much everyone eats, and bones are an excellent way to do this.

"Get the spicy," I told her. "They look better."

"But not everybody likes spicy," Mom said.

"Then get the plain."

"But do they look bad?" Mom asked.

"No, they don't look bad."

"You said they looked bad."

"No, I said the spicy looked better."

“Should I get the spicy?”

“Yes.”

“What if people won’t eat them?”

“Then the world will come to an end.”

“I’ll get the plain. Do they look bad?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe I should get half and half.”

“Excellent idea. Get half and half.”

“Do you think people will know the difference?”

“No, I think suddenly everyone will be without taste buds.”

“Stop being a smart ass.”

“It’s either that or kill you. Right here. In Wal-Mart.”

“How many should we get?”

“Seriously, prepare to die.”

Mom ordered more chicken than any army could ever eat from a pretty young woman wearing an unfortunate black hairnet, turned to me and, I swear to God said,

“Now, what should we get for dinner?”

I wore a stained white T-shirt that said, *Brenda Starr Reporter* and pushed Linda’s heavy vacuum across the beige carpeting in the living room, first making

snowflakes with the tracks, then erasing those to make parallel lines. I didn't know I was crying, sobbing in fact, because the whine of the vacuum drowned out the sound. But Linda saw, and wrapped her arms around me.

“Don't cry,” she whispered in my ear. “I feel so guilty making you clean my house if you're crying.”

I wiped my face with the back of my hand. We laughed.

We moved to the game room, where Bobby's things were. We were cleaning for his funeral, and we had to clear his stuff out so people could come in and mourn him. I stood in the doorway, and watched my sister move around the room, on auto pilot, picking up clothes and folding them into a neat pile. I didn't move. The room reeked of Bobby, vibrated with his laughter, his voice, his cell phone crying out every few minutes “everybody party, party, everybody, party, party.”

My sister moved into the bathroom, and balanced the folded clothes on top of a bureau. When she left, I walked inside the bathroom and shut the door behind me. The clothes were piled above my nose, and I placed both my hands on top of the fabric. I rested my forehead against the lip of the bureau. I felt my chest cave in, as if I were hollow inside, as if my ribs were a Chinese lantern.

Your arm's in my nuts.

I heard Bobby's voice as clear as if he were standing right next to me, except it filled my head, expanded inside me. I looked up and saw that my hands were folded together on top of a pair of jeans, right where the seams came together and formed the crotch.

I remembered a time when we were six and nine, fighting over who got to sit closer to Mom on the couch, in our wrestling, I ended up elbowing him in the groin. “Your arm’s in my nuts,” he’d said then. It sent my mother and father into hysterics, and sent me, red-faced, off the couch and into the Elba of a green chair nearby. I hadn’t thought about that in 20 years. I moved my hands from the crotch of the jeans.

Did my mind retrieve a long-forgotten memory to make me laugh? Or did Bobby speak to me? Did he send me a message to let me know he was still near, still in this room, still laughing with all of us? I touched the clothes again, hoping to hear the voice. Nothing. After a few minutes, I left the bathroom. I went to help my mother clean the kitchen. Every 30 minutes or so I’d return, place my hands hopefully on top of the clothes. Nothing.

The morning of Bobby’s funeral, I caught Mom staring at her feet. What now, I said.

“Are my knee highs the same color?”

“Yes, both black.”

“Are you sure one isn’t blue.”

“Positive.”

“One looks blue to me.”

“Which one?”

“The right one.”

“No, it’s black.”

“Are you sure?”

“Would I send you to your grandson’s funeral with mismatched knee highs?”

We arrived at the chapel 30 minutes before the service and pushed our way through the crowd. People stood shoulder to shoulder in the back. Thirteen people perched on pews meant to hold 10. I’d only met a few of Bobby’s friends, and had no idea there were so many. My sister counted 250 people. We learned later 12 already had tattoos that read, “Robert L. Jackson R.I.P.” We’d ordered 200 prayer cards, and all of them were gone. Bobby’s flower arrangement contained no pink. Next to it stood an eight by ten photo of him looking over his shoulder, taking one last look back.

My brother’s wife grasped me tight and whispered, “He’s in a better place.” I pushed away from her. Linda sat with her two granddaughters, 6-year-old Briannah and 9-year-old Savannah. Briannah was Bobby’s biological child. Savannah was only nine months old when Bobby met her mother, and we all consider her Bobby’s too, ours, too. We’re a family with an open-door policy. The little girls wore matching black dresses with tiny white polka dots. Black velvet headbands held back ruby-red curls. Briannah crawled into her grandmother’s lap.

A young Baptist minister named Casey climbed the steps up to the podium, stood, looked at us, and acknowledged he hadn’t known Bobby, but wished he had.

“He sounds like a real interesting character,” he said.

Everyone laughed. Casey regurgitated what he’d been told about Bobby. He greeted you with, “what’s up slick?” He had a remarkable number of friends. He once got spanked for throwing rocks in Dad’s swimming pool. Then Casey asked if anyone

wanted to be saved he'd do it right then and there. No one moved. He asked again. Silence. Then he stepped off the podium and Dad's voice welled inside the room, rocketed off the walls, suddenly too thin and tinny, Linda's second choice a song called *House of Gold*.

I'd rather be
In a deep, dark grave
And know that my
Poor soul was saved

Briannah, who'd been silent, writhed on my sister's lap, convulsed, wailed like a wounded animal, which I guess she was. We watched her, the personification of our collective sorrow. I wished I could join her, scream like that, writhe on the floor with my underwear showing.

My sister Tammie leaned in close to me. "Now c'mon, Dad doesn't sing that bad." We giggled. Mom turned to give us a look.

I was 15 years old the first time I saw grief. Our German Shepherd, Tuesday, had a litter of puppies and they'd grown old enough to run all over the yard. One day, I came home from school and saw Tuesday frantic by the pool. I don't know how long she'd been there. Floating several feet off the deck, there was a little island of fur. I grabbed the pool net, with its long handle, and fished out Silver, the prettiest of the puppies, the one my Mom favored, named because her black saddle was threaded with silver, like tiny stars.

Silver must have been four or six weeks old, she was not yet weaned. I held her drenched in my hands, tried to warm her against my chest. Her small body was lifeless. Tuesday wagged tentatively at my feet. She gazed up at me with sad brown eyes, both question marks and exclamation points. She jumped a few times, tried to look at her baby cradled in my hands, wanted me, I could tell, to give her the little body.

I went inside, put the puppy in a grocery bag, and left her on a table in our screened-in porch while I dug the hole in the backyard. I picked a shady spot, near the shed, near us. Tuesday watched me, whined, stared into my eyes when I looked down at her, seemed to plead for her baby. I dug the hole deep, the way I'd watched my father do it. By that time, I'd been living on a farm nine years. I'd watched my father shoot a cow crippled in a horrific delivery that also killed the calf. My pony, Honey, had a heart attack, my first dog, Fritz, was hit by a car and killed while I waited for the school bus, my second dog, Dolly, died of old age, two cats, Heidi and Tom, also died of old age. We got Tuesday after our big, 100-pound junkyard dog, Smokey, also a German Shepherd, wandered off to find a mate after Dolly died. He never came back.

Tuesday was Smokey's polar opposite, small and feminine, sweet and gentle. I put her puppy in the hole and covered her with black earth. The news made my Mom sad. She loved Silver, and we'd planned to keep her, even though we were going to give the rest of the puppies away. That night, I kept vigil poolside until I had to go to sleep. My father sent me to bed and swore he'd keep an ear out for puppy misfortune.

The next day I came home from school and saw Tuesday carrying Silver in her mouth. She saw me and dipped her head, knew I'd disapprove of what she'd done. She

went running beneath our trailer where I couldn't reach her, where I couldn't take her baby from her. Twenty-five years later, I can still see my sweet-faced dog, eyes mournful, dipping her head, running from me, hiding her limp baby.

The next morning, I caught Tuesday far enough from the house where she couldn't run and hide. She gave me her puppy, because she was my dog, and she did what I said. I don't remember a struggle, anyway. I remember she didn't want to. She jumped on me as I carried the puppy above my head, where she couldn't reach. This time, I double-bagged the puppy, believing – because I was 15 and silly – that maybe she wouldn't smell her through two bags – then I dug the hole extra deep, put Silver inside, and covered her up. Tuesday sat nearby, in a pit of sadness herself.

I spent another night on my puppy vigil, poolside, until bedtime. The next morning, the sun was shining, and it looked like such a pretty day, until I saw Tuesday, standing near the house, poised, ready to run, carrying Silver in her mouth. Except this was Florida, and Silver was starting to decay. Pink flesh hung open where the puppy was clutched in Tuesday's jaws. It was too much for me. But this time, I wasn't home alone. Dad hadn't yet gone to work. I went inside and told him. "You have to take care of it." Dad handled it the way he did all things, quietly, soundly. When I came from school that day, Silver's little grave was again fresh, but this time, there was a large, heavy cement block on top of it. Tuesday laid nearby, on her belly, her nose resting on her paws, her face a mother suffering.

For the rest of her life, Tuesday would wail and whine when we were in the pool. She would circle the deck and bark, beg us to get out. When my nieces were small, 5 and

6, she would grab the straps of their bathing suits and try to drag them out. The little girls would pat her snout and squeal, “Tuesday, we’re just playing Tuesday, We’re OK Tuesday!”

The second time I saw grief was at my grandfather’s viewing later that same year. The hour we’d paid for was up, and the funeral home wanted us out. My mother stood, gripping his casket, looking at her father’s face. Dad took her gently by the shoulders. “It’s time to go now, Terry.” Mom wouldn’t move. “If we go, they are going to close him up, and I’ll never see his face again,” she said. My mother was close with her father. She was well into her 50s, and still called him Daddy. Mom’s mother, my grandmother, was by then in a dark cave of dementia and recognized few people in the family. She’d moved in with us, and because I ran her bath and got her breakfast, she’d started calling me the maid. When Mom’s mother saw her daughter standing immobile, gripping the lip of her husband’s casket, she sauntered over. She put a hand on my Mom’s arm.

“Did you know him?” Grandma asked.

My mother looked at her mother, and began to sob. “He was my father,” she said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Grandma said.

I’d turned 16 when my father’s mother died, and I remember my strong, silent Daddy, sitting alone on the porch, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, every once in a while running a hand through his hair, at that time not yet white, and once muttering, so low I could barely hear, “I know it don’t mean much now, but I wish I hadn’t been such an ass.” My mother and I looked at each other. We didn’t know what Dad was talking

about. He'd been a wonderful son. His mother lost a leg to diabetes, and we couldn't accommodate her wheelchair in our trailer. So, we'd put her in a nursing home close to where we lived. Dad visited her twice a week. I'd often go with him, and paint her nails. It was far from ideal, but he hadn't abandoned her.

The most fascinating part of grief is that we somehow survive it. Did we mourn like this when we were nomads? My mother couldn't leave her father, days gone and frozen in a casket, his hair combed straight back, the way he never combed it. How in the world could we bring ourselves to leave behind the old and infirm, people too sick or crippled to walk? Did mothers leave behind babies? Did daughters leave behind Daddies?

When Bobby's funeral was over, I thanked Casey for his efforts.

"You look familiar," he said.

"I grew up here," I said.

"Did we go to school together?"

"No, I'm older than you," I said.

"Maybe I've seen you in church," he said.

"No," I said. "You haven't seen me in church."

He nodded.

I walked on.

"Maybe he was coming onto you," said my niece Christina, back at Linda's house. We were sitting in a circle, me, my two nieces, my sister Tammie, and Bobby's

girlfriend Anna. We all balanced paper plates on our knees, stared at finger sandwiches and Mom's wings.

“Oh, I doubt that,” I said. “I ain't no preacher's wife.”

We laughed.

“Unless it's the church of Latter Day Dirty Martinis,” I said.

Everyone laughed again.

Anna was Bobby's serious girlfriend for about a year. Rumor was, Bobby had his accident because he was on the phone arguing with her. Some of Bobby's friends blamed her for his death. I didn't. I figured that if they had been arguing, and I don't know because I never asked, then she felt bad enough as it was. She was a sweet girl and I believe they were in love. I remember once we were hanging out in the game room and they kept smooching, pawing at each other. It was driving me nuts. “Would you get a room?” I said. “You're just jealous,” Mom teased. I wasn't. Affection makes me anxious.

Linda placed Bobby's box on the fireplace hearth, and we all milled around it. Friends Linda hadn't seen in years asked her why there were no photos of them in Bobby's memorial slideshow. I thought this was an odd thing to say, but I guess they just wanted to feel connected. I thought about the photo of me and Bobby, taken at my father's 70th birthday party. In it, I am reaching around Bobby's neck and he is just reaching his arm around my back. We are caught like that forever, in the midst of a hug. In the photo I am gazing up at him, and I see in my own eyes all the love I failed to tell him about while he was alive. I suppose that's what my sister's friends wanted, to see

themselves smiling and happy with Bobby, proof he really was here, that we weren't just dreaming.

People trickled out of Linda's house, hugged us, said good-bye. Soon it was Mom, Linda, and me sitting in our pajamas in the living room, packed with flowers. Bobby's box was an exclamation point. I opened a magnum of cheap red wine and drank a lot of it. We didn't turn on the TV. Things got quiet. I started doing impressions to make us laugh.

"Linda, remember when we went Christmas tree shopping that time you had Bell's Palsy and couldn't move the right side of your face?"

Linda laughed. She covered her mouth to keep from spraying vodka.

"Could you hold that one up?" I mimicked, making one side of my mouth drop.

"Ok, now that one."

"Remember how the teenage boys working the Christmas tree lot stared at you?" I said.

Survival, in my family, depends on the quickness of your wit, the ability to tell a good story, the swiftness with which you return a less-than-gentle jab. I once dated a man who accused me of being mean. He said I was harsh and sharp. Women are supposed to be warm and gentle. Teasing means love, I said. He shook his head, no.

My brother-in-law Kevin, Tammie's husband, always calls Dad in the hospital, pretends to be an Indian doctor, and tells my father he needs to collect a sperm sample. This has been going on two decades, and Dad still falls for it. Kevin will finally collapse into hysterics and Dad will say, "Kevin, you nearly killed me."

