


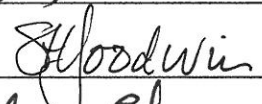
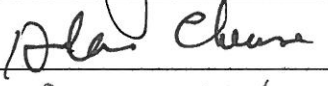
ESCAPE THE END

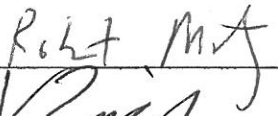
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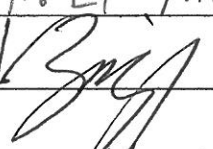
Traci Cox  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
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of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
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of  
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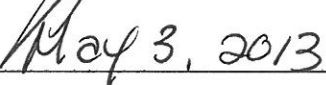
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Spring Semester 2013  
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Escape the End

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

by

Traci Cox  
Bachelor of Arts  
James Madison University, 2008

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Spring Semester 2013  
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## **DEDICATION**

This collection of essays is dedicated to my mom and to my future husband, Juan Pablo.  
Thank you both for always being by my side and for inspiring me to do what I love most.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Kyoko Mori for all of her guidance and insight throughout the many, many drafts of this collection. Kyoko, you have made my three years at Mason the most fruitful and constructive periods of my writing career and I'm honored to be your student. Many thanks to Steve Goodwin and Alan Cheuse for being wonderful professors and for serving as readers of this thesis. Dad, I love you; thank you for helping me realize my dreams. Thank you, Juan Pablo, for encouraging me to write and revise and for always offering to read and reread pieces countless times. Lastly, thank you, mom, for everything. I miss you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract .....	vi
Auf Wiedersehen, and the Rest.....	2
A Quiet Defiance .....	8
Butter, but Better.....	14
Once More to the East.....	19
Pomaly, Pomaly .....	28
Missed .....	50
Begin Again .....	65
East Meets West.....	70
Shifting.....	88
Consumed .....	111
Palms Tell Me .....	120
Songs of Swallows .....	129
The End .....	140
The Beginning.....	145

## **ABSTRACT**

ESCAPE THE END

Traci Cox, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2013

Thesis Director: Dr. Kyoko Mori

This thesis is a collection of personal essays that span my entire life. A few concern my childhood, but most of the essays revolve around the past few years, from the ages of twenty-three to twenty-six. The collection poses questions about ideas of homecoming—what “home” means, why we feel the desire to escape, and what, inevitably, brings us back. The centrifugal force behind this work is the passing of my mother, Tina, who died on April 20<sup>th</sup> 2010. Although I spent years trying to get away from Virginia, traveling to nearly two dozen countries on three continents, living for extended periods of time in Germany and Slovakia, I’ve always come back to where I was from. I currently live in Virginia, tethered to a teaching job and a fiancé; however, in less than a year I will be escaping yet again—south this time, to settle down in Mexico City.

"A journey is a gesture inscribed in space, it vanishes even as it's made. You go from one place to another place, and on to somewhere else again, and already behind you there is no trace that you were ever there. The roads you went down yesterday are full of different people now, none of them knows who you are. In the room you slept in last night a stranger lies in the bed. Dust covers over your footprints, the marks of your fingers are wiped off the door, from the floor and table the bits and pieces of evidence that you might have dropped are swept up and thrown away and they never come back again. The very air closes behind you like water and soon your presence, which felt so weighty and permanent, has completely gone. Things happen once only and are never repeated, never return. Except in memory."

—Damon Galgut, *In a Strange Room*



## AUF WIEDERSEHEN, AND THE REST

*I hate myself at this moment. I hate my indecisiveness and my twenty-year-old idealism. I hate this plane ticket and I hate this airline servicewoman and I hate the guy behind me who keeps brushing my thigh with the impatient fanning of his passport. I hate leaving here, going back there, and most of all, I hate the possibility of forgetting.*

That was me, in an embarrassing instance of abject self-loathing recorded in my journal just over six years ago. I had finished studying abroad in Berlin and was about to board a plane back home to Dulles airport from Tegel. People were waiting for me—people I did not particularly want to see. I realized that summer of 2007 that I was not in love with my boyfriend of one year, my mother's disease-ravaged body had been dragged in and out of the hospital all summer long and my father needed me desperately, needed me at home to take care of the laundry and the trash and the dog.

What I wanted more than anything, standing in that stagnant line clutching my ticket, was an escape. Berlin had offered that escape to me, showed me its routes and diversions, and I simultaneously lost and found myself somewhere between East and West. The city's dissonant and controversial history embraced me and I had become gratefully attached to being unattached.

Berlin is not an aesthetically appealing city to the common traveler. It's certainly no Rome or Paris; it lacks those romantic boulevards or charming historical gems that idealized Euro-holidays are made of. I lived in a hovel disguised as a dorm, its whitewashed concrete walls cold and uninviting, the buildings claustrophobically surrounding it reflecting its infinite sameness. Remnants of socialism. The built environment of Germany's capital feels like a living room decorated with valuable antiques that don't match anything. Its architecture pushes, disconnects, and confuses. Beautiful in isolation on a postcard, its buildings do have some heart and character. As a city, it's a bombed-out, gray, haphazardly designed mess.

I think that's what attracted me most to Berlin. It wasn't the river cruise, flashing camera, funicular adventure. My life was anything but a Venetian boat ride. I couldn't have lived in the city of most people's European fantasies. Maybe I thought I didn't deserve it. Living amongst architectural litter felt appropriate. I meticulously kept a travel journal that summer, a leather-bound 100-page notebook that began as a half-inch thick blank space and gradually evolved into a helter-skelter jumble of coasters, bus passes, pamphlets and notes. On one of the scraps of paper shoved inside I scribbled a quote, its source still unknowns to me: "Paris is always Paris, but Berlin is never Berlin." Something is always being rebuilt, refurnished, redone the way it was "before." This is a common word associated with Berlin that I did not understand at first but grew to empathize with as I slowly began to comprehend its delicious complexities: what it was before.

Before what? We've all had hundreds of befores. *Before he left me. Before she died. Before the money ran out.* Before, the city was a cultural hub, an intellectual and artistic scene idolized and visited by bohemians the world over. *Before Hitler tried to take over the world. Before the Wall went up.* Before my mom was diagnosed and my dad's life fell apart and the money ran out and the treatments started and ended and started again.

Before and after. East and West. The things that divide us.

Who was I before? Before my own walls went up?

The Berlin Wall was not just one long concrete slab that divided the city in two. It was actually two walls facing one another with a 100-yard empty space in between. East Berlin guards perpetually kept watch over each side, prepared to shoot at anyone who dared to approach the ten-foot concrete slabs. The space was named "No Man's Land." For me, living in the city and seeing that Wall daily became more a part of my mental state than an unfortunate apartment location. Instead of guards there was cancer; instead of Eastern refugees there was my mother; instead of No Man's Land there was no cure.

The night prior to my leaving for home I said my bittersweet goodbyes to Berlin. I had imagined a grand finale, something extraordinary, but it was nothing like that. My journal has no entry for that date. No pictures were taken. I forget why we left the West, where we lived, and journeyed an hour on the train over the border to the East. It seems like a waste of train fare now. My fellow culture junkies, Luke and Ryan, are the "we" I am referring to, two American exchange students I met in my dorm. We probably had

forgotten to eat dinner, or maybe we had run out of money and were unable to eat at all. We starved in that city. I remember that I bought the cheapest beer the vendor offered in the S-Bahn station and silently toasted the town as the subway flew by, eye-to-eye with the city, drinking it all in for the last time. Willa Cather's words from *The Bohemian Girl* came to mind as I became painfully aware of my ephemeral youth: "You are young only once, and I happened to be young then."

The three of us really only had one main thing in common: we were addicted to the cacophonous environment Berlin had become during the past sixty years. We felt alive walking through the Turkish quarter of Kreuzberg and smelling the sticky-sweet hookahs men in tunics gathered around. None of us smoked, but the smell stayed on our clothes and in our hair and pores for days and we liked Berlin becoming part of our bodies. The three of us sat for hours around figures of Stalin, Lenin, Wagner and Goethe, observing their hardened, expressionless faces, drawing out the coldness of the iron with our palms, following the sculpted wrinkles of their clothes at night when no one would stare at us. We got to know those men in the darkness. We were lonely. It felt good.

I do not want my summer memories of socialism and starvation to be neat and packaged, and I don't think Berlin ever does either. My memory is messy, unsure; Ryan and Luke are now murals I have quickly sketched and spray painted in my mind. I still today feel a core-shaking nationalistic sentiment for the city I briefly passed through. My loyalties remain there, in the face of an anachronistic communist statue; at the banks of the Spree river; in the graffiti art I helped to create one night on the wall of an abandoned office building in the East. As I sat staring at Stalin's stoic face on my final night I was

reminded of the very face I had put on the past two years “living” with my mother’s illness and my father’s incurable anger at her immobility. No, I don’t think you can call that living. In Berlin I was living. My loyalties should be with my family, I thought, and I still feel guilty for wanting to make a new home when I had one waiting for me. I could picture myself living in Berlin; I could not picture myself returning back home. Here I was, standing in places where so many people have suffered and died and done unspeakable things to each other, and I felt at peace. I wanted to escape my past that waited in Virginia. I wanted to disappear, to go someplace where the weight of my own history would not follow me.

If there was a before, there inevitably is an after. Crossing over the Atlantic meant a definite and palpable break between my old home and the start of something new. I traveled westward home from Eastern Germany, riding a little dotted line that extended across the ocean on a computerized map, back to where I was from. Years later I still find myself unhappy with my stagnancy yet feel validated that I made the “right decision.” What would it have been like to leave that stuffy airport line, to escape back to East Berlin once more and for years to come? Could I make a life there? Would I be happy? Would my mother have lived through it?

“It is sometimes better to travel hopefully than to arrive.” This tiny piece of paper wisdom came inside a fortune cookie I unwrapped the night I returned to the States. I felt, somewhat naively, that I had traveled so far in my twenty-something life during those three months on my own—independent, starving and perpetually lost. I hate being

safe, being dependent and depended on, knowing my way around the suburban neighborhood I resigned myself to in Northern Virginia. I hate not feeling divided.

About six years ago, I got on a plane back home. Berlin both ends and begins for me then. I understand now that it was not the city, the people, the wall or the history that I saw myself reflected in. It was the decisions that got me there. Got me here. I had to convince myself that there would be other opportunities to glimpse what awaits me on other side of the wall, to find freedom. To, once more, escape.

## **A QUIET DEFIANCE**

My first memory is of the golden light under the bathroom door. As a small child, about four years old, I would lay on my left side, my cheek resting against the scratchy muddy-brown carpet, staring into the golden light for hours. I was waiting for my mom to come out of the bathroom and play with me.