No wonder I never had a heart to heart with Bobby. That wasn't how we operate. Perhaps he knew how much I loved him with every barb? Like that time I brought the lawyer boyfriend home and Bobby said, "I could use a good lawyer" and I said, "He's not a criminal lawyer, Bobby." Do you think he read between the lines and saw how much I loved him then? That day I was so nervous. I was nervous what the boyfriend would think of my family (Bobby greeted him barefoot and shirtless on the front porch.) And I was worried what my family would think of my boyfriend. I guess that's why, when I saw the opening, I fired away.

"Do me! Do me!" Mom shouted.

I reclined back in the cushions of the couch and mimicked, "I don't want you to panic, but I can't move the right side of my face."

Linda did spray me with vodka that time.

She'd said it early one New Year's Eve. We'd stayed overnight at the beach because she wanted to look at the water. Her face looked as if someone had tied a string to the right side of her mouth and was giving it a good tug. We both thought it was a stroke. We packed our things and headed for the hospital. Mom insisted on driving.

"I said 'You know if you are having a stroke you are going to crash the car and kill us both, right?' She said, 'I know.' Just like that, 'I know.'"

Linda laughed out loud. Vodka dribbled down her nightgown. "Hold on," She said. "I have to go clean this up and pee. Tell me the rest of the story when I get back."

Linda returned in a fresh nightgown.

“The triage nurse told us if Mom had been having a stroke she’d be dead by now,” I told Linda.

Mom and I waited three hours to see a doctor. Mom passed the time talking about everyone else in the waiting room. She stared down an old man holding a bloody, dripping, dishcloth against a gash on his forearm.

“Oh, look at that poor little guy,” I mimicked for Linda. “I wonder where you get pants that color?”

“Kelly, Kelly, tell her what they found?” Mom broke in.

“That you had Bell’s Palsy?”

“Yes, but what else.”

I laughed.

“Oh yeah, Linda, Linda, get this. They said Mom had an extra thick head!”

“They had a name for it and everything.” Mom said. “It’s a real condition.”

Linda looked at me, “Did we really need a doctor to tell us that?”

Later that night, Linda and I huddled in the same bed. We turned out the light, curled into question marks, and blinked in the dark. I heard her open her mouth. She asked, “Do you think Bobby went to heaven?”

I’d been wondering that myself. Bobby had been in jail. He loved drinking, smoking weed, ignoring bills. But he’d also been so loved that a dozen people marked their bodies when he died.

“Yes,” I said, mostly because I wanted to comfort my sister, but also because I believed it. “Bobby is in heaven. Absolutely. Without a doubt. He’s in heaven right now, drinking Heineken.”

My sister rolled over to face me.

“There’s no beer in heaven,” she said.

“Of course there’s beer in heaven.”

“No, there’s not.”

“How could it be heaven without beer?” I asked.

She turned back over without answering. I thought it was a valid question.

We pulled into Tarpon Springs, a coastal, touristy town settled by Greeks. It’s a good day trip place, and Mom and I have been coming here all my life. We parked in the same lot, paid the same old man in the black wool captain’s hat \$3. We got a table at a small waterfront tavern called Dimitri’s. We ordered a pitcher of beer at 11:30 a.m. It arrived with two frosty mugs, and I poured Mom a glass first, then I filled my own.

“I want *House of Gold*,” she said, then nodded.

For reasons I didn’t understand, Mom thought the day after my nephew’s funeral was a perfect time to talk about her own memorial service. I didn’t want to talk about death, so I made jokes.

I said, “You’re getting *Brick House*.”

“What’s *Brick House*?”

“Oh, c’mon, Mom? The Commodores? *She’s a brick house; she’s mighty mighty, just letting it all hang out.*”

“I don’t think I want that. I want *House of Gold.*”

“You’re getting *Brick House.* And you’re going to love it.”

Mom and Dad want to be cremated, poured into the same vessel, and then tossed off the back of a booze cruise and into the Atlantic Ocean.

“There’s this pillow you can get,” Mom said, making a rectangle shape with the thumbs and forefingers of both hands. “You put our ashes in that and then you just fling it over the side and the pillow melts in the water. Then you don’t have to toss handfuls of ashes into the wind and we won’t be flying all over the place.”

“But I don’t think I can just leave you bobbing on the waves like that,” I said.

We’d come to Tarpon Springs to drink beer on the water. My mother believes water heals her. A few times a year, she finds a way to spend a weekend at the beach, it’s her sacred place, her prayer, her church, a reminder that whatever problem she’s wrestling with is tinier than the sea. She remembers life is short, the waves are long, and that the ocean will outlast her latest crisis, whether it’s a money shortage, unexpected illness, or, now, tragic death. In times of real desperation, she’s bought a can of beer at a nasty looking bait shop on the Withlacoochee River, sat at a knarled picnic table, looked out over the tea-colored water and sipped from a paper bag.

After lunch, we meandered along the same path we’d walked a million times before, past dried sponges, brown like old pennies, past seashell shops, past the life-sized bronze statue of the diver, past the spot where I saw my first transvestite and she

complimented me on my black jeans. We walked into the leather goods shop where we always admire everything and never buy anything. We walked back up the other side of the street, past Hellas restaurant, home of the nine-legged octopus, where my parents had one of their first dates, past the bakery that's displayed the same wedding cake in the window for two decades, past the shops selling orange and blue crinkly sundresses blowing in the wind like flags at half mast.

Mom pointed to a bench on the water and we headed that direction. She sat down with a sigh and I sat next to her and looked at her face. My mother never lowers her chin, never shows weakness, points her face toward the horizon like a battleship. But her eyes were soft and red. She sighed again. She seemed to be searching for instructions on the white caps that turned toward us with the breeze. Mom always knew what to do and I thought then if we waited long enough, she would see it, point it out to me. I turned away and looked out over the water too, watched the seagulls circle overhead. I looked for the instructions just in case Mom missed them. I wanted to be able to call out, "There! See it! It's right there!" We sat in silence for several minutes.

"Well, that's it," Mom said. She'd given up. We got up to leave and as we walked away I heard the waves lapping against the pilings of the dock.

CHAPTER FOUR

I returned to work Monday, walked into the newsroom, felt my whole body was a big, purple bruise. I watched eyes dart toward me and then away. Co-workers were silent, unsure of what to say. I didn't know how to comfort them, to tell them they couldn't say anything, didn't have to. A woman I didn't like hugged me, and I let her, because I knew she was trying to be kind. I'm fine, I said over and over. I'm fine. Hey, really, I'm fine.

I sat in my cubicle, looked at some e-mails, stared into the computer monitor and didn't see a thing. My friend Angie took me to lunch at a café we only went on special occasions, or payday. I stared at a young man seated at the bar who wore his hair shorn, like Bobby. For an hour I watched him chew and swallow, chew and swallow. He turned toward me occasionally, perhaps wondering how he knew me, perhaps trying to signal I was rude. But my eyes wouldn't go anywhere else. Every time I lifted them away, they would fall back on hair like Bobby's.

I felt both enamored by the world, and not a part of it. As if I'd recently been rescued from a deserted island. There's this passage in a book I love called *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. It's told from the point of view of a young girl who'd spent years living with her missionary father in post-colonial Africa. She returned to the United States, and gazed for hours at a curb painted yellow. It was pristine, represented civilization, a culture where she no longer felt she belonged. Angie drove us

back to the office, and along the way I marveled at red lights, how people still stopped at them, waited patiently for green, moved on. Tick, tick, tick went life, and no one seemed to notice.

I sat down at my desk, and stared at my black monitor. I knew when I woke up that morning I wasn't ready to return to work, but I wanted to keep my job. Someone said, and I can't remember who, that it would be good for me, that I should get back into the swing of things, work would take my mind off it. I'd returned to work, again, because I didn't know what else to do.

My editor swept up next to me and said I should call HR, the company didn't allow time off when nephews died and I'd taken four days. This was my fault. After leaving the previous week, on Tuesday, I hadn't called in, checked in, nothing. I'd been in a daze, or a cocoon. I showed her my employee handbook, pointed where it said employees got three days bereavement for nephews and nieces. She told me I had an old handbook. I dialed HR, told the woman who answered the phone I'd taken four days off because the nephew who was really my brother died in a car crash, and I had an old handbook that said I got three days off for nephews, and if it was that big of a deal they could just keep the damn money. "I just can't lose my job," I said. I should remember the name of the woman who answered. But I don't. "Oh, God," she said. I could almost hear her roll her eyes. "Don't worry. I'll take care of this." Then she did. My next paycheck arrived entirely intact.

That night my friends Jen and Rochelle, both reporters, brought me dozens of Kashi, organic frozen dinners in two, big green shopping bags. Rochelle covered cops

and Jen covered the county. They stood nervous, wordless, grinning, in the foyer of my apartment. Jen handed me the bags. I put them on the counter in the kitchen, then turned and hugged her, fell into her arms, reached around her neck, crushed her. Jen is taller than me, but I am larger, stronger, rough when I don't mean to be, like a German shepherd puppy, like a junkyard dog. They did not stay long, did not sit, did not make me talk. They were worried what I was eating, Jen said, worried I wasn't eating, worried I was only ordering pizza. Kashi dinners were on sale, two for one, she added, as if apologizing.

These kindnesses did not stand out then as they do now. Now, they are like two Chrysler buildings, two soaring buttes, two fist-sized jewels in a sock drawer, two of whatever you think of as grand. I mention them because I am more grateful now than I was then. I mention them as a pause, a semi-colon, a breath, a reflection on the power of two-for-one, on someone thinking of you, of someone taking care of you. I mention it because in the upcoming days I learned how fast the world turns, and how little time people have for your grief.

“Kelly, I have no one else, you have to go,” my editor said.

It was my third day back at work. I'd been gazing, catatonically, into my black computer screen when the phone rang. My editor said a semi-tractor trailer hit a mini-van just past 20-Mile Bend, halfway to Lake Okeechobee.

“OK,” I said. I told myself, you are, after all, a reporter. If you keep sitting here, doing nothing, you'll get fired. I held the phone to my ear with my shoulder and gathered my things: pens, notepad, purse, keys.

“There are children trapped inside.”

“What?”

“Children. Trapped inside.”

“Fuck.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

I got in my car, drove through a Burger King, asked for the biggest Coke they had. “No, regular!” I shouted into the intercom. Just past The Acreage, I pulled over, opened my car door and threw up. I shut my door, eased back onto the road and kept driving. I entered the sugar cane fields, walls of green on both sides of the roadway, Connie May Fowler described these fields as a sugar cage, and I agree. My cell phone rang.

“You can turn around,” said my editor.

“What about the accident?”

“Turned out to be nothing,” she said. “No one died.”

I made a U-turn, pulled over, and rested my head on the steering wheel. I thought about running into the sugar cane, crouching at its base, knees in the black muck, like a child, like when Bobby and I played hide and seek. *Aw, Kells, you give up too easy.* I listened to it rustle, breathe, just beneath the sound of traffic passing. I am a Florida native, and sometimes I think if I take off my shoes, my toes will sprout roots and I’ll grow into a Cypress tree. My mother grew up in Orlando, and spent so much time swimming at Rock Springs she thought she’d grow a tail and spend her life as a mermaid.

You can't live here and not believe in God, a higher power, something. We're at the mercy of nature. Developers try to turn Florida into suburban New Jersey. They think they control it. But that's like a toddler wrestling with his father. Florida can turn around and destroy anything, anyone, anytime it wants. Here, hurricanes will flatten a major U.S. city, easy as a sigh, send monkeys from the zoo running into the streets, send wealthy people to live in tents. Here, black muck gives birth to white sugar; and the cool silver of Lake Okeechobee meets the burning orange sunset, and you can look up and see how easily Heaven and Hell meet, bleed together on the horizon. Our aquatic ancestors are imprinted in the soft limestone where we walk, a reminder we're here so short a time it's like we were never here at all.

It occurred to me then I could walk into the sugar cane, into the sugar cage, and never be seen again. I could leave it up to God, or Florida, to decide. Perhaps I could live off the land, forage for food, become some sort of South Florida shadow person, show up later in a Carl Hiaasen novel, a scrawny woman in rags still wearing her press badge. Perhaps I would meet a big, old bull gator and he'd make it easy for me. Perhaps I would meet some leathery good old boy on an airboat. Perhaps I'd pretend I had amnesia. Perhaps he'd take me home and take care of me forever. I thought about this option longer than a sane person would. Then I decided I wanted a beer. I wanted a beer, my bathing suit, and the condo pool. I lifted my head, drove on, back toward the east, back toward the beach, back where the bridge walkers walked, where the sun rose, where days, presumably, start.

An intervention-themed, surprise birthday party was planned for Rochelle. When she walked in, instead of shouting surprise, we were supposed to read statements, in a grave, intervention-style tone, about how Rochelle had annoyed us. Rochelle, a 100 pound Golden Gloves champion, work-out fanatic and health food fiend, had recently been defeated on *American Gladiator*. She was subsequently featured on the Chelsea Handler show, which replayed the clip where Rochelle was wrestled off an airborne contraption by a female gladiator who wrapped her legs around Rochelle's head. As a present, I bought Rochelle a grey tank top, ironed Glad-He-Ate-Her across the front, and wrote a statement about how no matter how many times she offered, I wasn't going to eat her raw, unsalted nuts. "The only raw nuts I want in my mouth belong to your husband," I said. Everyone laughed.

This was how I attempted to crawl back into my old self, a suit that now felt so heavy, tight and inflexible, that I thought I would suffocate. I drove home from Rochelle's birthday party, drunk and shaking, exhausted from pretending, angry I was already being drafted into social situations, angry at myself for not saying no when my roommate asked if her new beau could come stay the weekend, angry at myself for attending the party at all, for wasting an entire afternoon ironing on letters and drafting a fake intervention letter.

Still, every time someone asked something of me, I answered in the affirmative. Would I go to O'Sheas for a drink? Yes. Would I like to go to the movies? Yes. Would I like to get a room at the Hard Rock? Yes. Would I like to dance all night? Yes.

I felt then as if people were watching me, as if they sensed before I did something was seriously wrong. Was the pressure to get back to normal real or imaginary? I felt then as if people didn't have time for my sadness, as if befriending the Kelly that made them laugh did not mean they were friends with the Kelly who put on a bathing suit after work, and floated in the pool all night with a Solo cup of wine balanced on her belly, retracing the path of her childhood, over and over again, as if handcuffed to a train.

I floated on top of the water, let my ears sink down, let the bleached blue waves block out the world around me. Was Bobby six or seven the year he was into He-Man and Castle Grey Skull? I had to remember everything because I was now alone with our childhood. *Goddamnit, there you go again. How can you be sad drinking in a swimming pool? I'd a been all over that shit.* I had seven older brothers and sisters, but Bobby was the person I was a child with. How did he see me back then? A quiet, bookish girl who snapped at every opportunity? *You forgot ugly.* How had he seen me as an adult? A lonely workaholic with no romance, no love, no children? *You forgot stupid head.*

I carefully lifted my wine from my belly. I'd learn to balance it there because I found it annoying when every time I wanted a drink, I had to swim to the side of the pool and retrieve my cup. I thought about the time I'd spent the night at Linda's. I was 12 and he was 9. Linda wanted to drop me off so I could watch Bobby play baseball. The suggestion filled me with anxiety. That was the era when I was most frightened of people, of other children, of everything. (The following year my parents put me in therapy.) I felt my throat close, fold in on itself. I wanted to claw open a hole in my trachea so I could breath. Instead, I simply refused. Linda's then husband, John said,

“You don’t want to go to a baseball game? There will be other kids there.” I remember just shaking my head, horrified. I think now how proud Bobby would have been to have me there, how happy, how we could have spent that afternoon alone, how we could have vaulted together over all the high bars the other one had set. “Why are you such a weird kid,” my mother had said.

Perhaps, if I had gone, I could have repaired some of the damage already done, glued it back together like an heirloom teacup. But I didn’t know how. I was a child then, and saw mistakes as something to ignore, extricate myself from. I didn’t understand then how to apologize for what I’d done to Bobby, especially since he didn’t blame me, which somehow made it worse. But I already knew, at 12, I had wronged him, that I could have handled our lives in a better way. I knew, even then, that if the roles were reversed he wouldn’t have been so frightened. He wouldn’t have abandoned me the way I abandoned him.

I took another sip of wine, then reclined back in the water, put the cup back on its place on my belly.

I was nine. Bobby was six. I wore a blue denim dress threaded with red and yellow ribbons. I played Pac Man with Bobby’s two step brothers in an apartment off Linda’s house, inhabited by John’s mother, a stringy-necked creature who made us call her Nana.

“Kelly,” she said, old claw wrapped around my arm, just above the elbow. “Have you seen my new Induction?” I had no idea what an induction was, but I knew she was excited. I also knew she was scary, so I did my best to look happy, to please her.

“It’s nice!” I said, looking vaguely toward one corner of her apartment.

“Oh, you’re not even looking at it,” she said. She sunk her claws into my shoulders and turned me roughly toward the kitchen, pointed me at her stove.

“You mean the stove?”

She exhaled in frustration, smacked me on the back of the head so I’d know I was stupid.

“Yes. The stove.”

“It’s nice. Shiny,” I said.

“Bobby!”

I turned, but did not see what Bobby did to catch her eye, lure her wrath. Released from her claws, I went back to playing Pac Man. Moments later I heard behind me, “Bobby! Do that again and you’re getting the fly swatter!”

I turned to look at Nana. Grown-ups didn’t hit children in my house. They didn’t have to. I was so timid, I’d be in tears before Dad could even yell at me. The idea she might strike a child with a flyswatter was so horrifying, so unlikely, that I didn’t believe she’d actually do it. To me, it was like saying, “Do that again and I’ll kill you.” I thought it was an empty threat. I went back to playing the game.

“Bobby!”

He pleaded, “I didn’t do anything!”

I turned away from the video game again to see Nana grab Bobby with her scrawny claw, nails like talons, unpainted. I saw her shake Bobby, saw her drag him across the room, into the kitchen with the new Induction. Then I saw a yellow fly swatter.

“No! No!” Bobby screamed.

I saw her pull the fly swatter back like a tennis racket, I heard it whoosh through the air, land with a snap on Bobby’s scrawny rear end. I saw his mouth open so wide I thought his face would crack in two, heard him wail. I heard, just below the wail, another whoosh, another snap. I watched with my mouth open, felt sick, small and disposable.

When she finally released Bobby’s arm, there was a red mark where she’d held him. His face was a mask of tears and snot and spit. He looked like a broken doll. He was a broken doll. I said nothing. I. Said. Nothing.

I felt tears slide from my eyes and into the pool. Why didn’t I move to help? Why didn’t I move to comfort my nephew? Why didn’t I at least tell my parents? I did nothing. Almost 30 years later, nothing weighed on my chest, a heavy bundle that almost sent me beneath the water. I argued with myself. I was terrified, had never seen anything that violent in my own, sheltered home with its vegetable garden and half a dozen, sweet-faced, black and white cows. I carefully pulled the wine from my belly, rose from the water, sipped. I abandoned Bobby then, betrayed him, aligned myself with the strong by way of silence, feared the goddamn fly swatter myself.

I threw my head back and polished off the wine. I’d never go back to childhood, with its assumptions that everything adults do is OK, or allowed. They hold all the cards, don’t they? They are bigger, stronger, own things, take us places, pay for everything. That kind of vulnerability would terrify me now. I’d never walk back into a situation where I had so little power, where I felt that afraid.

That surely wasn't the first time Bobby had been beaten. When I stood there in my denim dress, it was if an ugly thing had passed and we should all just forget about it, go back to our games. I wished then I could go back as an adult, walk straight into the apartment, and beat the living shit out of Nana. Or at least, at the very least, go and get my mother and father. I wish I could wipe my nephew's face, tell him how much I loved him, tell him he wasn't alone, tell Nana she was an ugly, old crow, then wrap that goddamn fly swatter around her throat.

Worse, I know he would have defended me. I know this like I know my shoe size. He was brave. I remember him, ripping off his shirt, demanding, "Am I turning green? Am I turning green?" *It wasn't your fault, Kelly.* I should have helped you. *It don't even matter now.* It does to me.

He never hated me for abandoning him. Even the morning after I skipped his baseball game, afraid, then, of children as well as adults, he was so excited to see me; he woke me up standing over my trundle bed, bending low, close to my face. I screamed, startled. "Bobby, you scared the crap out of me." He dropped his head and walked out of the room, disappointed. I still remember the little red curls at his neck. Later that day, Linda took us shopping. Bobby had one dollar, and spent the entire day searching for something he could buy me. "Stop it, Bobby," I said. "You have to save your money. Don't spend it on junk."

I was drunk in the swimming pool, cold, nearly naked, bloated with our childhood, like an infection, a dead fish on the beach. I managed to make it up the steps

and to my towel. I staggered back into my condo building, up the elevator, and into my unit.

The next day, I received an e-mail from my sister-in-law inviting me to a run in a 5K with her. Yes, I said. I should do that. All I'd been doing for exercise lately was floating in the pool with the wine balanced on my belly. I received this message back:

“KELLY, listen to me right now!!!! Your grieving is over!!!! You MUST start back on that high road. From today, you WILL smile holding high those good Bobby memories and YOU WILL leave the sadness behind. Visualize you walking away from the sadness. Do it RIGHT NOW!!! You're heading back into the light!!!!!! Bobby would NOT want you to fall back and certainly not gain weight!!! Even if you didn't say it as much as you now would have liked to, he KNEW that you loved him & felt privileged to have you as an auntie. He loved you too, would want you to continue on your BRIGHT future... and to have some fun for him!! Your mission should be to be even more successful in your career as he did not have your chance with the cards stacked against him. He would want you to be a good example for his daughter. I know very well that it's hard to get back to that exercise routine BUT YOU WILL DO IT NOW!!!! It is NOT an easy road and as you age, it doesn't get easier so START NOW!!! YOU GO KELLY!!! Pick yourself up NOW and go forward!!!!”

I opened the e-mail at work. Read it. Shook my head. Read it again. I turned to Angie.

“Is it just me, or is my sister in a law a total fucking bitch?”

Angie wheeled her chair into my cubicle and read over my shoulder.

“Total fucking bitch,” she said.

Shaking, I typed out this response: “I know you mean well,” I wrote. “But it's incredibly offensive for you to tell me when my grieving is over. It's over when it's over. And it's not over. It's only been two weeks for crying out loud. Please don't tell me what I will or won't do ever again. –Kelly”

I walked into a bar painted with red walls. Above the bar, there hung a long mirror in an elaborate, gold frame. In the middle of the bar sat Mom and Linda. I greeted them. Linda looked tired. She lit a cigarette. Beyond her, at the end of the bar, sat Bobby.

“Why aren't you sitting with Bobby?” I asked.

“He's waiting for you,” Mom said.

I walked to the end of the bar and threw my arms around my nephew. “Bobby, thank God, I thought you were dead.”

He hugged me back, but didn't acknowledge what I said. He squirmed on the barstool.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“My back hurts,” he said.

“Bobby, I never told you how much I love you. I never told you how proud I am of you, how you are such a good Dad.”

Bobby said nothing. He just let the words fall from my mouth without acknowledgement.

“I never told you how much I love you, how much you are a part of my heart.”

He nodded, said nothing, then hugged me again. He looked down at my face.

“You’re not going to believe how it is, Kell. There is so much room. It’s like a mansion that never ends.”

I nodded, as if I understood.

“I have to go see Tammie now.”

“Please don’t leave.”

“I’ll be back,” he said.

I awoke, looked at the clock. It was 2:34 a.m. I felt lighter, at peace, as if I really had spoken to my nephew. Then I fell back asleep.

I stood in the living room of an old, white house. Bobby sat on a chair in one corner. Another young man sat in a chair in another corner. They both looked at me and grinned.

“This is my friend Paul,” Bobby said.

“Hi Paul.”

Bobby got up and walked toward me.

“We have to go now.”

“Bobby, don’t go,” I said.

He wrapped me in his arms, hugged me close, kissed my cheek.

“Don’t go,” I begged.

Then I woke up again.

I know there are people who will believe me when I say I believe Bobby came back to relieve me of some of my guilt. I know there are people who will believe that I

was so heavy with guilt, my mind did what it had to do to survive. I think about the conversation we had in the bar with the red walls, and realize I was the one speaking, not him, which proves both points. Either he really was here, and for him, our childhood was already forgotten, in the rearview mirror, and he didn't need to forgive me, but knew I desperately needed to be forgiven. Or my mind assembled it all on its own, so I could figure out how to get up in the morning.

Cheryl Strayed writes in *Wild* that she asked her brother to shoot her mother's beloved horse named Lady. Lady had grown old, was tired, sick and scrawny, and Strayed believed because the family loved her so much, they should be the ones to put her down. She thought the horse would fall after one bullet between the eyes. But it took several shots to take her down, and Strayed writes that she stood horrified as Lady bled and suffered. She felt guilty, as if she'd caused the horse undo harm. But in later years, Strayed said she dreamt of Lady with a bouquet of flowers in her mouth, and knew she'd been forgiven. I write this now, and think it's an odd comparison. But I'm a woman in pain here, grasping at illusion.

Several years ago, when I was going through a bad break-up, and I felt lost, I dreamt of my grandmother sitting in a green chair, wearing a brightly-printed red muumuu. "Don't worry," she said. "I'm coming." Soon after, I moved out of the dark apartment where I lived, and into the condo high rise with the pool. I met my friend Nicole, who introduced me to her army of friends. I lost 25 pounds, went out every night, and had the time of my life. It seemed then as if Grandma really had stepped in. This grandmother died when I was 20, twelve years before my dream. This was the same

Grandma who suffered from dementia when I was in high school, and I'd been her caretaker. One night, when I was 16, my family threw a luau. We all partied around her while sat in the green chair, in the festive muumuu, with a wooden expression on her face.

Another time, I dreamt I was standing in her green kitchen, with the big, red clock, and she was leaning over, putting something in the oven. I'd been worried about her, because even though I appreciated her help, I began to worry she was trapped somewhere between Heaven and Earth. Or, worse, she left Heaven to help me and then couldn't get back. You think crazy things sometimes, when you love people. So, in the dream, I was watching her at the stove when she turned to me and said, "Stop worrying. I'm great. I'm fine."

Two months before Bobby died, I dreamt of her a third time. She stood wearing a dirty, white T-shirt and jeans. She was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't hear her. "What?" I kept saying. "What?" Grandma, when she had the ability, before we dressed her in red muumuus, had been very particular about her clothes. She never would have worn a T-shirt and jeans. In the dream I asked her, "Grandma, what are you wearing? Those aren't your clothes. What are you wearing?" Now I wonder, was she trying to warn me about Bobby? Was she wearing Bobby's clothes?

Part of the stage production, *The Metamorphoses*, features King Ceyx, who dies onboard a ship, during a journey he felt compelled to take. His wife, Alcyone, is so pathetic, awaiting Ceyx's return, the God Juno sends a messenger called Sleep to visit her in her dreams, in the form of her husband, and tell her of his fate. Alcyone runs to the

seashore in mourning and despair, and sees her husband's corpse drift toward her on the waves. She hurls herself beneath the water, but instead of drowning, morphs into a sea bird along with her husband, no longer dead, but a bird. They fly off together, like the birds on Bobby's box.

I believe, or I hope, our dreams are as important as our wakefulness. Perhaps our world is split in two. Perhaps we have the ability to talk to the dead at night, and the living during the day. This is what I choose to believe, anyway. The rest of you can do what you have to do to get by. The triumph, sometimes, is the keeping going.

There's a poem I love to teach, called *The Waking*, by Theodore Roethke. My students like it because it unravels like a mystery, and they like to guess what the poet meant. "I wake to sleep and take my waking slow," he starts. Interpret that any way you wish. I think it means if we're not careful, we sleepwalk through life and only really live in our dreams, when we're sleeping. But I think it can also mean that we wake from a deeper, more spiritual existence and into a life of cubicles, bill-paying and routine.

Weeks later, I told Linda about my dream. I told her about the bar with the red walls. "Well, where else would we be," she said. It told her I spoke to Bobby, and that I told him I loved him and that he said his back hurt.

"I figured he hurt his back in the accident?" I asked.

My sister paused.

"No, Kelly," she said. "He hurt his back at work. Right before the accident."

Linda then told me about another death. Bobby had a friend named Paul, who'd overdosed. Bobby's circle of friends reeled with its second death in as many months.

I paused.

In my dream, I told Linda, Bobby was there with a friend named Paul. “He said they had to go.”

“I just got goosebumps,” Linda said.

“Do you think Bobby came back for Paul and stopped in to see me?”

“I don’t know,” Linda said.

For three years I’d spent nights, early mornings and weekends pecking away on a novel with the working title *Very Bad Fiction*. I called it that because it was awful, not in a self-deprecating way, but in a truth-facing way. I’d read it at least 100 times, and sent it off to two newspaper editors and book critics at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, who’d sent it back with what I now understand were the world’s most gentle, kid-glove critiques. Still, I had no idea how to fix it.