Since the age of sixteen, my mother suffered from Crohn's disease, an incurable gastrointestinal illness that causes polyps, ulcers, holes in the stomach, bleeding from the anus, debilitating cramps, diarrhea, abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, and a myriad of other miserable symptoms. It can be hereditary, or not. Most Crohn's patients will eventually end up with some kind of cancer, usually settling in their colon or small intestine or stomach around middle-age. Its causes and diagnoses are a complicated process that continues to confuse doctors today. I cannot remember a time when I didn't understand that my mother had to endure messy difficulties of this disease. Crohn's had a tangible presence in our home. It was like another member of our family.

Because my mother's Crohn's affected her lower intestines most severely, she had incredibly painful bowel movements. She would lock herself in the only bathroom in our tiny two-bedroom townhouse for hours. I could hear her crying sometimes, moaning others. Usually I just heard the hum of the fan, filtering the sounds and smells of what

went on inside that locked door. What went on, exactly, neither my father nor myself would ever truly know.

As a small child I was extremely attached to my mother. She remained my best friend from age four until she passed away, although I gradually became more independent from her as I grew older. At preschool age, however, I hardly let her leave my sight. Whenever she locked herself away in the bathroom, I waited for her—sometimes for two, three hours at a time. I watched the shadows under the door to see if her feet were moving towards the sink, or back to the toilet, or if her shaky hands were placing a *Redbook* magazine down on the fuzzy crimson-red bathmat. Sometimes she talked to me if she could, or told me to read a story aloud outside of the door to her while she waited for the pain to pass. I'd pull out one of my much-loved *Little Critter* or Eric Carlyle books and begin to read, and wouldn't stop even if I heard her groan or blow her nose repeatedly into a tissue. I'm not sure if the reading was meant to be more of a comfort for me, or her.

I envied my friends whose mothers played soccer with them in their backyard, or could swim in the pool with them or go off the diving board, or drove minivans and volunteered for elementary school PTA activities. My mother's disease was so crippling that she was unable to keep a part-time job; she simply missed too much work, or would be locked in a bathroom stall for so long that her employers thought she had snuck out of the building. She was seemingly healthy on the outside: five-foot-seven, curvaceous, with short bleached-blond hair, always dressed to impress. But inside I pictured her intestines to look like bloody ground beef, all meshed together without order or



definition. If one was to pull out her intestines and stretch them out in a straight line, there would be parts missing, and others would be tangled together like wiry necklaces, and her stomach would be so bloated that it might float away like an inflated balloon.

My mother did the best she could, despite her bodily hindrances. She was not what I would call a very active mother; she attended all my sporting events, but couldn't help me practice; she sent me to school with cupcakes on my birthday but was too exhausted to hand them out with me at lunchtime; she took me back-to-school shopping but could only go in hour-long shifts because she was too exhausted to walk around the mall. I didn't know any better, though. She was my mom, and I loved her more than anyone else in the world.

Around age six, I began to notice that my mom was quite unlike other moms I encountered in my Girl Scout troop or at softball games. She chain-smoked extra-long Virginia Slims cigarettes at ballgames, she bleached her hair, she blasted Tom Petty in our tiny two-door red Mazda and carried a diet Dr. Pepper with her at all times. But most of all, the other moms didn't tote around a separate purse everywhere containing a messy mélange of prescription drugs. I became embarrassed of my mother's physical weakness. Why couldn't she be healthy? What did she do to make herself so sick? Why was she in pain, and not Colleen's mom or Kaitlin's mom? Why did it happen to her, and my father, and me? Why *us*?

Around the September when I started first grade, I decided that it was time I asserted my independence and should stop watching my mother's feet under the bathroom door. She was taking up too much time in there, and I became impatient. In an

act of childish rebellion, I concocted a plan that was sure to teach my mom a lesson and show her that I was through waiting for her all the time. One afternoon after school, I came home to find my mom in the bathroom. I knocked on the door, called to her once, twice, three times, but she did not answer. I knew she heard me. Angry that she was ignoring her eager daughter, I decided to leave her a little present to remind her that I was indeed still very much here.

Since she took up so many hours in the bathroom daily, my dad and I became used to holding it. Sometimes, if we were forced to hold it in for too long, he'd drive us up to McDonald's or the gas station to use their bathroom. It was frustrating, and I resented my mom for this. I didn't see that, of all of us, she was the most frustrated, and embarrassed, and desperate. It wasn't her fault, but it was easy to blame her.

On this particularly rebellious day, I really, *really* had to go. I hadn't gone number two in a couple days, and I was always hesitant to relieve myself at school in earshot of my gossipy classmates. My dad wasn't home yet from work, so I couldn't ask him to drive me up to the shopping center to drop a deuce. So, I defiantly pulled down my shorts, grabbed some tissues from my parent's bedside table, and took a silent dump on the top stair directly across from the bathroom door.

I immediately regretted this decision. First of all, the mess was bigger than I anticipated. In the toilet it never looked that sizeable, but on the stairs it looked bigger than what my neighbor's Rottweiler, Daisy, left behind. The tissues my parents had were generic grocery store brand, one-ply pieces of stringy fluff, and did not do a thorough job

of cleaning anything. There was no place nearby to dispose of these tissues without causing the entire house to smell like a dumpster.

I decided to gently ball up the tissues and carry them outside of our townhouse. I checked stealthily to see if any of my neighbors were around, and when the coast was clear I darted to the nearest sewer and shoved the soiled papers down its belly. I ran back to my house and washed my hands until they turned red, disgusted equally by the tissues as I was by the smelly sewer. Then, I walked back upstairs to confront what I then referred to in my mind as “the BIG problem.”

As I stared nervously at “the BIG problem” wondering what to do next, I heard my mom stirring in the bathroom. First the closing of a magazine, then a flush, then the water pooling in the sink. I knew she would be coming out of the bathroom any second, and would be extremely disappointed in her six-year-old daughter who pooped on the stairs in an act of defiance against her toilet-hogging. I had to act fast.

I shuffled into my room and grabbed a small coaster I had made out of blue and yellow yarn on a tiny loom in art class. I was planning on giving it to my grandmother on her birthday, but I knew she would understand when I gave her a handmade card instead. It was only slightly larger than the problem. I held it flat against my palm, draped it over the mess, and picked it up in a swift claw-like fashion. Amazingly, no evident remnants were left behind. Before the bathroom door opened, I was already outside and running towards the pine tree in the common area of our townhouse complex, digging a shallow hole with the heel of my light-up purple sneaker. I buried the problem and its tiny colorful blanket and never spoke of it to anyone. For years to come, each time I walked

by that pine tree, I looked to see if the coaster had begun to creep up underneath the fallen needles. I suppose it decayed as quickly as my problem did.

## BUTTER, BUT BETTER

When the little hand touched the roman numeral “II” on the beach-themed clock in the foyer of my childhood townhouse, I was conditioned by my mother to know that it was naptime. I used to hate naps; I suppose I thought I might miss something exciting if I closed my eyes for even a short half-hour. My mother told me stories when I was in college (and I began taking hour-long power naps almost daily) about the aggravating and exhausting process of putting me down for a nap in my crib as a toddler. As soon as she was out of eyeshot, I’d throw everything out of my white wooden barred cell—blankets, stuffed animals, rattlers, pacifiers, my own ripped-off clothing, diaper included—and begin to scream until my mother walked back into my bedroom. With what I can assume was affectionate motherly patience, she would calmly place everything back inside, dress me once again, and attempt to lay me down for a nap. The process repeated itself until I completely wore myself out and passed out for a solid two hours. I have no recollection of this.

My dislike for naps only increased when I hit preschool age. Looking back, I realize that my mom probably knew I wasn’t upstairs sleeping, but the hour break to catnap or watch *General Hospital* or stretch out her distended, bilious stomach was necessary for her health and sanity, and well deserved. Around age five I began finding

innovative and mischievous ways to pass the monotonous hour alone. Sometimes I would turn the Disney-themed Pocahontas sheets on my bed inside out. Other times I would drop colorful plastic beads and small toys down into the slats of the vents built in the floor and see if they came out the other end (they never did, and as to where these objects ended their journey, I'm still baffled). Occasionally I'd venture downstairs, past my snoring mother sleeping with an ashtray or the remote or a women's magazine balanced on her stomach, and creep into the kitchen looking for a snack—something salty, something savory. My mom wasn't much of a cook, and because she was so often sick or sleeping, I was usually responsible for getting my own snacks or foraging a small lunch—but *never* during naptime. Leaving my lair was forbidden until she came to get me. We didn't have a cookie jar, and I never had much of a sweet tooth anyway. I was small and could only reach certain shelves in the refrigerator. It was a combination of height, convenience, and a penchant for simpler tastes that led me to reach for the butter dish.

So perfectly yellow, so smooth, so shiny and creamy and cool to the touch: butter melted; it could be cut into interesting shapes; it could be spread; it complimented nearly every dish. It made eating broccoli bearable, and toast succulent, and popcorn delightful. And here it sat, flat on a gleaming glass throne, just waiting to be knifed and used and altered. My interest began with mere observation. Could it be frozen? When was butter invented? Why was it in a square shape, and not an oval? Do the people in the grocery store make it in the back behind the freezer? And what crumbs were those on its lopsided end? Toasted bread, or maybe remnants of a bagel? I'd lick my forefinger, gently touch

a particularly interesting crumb, where it would stick to my skin via my saliva, and then lick it off my fingertip with satisfaction.

The private experience of examining the butter was one of high stakes and concentrated stealth. I'd listen intently to see if my mom was still asleep—did I hear a rustle of a blanket? Was that her lighter igniting in the next room? I knew I'd be in deep trouble if she discovered me out of my bedroom during naptime, and would be severely scolded if she found I was fiddling around with the condiments drawer. I became adept at ducking under the table at a moment's notice, or positioning myself between the fridge and the wall in a nook just large enough for my thin, lithe body. My butter mania went unnoticed for weeks.

Eventually the crumb picking lost its allure and my taste for raw butter grew into an insatiable desire. It started out as a lick here, a tiny nibble there. I knew what I had to do, how I may possibly satisfy my Country Crock cravings, and even as a young child I was aware of the consequences of my naughty actions. Boldness overcame me. One exceptionally boring naptime, I summoned the nerve to pluck the stick of butter precariously out of its resting place and hold it sandwiched between my fingers, akin to how one would hold a taco. It was a fresh, newly unwrapped stick; no crumbs, no knife scrapings—pure. I thought briefly about putting it back, but it was too late now—my fingerprints were all over its surface already. Holding the stick up to the dull light of the refrigerator, I looked upon my snack with wonder and hunger and opened wide, taking a large bite off the front end. It was everything I imagined it to be; that is, delicious, the best thing I ever tasted. Salty, cool, slippery. Nothing else on earth possessed the same

texture, the same weight. I took another bite, and another. By now what was once a six-inch stick of butter had been chomped away to half its size. Not meaning to be greedy, I placed the nub of butter in its glass dish and positioned it quietly back in its rightful place on the condiments shelf. It would be impossible to conceal the transgression I had committed.