I pulled it from a drawer after seeing an ad for a fiction writers’ workshop in Miami, led by Connie May Fowler, author of *Sugar Cage*, and a fiction writer I admired because we both went to the University of Tampa. I was looking for focus, balance, something on which I could pin my life, point to it, say, “see, that’s what I’m doing.” Perhaps, this fiction workshop could turn my novel around. Perhaps I could get published. Perhaps I could become a fiction writer, quit the newspaper and sit around in my jammies all day and write about people who didn’t exist. There would be no more blood on the road, no more shattered faces, no more bodies discovered in brambles, tossed onto the right of way like used paper cups.

I was officially adrift. It was May, I'd turned 35, my newspaper had just completed a reshuffling and there were rumors about layoffs. My best friend, Nicole, with whom I shared our upscale, high-rise condo, was offered a glamorous job in New York and I couldn't afford our home alone. And, of course, Bobby's death haunted me, as much as ever. I revolved around it.

I told Mom I'd signed up for the workshop and she decided, as a late birthday present, to put us up in a Miami hotel. That way I wouldn't have to drive back and forth from West Palm Beach, and we could go have Cuban food and visit Vizcaya, a historic mansion she'd always wanted to tour.

I agreed with hesitation. My mother doesn't mean to, but she has a way of reducing my dreams, things in my life I'm serious about. We've talked about it, and neither one of us knows how to fix it. I believe if I'd gotten married and had children, she'd have an easier time seeing me as grown. But that never happened for me. So this is how we are. We love each other madly, and drive each other mad. I sent her links to hotels on the beach, close to the conference, at rates I thought were reasonable for Miami. She booked a La Quinta Inn next to the airport. When I told her that was far from the conference, which was happening downtown, she volunteered to drive me to "school" every day.

We got lost looking for the hotel. She was driving and I was navigating. We circled the airport several times, finally finding the small, yellow building tucked into a barren little pocket within sight of a runway. Next to it was a Bennigan's restaurant.

We checked in. Inside was dark and small with out of date, dark wood furnishings. In any other era, I would have thought it was funny. But what I was looking for when I signed up for the workshop was an escape, some light, I was grasping at straws. This was not an escape. It was a holding cell.

“I guess this will do,” Mom said.

Mom was being generous and kind. She wanted to spend time with me, to explore Miami with me. But all I could think about was my bright, sunny condo with a pool, only an hour north.

“This is great, Mom, thanks.”

The next morning, I asked if she wanted to read my submission while I dressed for the workshop. She read it, put it down, said nothing. I watched her in the mirror and thought about what a weird pair we are. I took the absence of words as a harsh criticism. It reminded me of when I was little and she was consumed by work. On her days off, she and my father would go away to the beach. She seemed then to be desperate to escape her responsibilities, and I was one of them, the only child left at home. Perhaps that wouldn't have been so bad if we hadn't lived so far out in the country, where I had few friends. But I remember being lonely for my parents, and feeling abandoned by them. I can look back as an adult and see why she did it. Her job was arduous, her commute long and tiring. She lived way out in the country for my Dad. She worked long hours to keep us housed and fed. She was then the benefactor of everyone else's dreams. I imagine those weekends at the beach made her feel free, sitting there by the sea like she likes to do.

Childhood memories are like shards of glass under the skin. They fester, rise to the surface, worm their way out of bloody flesh whether you like it or not. Her silence in that dark motel room reminded me of the time when I was 12, and in a rare moment of interest, she'd asked if there were any boys I liked at school. I'd rushed out of the room for my yearbook, and returned breathless to show her his picture. But in the few moments I'd been gone, her interest had landed on something else, perhaps a bill had come due, or my father had delivered some sort of news that I wasn't privy to. But when I pointed to the boy I liked, she just nodded, turned away, said nothing. Twenty-three years later, I was surprised to feel the exact same sadness when Mom set my manuscript aside without a word. Especially since she hadn't abandoned me at all, she was right there, across the room, trying to support something I'd suddenly decided was important. Why, I wondered then and wonder now, can't we see things as they are? So often, I feel like I'm peering at the people I love the most through a film, like water, everything colored by the light of my own making that I know, I know, is not the truth.

I indeed felt like a school girl crawling out of my Mom's car outside the conference center in Miami. I checked in, was given a massive black conference bag with a pad and pencil in it, found my way to the coffee station and found my way to the workshop where I met the other participants. I was settling in, chatting with a mother-daughter combo trying to break into the Young Adult market, when my phone rang. I fished through the large black conference bag. It rang and rang. People turned to watch me, agitated, wrinkled foreheads. I finally saw it, lighting up and then going dark. I looked at the number. Mom. I stepped outside the room in a panic, remembering the last

time she'd called and I hadn't immediately picked up. My heart hammered against my ribcage. I dialed her number. The phone rang for years. Finally, she picked up.

"Hey!" she said.

"Mom! Are you OK?"

"Yes! I just wanted to tell you I made it all the way back to the hotel OK."

"God, you scared me to death."

She laughed. "I'm sorry. Did you find your class OK?"

Why oh why was it driving me nuts that she was referring to this workshop as school?

"Yes, I found the workshop."

"I guess you should get back?"

"Are you sure you're OK? I'm freaking out now."

"Yes, I'm fine," Mom said.

We hung up.

The workshop broke for the day at 1 p.m. and by the time I made it out to the curb, I saw Mom's Grand Marquis idling up the street. I climbed in. We were going to visit Vizcaya, a mansion built on the bay of Miami in 1916 by James Deering, heir to International Harvester and rumored homosexual. Mom loves to tour old buildings. She insisted on paying the \$20 admission, with tour, for me, and her senior rate of \$15.

Our group began moving through the rooms of the house. I was bored, because I'd been to Vizcaya before. I felt uptight about the workshop. We were going in alphabetical order, which meant my manuscript would be read last. I felt suffocated, as if

my new path had been hijacked, and now my dream of finishing my novel and becoming a fiction writer had been reduced to nursery school, with my mother picking me up, dropping me off, deciding where we lived, and showing as little interest in my work as the boy's photo two decades prior. I wandered ahead, away from the group, into rooms they hadn't yet reached. I felt desperate for space, room to breathe, probably like my mother had once felt, all those times she left me to go to the beach, to breathe in the sea.

Behind me I heard a collective gasp, along with one, female shriek. I ran back, knew before I got there what happened. I saw Mom lying on the concrete floor of Vizcaya, her eyes closed. I knelt and took her hand and whispered, "Mom?" I was scared, more scared than I'd ever been in my life, so scared I couldn't feel anything. A German tourist wearing yellow and red shorts and a matching red tank top, tossed Mom's legs up over his shoulders and began pumping them up and down. My mother's face, usually so certain, was vacant. "Mom," I whispered again. A tidy, blond Vizcaya employee click clacked up to us in heels and began barking questions at me.

"Did she slip," she asked.

"No," the German man said in English. "She was standing against the wall, and just fell down. She passed out."

He answered while pumping my mother's legs up and down.

I felt both hollow and heavy at the same time. I squeezed my mother's hand and she opened her eyes. But she couldn't focus. The blue that had just that morning wordlessly pointed at my manuscript was now rolling around in their sockets. I couldn't breathe. The tidy woman with the clipboard said she was going to call an ambulance. At

the mention of money about to be spent, my mother sat up, with her legs still draped over the German. “What?” she said.

“I think we should call you an ambulance,” the tidy blonde repeated.

“No,” my mother said, clamoring off the German. She dropped my hand and used her hands to claw back up the same wall off which she’d slipped, managed to get to her feet. “No, I’m fine. See? I’m fine.” Her eyes were still unfocused. I could tell she still felt sick.

This is why I find my mother so fascinating and infuriating. I was worried, terrified even. I wanted her to go to a hospital. Her sudden plummet to the floor made me feel as if any moment, people were going to start disappearing from my life. I wanted the surety of the hospital, of people in white coats telling me everything was going to be alright. I wanted the buzz and whirl of machines marking the beating of her heart. But Mom would not pay for an ambulance if both of us had been shot at close range with a sawed-off shotgun.

I helped Mom hobble to a nearby bench and sat her down. The tidy woman hovered, holding the clipboard between her and us.

“Looks like the choogar to me,” said a Cuban security guard.

“She is not diabetic!” I yelled back.

I wanted them to go away. They were sucking all the oxygen out of the room. I wanted to grab the clipboard and shear off the blonde’s head with it.

They kept circling us, waiting for us to leave. Finally, Mom felt strong enough to walk to the parking lot.

“I can’t believe they didn’t offer us free tickets so we could come back,” Mom said.

We decided Mom should eat something, and she shocked me when she gave me her keys and told me to drive. I navigated the Miami highways while Mom closed her eyes in the passenger seat. She never let me drive her car. That meant she must have felt really, really bad. I drove us back to the Bennigan’s beside our hotel. A server stopped by our table.

“Can I get you something to drink,” she asked.

“I’ll have a Coors Light,” Mom said.

The server walked away.

“Mom, do you think you should be having a beer?”

“Why,” she said. “Don’t you think I need one?”

We’d learn later Mom has a condition where, if she stands still too long, the blood rushes from her head and she passes out. Now, whenever she stands in line, most often at airports, she sways from side to side in a dance we call The Elephant Walk.

CHAPTER FIVE

Our beloved, amiable publisher, who knew hundreds of us by first name, retired. Rumor was, he refused to lay people off. A new publisher was shipped in, tall, blond, young and handsome, a company henchman. We were called into the conference room, two and three dozen at a time. The new guy went around the room shaking our hands.

“I’m Kelly,” I said, and watched him nod.

I sat next to my friend Dianna. We listened as he stood in the center of the room and gave us the facts. The upcoming layoffs were going to be a blood bath, he said. Half of us would have to go. Afterward, the features editor handed me a manila envelope with my name on it and a figure inside. The company had determined my worth. Two weeks pay for every year of employment, plus health insurance. I’d been there six years. If I left, I’d get three months pay and health insurance while I found a new line of work. If I stayed, I could still get laid off, and get nothing.

I left the conference room reeling. It was lunch time, and I stumbled into our cafeteria. I saw our managing editor standing in line, and he turned to me with a vacant expression and said, “That wasn’t so bad.” He said it earnestly, although I now believe he was joking. Or in shock. We were all in shock. By that point, lay-off rumors had been circulating for a year. But our new, confirmed knowledge, and the brevity in which it was delivered, shook us, hardened our faces into masks.

During that era in 2008, many news outlets were bloodletting, cutting staff at enormous rates. But our newspaper was one of the worst. We were a poster child for a behind the times, bloated industry that failed to plan for technology until it was eating us alive. So much so, that *ABC World News Tonight* came into our newsroom to do a story about just how awful our predicament was. My friend Rochelle gave an interview, hoping to parlay the national spotlight into a job elsewhere. I continued to stumble around, weighing my choices, drowning in the shock of that spring, stepping carefully from memory to memory, thinking of my nephew, my mother's collapse, my job, fearing the future the way I never had before.

My sister Linda and I were seated on a fourth floor balcony, listening to the endless, rhythmic crashing of waves on sand, in darkness so thick I could barely make out the outline of her face. I could hear ice clink against the interior of her glass – like little bells -- each time she brought the vodka to her lips. I could see the red tip of her cigarette burn against the black sky. Hotels up and down the coast were dark to accommodate sea turtle nesting season in Florida. Turtle mothers get confused when the beachside hotels are aglow with neon and florescence; the reflection off the sea is meant to be the turtles' only guide home – an expansive, rolling compass even older than they are.

We'd gathered in Melbourne Beach, Florida, at a Radisson that was equal distance for all of us – exactly a two hour drive. We were here to celebrate Mom's birthday, and mourn the vacuum of Bobby's birthday. Mom was born June 22, Bobby

June 26. There was a Winn-Dixie across the street from the hotel, and shortly after arriving we'd gone there to buy lunch meat and bread, wine, beer, Diet Cokes and a small birthday cake for Bobby. In my suitcase, I'd brought the manila envelope from work. For some reason, I thought the trip would clear my head, and I'd be able to make a thoughtful decision, as if in the darkness, I'd be able to see the answers to all my questions.

It had been a wet, summer day in Florida. A storm had rolled in like the apocalypse, dumped a lot of rain, then rolled out again, leaving behind thick, hot air, more gravy than oxygen, and a ceiling of gray, impotent clouds that hid the stars. Linda and I had been quiet for a long time, and even though we didn't say, I knew we were both thinking about Bobby. In a few moments, it would be his 32nd birthday. We listened as the waves crested and receded, crested and receded, and I thought the sound was the only thing in my life both constant and sure.

Right above our balcony, the clouds parted. A lone star pierced the sky. I pointed. I wanted to show my sister something happy, something beautiful.

"Look! Linda! A star!"

I heard her chair creak as she leaned forward.

"Oh," she said. "Maybe it's Bobby."

I thought of my father. When I was little, and he was young, he'd sit outside and stare up at the night sky. He'd point heavenward the burning tip of a Winston Red. "See that star, Kelly?" I'd have no idea which star he was pointing at, but I'd nod. "That star burned out hundreds of years ago, but its light is only now reaching us here on Earth. Isn't that amazing?" I'd nod again. It was a vague astronomy lesson at best, and my

mind was a firefly of questions. But I never said anything, because I loved more than answers the silence between us.

It was like that just then, as Linda and I turned our faces up, Bobby's light finally reaching us.

"Wait," my sister said.

We paused.

"I think it's moving," she said.

We watched another moment. The red tip of my sister's cigarette hung in the air. The ice in her glass went quiet.

"It is moving," I said.

We stared a minute more.

"It's an airplane." I said.

We laughed. I kissed my sister's glass with my own.

We drifted again into our own thoughts and I realized the severity of our sentence. We would never, ever stop looking for Bobby. I knew this like I knew my sister's hair was red. The idea that Bobby was no longer somewhere would never feel as real as the idea that he was out there, waiting to be spotted, waiting to be seen. The responsibility of recognizing his signals meant that we were forever crouched, muscles tense, like barn cats stalking mice, like anything stalking anything.