The damage had been done. There was no turning back now. I crept upstairs just in time, my mouth still full of the creamy, waxy substance; my mother was waking up, the click of her lighter sounding down below me from my top floor bedroom hideout. I heard her fluffing the pillows, putting on her slippers, and shuffling, sleepily, into the kitchen. A pill bottle was tilted over and shaken, and I heard the *Pop!* of a freshly opened diet Dr. Pepper. Her black porcelain ashtray was placed onto the countertop with a heavy thud and then, inevitably, the fridge door opened.

“TRACI MARIE! GET DOWN HERE *RIGHT* THIS INSTANT!”

How would I explain myself? How could I justify the fact that I snuck out of my room and consumed half a stick of butter? Had it all been worth it? I shuffled down the stairs, a criminal, a butter-eating thief.

My mother held the stump of butter in her hand, displaying my tiny teeth marks. “Did you do this?” she asked me calmly.

I nodded.

“Did you eat *half* a stick of butter?”



Again, I nodded, eyes downcast, my blanket dragging on the floor beside me. I felt the inside of my teeth with my tongue, lined with a fatty film. It tasted like adventure.

“But...*why*?”

I had no answer for her. I knew I’d get caught; fingerprints, teeth marks, and slick lips all obvious evidence of my guilt. After I was nabbed in the act, I was sent upstairs for time out. On top of the hour-long naptime, it was the worst day ever lived by a five-year-old, except for my delicious little victory that I celebrated alone in my room. My mother moved the butter to a higher shelf, and I took to stealing rotting gherkins from a forgotten jar in the bottom drawer. No fingerprints, no teeth markings, no punishment—no getting caught.

## ONCE MORE TO THE EAST

Berlin changed me. As soon as I stepped on the plane at Tegel Airport and left Berlin, I wanted to return. I was only there for two months in 2007 for a short stint studying abroad, but the city left such a strong impression on me: the noise, the food, the history. I suppose it could have been Paris or Rome or London, but it was Berlin I had chosen for my summer study abroad, mostly because my grandmother on my mother's side was German and I didn't know the language and I was completely enraptured by the divided nature of the city—a capital once torn between East and West. It fascinated me that citizens of this nation didn't choose to be cut in half, as the United States did during the Civil War—it was a decision in the hands of a totalitarian entity that they had no real control over—and many East Germans had to make a choice to succumb or emigrate. *Do I stay in the East because my family and job are here, because I've lived here my entire life and it's the only place I know, or do I venture to the West, knowing that there is more freedom and opportunity on that side?* they might have asked themselves. *How do I picture my life? Do I stay or do I leave?*

I identified with East Germans. Although as a twenty-year-old I was clearly not faced with the horrors and hardships of their daily lives, I drew parallels between my life and theirs through our respective battles with repression and escape and a yearning for

freedom. I saw photos of young couples crawling up the Berlin Wall into the West, or devising submarines and flying machines to sneak across the Spree River at night to the other side. Some were shot; some were sent to jail. Others stayed in the East because they felt they belonged there, had roots there, but in the end many regretted it; they spent hours imagining how to escape their past, their present, their bleak future. Their history. My mom had been ill since long before my childhood, but it wasn't until I graduated from college in December of 2008 that her health issues increased tenfold. She was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer in December of 2006, although she seemed as relatively healthy as she ever was. When I went to Berlin the following summer, she was extremely happy for me. She and my dad even played around with the idea of visiting me overseas, but between my father's intense fear of flying and my mother's rollercoaster of medications and flare-ups and Crohn's complications, they never ended up booking a trip to Germany. Her mother, my Grandma Lilo, was born and raised in Germany; my mother was born in Frankfurt but moved to the United States before she started elementary school. My mom always wanted to return to her homeland, but never had the chance. I remember Grandma Lilo used to say my mom had a "German face." I wanted a German face, too, but Lilo told me I looked "too much like a little bird" to have a proud and round German face. I was too delicate.

When I left for Berlin, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that I would return to the same life I had left behind in America—the same house, the same dog, the same mom and dad. But when, one year later, I applied for my Fulbright in the fall of 2008 just before graduating from JMU, my mom had reached a point in her cancer treatment where

options were running out. When I heard her speaking with her oncologist over the phone that there were only two possible treatments left for her, I pictured an hourglass, the sand falling swiftly from top to bottom, passing faster and faster through the narrow gap between the two fragile glass spaces. She didn't know I was listening.

I graduated from James Madison University a semester earlier than planned, in December of 2008. The only person in my major—English—to complete an honors thesis and graduate with the prestige that comes with being the top student in the class, I felt simultaneously relived and anxious on graduation day. On one hand, I would be free of the laborious academic and scholarly duties that had tethered me to my desk for so many hours each week. No longer would I be forced to waste my time on superfluous classes like “Math for Liberal Arts Majors” or “Introduction to Geology.”

On the other hand, graduation was—like Berlin—the beginning of the end for me. My mother's health had declined rapidly and drastically during the autumn of 2008, and I made more and more weekend trips from Harrisonburg to Ashburn, Virginia, to spend time with her. It was a two-hour drive, but it was always worth it. Seeing her on the weekends was a relief; she'd be in a good mood, she'd be excited to go shopping or out to lunch. Cancer seemed far away when I was in college, removed from me, because I only saw her occasionally and I did not endure the day-to-day symptoms of her illness. But from brief phone conversations with my father I learned that while I was away at college her chemotherapy treatments had progressed from once every two weeks to every week, and she had begun weekly radiation to shrink the multiplying tumors in her lower intestine around Thanksgiving of that year.

My dad was forced to take more and more time off of work to take care of my mother. I could see in his face and hear in his voice the exhaustion and stress that came with being the only breadwinner in the family as well as the caregiver and chauffeur for mom's constant medical appointments. Deep, heavy lines began to creep across his forehead, and under his eyes dark circles began to form. The reason I decided to end my time early at JMU was to come home to take care of my mother and the housework. I'd lighten the burden for my dad and hopefully diminish the stress of a rapidly worsening situation.

This isn't the reason I revealed to anyone, though. I lied. I made excuses for my seemingly strange decision. I said that I wanted to graduate a semester early because I was "over" college; that I wanted to move on to graduate school or a job or better, more important, grown-up things. Sometimes I'd say that it was a financial issue and I wanted to save the tuition I would've spent on the spring semester for another trip abroad. Other times I'd play up my intelligence, bragging that I was so academically driven that finishing college early didn't even require much effort; taking 18 credits each term was the norm for me. I had already applied for a Fulbright Fellowship to Slovakia and was nervously awaiting a response—or rejection—any day.

At twenty-one, on the brink of graduation and with very few interesting job prospects, I was lost as to what my next move would be once I had a college degree in my hand. I didn't know what a Fulbright was except that one of my favorite poets, Sylvia Plath, had one to Cambridge in the 1950s and that it was a prestigious academic

award. The whole Fulbright idea came as a surprise to me. In September of 2008 I contacted my former German teacher in Berlin, Dr. Pickett, and asked him about scholarships or internships for American students in Germany. I wanted desperately to return to Berlin. “Why don’t you apply for a Fulbright?” he wrote in an email, and attached the Fellowship link to his message. Although the application process immediately intimidated me—numerous letters of recommendation, a resume, a personal statement, a statement of grant purpose—I decided to apply. Without non-English language skills my options were limited; I chose Slovakia because it seemed I had a better chance of getting a Fulbright there. It was also in Eastern Europe, and I liked the idea of the East; more foreign, tougher, slightly uncharted. If I couldn’t get to Berlin, I’d get as close as I could.

I submitted my Fulbright application in November of 2008, a few weeks before I was due to graduate with honors from James Madison University. I had a feeling I’d get the Fulbright, and I also had a feeling that my mom wouldn’t be around more than a year or so. I can’t explain why; my intuition simply tugged at me. The day I graduated from college, she and my dad drove down to see me walk across the stage and accept my diploma. Her face was bloated and puffy; large, grey-green bags sat beneath her eyes. She looked exhausted. She sat through the entire ceremony, although my dad told me he waited two hours for her to come out of the bathroom afterwards.

“I’m so proud of you,” she told me later at dinner, eyes blurry with tears and an Oxycontin haze that I’d become accustomed to. “You’re the first woman in our family to

graduate. I'm so happy for you; I always knew you were special. You are going to be *great*."

Being awarded the Fulbright was as important for me as it was for her. I knew that she always wanted to travel overseas, but couldn't because she could suffer blood clots on the airplane or have a bad reaction to a medication overseas or surrender to complete exhaustion if she walked for too long. I think part of me desired so desperately to flee the US because I knew she would never leave its shores. I imagined her in an alternate life, a stunning and carefree twenty-something, stomping around Salzburg, Austria, flirting with violinists in the street during the annual springtime music festival. I pictured her dressed up for a night out on one of Paris' exclusive nightclubs. I thought about her in a string bikini on the shores of Greece, rubbing coconut-smelling oil into her skin and tanning all day underneath a warm Mediterranean sun. She would never experience any of these vacations, these adventures abroad. I would have to experience them for her.

Whenever we'd go to her chemotherapy or radiation appointments together, she was so eager to introduce me to the various nurses. "My daughter's going to be a Fulbright Fellow," she'd tell them, even though she didn't know if my application would be accepted. "She just graduated from JMU—with *honors*. And she's going to graduate school for creative writing soon, too," she'd brag. The nurses would smile at me and ask me questions about what I wanted to study and where I'd like to travel. But when they talked to me, I heard a hint of sadness in their voices. When they smiled, it was half encouragement, half regret. They already knew.

When I received the news of my Fulbright acceptance in April of 2009 my mother was the first to know. I was under the impression that the news would come by mail; I suppose, since the information would be coming in an official document from Slovakia, where I thought Internet was sparse and a luxury, that it must surely arrive in my mailbox. I checked the mail every day at 1 p.m. to see if a letter from the host country had arrived. But it was during a late-night last-minute email check that I found the message in my inbox from Nora Hlozekova, the Fulbright director in the Slovak Republic: “Dear Ms. Cox, I’m pleased to inform you that you have been awarded the distinguished J.W. Fulbright Fellowship...” As I read Nora’s electronic congratulations, I held my breath. *I did it. I would be moving back overseas. I could, once more, escape.*

“Mom!” I screamed from the basement as I ran upstairs, tripping over my own feet, to the living room. “I got it! I got it!”

My mother, standing in the kitchen, hugged me tightly. She knew what I was so excited about. “I’m so proud of you. I’m so proud of you,” she repeated. “I knew you would get it. I just knew it.” She smiled, and I recognized that same glassy-eyed look from the day I graduated college.

As I hugged her back, I wondered if she had a silent prediction about what the next twelve months would hold. Part of me recognized the possibility that she would not be here when I was scheduled to return in June of 2010, but I felt that I could not put my dreams—and her dreams for me—on hold for what may or may not happen. She had already lived three years with Stage IV colon cancer—an uncommon feat for most with the same diagnosis. She was a fighter. If anything were to happen, I could always come



back; I could always see her again. She wanted me to go; she was my most ardent supporter and wanted me to embrace every aspect of my new life in Slovakia. But I understood a year abroad would mean a year of depreciation in her body.