The next morning, we woke to find a turtle nest beneath our balcony. Linda and I wished we'd seen her lumber from the sea. Perhaps she was obscured by the dark; perhaps she'd waited until we'd gone to bed. I held my coffee mug and thought of her,

shell like a boulder laboring onto the high, dry dunes. She would have propelled herself out of the water, using flippers meant for swimming, not walking. That's what it means to be a mother. You have to make the unnatural natural. I looked at my sister, the gifted engineer, now wearing permanently the vacant expression of a mother without children. Is a beach without the sea a desert? I looked back at the turtle nest, and chose then to believe the turtle hadn't been alone. We'd been with her. She'd been guided by the tinkling of my sister's ice, our laughter, and what we thought, for an instant, was Bobby's light.

At 10 a.m., we changed into bathing suits and took beers down to the pool. Mom is fair and freckled, and from time to time has to have an odd-shaped bump, a basal cell, removed from her skin. Now we only venture into the sun early in the morning, and only briefly. The path to the pool led us past the brunch crowd, and it felt as if it took us 20 years to flip flop past, carrying cans of Natural Light. "Smile and wave girls, smile and wave," Linda said.

We turned our chairs to look at the sea.

"If we see a porpoise, it's good luck," Mom said.

We watched for a dark silhouette, like a comma, rising from the waves, proof that everything was going to be alright. When one didn't appear, Mom asked, "If you leave, what will you do for money?"

"I don't know," I said.

We went silent again.

"Well, think about it," Mom said.

I laughed.

“Thanks Mom, because before you suggested it, I hadn’t been thinking about it all.”

Mom smacked me on the thigh.

“Smart ass.”

Grieving people should never make a major life decision the first year. I don’t know where I heard this. But it makes sense. You think differently about life when it seems as if you might drop off the planet any minute.

I knew staying at the paper was the right thing to do. Taking the buy-out made no sense. The industry was imploding. Papers all over the country were laying off, going under. If I left, I’d never get another journalism job. I was being paid a good wage to do a job I loved, to work with people I loved, in a newsroom three minutes from my luxury, waterfront condo with a pool and a gym.

But then again, the industry was imploding. How many years would I have left? I was 35. It would be harder to switch careers the older I got, the more responsibilities I had. I was in an excellent position to make a move. I was single and childless. No one was depending on me. My condo was luxurious, but I shared it. A new roommate moved in after my friend moved to New York. My living expenses were cheap. What, I wondered, would the newsroom look like with half the people gone? Did I want to be someone who walked in the next day and picked up the pieces? Or did I want to be someone who went out and made a new life for herself? “Only moving in the direction

you least trust can you be saved,” wrote the essayist Roger Rosenblatt in *Kayak Morning*.
I really wanted to be saved.

Bobby’s cake had four yellow flowers on it. That night my sister sunk candles into the frosting. She lit them. We watched them burn, a candle for each of us. Mom and I sat on either side of Linda as she said, “Happy Birthday Bobby. We love you. We miss you.” Then all of us blew out a candle. I wished for peace for Bobby, for my sister, for clarity, for something to make sense, for my future to blaze before me, like a beacon, like the yellow brick road. I felt the nearness of mistakes, like breath on my neck. My sister cut the cake into four slices. The three of us ate in silence. I swallowed, sending everything down into my stomach. When it was done, I was relieved. Linda left the fourth piece on the table, “We’ll leave this out for Bobby,” she said. “But if it’s gone in the morning, it’s really going to freak me out.”

Monday morning, my editor approached my desk. An interior designer to the rich and famous on Palm Beach Island had been found dead in his home, beaten to death by a young man he picked up in a park. My editor told me to call the family, write the story, go heavy on the melodrama. The family didn’t want to talk, so they elected a family spokeswoman, who told me how talented the designer had been, how kind, how funny. The next day the family called me to complain. The facts were wrong, they said. Where? I asked. Was any one misquoted? I’d written 20 inches about how talented this man was, how beloved, how senseless his death. I thought of my Mom holding Bobby’s news brief,

how one end of it fluttered in her hand, her anger, “This is just bad journalism,” she’d said.

I knew this family was angry because they’d lost someone they loved. I knew they called me because I was someone still living to be angry at. I knew all of this. Still, when I hung up the phone, I felt my hands start to shake. I realized how angry I was at them. I knew this, too, was misplaced, irrational. But I didn’t care. I rushed from my desk to keep from calling them back, to keep from yelling into the phone how lucky they were, because the newspaper cared. I walked out of the building and into the oven of the midday summer sun of South Florida. Sweat pooled in my hair and dripped down my back. This man had been rich, had served the rich, and because of that I’d been asked to write 20 glowing inches about him. Bobby had been poor, and there had been no mention of his life in the paper at all, just his death, boiled down to one inch my mother had shook and shook in the kitchen. “This is just bad journalism.” I made one loop around the building. I felt my skin vibrate, as if at any minute it might peel back, reveal bone, muscle and tendon. If I died here, how many inches would I get? The paper had already determined my value. It was stamped on a white piece of paper inside a manila envelope I carried everywhere. I was not being reasonable. I made another loop around the building. My feet sweated inside high heels. I knew I had to calm down. But I couldn’t figure out how.

I was well into adulthood when I realized how unreasonable I could be, how these angry fevers frightened people. I still don’t know where they come from. I know now to immediately remove myself from people I may hurt, and to try and see the situation as it

is, and not through the kaleidoscope of my rage. I wonder sometimes if it's from being the youngest, and how rarely my grievances were considered serious.

I remember being 16, and how my first serious boyfriend broke up with me for a 23-year-old woman, his best friend's oldest sister. All the time I thought he was hanging out with his friend, he'd been cheating on me. I'd had such a sheltered childhood, it never occurred to me he would tell me he loved me if he didn't. The break-up happened right before my family packed up and went to the beach for Thanksgiving. I was devastated, paralyzed by this new pain, humiliated but had no word for humiliated yet. No one spoke to me about it, asked me why I was sad. I felt so alone with all that grief. My parents might have been relieved by the break-up, might have been concerned about another teen pregnancy.

One night we were playing cards. I was dealing. Bobby came to play, wanted to deal. My Mom suggested I let him. My anger consumed me like a gas fire. I was screaming, "No!" Then I was rushing from the room. Then I was back at the table, a crazed animal, clawing at Bobby's hands, trying to take the cards back. Then I was spilling the cards on the table, running from the room crying, wailing like an animal. Then I was outside, running down the beach, trying to get as far away from the beach house and my family as I could. I contemplated walking into the sea and decided I wasn't brave enough. I walked back toward the beach house, looked through the sliding glass door and watched my family laugh with Bobby in the yellow glow of the kitchen, and felt so far removed from them I might as well have been on Mars. I didn't walk into the house. I took a seat on the deck, stared into the dark, and listened to the waves, just

like I did the night Linda and I saw Bobby's star. It felt like I was out there alone for a long time when my mother joined me. I was relieved, hoped she would ask what was wrong, hoped she would see how much pain I was in.

"Did you have a nice walk?" she asked.

"No," I said.

She was quiet for a while.

"Well, of course not," she said.

Then she got up and left me there. I felt my shoulders shake with sorrow. My chest went hollow, and I thought I might fold in two. Behind me, I heard my family laugh. I looked through the window again. Bobby was dealing. My parents sat at the table, beaming at him. Of course they loved him more. Who wouldn't, given the choice?

The day before we left the beach that Thanksgiving, Bobby dared Mom to sit on him. Bobby didn't have lap enough for a housecat, let alone a menopausal woman, and he screamed as Mom lowered herself onto his scrawny legs. Everyone laughed and snapped pictures. That's what my mother remembers from that trip. "Was that the trip when I sat on Bobby?" I suppose that's another talent Mom and Bobby shared, an ability to just think about the good stuff. I am grateful no one remembers my hostility, that no one remembers my anger, my rush of insanity, my fleeing from the room, my first heartbreak that would always be a tender wound. But then again, no one remembers.

I walked back into the newspaper's air-conditioned lobby, and felt the cold air freeze the sweat in my hair and down my back. I used a first-floor, out-of-the way ladies room where I was less likely to run into editorial staff. I used rough, brown paper towels

to dry my neck, my chest, my face. I ran my hands and arms under the cold water, trying to cool my skin, extinguish the anger. When I returned to my desk, my friend Dianna swiveled her chair toward me. “Are you OK? Where’d you go?”

I knew I would sound crazy if I told her I was angry at a family whose loved one had been bludgeoned to death two nights prior. So I said, “It’s cold in here. Just went outside to warm up.”

I don’t remember making the decision to leave the paper, as much as I remember a deep need to flee. This sounds nuts, but it was as if striking out, doing something new, would bring Bobby back, as if his death were part of my old life, but he would be alive in my new one. Three editors tried to talk me out of it, but I was determined. Colleagues asked me good questions. “Where are you going to work,” they asked. “Barnes & Noble,” I answered.

I look back now and think of myself as a shipwreck survivor, alone in a lifeboat, going mad and drinking the seawater. Years later, as I write this, I want to shout at my own figure in the review mirror, don’t go! You don’t know what happens next! I watch myself turn in a yellow slip of paper with my signature on it.

I had one moment of clarity. I looked up from my desk and panicked, realized I could change my mind. You could renege on the buy-out until the last day of August. But if you didn’t, on the first day of September, you were officially unemployed. In that one moment at my desk, I realized what was at stake. I was walking away from a career, a real, grown up career. I had a Master’s degree and everything. I needed air. I got up and

walked to a balcony off the cafeteria only inhabited by smokers. My friend Rochelle was there. She, too, had decided to take the buy-out. Her brief stint on *American Gladiator* and her close up on *ABC World News Tonight* made her believe she had a future in television.

“I don’t think I should go,” I told her. “I’m being stupid.”

Rochelle looked at me as if my panic might infect her.

“No, you have to go,” she said. “We have to go. There’s not going to be anything left here for us.”

I didn’t look at her. I looked at the concrete beneath us, speckled with crushed cigarette butts.

“I should stay,” I said.

“Are you kidding? Do you know what it’s going to be like, walking into this newsroom the day everyone else is gone?”

I was silent.

“You’re just having cold feet,” Rochelle said.

“Yeah,” I agreed, although I wasn’t sure about that. I didn’t feel confident anymore.

I still don’t know why I left. But on the last day of August, I sat across from the Metro Editor. He was a quirky, old fashioned newspaper type guy, totally, physically unable to inhabit any other kind of job. I liked him. He liked me.

“What are you going to do?” He asked.

“I might write a book.”

He laughed. “I tried that once. It’s harder than it looks.”

I smiled.

“Kelly, I have to ask for your press badge.”

I reached for the plastic rectangle that hung around my neck. It had my picture on it, but my picture had been sliced in two because I’d swiped it so many times to enter the building. Large block letters spelled out the name K-E-L-L-Y. I loved my press badge.

My editor looked at my face. “Or,” he said. “I can just say you lost it.”

I nodded, almost cried. “Yeah, can we just say I lost it?”

He smiled. “Sure. I asked for it. You lost it.”

Afterward, Dianna helped me carry a giant box of clips from my cubicle to my car. We each held a side handle.

“I feel like pallbearers,” I said.

“God, Kelly, don’t say that.”

The first day I didn’t have to go into work, I slept in. Then I went out and got a manicure and a pedicure. I went to Barnes & Noble, filled out an application and read all the magazines. Dianna called and said the office was too quiet, depressing, “like a funeral.” We hung up. I went home. Then I dialed a travel agency and booked a flight to Costa Rica. I wanted to go somewhere exotic, where I might get lost, where no one would find me. But also cheap, close to Florida, and populated by enough tourists that I felt safe going alone. I wanted to run away, but not; to throw myself off the edge of the world, but not.

I packed a backpack with one pair of baggy shorts, one black sundress, three T-shirts, sandals, underwear and a raincoat. I wore heavy hiking boots and jeans. I drove to the airport, and waited to board my plane. Then I panicked. A year prior, I'd gone to Africa to hike Mount Kilimanjaro. I remembered the lengthy, expensive series of shots. I remembered taking malaria pills the whole time I was there, plus two weeks after I returned. Shit. I hadn't considered getting sick in Costa Rica. I hadn't even looked at Wikipedia for crying out loud. What if I got malaria? I called Dianna. She laughed. "You're not going to get malaria,"

"Promise?" I asked.

"Promise" she said. "Stop acting crazy."

Oh, if it were only that simple, I thought.

We hung up. I got up, strapped on my backpack, and circled the waiting area like a wild animal. Of course I saw potential tragedy behind every decision, even a vacation. My nephew died on a country road he'd navigated 1,000 times before. My colleagues and I were corralled into the same boardroom where we'd had Christmas potluck and told of a bloodbath. There seemed to be no distance between normal and fucked up in those days, no warning bell, no flashing red light. Of course I thought I was going to get malaria. Of course I found myself waiting for the next terrible thing.

At 6 a.m. the next morning a bus picked me up at my hotel in San Jose. I was the first one on, but by the time we headed out of the city, there were three Spaniards, two Germans, two Danes, three Brits and me – the only American. We wore the uniform of

the Western adventure traveler – beige shorts, T-shirts, Texas and backpacks. Except for the British woman, who traveled with her leggy teenage daughter and short, fireplug of a husband. She clip-clopped out to the bus wearing high heeled mules, fake eyelashes, a sparkly sweater, and long red curls. I stared. We were headed to the middle of a rain forest, to a series of cabins with naked bulbs and no hot water. The Brits sat behind me, and I felt smug in my hiking boots.

It was a four-hour bus ride to an open-air boat, then a two-hour boat ride to our cabins. My cabin had three cots in it, and it made me feel lonely. There was a white bathroom with rough, white towels and a clean shower, but no shower curtain, a small bar of soap, and a sign urging me to throw toilet paper in the waste paper basket instead of flushing it. The resort was also equipped with a large swimming pool and a bar. We were fed buffet-style every five hours, steam tables of grilled chicken, fish, beans and rice. I sat alone for two days, finally growing so lonely and bored I eased close to the Brits, like a homeless dog seeking table scraps. In my fantasies, I'd seen myself as a mysterious, single traveler, raven haired, a woman always gazing off into the rain forest with an expression that let fellow travelers know I'd suffered, oh how I had suffered. But in reality, I was still plump and ruddy, a woman topped with a frizzy question mark of a ponytail, who fed on laughter more than she knew or would let on.

The Brits welcomed me. We agreed the food was delicious, better than we'd predicted. We stayed at the long tables after everyone retired, carrying multiple glasses of wine from the bar, buying each other drinks. I was giddy with the sound of English on the air, instead of circling inside my head. The mother wore a thick layer of greasy make-up

that looked heavy, tedious. But behind that, her eyes glinted when she told a story, when she laughed, and I realized she was far different than I expected, not phony as her get-up implied, and I liked her very much. I felt ashamed of myself for judging her, like a kid on one of those *ABC After School Specials* I used to watch in the 1980s. Her husband and I had a full glass of wine when she said she was tired. Her daughter and husband moved to go with her. No, she said, stay up, have fun.

“I don’t know why, but I just can’t bounce back like I used to,” she said as she bent to kiss her husband’s cheek.

“I wonder why that is,” he responded.

“Don’t know,” she said. “It’s extraordinary.”

Her husband chuckled.

I watched him watch her clip clop back to their cabin. When she was inside, he turned to me. “My wife,” he paused. “Is not well.”

She had cancer. I didn’t ask what kind. She’d exhausted her options, her husband said. She was going to die. This was their last vacation together as a family. The doctors told her not to come, that she was not well enough for the trip. The evidence clicked into place. The long, red curls were a wig. The thick make-up hid God-knows-what. She was as tall as Hercules, wearing heels in the rain forest. In fact, the husband said, they’d chosen this trip because it sounded easier, more luxurious than the adventures they’d chosen in the past, which included Morocco, Asia, India and Syria.

The next morning, it rained. The four of us sat side by side in an open boat, peering up at the sky, searching the trees for sloths, laughing because the raindrops stung

our eyeballs. I opened my backpack and gave the teenaged Brit a spare, 99-cent plastic poncho I bought at Wal-Mart just in case. We laughed at the ridiculousness of it, of sitting drenched, shoulder to shoulder, cold, while our guide searched in vain for an animal sighting that would make this outing worthwhile. The less we saw, the funnier it became. We were the only ones laughing, and this bonded me to the Brits for the rest of our trip. We ate every meal together, and I drank wine with the husband when exhaustion overcame his wife. Alone, I questioned whether I should spend so much time with them, as their time together was so limited. But they invited me to eat, even fetched me at my cabin. I wondered if they felt sorry for me, because I was alone; or, if my company kept them from speaking about the illness, the cancer. The four of us seemed suffocated by sadness just then, but we always kept the conversation light. They told me about their travels, and I told them about my big family in Florida. I did not tell them about Bobby.

One afternoon, the mother and I lounged by the pool. I wore a big hat, sun block like spackle, and sipped a cold beer. She wore her wig, a full-face of make-up and hid pill bottles in a bag beneath her chair.

“The Germans are always acting so superior,” she said. “Look at that. Playing water polo. Always have to be doing something athletic.”

I looked at her. Then looked at the pool. Four blondes were playing what I would have called Volleyball.

“The Spaniards, lounging in the shallow end, taking over half the pool. They think they are so gorgeous.”

And on and on. It was a much better lesson on European politics than I'd ever had in school. The Danes were practical, a whiz with languages, and people we should all aspire to emulate. The Irish, who'd arrived late, after we'd formed our little English-speaking clique, wore too much green and smiled needlessly.

Mother Brit wore herself out, gathered her things, and went to nap before dinner. I went to buy another beer, and when I made it back to my chair, a small, dark-haired man who worked at the resort was standing there. I knew his name was Erik, and that he was a handyman who also cared for the red-eyed frogs on the property, the kind on the Visit Costa Rica posters. He'd let me hold the frogs the day I arrived, and we'd laughed when one hopped from my palm into my glass of wine. I fished it out and handed it, wine soaked, back.

I smiled at him. He smiled back. Then he said, "You have a nice body." I was startled. I wrapped my towel around me as if shutting a door, and put on my sunglasses on. Then, I said thank you. I feared, for reasons I can't understand now, being rude would make him angry.

"Do you have children?" he asked.

"No."

When I didn't say anything, he said, "I have three."

I still didn't say anything.

"Two are black but one is white."

"That's nice," I said. He took a step closer.

"I love white skin and blue eyes," he said.

I didn't answer. I looked down to make sure I was covered by the towel.

"Kaaa-lee, I like you," he said.

I didn't answer. He dropped his voice, as if telling me a secret.

"Kaaa-lee, I'd like to see you tonight."

"No."

"No?"

"No."

I stayed quiet and closed my eyes, although I felt him standing next to me for what seemed like a long time. I heard someone call his name, and relaxed when he moved away. For the rest of the afternoon, I caught glimpses of him moving through the trees on the property, carrying buckets or a ladder. After dinner, I went to bed and worried he might have a key to my room. I pushed one of the empty cots in front of the door. I read until my eyes burned, then I turned off the one light in my cabin, and listened to the rain on the roof. It sounded like the sky was laughing.

The next morning, Erik found me at breakfast.

"Kaaa-lee you leave today?"

"Yes."

"I write you in America?"

"No."

"No?"

Our group climbed back on the boat for the two hour ride back to the bus. Erik stood on the shore and watched us pull away. I wondered if he thought I was going to fall in love with him and take him home to America. I wondered briefly if I should have.

The Brits and I sat on the boat together.

“What,” the husband asked his wife. “was your favorite part of the rain forest? What will you remember?”

“The clear water,” she said. “I love the water.”

We landed on shore, and went our separate ways. The Brits wanted to spring for a more luxurious hotel than I could afford on the rim of the volcano Arenal. I rented a cabin in a resort at the volcano’s base, which had mineral baths, a swim-up bar and a view of red lava spitting into the stars. I changed into my bathing suit, waded into the blood-red water, and perched on a stool at the swim-up bar. Soon I was singing along with the radio, with two building contractors from New Orleans.

I caught sight of the smiley, green-clad Irish couple we’d ignored in the rain forest. I felt like Hemingway, drunk, wet and running into fellow travelers.

“Hello!” I called out. They turned. They were dragging behind them heavy suitcases.

“Hey! Come get in the mineral bath!”

They looked at me. We’d barely spoken at the rain forest resort, and they surely wondered why I was being so friendly now.

“Kelly?” the wife said. “Are you already in a bathing suit?”

I looked down, embarrassed. The Irish wife and I were two different kinds of women. She was the kind men married. I was the kind that got drunk in mineral baths, sang with strangers, and called out to acquaintances. No wonder Erik thought I'd let him in my room.

“We're just going to go to dinner, I think,” the husband said.

I stayed for one more glass of wine and sang with the boys from New Orleans. Then I staggered out of the mineral bath, and got lost trying to find my cabin. I fell, skinned my knee, and broke my wine glass. I wandered around until I found the lobby, where the desk clerk said, “I'll just take that,” and took the broken glass from my hand. He called security to whisk me back to my cabin in a golf cart. I stumbled off the seat, toward my door and the security guard called out, “Hey, lady, are you OK?”

I started to cry, and walked faster toward my door so the security guard wouldn't see. I showered, crawled into bed, fell asleep, and then awoke two hours later. My stomach felt sick. My head hurt. I could smell wine seeping from my pores. My decision to leave the paper clawed at my insides. What had I done? Who was I now?

The next day I sat in the same lobby I stumbled into with a broken glass and waited for a van to pick me up and take me to the Montverde cloud forest. The desk clerk smiled and waved and I waved back, then put my head in my hands in shame. The van arrived an excruciating 15 minutes late. A family was already seated in the back, so I rode up front with the driver. He spoke English and gave me a mini tour as we cruised along.

“That's coffee.”

“Coffee,” I repeated, as if were some strange herb I’d never heard of before.

“Cows. Moooooo!” He pointed and smiled.

“Cows,” I repeated.

“You from Florida and you no speak Spanish? Kaaa-lee, that’s bad.”

“I know. I know,” I said.

“Kaaa-lee you must learn Spanish.” He winked at me.

Perhaps, I thought then, that’s what I’ll do while unemployed. I’ll stay in Costa Rica and learn Spanish. The driver dropped the family off first, so I was alone with him when he pulled up in front of my hotel. He handed me my bag.

“May I tell you something?”

“Sure.”

“You have beautiful eyes.”

“Thank you,” I said, then handed him \$5. I walked into the lobby, stopped, turned and watched him drive away. I thought about what would have happened if I’d asked him to come back, invited him into my room. Perhaps I could be the wife of a Costa Rican van driver. No, I thought. He was probably married already. I could stay in Costa Rica, learn Spanish, and be his mistress. There, a direction. Problem solved. I turned back toward the front desk, toward the small woman dressed in black who was watching me watch the van. As I approached, she smiled. “Buenas tardes,” she said.

In online photos, the Montverde cloud forest looked mysterious. I saw a ceiling of lush, green trees, clouds draped like a bridal veil. Here, everyone’s vision was obscured. No one could see more than a few steps in front of them. But what I didn’t know until I

arrived was that the cloud forest was also cold and wet, damp down deep into the black soil, damp down deep into my soul. Three dozen dead moths were in my bathroom sink, for reasons I couldn't understand. I left my things in my room and ran all the way back to the main house for lunch. I looked out a large, picture window and into an ugly grey fog – more like smoke than a veil. I wrapped my hands around a coffee mug and tried to feel warm.

Soon, rain began to beat against the glass in sheets. I shivered. It was like sitting inside Niagara Falls. It was even heavier than the rain I'd seen in Florida, including Hurricane Katrina, which I'd watched from a large window inside a suite at a swanky South Beach hotel.

After lunch, another van picked me up to take me zip lining, which I'd already booked and paid for, no matter the rain. When the van arrived, I crawled inside, where three German girls and two honeymooning American couples shivered. We reached our destination, and were outfitted in mildewed, smelly rain gear. The zip line waits for no storm, they said. We looked at each other. No one wanted to back out in front of the others. We wanted to be able to go home and say we zip lined in Costa Rica.

We rode four to a metal basket, similar in size and shape to a grocery cart, up above the tree line, where the wind whipped our hair. We arrived at a slick, metal platform, as close to God as I've ever been. I felt small and frail, like a squirrel on top of the Sears Tower. We were instructed to sit in a skimpy harness, ride the line from slick platform to slick platform, ten times, about a mile across each time. One of the husbands agreed to go first, while the rest of us trembled, shook from cold and fear. We could see

perhaps the first three feet of the cable, which draped slightly before disappearing into the clouds. The young husband was strapped into his harness. He was handsome, broad-chested, virile. He looked at the path before him and laughed a nervous laugh.

“It’s a line to nowhere guys,” he said over his shoulder, to us. Then the zip line worker gave his back a shove and he was off, letting out a girly scream that made us laugh.

I went last, suddenly alone on the platform, unable to see where everyone else had gone.

“On the other side, you have to spread your legs to stop.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Spread your legs to stop.”

“OK,” I said, although I hadn’t really agreed. I was just acknowledging he’d said something. I had other things on my mind, like not falling to my death.

I felt him put a warm hand on my back and push. I roared with fear. The rain fell like knives on my face, arms and legs, and I thought surely, surely, I would arrive at the next platform bloody, skinned alive. Then I opened my eyes, looked below me, saw nothing but clouds. It occurred to me I was so close to Heaven, Bobby could be nearby. I pictured him flying alongside me. The second platform came into sight. I saw my group crowded around the zip line worker, who was gesturing wildly. The crowd shouted, “Spread your legs!” I regretted wearing baggy shorts, but did as I was told, rocketing onto the platform crotch first. (My sister Tammie would later joke, “Everything you see

here can be bought!’”) The zip line worker grabbed my harness as I passed and yanked me backward. Warmth bloomed inside my gut. I felt brave.

The lines came easier after that. We jumped like birds off the platform, flew into the cold, grey haze. Our group became friendly, jovial. We were proud of ourselves for being out in the cold and rain. Oil from the zip line covered our faces, and made us feel like tough, adventure-seekers. We spoke about meeting up once a year to do something equally dangerous, like diving the blue hole in Belize. When it was over, we piled back into the tourist van, and the driver dropped us off one by one. We said good-bye to each other, stepped out, and never exchanged an e-mail address. How quickly bonds are made and broken.

That evening I drank wine and ate more black beans. I was in the mood to celebrate, but there was no one in the dining room. In fact, there appeared to be no other guests at the hotel. I gazed out the picture window, and saw my own face staring back at me, floating in the black, untethered. Then, behind my own face I saw three more faces approaching, smiling, growing larger. I turned.

“May we join you?” asked the British husband. We grinned at each other as if we’d known each other all our lives, and had been separated 20 years. I wanted to fling myself into their arms, but didn’t. They sat, ordered wine, told me how wonderful their hotel had been at Arenal. I told them I got drunk in the mineral baths, was dissed by the Irish, got lost my way to my cabin, and stumbled into the lobby, wielding a broken glass.

The Brits laughed so hard, I feared the mother would lose her breath and expire right there. The father wiped tears from his eyes. My mood lightened, as if someone had

tied me to a helium balloon. Of course, I realized, it was funny. Once it was out of my head and told over wine, it was funny. Perhaps, I had found myself stumbling around that resort not because I was pathetic and unemployed, but so I could tell Mother Brit this story, so that she could laugh so hard she had to put her head between her legs and gasp for air.

Then I wondered, because I can't leave well enough alone, if it was shameful to let this family bring me so much peace, when they should have been spending every small moment alone, absorbing one another, drinking each other up. If I had known Bobby was going to die, would I have shared him like this? Could I have welcomed interlopers, the way the Brits welcomed me?

I think of the Brits now, years later, and wonder how old the daughter is, how she weathered the loss of her mother. I think about the Dad, and wonder if he kept traveling after losing his wife. I think about the mother, and still remember her wig, red and long like the mermaid, Ariel, lips painted the color of blood. If you remember someone, does that mean they live on a bit longer? Is that what I can tell myself? I gave away a 99-cent rain poncho and keep you in my memory? I think of you when I have no reason to feel afraid, and yet I do. I think of you when I have no reason to feel ill, and yet I do. I think of you when I have no reason to feel tired, and yet I do. Can I say that my memory of her made her life bigger, broader? Why do I badger myself to feel as though I have to contribute anything at all? Because I feel guilty I stole time away from them, when they could have been alone together, and that I took a piece of her life and sewed it into my own.

The next morning, I awoke to the cries of howler monkeys at dawn. It's a sound both mournful and hopeful, and made me feel at the same time far from home and close to it, close to me. "Before they begin their day...they howl. Before they live, they howl," wrote Roger Rosenblatt of the monkeys, and I envy them. How much lighter would my chest be if I could awaken, remember, and let out one, long howl before getting out of bed?