A year after this hug, she wouldn't be able to hold me anymore.

“Part of the allure of going to a foreign place is that even the problems are foreign. The hollowed-out buildings all around us didn’t apply to me. If I was going to continue traveling, it wasn’t going to be Club Med, the kind of place that allowed you to forget your worries for a week. No, I needed to head to the dark corners of the world, where my problems would seem insignificant by comparison.”

—Wendy Dale, *Avoiding Prison and Other Noble Vacation Goals*

## POMALY, POMALY

The conversation usually goes something like this:

“Wow, you had a Fulbright Fellowship! That’s fantastic. Where did you go?”

“Slovakia,” I reply. A look of slight confusion washes over my acquaintance’s face.

“Hmm...Slovakia,” they’ll nod, mulling it over, preparing to ask their next question. Some people simply ask, “Where *is* that?” Others are a little bolder and will guess, “That’s near Russia, right?” I never really expected anyone to know where Slovakia was, because even I wasn’t quite sure of its exact location before my Fulbright.

“Almost,” I say. “It’s in Eastern Europe.”

“Ohh, *right*. I went to Prague on vacation, and it’s pretty cool there. Why did you go to Slovakia?” they want to know, bemused as to why I’d choose such an unknown, rustic and unpopular tourist destination. Why choose Slovakia when you could go to Italy, or France, or England?

And here is where the conversation usually withers and dies. It’s difficult to explain to a stranger, or even a close friend, why someone would desire to exile him or herself to a foreign land, an unknown tongue. “Because I didn’t know anyone living there. Because I’d never been. Because I didn’t know anyone from Slovakia, nor did I

know anyone who had ever ventured to that country. Because it was in Europe, close enough to the Western part but far enough East to be exotic. Because I was bored living in Virginia, and jobless, and didn't want to understand the language, and wanted to be at the heart of the continent."

Another half-understanding nod. "Oh, right...*okay*. So when I was in Prague last summer, you won't believe what we did..."

There's nothing worse than hearing friends talk for hours about their "amazing" vacations—well, that is, except for being forced to look through their hundreds of photographs of random architecture and all the meals they consumed while overseas. When people tell me about their adventures abroad, how much they loved the scenery in this city or the food in that country, I ask them why they ever came back. If they loved it so much in Paris or Florence or Vienna, why don't you move there one day?

"Oh, don't be silly," they'll tell me. "I have a job; I can't give up my job. And what about my friends? It's fun to visit [insert name of exciting city/foreign country here] for a week or two, but I'm fine where I am. I can't just pick up and *move my life*."

I was never able to sympathize. I couldn't wait to get away from the United States.

Slovakia is, in fact, the "Heart of Europe"—geographically speaking, it sits in the exact center of the continent. I thought it would be a convenient place for travel; Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary and Ukraine all hug Slovakia and were only a train ride away. Little did I know that once I arrived in my host country, I'd never want to

leave its borders. Unlike most countries that offer Fulbrights to recent college grads, Slovakia—like most of its Eastern counterparts such as Bulgaria, Bosnia and Poland—does not require language experience to teach and study there. It's a catch-22, though; you aren't required to know the native tongue for the Fellowship, but the overwhelming majority of natives in these countries do not speak English. In my case, most had never met an American. My Slovak language experience before arriving in the host country consisted of about seventy vocabulary words written in highlighter on index cards that I carried around in my purse. I knew all the colors, and most of the foods, and how to say the different types of transportation, but I couldn't order a meal or ask for a train ticket. The only Slovak language resource I could find was a text entitled *Vlado Cooked My Lunch!*, twelve Comic-Sans font pages of roughly translated Slovak-English recipes with accompanying photos of the aging, mustached chef.

I arrived in Zilina (pronounced jill-in-uh), my new hometown in the northwest part of the country, in August of 2009, one week before the school year was to begin. My assignment would be teaching English to intermediate-level high school students. I had emailed a photo of myself to the headmaster the day before so she would know whom to pick up from the one-hangar airport on the outskirts of the city. I arrived with eight other Slovak and Czech travelers on the only flight for the day from Prague after a tiring day and a half of traveling. Nad'a, my new boss, kissed me, quickly threw my suitcases in the back of her blue Fiat, and drove me to my apartment. We didn't speak. Lady Gaga was the soundtrack to my first hour in Slovakia, and as the headmaster wound the small car through the pothole-laden streets I noticed the bright, mismatched colors of

the giant concrete apartment buildings: pastel pink and sky blue, lime green and violet. Green space was rare in the city, but beyond it lay rows and rows of snowcapped mountains—the Mala Fatra range, I’d learn later. My new home, I thought. My town, my mountains. My streets.

The apartment building was eight stories tall and painted bright orange with lemon yellow accents. I’d be on the sixth floor, living alone, with an amazing view of the neighborhood, named Vlcince (vul-chin-say). Outside my bedroom window I could see other apartment buildings mostly, along with a run-down primary school and a small playground nestled at the building’s base. For 280 Euros/month (about \$350 then) I had a bathroom, a newly refurbished kitchen, two bedrooms and a living room with a balcony and, thankfully, Internet. Nad’a showed me around—how to open the windows, how to turn on the stove, where the watering can for the plants was stored. She thoughtlessly gestured toward the street where I could find a market, and then told me not to look out the window when I woke up tomorrow. “Your first night in a new place is filled with dreams,” she said in broken English. “If you look out your window, your dreams will fly away, and you will lose your purpose in coming here.” It seemed premonitory, an omen of sorts, and it scared me a little. With that she left me alone, said she’d see me next week at the school (where the school was actually located I did not yet know), and wished me good luck. “Do videnia,” she said. “Zbohom.” *Goodbye, and go with God.*

My first mission in Zilina was to find food. The market, called CBA, was only a two-minute walk from my flat, tucked underneath a crumbling office building from the Soviet era. My food vocabulary words would certainly be put to good use on my first

day, and I prided myself on what limited use of the language I possessed. The market was about twice as large as my new apartment, crammed and cluttered with boxes of unopened produce and giant bags of fresh toilet paper rolls littering the floor. The shopping carts were so small, they reminded me of the tiny plastic one I pushed around the house as a child. There were two cash registers, both operated by equally dour and tired-looking women. “*Dobry!*” I called to them, wishing them good day. Neither looked up from their tills. I navigated the cramped aisles looking for words I recognized from my flashcards: so, that’s pasta, and that looks like an egg, but why is it blue? That carton with a dancing cow on it is obviously milk (*mlieko*), but why is the bread sitting out unwrapped? Is that seeds on its crust, or dirt on its surface? Why isn’t the butter (*maslo*) refrigerated, and is that normal? What does *Smotana* mean, and why is a yogurt product named after a Czech composer? As I perused the goods on the shelves, I had my first taste of the limited selection—and the seemingly unhygienic way in which food was displayed, unwrapped, not chilled—in Slovakia. In spite of these drawbacks, I soon grew to love the simplicity in selection, the ease of walking to a market to get the two or three fresh ingredients needed to make a meal that day. No driving, no giant carts, no big box stores, and no stocking up necessary.

I’d heard that Eastern Europeans were less “friendly” than the average American, so I tried not to take Slovak callousness too personally. Still, at first, it bothered me that people didn’t smile, or say hi, or hold the door. But after doing a bit of historical research on the nation, I began to understand why Slovaks seemed skeptical, or cold, to strangers. The Velvet Revolution of 1989 meant the end of communism in the country,

but traces of its influence still remained. For decades, neighbors spied on each other, whispering bits of information to informants on those who may not agree with Party ideals or even making up lies about someone's political preferences so they could gain an upper hand in the eyes of the government. Some of the elder Slovaks that I met wished democracy had never arrived. My elderly neighbor, Sylvia, put it this way: "Under communism, everyone had a place to live, a job, and a purpose. Now we have 20% unemployment in this country, flat rent takes over half a person's salary each month, and the country's traditions are being lost as the youth travel to Western places to study or work. In thirty years, we won't recognize the real Slovakia anymore." While they may no longer fear being interrogated by the police or expressing their political opinions in public, Slovaks still live with a different type of apprehension each day—a fear of changing too much.

I was startled to see the similarities between American and Slovak teenagers while working at SSAG, a secondary bilingual English-Slovak school in Zilina. Part of what drew me to Slovakia was its bucolic way of life; I'd never really experienced that before, growing up in suburban Northern Virginia. Most of the photographs I saw of the country were of tiny villages tucked into snowy mountains. The major industries are farming and car manufacturing. The majority of Slovaks live in the countryside, in small villages, but commute by train or sometimes car to one of the five major cities each day. There are five million Slovaks; one million live in Bratislava, the capital city, and in my town of Zilina—the fourth largest in the country—only 80,000 people lived there in 2009. My students in Zilina grew up in villages surrounding the city. But they weren't



children of farmers or factory workers; their parents became wealthy after buying up businesses and apartments in the early 90s when the Berlin Wall came down. These teenagers had iPhones, iPods, MacBooks, Range Rovers, BMWs—technology and a lifestyle that I, an American and a good seven years older than them, could not afford to possess.

There were six other Fulbright English Teaching Assistants in Slovakia at the time, but I decided to immerse myself in the culture, the language, and the people of my host country. I hardly spent a weekend in my flat; I went hiking in the Velky Tatras (high Tatras) in the East of the country with a Slovak couple from my school. Janka, a twenty-five-year-old Slovak-English teacher at SSAG, quickly became my best friend, and we spent many weekends at her friends' cottages in the central part of the country. I welcomed those rustic trips to the *chata*, or cottage—no running water, a coal stove, seven or eight people sleeping head to foot on an uneven wood floor. While Slovaks were unfriendly on the street, as a people they are the most welcoming, warm-hearted, and fun I've ever encountered. "Once you get to know a Slovak," my friend Bety told me, "you know them for life." I cannot count the number of times a friend or colleague took me to their parents' or grandparents' house for a meal. I didn't speak Slovak, and they didn't speak English, but that didn't stop these strangers from welcoming me into their small one-bedroom home for the weekend and stuffing me with home-cooked bryndzove halusky (cheese dumplings) and pouring shots of slivovica (plum brandy) while they toasted to my health.

The first lesson, and perhaps the most important, I learned while living in Slovensko was to simply *slow down*. Shopping, walking everywhere, cooking all my meals from scratch, pulling out my dictionary to decipher a sign, waiting for stories to be translated to me in English—there was no other option than to be patient and live in the moment. My headmaster would often yell “pomaly!” at me as I sprinted down the hallway to teach the next lesson. It became a joke with my colleagues, and whenever I became frustrated that a student wasn’t attending class or my bus was late or the computer wasn’t turning on, they’d call out “pomaly, pomaly!” and make me laugh. Slowly, slowly—live your life slowly, enjoy each day, and hold onto your dreams before they fly out of the window.