I found the Brits again in the dining room. They had to eat early so they could go zip lining. They asked me how I enjoyed zip lining and I told them my tale, how the rain felt as if it would pull the skin from my bones, how I had to spread my legs to stop, how oil covered our faces and made us feel brave, how we promised to get together once a year and do something dangerous, then didn't as much as exchange an e-mail. Father Brit was nervous. His daughter was excited. He didn't want to go, but promised his daughter he would take her.

I was packed. The van would pick me up while they were gone. I'd never see them again.

"We don't even know you're name," Father Brit said.

I told him. He told me his, introduced his wife, his daughter. I can't remember their names now. I wish I could. I would use all my rusty, journalistic skills to track them down, tell them what they meant to me during a very dark time. But, maybe it is better the story ends here, with this hurried good-bye in the dining room. I never disappointed them, they never disappointed me. They remain forever the brave ones, who rescued me from the inside of my own skull. Perhaps I remain the goofy American, traveling alone,

dissed by the Irish, the ridiculous clown who made them laugh. Perhaps they still think of me and laugh. Perhaps they don't remember me at all.

As the van carried me across the countryside, I thought about staying in Costa Rica. My severance would go further here than in West Palm Beach. I could live for a year, maybe even two. I could teach English, learn Spanish, find that van driver who delivered me to Montverde. But soon I was back at my hotel in San Jose and I started to feel like I had to go back, face reality, get a job. I don't know why I thought this. At the time, it seemed like I was old and out of time. But the older you get, the younger you realize you were. Instead of making plans to stay in Costa Rica, I bathed, put on the black sundress I hadn't worn all trip, and walked to a restaurant, where I ordered chicken, black beans and rice. Afterward, I walked to the hotel bar. I took a seat on a terrace that overlooked a garden with a fountain. A nearby club was playing loud Salsa music and I sipped wine, feeling distant, as though I were drifting further from the Earth than just a second-floor terrace. The waiter came outside, "Do you like the music," and he pointed in the direction of the club.

"I love the music," I said.

He laughed and did a couple of salsa steps. I stood and we danced together, tentative, without touching, like two distant cousins at a wedding. Then he went back inside.

"This is, how you say, on the house? No charge." He set a glass of wine on my table, filled to the rim.

We danced some more, rule breakers on the terrace. I finished the second glass of wine and felt my mind reel. I thought about how I'd embarrassed myself at Arenal. I paid my waiter, tipped him handsomely and told him I had to get up early for my flight. He did not ask to visit me in the night, as Erik had, and I was glad. He just smiled as I left. "Hey, wait, did you enjoy Costa Rica?" he called, when I was several steps away.

"I loved Costa Rica," I said.

"Perhaps you will come back?"

"Yes, I think I will."

I meant it when I said it, but so far, I have not been back. I fear returning will remind me of that half-life I was living then, the darkness I thought I could escape, my fear of the future, my desperate, jagged grief. Sometimes, though, I wish I had stayed. I wonder how my life would be different, if my wounds would have healed faster the more kind strangers I met, or if I'd be married to some hearty Costa Rican van driver and given birth to a dozen fat Costa Rican babies. But that's not what happened, is it?

CHAPTER SIX

I had a recurring dream. I'd found a black phone in some public place, it almost looked like a phone bank at a customer service center, and if I picked up the receiver I could talk to Bobby at different times in his life. I had no control over when I could speak to him. Sometimes I would pick up and he'd be five. Sometimes he'd be 20. Once, I picked it up and he was 31, and it was right before the accident. In my dream, I knew without asking that there were rules attached to this phone. I knew the Bobby I spoke with did not know about the accident or the future, and I knew that if I told him, I wouldn't be allowed to use the phone anymore. I always woke up as I was trying to figure out a way to warn him without losing access to the phone.

In life, Bobby and I didn't speak on the phone. With a family as large as ours, if you start making regular phone calls, you'll never get anything done. In fact, I remember only one phone conversation our entire lives. I was 27, he was 24. I was living in Philadelphia, in a room for \$400 a month, one step above a flophouse, really, surrounded by boxes after my boyfriend kicked me out. I'd moved to Philadelphia for the guy, followed him because he got a job at the *Philadelphia Daily News*. We were supposed to get married. But he lost interest in me. He met up with an old girlfriend behind my back. He got married a year after our break-up. I felt then disposable, small. Bobby, meanwhile, was on house arrest after getting busted with weed. I picked up.

“It’s Bobby!”

“Bobby!”

We talked for an hour. He asked, “I hear you’re having a hard time.”

I laughed and told him about the break-up, and the small, dark room stacked floor to ceiling with boxes.

I said, “I hear you’re not doing so well yourself.”

He laughed. “It’s like *Rear Window*. I watch everybody come and go. I know everything that’s happening in this neighborhood.”

He laughed again, “Damn, girl, we’re both in jail.”

At the time, my bedroom might have been even smaller than a cell. I laughed. “You know, you’re right.”

Why, I wonder now, didn’t I take down his phone number? Why didn’t I call again and again and again and again?

I returned from Costa Rica and my life startled forward like a faded, rickety roller coaster at a less than reputable park. I think back now and wonder how things would have been different if I could pick up the phone and speak to the woman I was then, warn her to take her time making decisions, warn her not to move so fast, even if she felt the cold wind in her ears, rusty rails beneath her, shoving her forward.

In *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Jeanette Winterson writes, “I have noticed doing the sensible thing is only a good idea when the decision is quite small. For the life-changing things, you must risk it. And here is the shock -- when you risk it, when you do the right thing, when you arrive at the borders of common sense and cross

into unknown territory, leaving behind all the familiar smells and lights, then you do not experience great joy and huge energy. You are unhappy. Things get worse.”

What if I could get on the phone and simply read myself that passage. “Hey, Kell, get this shit.”

Mom and I sat sequestered in a dark hotel room somewhere on the Walt Disney World property in Orlando. We’d tagged along with Linda, who was attending an engineering conference. We thought we’d take advantage of the free hotel room and go to one of the parks, or at least hang around the pool. But a huge, slow-moving tropical storm moved off the Atlantic and began crossing the state at what felt like two inches every 12 hours. The day time sky was heavy, dark, dripping. The dampness had slunk indoors, turned our white hotel linens swampy.

Mom and I stared into the blue rectangle of the television and tried not to eat all the potato chips. My phone rang. On the other end were two editors from a magazine based on Palm Beach. I’d interviewed with them two days before.

“Congratulations!” They exclaimed. “We want you to be our new Web Editor!”

I hadn’t exactly applied for the job. I found it looking for freelance work. My resume crossed the publisher’s desk and he asked his two top editors to meet with me. He wanted someone who knew how to write daily copy. That was me, I said. I said this, despite the fact I didn’t know what a magazine did, much less a Web editor.

They would match my salary at the newspaper. I’d been hoping for a bump. Mom kept trying to signal me with her fingers, she was whispering questions loudly, distracting

me while I spoke. She worked in Human Resources at Lockheed Martin for 30 years, and even though she's been retired a decade, she still thinks of herself as the Stephen Hawking of hiring and firing. She was so distracting, I said, "Can I call you back? I have to talk to my Mom."

"Your Mom?" one editor said. We hung up.

"Mom, write down everything you want me to ask this guy, so I can talk."

Mom handed me back a list of questions longer than time.

"What should I do?" I asked her.

"What choice do you have?"

Six weeks prior, I'd had a phone interview with a local university who needed a director of the journalism program, and I was hoping to hear back about that job, even though, I got the idea the university was very political and the job fairly chaotic, balancing the needs of the staff and the students with administrators who didn't want to give up the money. But that was a long time ago. That position, most likely, had been filled.

Mom was right. What choice did I have?

"That must have been a good conversation with your Mom," the editor said, when I called back to accept the position.

Fifteen minutes later, the university called and asked me to come in for an in-person interview. I guess it was because I was excited, sick of the job search, just hoping to start down one goddamn path, but in any event, I blurted that I'd just accepted another

job. I was immediately sorry and thought about saying, “Can you just forget I said that, I’d love to come in for an interview.” But I didn’t.

My friend Lady suggested church. Lady was a believer who still liked to party. Her father preached at an AME church in Alabama. Lady was sweet, kind, funny and beautiful. I called her the Mayor of Everywhere, because you couldn’t walk into a bar or a restaurant between Fort Pierce and Miami without at least one person calling out, “Lady! Hey Lady! Remember me?” She’d left her job at the Post when I did, but was still unemployed. Her situation was more daunting, because she had a mortgage. She sold knives and ate 99-cent frozen dinners to stay alive. I felt responsible because I’d encouraged her to leave, like Rochelle encouraged me. I bought a knife, and hoped she would be OK.

Lady was a believer. She said there is a saying in the black churches, “Trouble don’t last always,” and I prayed that was so. I felt, then, always in a state of icy panic, the way people feel immediately following the slice of a finger, blood everywhere.

We chose a hippy, dippy Episcopal Church in Lake Worth because we’d both covered, on separate years, its annual Thanksgiving Day sermon and because its Deacon was a woman. Each year, on Thanksgiving, to show thanks and unity, St. Andrews invited representatives from other religions groups to say a few words and share coffee and cake afterward. The event was attended by Jewish Rabbis, the Friends Meeting House and one woman from the local Unitarian Congregation who breastfed on the pulpit. St Andrew’s was 95-years-old, small, smelled earthy like a sock drawer and had

personality. The diverse congregation included rich, white Palm Beachers, skinny drug addicts, homeless women, gay men, and black children with dreadlocks down to their waists. It was led by a new guy, the Rev. Paul Rasmus, whose last church had been on Duval Street in Key West. We decided he'd be impossible to shock. That was a good thing, since our first Sunday there, Lady arrived late, and said she'd been up until 4 a.m. dancing in Fort Lauderdale.

“What in the hell did you do?” I asked.

“I can't talk about it in the sanctuary, girl” she said.

Father Paul stepped onto the pulpit, and I looked up at him. I needed peace and Lady needed a job. We needed emergency solace. Stat.

I pray. I'm a prayer. I'm somebody who prays. At the very least, I think, it's interesting. It's good to know where your priorities are, and prayers are an excellent way to do this. If there is a God, and I don't know if there is, but I like to think so, then you bring this entity your top three or four problems, hopes, dreams, anxieties. You learn a lot about who you are. But even prayer, in those days, seemed like a dead end.

More than a decade prior, when Bobby was 18, he'd been convicted of sexual assault on a minor after a 15-year-old girl gave him a blowjob. Her mother found out, got angry and reported it. Bobby claimed he didn't know the girl was that young. A public defender convinced Bobby to plead guilty to avoid jail. But that meant Bobby was forever on the Sexual Offender database. My sister hired an expensive lawyer to try and get him off, claiming that Bobby was also a teen when the offense occurred. Bobby died while the case was still working its way through the courts.

For a dozen years, I'd been praying the conviction would be expunged, that he'd be removed from the list that had, in many ways, ruined his life. After his death, I asked God if this was a macabre answer to my prayers. "Not this way," I'd said. "Not this way." I'd recently searched Bobby's name on the database, just to see, and there was his photo, with the word "deceased" stamped under it.

But I was still willing to try. In those days, I prayed that my sister would find some sort of peace, that she would find the strength to get out of bed every day, and that I would find a new job, and some sort of peace myself. I prayed Lady would find a job, and Rochelle, and that, in the meantime, we would all be OK.

But we were not OK. Rochelle couldn't find a job and her husband's teaching salary wouldn't support them after her severance ran out. Lady was far more desperate than she let on. Linda was barely functioning. I was miserable. And Bobby was still on the goddamn sexual offender list eight months after his death. So, when Lady suggested church, I shook my head, no. God wasn't listening just then, I thought. Then I thought, what the hell? Why not church?

St. Andrew's felt progressive and old fashioned all at once. The sermons were always the same and boiled down to "live a peaceful, loving life." There was no mention of sin or hellfire, like the Baptist churches of my childhood. Afterward, we'd have coffee and pastries in the communal hall, and people would come around and chat with Lady and me. Lady got a couple of job leads, and at least one meal on Sundays. I usually left feeling as if something was on my side, even if I didn't see it.

One Sunday, Father Paul walked straight toward us. I panicked, as if I was about to be outed as an imposter. I had a plate full of donated pastry and was working on my third cup of coffee. I had forgotten to stop for cash, and only put a few dollars in the collection basket. Lady was so desperate in those days, she hadn't put anything.

"I just wanted to say it's so good to have you with us," Father Paul said, then shook our hands.

We chatted, exchanged life Cliff's Notes. He said he looked forward to seeing us again next week. Then, he turned and walked away.

"He thinks we're a couple," Lady whispered.

I laughed. Coffee went up my nose.

"He spent too many years in Key West," I said.

"And to think I started coming here to meet men," Lady said.

We laughed.

There's a joke that Florida is God's waiting room. But what if God really does have waiting rooms? Perhaps, while we wait for God to answer our prayers, we're shuffled into heavenly versions of dental offices, with old *New Yorkers*, fake plants, and piped in easy listening. As I look back, that's how I think of St. Andrew's. There was never a moment there where I crossed over from engaged spectator to true believer. But that church brought me tremendous comfort during some very dark days, when almost nothing else did.

As for my prayers, Lady eventually got a job in the communications department of a Christian college. Rochelle got a job at the local CBS affiliate. My sister and I were

no closer to peace. I never had the guts again to search Bobby's name on the Sexual Offender Registry. And I continued to, metaphorically, sing along to Muskrat Love and wait.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Part of my job as Web Editor was to edit videos for our Website. But I couldn't make our video camera talk to my computer. I did some research, figured the problem could be solved with new software, and told my publisher I wanted to buy it. He said he didn't want me to spend the money; because he knew a young man who'd majored in film and he could help me.

The young man arrived later that afternoon. He was also stumped. He didn't know how to load the video onto the computer either. We called my counterpart in our East Coast office, who said he didn't know how to help us because he edits on his PC, not the office Macs. Then he began babbling about editing for the Web, his part-time gig as an independent filmmaker, and how fantastic he was in general. The young man brought in to help me pulled his legs into the office chair, wrapped his arms around his knees, and began to rock, "He won't stop talking, he won't stop talking," he repeated over and over, just above a whisper. I put my head in my hands and focused on my breath, as they say in yoga. I also focused on not throwing a video camera across the room, and not committing mass, office murder.

I told my counterpart I was hanging up, told the young man with the film degree to go home, and was turning out the light in my office when my publisher spotted me. He insisted on taking me to dinner. I shook my head no. I was exhausted, frustrated, tired,

had worked a 12-hour day already, and wanted desperately to go home and get in the pool. I did not want to spend another two hours with my boss.

We met his wife at their favorite Italian place. They ordered a bottle of wine that cost twice as much as the software they refused me. We ordered appetizers, and entrees and more wine and dessert. They asked me questions, quick, like an air pistol. I'd answer, they'd ask. I'd answer, they asked. They were two, old rich people with two perfect, adopted children and they were fascinated by my family.

“How many brothers and sisters do you have again?”

“Seven.”

“How many nieces and nephews, then?”

“Um.”

“Don't you know?”

“Well, I did, but the number,” I caught myself. I didn't want to tell these people something so private. Why hadn't I thought to lie?

“What?” my publisher asked.

I didn't know what to do, so I just plowed ahead.

“The number is different now. I used to have 25 nieces and nephews. But I guess now I have 24.”

The publisher gave me a look, and I knew he was interested, but not sympathetic. He wasn't sad because I'd lost someone I cared about, but delighted he'd stumbled on drama.

“What happened?”

“My nephew died.”

“How?”

“Car accident.”

“When?”

“March.”

My publisher almost smiled.

I went out the next day, bought the software I knew I needed, sent the receipt to the publisher, and he reimbursed me without question.

When I worked at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, I wanted very much to work at *Philadelphia magazine*. It seemed, again, so glamorous, like a *New Yorker* south. I begged and begged until I snagged an informational interview with the editor, who I thought looked like Graydon Carter. I explained to him I wanted to work at *Philadelphia magazine* more than I wanted air in my lungs. He looked at me, dressed in a black sports jacket and khaki pants and said, “Kelly there are newspaper people and there are magazine people. Which one are you?” I could tell by the question what he already thought of me, so I didn’t answer. But I didn’t truly understand what he meant until I worked at the magazine in South Florida. I was full-on newspaper people. I wanted to be magazine people, to be perfectly coiffed and comfortable working long hours in small skirts and five-inch heels. But that was not me. Worse, I felt so lonely among them.

I missed my tribe. Yet, rumors from the Post were worse. More lay-offs were expected at the beginning of the year. People still there congratulated me on moving on. “You got out at the right time,” they said. I smiled, because I was ashamed I’d left like I

did. I wished I'd stayed. I was both bored and exhausted at the magazine, where I worked seven-day weeks and 12-hour days, not only maintaining and updating the magazine's Web sites, but also shooting video after video, making tiny narratives from beach fashion forecasts and pastel-lit parties. My mind felt like a balloon, stretched to the limit, and yet empty.

I knew I identified myself as a newspaper reporter before my job at the magazine, but I didn't know how much. I suppose, in the same way, I don't realize how Florida I am until my friends in D.C. laugh at my accent, point out the way I sometimes pronounce certain words like "her" (rhymes with far) and "nothing" (NU-tin). "I am what I think you think I am," wrote the Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley. But there was no going back. I *felt* there was no going back. Not only because the contract I signed prohibited it, but because I felt as though a door had closed on that part of my life. I was moving forward, whether I liked it or not. Sometimes forward sucks.

Weeks after the video debacle, I went to get a burrito in a shopping center I rarely used. After lunch, I went wandering down the row of shops, because it was a nice day and I didn't want to go home yet. I saw the words Book Store and picked up my pace. Then I saw the words New Age. I slowed down. I decided I'd go in and wander around. My father called it "killing time" and I usually hated the idea, killing something that went by tick, tick, tick. But this was a November day in South Florida, when we get our first whiff of oxygen after a long summer, and I wanted to be out in the world. I went to open the door and saw a small sign there, Psychic Fair Today. A little bell announced my entry and I stood still amid chaos. The small bookstore was jammed with people. There was a

photo booth where you could get a picture of your aura taken. An astrologer would map out your life as she saw it in the stars. You could buy clothes that looked like they were made for wizards or belly dancers. Or you could get a psychic reading. The last option appealed to me. It was \$25 for 15 minutes. I would have gone for the astrologer, but she was more expensive and this was a whim. I added my name to the list and waited.

I was in the midst of gripping each crystal in my fist and closing my eyes to see if I could feel any “energy” when my name was called. I sat across from a middle-aged woman with short, red hair who looked at me and frowned, as if my very presence disappointed her. “What kinds of questions were you hoping to answer here today?” she asked.

I told her I was unhappy in my job. I wanted a new one, but didn’t quite know what I wanted to do anymore. Did she see me doing anything? She closed her eyes. I stopped breathing, and realized I was nervous, hopeful. I’d meant this to be a lark. Now I was actually counting on this woman.

“Excuse me,” someone said, then reached behind my head for a book.

The psychic opened her eyes.

“You have a box above your head,” she said, and then peered at me as if this were a bad thing.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I don’t know. What does it mean to you?”

I shrugged. Then she stared at me, the way an eye doctor might stare at your eyes, but isn’t looking into them or even at you.

“You have static on your right side.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“You have to think about these things, determine what they mean to you,” she said.

I had no idea what static on my right side meant, or what a box above my head should symbolize. I wanted my money back, my time back. The psychic frowned.

“Did a male in your family just pass?”

I nodded.

“I feel like it was an accident.”

I nodded again. I picked my cuticles under the table. I didn’t want her to talk about Bobby. I didn’t like this woman, with her static and boxes and no answers, and it felt like an invasion of privacy, telling me about something I believed I knew everything about.

“It feels like he was younger than you.”

I nodded.

“His face is floating very close to your face, on your left side.”

I inadvertently turned my head to the left, curious and creeped out.

“Was he alone? I feel like he was alone in the car.”

“No,” I said, and wanted that no to be a slamming door. No, you’re wrong. His friend sat a foot away and lived. Explain that.

“He says he’s OK, he’s happy and to stop worrying.”

The woman grinned at me, as if she'd handed me a gold brick. But I didn't believe her. She'd ruined her credibility with box above my head, and static to my right, and I couldn't get past that. Besides, that had to be her standard line, right? What else was she going to say? "Bobby's living an afterlife of shit baths and chronic pain, and said he never liked you in life, and likes you less in death."

"There was a young girl Bobby wanted to say good-bye to, but couldn't," the Psychic said. "With the initial C."

"I didn't know all Bobby's friends," I said.

"What about B," the Psychic asked.

I shook my head.

"He has a daughter named Briannah, but she's a redhead."

"No, it's not her," the Psychic said. "This girl is blond. What about A?"

"He had a girlfriend named Anna," I said.

"Anna! It's Anna! He wanted to say good-bye to Anna. Is Anna blond?"

"No, Anna's Hispanic."

"Well, this girl is blond."

Then my time was up. She pressed her card into my hand, and waved her next client over. I barely had time to rise before the next future seeker was sliding into the chair beneath me. On the way home, I wondered if the psychic was talking about my niece Christina, 24, who moved recently. She's blond. Perhaps Bobby couldn't find her in her new house and that's why he couldn't say good-bye. I remembered the time Bobby, 14, took my nieces Michelle and Christina blackberry picking. They quickly

became dehydrated and the bush's thorns tore them bloody from knee to pinky toe. I remember Bobby walking back, carrying one girl on his hip and the other on his back, all three of them grinning.

So, was I charged with carrying a message to Christina or Anna? Who the hell knew? Was Bobby really floating close to my face or was the Psychic a charlatan? I mean, she was just going through the alphabet, A, B, C. I could walk up to almost anyone on the street and say, "Do you have a family member with a name beginning with an A? How about a B?" It made me sad to think Bobby was desperately trying to send me a message and I couldn't get it. But if he is floating close to my face, why can't he leave a note on the goddamn fridge? Meanwhile, I still had no answer to my original question, which was, "what am I going to be?"

When I was a college freshman, I wanted to major in fine art and become a painter, live in a New York loft, wear outrageous outfits, go to parties full of interesting people. I took drawing, sculpture I and II, and three sections of painting before the faculty pulled me aside. "It's hard even for people who have talent," they said. I changed my major to the generic Communications, but carried with me some artistic principles. My favorite was negative space. Negative space is the area around the objects in a painting or drawing – the shape around the shapes. For those of you who've never been ousted from an arts class – it's the background.

That's what I was thinking about our first Thanksgiving without Bobby. His absence was a thing, had a shape and a life, as if it were in the room breathing right along with the rest of us.

We arrived at Linda's house. She looked overly-tidy, every hair in place, a mask. I hugged her hello and she said she was OK. I didn't see how she could be, but I didn't say that. Mom looked around the kitchen, ready to get to work. Mom likes to have a job, a reason. "Where are the potatoes," she asked. Linda handed her a 40-year-old soup pot filled with knobby spuds. Mom grabbed a knife from the butcher block, and went to find a comfortable seat. I followed her, and when she sat down on a game room couch with the potato pot on her lap, I sat on the couch opposite to watch.

Mom can peel a potato so that the brown peel falls away in one, long, curly spiral. It's a graceful dance, with thumb staying just one step ahead of blade. It happens only on holidays, and only at Linda's house. She held each potato up to inspect her work. The potatoes were naked, white and vulnerable – held gently in Mom's scarred fingertips, burned in a grease fire when I was a baby. The potato peeling is a leftover thing, a mysterious thing, leftover from when Mom was a teenaged bride, before she became the big executive I've always known her to be.

My brother Randy walked into the game room and went to sit next to me on the couch. He turned 50 in October. I moved to make room.

"I'm not that fat," he said.

"I didn't say you were. It's your old man smell."

He laughed. I love my brother Randy. He's tall, smart, interesting; with a dry sense of humor that kills me. He's a building contractor that with an eagle-eye and near obsession with particulars. He once told me he can't stand strip joints because, "The minute I see a dirty toe or a C-section scar, I'm out of there."

He said work was good, and I remembered he used to get Bobby construction jobs, then nearly go mad with anxiety worrying Bobby wouldn't show up for work. Bobby was as likely to show up for work as not.

"It's a weird day," I said. Randy agreed.

"We're working on a house right now," he said. "And for some reason the inside of the cabinets are stamped R. Jackson. Every time I open a cabinet I see R. Jackson." He shook his head.

I had nothing to say, yet want to say something. The silence between us was heavy. I said, "Life is strange," which meant nothing.

"Yeah it is," Randy agreed.

We were quiet for a long time when Randy said, "You know what the biggest regret of my life is?"

"What's that James Randall?" I said.

"I spent too much time running after the cheerleaders in high school."

"Are you serious right now?"

"Hell yeah I'm serious. It was the band geeks, the band geeks were putting out."

I laughed for 20 years. People who do not know my family, who do not understand our rules, our values, have criticized me for making jokes when I'm

uncomfortable, for going straight to laughter instead of processing my pain. I don't answer when I hear this criticism. I'm quick with a joke, but not real answers. But laughter, I think, is the soul's aloe plant. It'll heal you up.

Bobby's little girls came running in, skinny elbows and freckled limbs, wearing purple, long red hair in tangles, grinning in the aftermath of a game. They wore their father's death like capes. They were at the same time dark and strong, like superheroes, their little faces shadowy, despite missing front teeth. Linda said, whenever they visit, they always say hello to Bobby's box on the hearth. They sit on either side and pet it and kiss it and tell Bobby how much they miss him. I grabbed my nieces and hugged them. They squealed. One received a purple princess dress for her birthday and I said I wanted to borrow it. She looked me up and down and shook her head no, I am too fat, she said. We laughed.

I hear the first holiday season isn't so bad. I don't know where I heard this. It's the second one, it's said, that solidifies the fact your loved one isn't coming back. As real as Bobby's absence was that year, it felt similar to the day we bought flowers for his funeral. All we had to do was get through it. Next year he'd be back. His absence wasn't permanent. We just got our Christmas pictures back from last year and there he is in our annual group shot in front of the Christmas tree, standing near the back because he's taller.

My Dad stood at the stove making his giblet gravy. It's his final holiday responsibility, along with picking up ice. Mom and Dad used to cook all the holiday meals, but they turned that over to Linda when she bought a big house and they moved to

a smaller one. Now, Linda gets up early to put the turkey in the oven. Dad likes to make the gravy, believes no one can make it like him. He wore a denim shirt rolled up to the elbows, jeans and a brown western belt with BUDDY stamped on the back.

“What’s up, Kell?”

“Just wanted to see what you’re doing.”

I watched Dad stir his gravy, add flour, add a little milk. Dad said nothing and neither did I. The quiet in the room felt fragile, and I watched my Dad stir and wondered how many more years I’d be able to stand next to him at the stove. When I was little, he didn’t let me stand in the kitchen with him because I was rambunctious and made him nervous. But we once did make an entire meal together, including dessert, a pineapple upside down cake, so I could earn a Girl Scout badge.

When the gravy was ready, Dad moved to the turkey, slicing up the bird with an electric knife older than I am. The buzzing knife announced dinner was ready, and we lined up with plates. Linda leaves all the pots on the burners and we make a circle around the kitchen, serving ourselves, buffet style.

We feasted, two dozen of us, stretched across three rooms, eating at three tables and on the floor at one coffee table. We ate Mom’s layered salad and mashed potatoes, Dad’s gravy, Tammie’s green beans, and Linda’s turkey that Dad carved. We ate butter with heat ‘n serve rolls, off gold-colored paper plates with matching gold-colored, disposable silverware. We drank sweetened ice tea out of gold-colored plastic cups. We’ve been eating this same meal, once a year, since before Bobby was born, since I was incarcerated in a high chair. In those days, we fit around that single, black, wrought iron

table, Early Spanish Bordello. We're eating food that is us and on the outside we're us and on the inside we're us and no one really knows what we've been through except us. I was seated on the floor, around the coffee table in the game room, 10 feet from where Bobby and I stood on the pool deck at Briannah's birthday party, that day Dad interrupted us and for once, for the first time in eight months, I didn't have to explain anything, not even to myself, because everyone in this house already knew.

When it was time to say good-bye, I found Linda outside, alone, smoking on the deck that Bobby built. The sun had gone down, and she was looking off into the woods. The oaks were giant guardians, black against the bruised sky. There are no streetlights here. My sister's face was lit by the stars. She looked at peace. I hugged her, became suddenly overcome, and let out a sob. I was horrified. I couldn't break down in front of my sister.

"It's OK," my sister said. "It's OK."

BIOGRAPHY

Kelly Wolfe graduated from South Sumter High School in Bushnell, Florida in 1991. She received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Tampa in 1995 and her Master of Arts in Journalism from American University in 1998. She was employed as a journalist at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Palm Beach Post*. She received her Master of Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2013.