On my first day as an intermediate English teacher at the Sukromne Gynmazium in Zilina, Slovakia, a flustered woman with wild, rust-colored hair shoved a piece of paper into my hand as she ran down the hall. The paper was severely smudged, with a complicated table printed crookedly onto it. Numbers, abbreviations, and classrooms were noted in the table’s margins: CELÁ TRIEDA 3, DEJPIS, (Angličky jazyk)143-3-2. It looked like an important document, but I didn’t recognize most of the words. I pointed out my name but was confused as to why OVÁ had been tacked onto its end: PANÍ UCITELKA TRACI COXOVÁ. Numbers were clear enough, but what they signified (a classroom? students? security codes? a locker combination?) was a mystery to me. I thought my class title of ENGLISH in Slovak would be, well, *in English*, but I was

wrong. The majority of my colleagues didn't speak English, and I didn't speak Slovak, which meant I was on my own to figure this one out. I guessed that 143 looked like a room number, so I searched the halls, trying not to look completely foreign, for what I hoped would be my classroom. I found it, fairly quickly—although it wasn't so much of a classroom as a closet. Nine chairs, most of them with their tan, tattered stuffing oozing out of the red cotton seat cushions, sat helter-skelter in a room that didn't contain a chalkboard or a computer. Three of the overhead lamps were broken, and the window was stuck, half-opened, half-closed.

My students trickled in a few minutes after I arrived, throwing down their notebooks and snacks and chattering away in what seemed to be the most illogical and complicated-sounding language on earth. I'd never had to get the attention of fifteen teenagers before, never mind the fact that we didn't even speak the same language. So, I coughed, once, then twice, to no response. "Eherm. Eh-eh-*eherm*."

Next tactic. "Helloooo," I greeted them with a loud smile and a wave. I thought I'd play up the whole overly-smiley, perpetually bubbly American stereotype, at least for a while until they got to know me.

"My name is Ms. Cox, and I'm from America." I'd recited my introduction over and over again the night prior in the tall mirrors of my new apartment bedroom, confident that my exoticness would immediately win them over. It didn't matter how charming, or entertaining, or intelligent I was; I was an American, and by definition, that made me cool in Eastern Europe.

So when I introduced myself the last thing I expected was to hear a roomful of laughter. What did I say? What's on my face? Is this a common cultural greeting for Slovaks—laughter in the face of an honored guest? Startled and distracted, I managed to complete my introduction and move on to the activity for the day. But, in the back of my mind, I wondered why they chuckled, and kept tonguing between my front teeth for remnants of my breakfast.

This routine continued for the remainder of the day—I'd walk into a classroom of slightly confused Slovak students, introduce myself, and watch their faces light up in amusement. Briefly I wondered if, perhaps, they'd heard (or seen) the American usage of my last name on an illicit adult website, with an alternate spelling, of course. None of my students had never met an American, and to have a native speaker at their school was a novelty and a mark of privilege. It was shocking to me to be met with such an unusual response.

At the end of my first day at the Sukromne Gymnazium, I was almost in tears. Frustrated, exhausted, without a chalkboard or a textbook or a copy machine, I wondered how I was ever going to get through the next year. Never having taught before was one thing; not having access to teaching materials was another entirely. My ignorance confronted me at every angle—while attempting to fix the broken window in my provisional classroom; my lack of language skills; not eating lunch in the cafeteria but in the office because I didn't know how to order food from the lunch ladies; and, now, even my introduction, which I thought was impossible to screw up, was wrong. My colleague in the English department, Deniska, noticed the look of utter defeat on my face as I ate

my soggy egg salad baguette and inquired as to what was wrong. I recounted the scenario—I'd walk in, introduce myself, and be met with a bunch of blushing, laughing faces.

“Well, what did you say?” she asked me, confused as I was.

“Something like, ‘Hi, I’m Ms. Cox, and I’m your American teacher.’”

Deniska laughed so hard her flavored mineral water squirted out of her nose. She called the secretary, Sylvia, over to hear the story, translated, of course, and she, too, doubled over in laughter, slapping both of her knees repeatedly.

*What the hell is wrong with these people?* I wondered.

“Do you know what ‘cox’ means in Slovak?” Deniska asked between gasps for air. Her mascara had begun to run down her heavily powdered cheeks.

I confessed that I didn’t, but I had an idea.

“Cox, or *koks* as it’s spelled in our language, means ‘coke.’ Like the drug, cocaine!” More laughter ensued, and Deniska ran to the one computer in the office to post about the new American teacher on facebook. “You’re *Ms. Cokehead!*”

After that week, I figured out I could go to the library to print out short PDFs of articles. Memorizing the few words it took to order food was easy enough, and I eventually began to enjoy the giggles of the cafeteria ladies as I ordered my lunch; they even gave me extra portions, winking slyly at me as, our little intercultural clandestine exchange. I taped pieces of blank paper together and wrote on them instead of using a chalkboard, and, for the rest of the school year, my students called me Traci.

While my students claimed to be “intermediate” English speakers, I found most of them to be beginners. They had trouble with even the most basic sentences, and their English was heavily influenced by MTV and movies. In the literature course I taught to a group of sixteen-year-olds, we started off the year by reading and acting out George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. Our first lesson was about basic literary vocabulary—plot, theme, setting, characterization. They seemed to grasp these basic concepts well, so I moved on to terminology that promised to be a bit more challenging. I asked my students what the opposite of a “hero” is in a story. I hoped they’d say something like “enemy” or “anti-hero” or even “bad guy.” A bit shy, since it was the first week of classes and we had just met, they had no initial response. I told them to think of a movie or a story where one good guy was fighting a bad guy. What would you call that bad guy? What would you call Voldemort or Hannibal or the Joker? Andre, one of my more clever students, without flinching, without a doubt, answered, “A fucker. A fucker is a bad guy in a story.” His classmates seriously agreed, nodding their heads in unison. “Oh, yeah, I’ve heard that before,” Tatiana added. “Fuckers are *no good*.” I pointed out that word’s absence from the word bank, and told my students those phrases are reserved for Quentin Tarantino movies—and certainly not for literature.

Much to my chagrin, the school only possessed nine copies of *Animal Farm* to be shared by fifteen students. “But what about when I assign homework? Won’t they need the book?” I asked Nad’a. She told me, in the flippant way most Slovaks respond to any hint of potential conflict, not to worry about it; students should only be using the book in class, anyway. Homework, a foreign concept to most Slovak students, would still go

uncompleted even if they had books at home. “But how will they *learn* anything?” I wondered.

Some days, I couldn’t find the books (probably because a student hid them, I imagine) so we had “Conversation” lessons instead. These were my favorite days at school; I loved getting to know my students on a more personal basis. I learned that one of them was a professional hip-hop dancer; another was preparing to play tennis in the Olympics. Beginning class with a short essay prompt, I’d use their responses to stimulate discussion. The first essay prompt I gave was simple: What do you think of America? I received mixed reviews:

Ondrej S: USA is something like slowly rotten apple. This starts with small children who are fat. USA produces a lot of impurities into air. USA have unhealthy lifestyle and unhealthy diets. US starts wars because they haven’t enough oil. This wars starts where there is enough oil. They always want to look like democratic state. A lot American people have fake smiles. USA has very well developed science and business because every scientist and fortune from Europe fled before the war come to USA. But also every country have a positives and US make a good films and music. US has forefront quality of electronics products. I think every state must have own style. American style of living is coming to Europe. It’s all about freedom of choice and lifestyle chooses.

Lenka: I know America only from films, I never be there but I have different opinions about USA. For example our teacher Traci is very nice but I know only you. But my friends whose were in America told that it is very crazy country with crazy people. Everywhere are fat people, everywhere are fast foods, everyone driving in cars. There are many violence. But! There are too nice places where I would like to travel. Maybe in New York, but I'm sure that my dream is Canada but it isn't part of USA. My schoolmates are there in USA so I will for them what they told me about America.

Janka: I have never been to USA I just know some things from books, magazine or TV-shows. People say that USA or the government of USA are the centers of global problems. But I do not want to solve some political problems. I want to write about the people. I know only 2 Americans. The first is Traci, our American lecturer, and the second one is Zac. He is also our lecturer of English. Both of these people are perfect. I hope that people in America have the same character as they have. They are cheerful, sensible, kind persons. This is exactly what I like on these people. I think that they enjoy every day and minute of their life. I think that they love this sentence: "Do not worry, be happy!" There are the most people who support science and research. On the other hand the streets of USA are the most dangerous in the world. There are the most cases of criminality, carnal abuses, murderers. So, what do I think about this country? America provides great conditions for living, great high schools and universities. But I do not want live there. Slovakia is a small country but I like it. I want to live there forever.



The students asked me what I thought about my home country, and I wasn't sure what to say. Should I be honest? Should I avoid politics? Would they even understand my opinions expressed in English? I acknowledged the stereotypes they saw on television—the obesity, the crime, the wealth. I told them I hated fast food and ate it very rarely, and that McDonald's makes me physically sick. When I mentioned I lived near DC, they asked me how many shootings I've witnessed, and I said none; I'd actually grown up in a suburb, not unlike where they were raised. I wasn't that different; I wasn't exotic, as I had hoped.

“Do you think America is the best country in the world?” Dasa, one of my favorite students, asked me openly.

“No,” I told her. “Is Slovakia the best country in the world?”

My students looked around the room at each other, wondering who should answer first. I could tell they felt uncomfortable with my retort and didn't want to offend me, or each other, with their response.

Andre spoke up. “In my opinion, all of these countries are just full of fuckers.”

One below-freezing Saturday morning in November of 2009 I awoke with an all-too-familiar tingling feeling in my lungs. I knew I was getting a cold, but on that particular day I was to travel to Čičmany, an historical village in the west of Slovakia, and I didn't have *time* to get sick. I was on a break from teaching—there was a flu epidemic going around and our school shut down until the student body “felt better.”

(It's a common occurrence in Slovakia; if one-third of the student body is proven to be ill—or simply doesn't show up to school because they're feigning illness—the headmaster will usually cancel classes for the week until the epidemic is under control.) There was just too much culture and excitement and adventure to be experienced, and I refused to let a little cough get in the way. But when I roused from a fitful sleep on Sunday, weak and trembling with a fever, I knew I had made a poor decision and pushed myself too hard. I was certain I didn't have H1N1, or the swine flu, which was going around at the time. If I grew any worse, I feared I'd have to visit a Slovak doctor.

I waited it out, praying that a day of rest would be curative. Yet when Monday morning arrived and I could hardly breathe without feeling dizzy, I called my Slovak friend and fellow English teacher, Janka, and begged for guidance. Where do I go? How much will it cost? I had never been to a doctor outside of the US and possessed no knowledge about how the system worked in post-communist Eastern Europe. Slovakia is proud of its socialized healthcare system, and through the Fulbright program I was given a very limited medical plan, but I was assured that no matter the cost of doctor services in my host country I would likely be reimbursed...eventually. To be honest, I was absolutely horrified to visit a Slovak doctor. What were their qualifications? How long had they been in practice? Did they have a medical degree? In the three months that I'd been living in the town of Zilina, whenever I felt ill, my friends and colleagues would encourage me to drink tea with rum. *Have a headache?* Drink tea with rum. *Can't sleep?* Drink tea with rum. *Stomach bothering you?* And so the advice went. I wondered if this homeopathic treatment would follow suit with the doctor's orders.

In my decrepit state, I couldn't walk, so the school custodian drove Janka and me to the clinic a mile from my apartment. On the drive he boasted to me, in Slovak, about how he never gets sick. He hadn't been ill since he was a boy. "What makes you so healthy?" I asked him. "*Slivovica*," he replied with a grunt and a tap on his breast pocket, which, by its lumpiness, I assumed held a flask. Slivovica is the national alcoholic drink of Slovakia, what the natives call "plum brandy" but what I think tastes more like what I imagine paint thinner might. "Drink slivovica every day and it will burn all the germs out of you! You will live healthy forever! You will be strong, like the Slovak peasants!" I was skeptical then, and I'm still not convinced. He told me that every day before he goes to work he takes a shot of slivovica for breakfast. I wonder what my headmaster at the bilingual school would have thought of this as he patched shingles on the sharply sloped roof of the school.

The local health clinic in my neighborhood was a labyrinth of dark hallways and closed doors and dead ends. It wasn't as it is in the US where you sign in with a friendly, smiling receptionist and wait in a comfortable lobby in a padded chair for a nurse to call your name and escort you to a private, tidy room. In Slovensko, every doctor has their own closet-like office, so an ill individual simply knocks on their door and hopes that they answer. If not, you move on. It was quite an arduous and exhausting process that took over forty minutes. I remember it like this: Janka would knock on a door and a frazzled-looking nurse would answer. My friend-turned-translator explained that I was an American living and working in Slovakia and that I needed to see a doctor immediately. The nurse, intrigued by my nationality, would then open the door a bit

further and poke her head out to see me. “Ohhhh! An *American*?” Once she got a good look at me, she’d shake her head and reply, “Nie, nie pomoc” (no, I can’t help you) and shut the door in our faces. This happened three times. I shuffled back and forth, exasperated and dizzy, short of breath, from office to office, begging for someone to take me in. No one would see me, for reasons unbeknownst to us.

We were lucky when the fourth door opened and the nurse told us to wait while she consulted the doctor about “the Američanka.” Once summoned, Janka accompanied me into the cluttered office where a nurse briskly pulled down my shirt and shoved a thermometer into my armpit. She seemed disappointed that I didn’t have a temperature, frowning, then pushed me out of my chair and behind a tattered shower curtain where the doctor was waiting. His “office” was a complete mess—empty boxes, eye drops, files, lab coats, and bits of loose paper covered the floor, his desk, the cabinets, *everything*. I sat down in a ratty brown 70s-era chair while Janka listed my long list of symptoms. The two talked for about ten minutes, not about how I was feeling but about Obama, Clinton, something about “fasts-foods,” and god knows what else. He then proceeded to dig out a digital thermometer from under a pile of junk on his desk. “Look! American-make!” I acknowledged the fancy thermometer with a nod and pretended to be impressed. Then he pulled down my shirtsleeve (*do these people not feel the need to ask for permission before removing someone’s clothing?* I wondered) and stuck it under my armpit.

When I didn’t have a temperature for the second time he halted the political banter and resumed his examination. This is where the real fun began. By this time I was so weak and miserable, I would have acquiesced to practically anything if it had

made me feel the slightest bit better. My Slovak physician had an interesting way of examining that went something like this: he would pull out one tongue depressor from a glass jar, think of something else to say to Janka, get distracted, and put it in his open briefcase. Slowly realizing what he had done, he chuckled, grabbed another one, got distracted again and put it on top of his computer. I watched with horror as tongue depressors began to accumulate around his desk. I was waiting to be diagnosed by this doctor who seemed to have a severe case of ADD.

Finally he managed to focus for a moment and asked me to open my mouth. As an American, I had been trained from a very young age to “open up and say, ‘ahhhhhh.’” So that’s exactly what I did. I closed my eyes and stuck out my tongue as far as I could to let him get a good clear look at my swollen throat. “What the *hell* is she doing?” he said in Slovak to Janka. “Tell her to put her tongue back in her mouth. And to stop making that *noise*.” Embarrassed, I did as I was told. I noticed he was shoving an ungloved hand into my mouth—that would never happen in America, I thought, making a mental note to brush my teeth as soon as I arrived back home. On my second attempt of his throat assessment, the doctor began emitting a series of “oohs” and “ahhs.” He seemed surprised, and I panicked. Perhaps my illness was worse than I thought. I heard Janka laughing hysterically behind me and asked her what was wrong with me—and what was wrong with this doctor. “He wants to examine your teeth. Is that ok?” *What? My teeth?* My teeth are fine; my teeth aren’t causing me unbearable chest pain. Defenseless and ailing, I gave him permission to tap my molars and poke my gums. “Wow. *Wow*. You have the most beautiful teeth I’ve ever *seen*!” he said. “Perfectly

straight. So white. You have great genes.” I thanked him and told him I’d tell my parents the good news.

In the US, medical personnel use those small handheld flashlights to examine the nose, throat and ears. They are sanitized and partially disposable. In Slovakia, they use what I’d like to call a modified lantern to examine your sinuses. It’s a lamp with a bulb about the size of a basketball and is placed about a foot away from the patient’s face so that he or she is immediately blinded and will stay so for about ten minutes afterwards. The Slovak doctor didn’t examine my nose or ears. He listened to my lungs for about twenty seconds and gave his diagnosis. Bronchitis, and a sinus infection. *Well, I could have told you that an hour ago*, I thought. “Do you have a man here?” he asked. I told him my boyfriend at the time was in the United States. “But you need to be taken care of. I can’t do it—I’m too old. And I’m fat! Look at my belly! Look!” He wasn’t obese, but he did remind me a little of Santa with his white beard and jolly demeanor. I felt nauseous as he clutched his spare tire and jiggled it up and down a few times for emphasis. He stood up to turn off the blinding light and in horror I noticed his pants gathering about his ankles. “Hoopsies! Hup-hup!” He chuckled and leaned over his potbelly to pick up his trousers. “It was just lunchtime,” he said. He explained that he must undo his belt every time he eats or else he becomes very uncomfortable. At least his lab coat covered up most of his legs and Janka and I were spared. My jaw dropped when he bent down to gather his pants and a beige tongue depressor fell to the floor from somewhere inside them.

The “exam” took over an hour. Although he had been in practice for over forty years, my doctor had never examined a foreigner, and I was something of a surprise and novelty to him, like a guinea pig or an exciting experiment. He spoke almost no English, and my Slovak was limited, but I understood he had done me a true favor by seeing me. I shook his hand and thanked him for his unusual hospitality. “All righty! Good, good!” he said in his limited broken English, chuckling again. Janka took me to the pharmacy to fill my seven—yes, seven—prescriptions. The prescriptions were not written on formal stationary but rather in unintelligible handwriting on a miniature neon blue post-it note. I saved the note for my journal and considered bringing it to the doctor’s office in America once my Fulbright was over to show my general practitioner, but I had an inkling they wouldn’t get as big of a kick out of it as I do.

"I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel...hearing footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon."

—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*



## **MISSED**

The Slovak Internet connection was weak, flickering unsurely as if it might fail at any moment, but the message came through all too clearly. “You need to come home,” my father, Perry, informed me over a trans-Atlantic Skype conversation in late January of 2010. “It’s time.”

When I received the news that my mother was dying and receiving palliative hospice care in our home, I was in Slovakia completing a Fulbright Fellowship. She had been battling stage four colon cancer for four years. I booked a flight home that evening—I’d be leaving the city of Zilina on the last day of February, buying myself a few weeks abroad to tie up loose ends and forfeit my teaching position—and prepared myself for what I might see when I arrived back to Virginia. I knew when I departed for my ten-month teaching appointment in Eastern Europe that I might receive this very call. But distance and time and unfamiliarity of my new surroundings helped me to lose myself and forget what I left behind, and the call—a wake-up call, really—was the beginning of the end for me.

Nothing could have readied me to see my fifty-year-old mother, always made up, always put together, completely changed from how I left her the August before, in 2009. Her heels were replaced with fuzzy bedroom slippers. Her hair, surprisingly still there

after months of chemotherapy and radiation, was matted and longer than I'd ever seen it, almost down to her chin, devoid of the pomade and hairspray and curls that I was used to. She wore no makeup, and her skin had yellowed and become saggy. She had lost about fifty pounds, and her collarbones jutted out from underneath a purple bathrobe. I imagined putting my hands around them and pulling her up, like a crane. When I hugged her for the first time after seven months of being overseas, I anticipated the smell of Chanel Number 5, but it was the smell of death. Around her hung the odors of urine, and unwashed flesh, and decaying teeth. Some teeth had fallen out, and one of her front teeth had been chipped, a tiny piece, so unobtrusive, so demure, that only someone who had stared at her for twenty-three years would notice.

"It's you, it's you, it's you," she cried as she hugged me. Tightening her thin arms around me, she wouldn't let me go. "I thought you would never come home. I thought you'd want to stay there forever."

"I'm here, I'm here, I'm here," I assured her. "I'm not going anywhere."

The truth is, I didn't want to come home. I'd envisioned myself teaching English in Bosnia, vacationing on the beaches of Croatia, sliding across the borders of Ukraine and Russia and darting between anonymous concrete jungles, always searching, always adventurous, never looking back. Slovakia had become my new home, and Virginia seemed like a faraway place—not a home anymore, but simply where I was from. Seven months earlier I had watched a tiny animated plane move further and further away from my past across the Atlantic and towards my future, towards opportunity and escape: Slovenkso. Coming back across that same ocean, I felt robbed of the gift I had been

given. I wrote only one sentence in my diary on that final day in what had become “my” city of Zilina: “I am grateful, but I am angry.” My time had been cut short, and so would my mom’s, and nothing seemed fair or right, and would never be.

My dad and I were the primary home caretakers of my dying mom, Tina, barely fifty years old at the time she passed away. Hospice workers were scheduled to come and go once or twice a week, but Sarah—a nursing assistant who came to our house quite often—came to be like a member of our family. She had black, almost blue, hair that hung down to her lower back. Sarah had the slightest accent—I never knew where she was from, and I never found time to ask. She smelled of lavender. My mother, a very private and modest person, would not let my dad or me change her colostomy bag, or bathe her, or see her naked. But she let Sarah see all of these things. They talked and talked.

My mom told me that Sarah was her best friend. I felt a little jealous—mom and I were always best friends, and I didn’t want to be replaced just because I hadn’t been home in half a year—but I quickly warmed up to Sarah. She had a soothing way about her, and took her time washing my mother, or changing her clothes, whereas the other hospice nurses seemed to always be in a rush, only concerned with her vitals.

I arrived home on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010. My mother would only live for six weeks after that day. During the first week I was struck by how positive she remained. “This is only temporary,” she said, her tone apologetic. “I know I don’t look very good right

now, but I'll get better soon." I remembered a verse from a children's song she sang to me in elementary school whenever something upsetting happened:

*"Be optimistic*

*Don't you be a grumpy*

*When the road gets bumpy*

*Just smile, smile, smile and be happy"*

Around mid-March, my mother began to realize the gravity of her situation. She wasn't getting better; she would never get better. About three weeks before she passed away, Sarah came over for her last visit. She was being transferred to a different location and would no longer be able to take care of my mom. Of course, she didn't tell my mom this; she only revealed the truth to my dad and me. I think she didn't want to say goodbye to her new friend, either. Sarah, like us, didn't want to see the end.

I heard the scream first, then the sobbing. My mom and Sarah were on the third floor, in the master bathroom, and she was about to wash my mother's hair. I ran up two flights of stairs and stormed into the bathroom, fearing the worse: bleeding, or a fall, or immense, unbearable pain from somewhere deep and unreachable inside.

My mother was crumpled on the floor, crying, Sarah's hands resting on the tops of her shoulders in a gesture of comfort.

"What happened?" I demanded to know. "Why is she so upset? I've never seen her like this before."

“Your mom looked in the mirror,” Sarah told me with a face that uncharacteristically displayed worry and sadness. “I told her not to, but she did anyway. She, um, didn’t like what she saw.”

“I’m a skeleton, I’m dying, I’m ugly,” my mother gasped out between sobs. “I look terrible, I look terrible,” she repeated. I didn’t know what to say; Sarah assured her that everything would be alright, but I knew it wouldn’t. She did look terrible, skeletal, sickly. Standing there, naked, in front of that mirror, she stared at death, and it stared back. And death wasn’t temporary.

I did the only thing I could think of; I wanted to make it better, to make her pain go away, to cover up and hide the state of her wasting body. I grabbed a few cosmetics from her organizer near the sink and had my mom stand up, leaning on the counter for support. First, I applied mineral foundation in swirling motions to her yellow, dry skin, covering up any discoloration or hyperpigmentation near her nose and mouth. Dipping two fingers into a dusty rose-colored cream blush, I gently patted the rouge onto her cheekbones, emphasizing the highest points. It was difficult to put mascara on her wet, teary lashes, but a shimmery golden shadow made her eyes look less puffy. Lastly, I applied lip gloss—her favorite shade, a sheer red color with flecks of gold—and told her to look in the mirror again.

“Not too shabby,” she said. I grabbed a peach-colored loose-fitting silk tunic shirt from her closet—it still had its tags—and draped it over her thin, wobbly frame. “Oh, that’s a nice color,” she noted, examining herself in the mirror. “I thought I’d never get

the chance to wear this shirt.” She wasn’t really smiling, but at least she had stopped crying.

“Remember when you taught me to do my makeup, mom?” I asked her. She nodded in response. “That’s definitely something I inherited from you: an obsession with makeup.” I remembered the times we used to go to Sephora and Ulta together and spend hundreds of dollars between us on high-end cosmetics, but quickly stopped myself; I realized then that we’d never shop for makeup, or clothes, or groceries, together again.

“I taught you everything you know,” she said, looking me dead in the eye. “No matter what happens, I’ll always be with you. You hear me?”

It was my turn to nod, so I did, holding back tears. I couldn’t let my mother see me cry; it would only upset her more. So I waited an hour until she fell asleep in the living room, and rushed to my bedroom. I’m not sure how long I laid in bed, face down, screaming into my pillow, but I know I lost my voice for the rest of the day.

During the first week of April 2010 I woke up every morning wondering if my mother had died. At night before falling asleep I prayed that she would pass, would drift off silently, peacefully, to be found in the dawn’s early hours completely at rest by my father and me. We’d stumble groggy and still in holds of sleep to her bedside and sense the coldness of her body, the lack of movement, maybe a scent in the living room that was unfamiliar. Instead of labored breathing we’d hear stillness. The birds would be out on the porch at that early time; I’d remember to get more feed to bring to them that afternoon, make a mental note as I saw my mother’s body, empty of soul and without her

in it. The birds that mom would listen for in the mornings—she always remembered their feed. They'd still be there when she wasn't, singing, watching the sunrise, looking out for the new day. But her death did not happen this way, the way she wanted it, in the home, in her sleep.

Tammy, her in-home hospice nurse, stood by her bed and held her hand. My mother looked up at her, searching, hoping for a final answer to a begging four-year question. "So when I fall asleep tonight, will I not wake up tomorrow?" With this question I could trace the process of a mother reduced to a child in a matter of weeks. Tammy blinked repeatedly, her head nodding in its characteristic, encouraging way. "I can't tell you that, sweetheart. I can't tell you when." And so my mother kept questioning. Kept begging. Rolled her eyes back into her skull and searched there for her miracle.

One morning as I lay on the couch next to her sleeping body, she began to call out my father's name. "Dad's working, but I'm here mom," I told her, patting her hands. "It's me—what do you need?" "Oh, thank goodness, thank goodness," she replied, relieved. I wondered what she was thankful for—that she wasn't alone? Was it about to happen? Did she know something we didn't? What did she see, what dreams and visions were fluttering around in her mind during those ten-hour periods of sleep? Where did she go?

My mom saw me in heaven in a red silk dress. She told me about this vision two weeks before she died. When she woke up from her fitful, groaning sleep, she liked to

tell me her dreams. I'd sit on the side of her hospital bed, positioned in our living room cockeye to the television set, and she'd hold one of my hands cradled in both of hers. Along with her dreams she often had vivid hallucinations during the last two months of her life as she lay and waited to die, disoriented and muddled with Oxycontin and Dilaudid and Ketamine and a mélange of other drugs that pulsed through her bloodstream at all hours of the day. In heaven, although all alone, she said I was happy, that I had never been happier, in this red dress. I smiled in heaven, and twirled around, showing off the folds and contours of my outfit to anyone who would watch, like I might have done as a little girl.

"You look so good in red, but you don't wear it often," she told me, the long fingernail of her first finger tapping my shoulder for emphasis. The last French manicure she would ever have was chipped; the slightest traces of white paint still remained on the tips of her nails. She wore one of my dad's old XXL bleach-stained t-shirts, cut completely up the back from seam to collar so that she didn't have to pull it over her head. "You look good in color."

"I don't like to wear red, mom," I reminded her. "It's too bright for me."

Tightening her grip on my hand, she looked up at me. "You were alone, in heaven. But I don't want to be alone. Will you be there waiting for me?"

"I have to stay here, mom," I told her. "You go. You get everything ready for us, and we'll follow you soon, and I'll wear a red dress so you'll know it's me."

"And a flower in your hair?" she asked me, childlike, excited.

"I'll wear a flower if you want me to, mom," I told her. "I'll wear a red rose."



And then, loosing the grip on my hand, she smacked my wrist. “Well, *duh*. You still have to match your *outfits* in heaven.”

Of all her recounted visions, however, this is the only pleasant one I can recall. The others are riddled with fear and anxiety and pre-terminal agitation. She wasn’t really my mother anymore; her mind was someplace else, someplace dark, unable to remember our names, oftentimes mistaking me for a nurse. At night, she would watch as mice ran across the floor towards her. In reality, what she saw were balled up socks, unmoving, unthreatening to someone with a clearer head, a brain that wasn’t being eaten away by disease. We couldn’t see what she did. Occasionally, household items were imagined out of their scale in my mother’s eyes. My father placed a small wooden organizer on the kitchen counter for bills and mail. She looked at it one day and asked how the building across the street went up so quickly. The builders were nowhere to be found, so how did it happen without her noticing? She’s always looking out of the windows, she said. She knows our townhome community in Ashburn, Virginia, “better than anybody.” Apparently the neighbors took down their fences, and the heating pad was a cardboard moving box, and the bedspread hatched red-eyed baby mosquitoes. At night I could hear the scratching of her chipped gel nails on the floral comforter.

Two days before she passed away, my dad and I decided to move her out of our living room and into a hospice care facility. We could not give her the high doses of medicine she needed in our home. She went insane in our house, showing signs of aggression and delusion. We could not control her from physically harming herself and lashing out at us. Sometimes she screamed so loud that I thought our neighbors would

call the cops. On her final morning in our home, she ripped out the IV from her upper arm, took off her clothes, and rolled out of her hospital bed. She couldn't walk, and didn't get far, but that didn't stop her from shouting. "You're trying to kill me!" she yelled. "You promised you wouldn't do this!" My dad and I were promised by nurses and doctors that she would die peacefully, quietly, in her sleep—no pain. We'd have time to say our goodbyes. But I didn't get the chance to say goodbye to my mom. None of us—not my dad, not my mom, not me—wanted to see what we were seeing, real or imaginary.

But we did see. "It's difficult to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends," Joan Didion wrote, and when I saw my mother cold and unmoving on a hospital bed at the Hospice House thirty minutes after she passed these few words came to mind. But all I could see was the end. It wasn't hard to. The end was laying right in front of me, in a blue and green floral nightgown that did not belong to my mother. The end had its eyes closed and the red, chapped fingers of both hands interlaced and resting on a swollen, hardened belly. The end felt like sunken temples when I brushed the back of my hand against her head, and the end had its warmth sucked out with its last breath. The end was not nigh, but here, and I wondered how I would begin again.

When the end was happening, I was in my car, driving to see her. At 9:29 a.m. on Tuesday, April 20<sup>th</sup>, I received a phone call that informed me my mother had just died. That's how the caller from Hospice House said it: "I'm sorry to tell you this, but your mother just died." Not passed away, or was gone, or was no longer with us; she had

simply died, alone, and unexpectedly. The caller's wording was deliberate, and to the point. A month before I was asked by another hospice nurse if I was "ready for the big show," and I wondered what kind of person—what kind of caregiver—would say something like that.

"She had a fever early this morning and was having trouble breathing. And then...she died." And then...and then?

I was the one to know first. And I didn't make it in time. I took the news in stride, hung up my cell phone and made a decision to keep moving on, keep moving forward in my silver Honda CR-V, the car that had belonged to my mother for eleven years before I inherited it at age twenty-three when she could no longer drive. I looked up at the SUV's cloth ceiling and saw grey stains from her cigarette smoke. She would not hold a Virginia Slims Ultra Light again.

Half an hour after receiving "the news," I arrived at the small, neat brick building, its manicured lawn welcoming, not telling of the events that transpired each day inside its walls. I saw her there on a cot, yellow and unmoving, in what they called the meditation room at Hospice House, although it felt like that room really gave you no room to think, it was so crowded with other people's memories and death and mourning.

A nurse wearing a freshly starched lab coat greeted me with a cold, ungloved hand. She smelled of hand sanitizer and disinfectant. I recognized her voice immediately from the phone; I'll never forget that voice, although her name escapes me now.

"Would you like to see your mother?" she asked me. Another strange question, as though my mom was simply waiting for me in the next room, enjoying a diet Dr. Pepper

or a coffee, lighting a fresh cigarette. She would scoot over on the hospital bed and I'd lie next to her and we'd catch up after not talking for a few days. I'd comment on the drabness of the decorations, and she'd elaborate on how much she hated the fake waxy flower arrangements placed in every corner.

"Yes, I would, please, thank you," was all I could say in response. My father, also too late, was silent.

The nurse stood next to me as I examined my mother like a person might examine a statue or a painting in a museum. Detached, critical, taking it all in. It was not my mom, but a body, a shell, empty.

"Your mother is very thin," she commented. I agreed. I noticed her protruding cheekbones, her sunken eye sockets. Someone had brushed her hair.

A minute passed. "If she looked anything like you in life, she must have been very beautiful," the nurse said. I smiled at the unusual compliment and opened my wallet to display the last professional photo of my mother, taken three years prior. She sits against a blue background, her hair recently cut, thin pink lips turned slightly up at the camera. My dad sits behind her in the photo. I wondered if it was their last photo together, if he knew as he stared at the lens that things were about to change forever. They were married for 25 years, and he still swears he'll never marry again.

"She could have been a model," the nurse remarked, nodding in appreciation at the photograph, and I told her that at one time, she was, in her early twenties. She never went to college, but in her mid-thirties attended nursing school to become an LPN. Tina-wina, as my dad used to call her, maintained her good looks until she became too ill to

apply makeup or do her hair. I wanted to remember my mother that way—her lipsticked half-smile, her arched and shaped eyebrows. But my admiring memories of her had been replaced with the duties of taking care of a dying human—instead of painting each other's nails, I cleaned her bedsores while she cried, humiliated. We didn't watch television together but I watched her every day, observing with fixed concentration her chest laboriously rise and fall and rise, dreading the moment when it would fail to ever rise again. I began using her Chanel perfume and sprayed her bed linens and robes with Febreeze.

The finality of it gets to me. No more miracles; she really wished for that. "I'm waiting for my miracle—I've waited four years, so it's coming soon," she'd tell the hospice workers, just a few weeks before she died. We wished for it, too, until the day my mother passed, and a different kind of miracle happened. She was at peace, even though those she left behind were not. And the realization of the events gives us no mercy, no hope. Just emptiness in the house, quiet. When I moved back home after graduating from James Madison University, I used to walk into our family home around midnight on a Friday or Saturday night, slightly tipsy from an evening out with friends, and while slipping off my shoes in the foyer I could hear the din of the television upstairs. It was a constant in my home, the flickering images, the chattering of voices from the plasma screen. My mom had always been a night owl, and stayed up late watching reruns of *I Love Lucy* and *MASH* and ordering jewelry and makeup off of the Home Shopping Network or QVC. She'd greet me, ask me if I'd like some coffee, or tea, or would I like to see the new bracelet or jacket she just ordered? And usually I'd sit for a

minute or two, recounting events of the day—how was work, I put up a new birdfeeder on the deck, tomorrow we have a radiation or chemo or blood work appointment—nothing deep, or profoundly special, or life-affirming.

“I missed you at home tonight,” she’d say. “My Traci.”

It’s these little moments I miss the most. I’d come home after a long day or night and the house would be dark; my dad’s working late, or driving around, or watching a lacrosse game somewhere. The television is off. The couch goes unoccupied. Smells of coffee and tea are nonexistent, and no one is home to ask me about my day.

"Mariam wished for so much in those final moments. Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her... she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad."

—Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

## **BEGIN AGAIN**

After my mom passed, one of the most difficult adjustments my dad and I were forced to make was how we would run the household without her. She was the one who did the laundry. Mom always took care of the dog. She did all of the grocery shopping, and although she was never much of a chef, she was happy to prepare simple meals for us. Mom was the glue that held our three-member family together, and when she was gone it felt like our home was gone, too.

Immediately after returning home from my mom's memorial service in April of 2010, I made plans to get away from our townhouse in Northern Virginia and do some traveling. I thought some time away would be therapeutic, and after spending six weeks watching my mom disappear before my eyes in our living room, I greatly needed a change of scenery. Friends invited me to stay with them in various parts of the country, and I welcomed the distraction. I spent two weeks in Utah backpacking around Zion National Park and canyoneering in Bryce Canyon with my college friend Kate, who lived out of her white Toyota Camry in the desert backcountry and didn't ask me any questions about my mom. I flew from there to Chicago, where my best friend Kim and I stayed with a family who were friends of her parents. We drank too much beer, went to as many museums as we could find, and walked the city streets until our calves became knotted in



cramps. When evening rolled around, we were so tired from sightseeing that I simply didn't have time to think about anything but my aching legs and what sights we would visit the next day. While in Illinois I also made plans to visit Europe again that coming winter, booking flights to Austria, Slovakia, and England, eager to return to the place I really felt was *home*—the place I was forced to leave too early.

After a month of domestic traveling, I returned home to Virginia where my father picked me up from Dulles airport in mid-May of 2010. I threw my dirty backpack in the trunk and as soon as I sat down in the front seat, he began to cry. I'd never seen my father shed a tear before; he was completely changed since I had last seen him. Watching his shaking shoulders, so different from how I was used to seeing my stoic, reserved father, reminded me of coming home from Slovakia two months prior to see my mother so completely changed, in an entirely different physical and emotional state than I had left her. He pinched his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and sobbed over the steering wheel. I felt like both of my parents were slipping away, and I wondered if it was my fault; every time I left, it felt like they died a little. I didn't know what to say.

"Do you think she knew I loved her?" he asked me. "Did she know? Did she know I did everything I could? Did I do the right thing?"

"Yes, dad, she knew," was all I could manage to say, looking down at my hands. My mother wasn't able to die at home due to complications with pain and preterminal agitation, which went against her wishes. My father couldn't save her. Now he was asking me for consolation that no one could give him. As we made the fifteen-minute drive towards our house from the airport, I was in complete shock—I remembered then

what I was coming home to, what I had so conveniently tried to forget. A grieving father, an empty house, and no mom. He went through at least a dozen wrinkled McDonald's napkins on the way, piling the tear-soaked tissues on the dashboard. He cried the entire way home while I sat next to him and looked out the passenger's side window.

The house was dark and empty when we walked inside together. The place was clean, but devoid of warmth. Our family dog, Sam, had passed away months before my homecoming from Slovakia, and the lack of a wagging tail and excited bark was depressing. I made a mental note to look into buying a puppy as soon as possible to bring back the comfort and joyfulness having a pet brings to a family. My father had made the living room his new bedroom, and the couch was draped in old sheets, an uncovered pillow, and a tattered afghan that once belonged to me in college. He told me he couldn't sleep upstairs in their bedroom anymore, and I understood. He retained his sleeping spot on the couch every night that he remained in that townhouse for over three years.

My mom was always a homebody, and most every time I would come home, she'd be on that couch watching an old black-and-white movie or some CourtTV show or marathon reruns of *I Love Lucy* and *Roseanne*. She loved to make coffee late at night since she stayed up usually until 2 a.m., and if we weren't in the mood for caffeine, she'd whip up some hot chocolate, usually flavored with mint or caramel or vanilla. More than any room in the house (aside from, perhaps, the bathroom), this is where she spent most of her time. I understood then why my dad wanted to sleep on the couch and not in the bedroom; this is where he could be closest to her. The tan, L-shaped sofa is where she had originally planned to take her last breath.

While my dad found solace sitting where she once sat, I wanted to get as far away from the memory of her as possible. The house was simultaneously empty and stifling, silent and deafening. The memories of hot chocolate and late-night talks in front of the television had been replaced by changing IV bags and bandaging bedsores, and while I tried to remember my mom as she was before, I couldn't get the image of her supine body in that floral nightgown at Hospice House out of my mind. I tried looking at old pictures of her and I from my childhood, but they just made me want to cry, so I put the albums under my bed and forgot about them. Sometimes I would stay in bed for hours after waking and relive things we had done together, simple things—spending too much money on beauty products at Sephora during Christmas season when they had the best sales. Listening to Bob Dylan and Tom Petty in the car on the way to softball games, remembering her hilarious impressions of the male singers. Sharing an Ultimate Feast at Red Lobster and stuffing extra garlic cheddar biscuits in our purses for later.

No matter what pleasant memories I attempted to recall, the memories that had been so freshly imprinted on my mind refused to be erased. I enveloped myself in her perfume, Chanel Number 5, hoping the smell would transport me to a time long ago when she wore it and looked beautiful, that my olfactory sense would trigger memories of when I hugged her and the scent lingered on the collar of her shirt and our lives seemed blessed and she was still here. It didn't work. I'd slip on her wedding rings, the set that I watched my father slip off her bone-thin finger the day she was removed from treatment in our home and put into the care of nurses at hospice house, and wonder about

the day I'd get to wear them as my own. But then I would remember one crucial detail: she wouldn't be there on my wedding day.

I was better—more sane, I felt—when I was outside of the house. My dad had become a black hole of bereavement; while I stifled any grief or painful emotions and tried to stay busy, he fell into a pit of misery that nothing could pull him out of. I put as much distance as I could between my home, him, and myself. I spent more nights at friends' houses or boyfriends' apartments. In fall of 2010 I began my first year of a creative writing MFA program, and I would leave for campus very early in the morning and return late at night, even if I didn't have class that evening. I'd stay out until midnight at a dark bar where I was sure not to run into anyone I knew and drink while writing essays on my laptop, or go for an hour-long run and lose myself in the meandering paths around Fairfax, Virginia, completely exhausting myself so that I would sleep deeply that night and would hopefully avoid any dreams of her.

## EAST MEETS WEST

“This is an Asian household,” Alan informed me as I walked into the foyer of our new apartment. After deciding to move in together following six months of dating, here we stood, literally taking our first step into our new lives together, and already I was receiving a lecture.

“You need to take your shoes off now,” he told me, gesturing towards my sandaled feet. “Asian house. No shoes.”

“But we never took our shoes off at your other house before,” I mentioned. “And you were still Asian there.”

“Doesn’t matter. Yes we did. *I* did. Just take them off.” He slipped out of his tattered Birkenstocks and padded barefoot into the kitchen, hands on his hips, surveying the unfortunate paint job our landlord did the night before.

I watched my Vietnamese boyfriend walk around the apartment, into the dining room, across the living room, and disappear down the hallway towards the bedroom. The carpet, not very white, was probably at least a dozen years old, with small noticeable stains in places. I slipped out of my flip-flops and placed them gingerly, side by side, near the front door, my first new ritual in our new home as we began our new lives.

Alan and I met in January of 2011; I was twenty-four, and he was thirty-five. He was the manager at a local bar that I had only been to once before, the previous September. I don't remember seeing him on that first autumn night in the dim, yellow lighting of the Old Fire Station #3 in Fairfax, Virginia, but he remembers me; I didn't notice him until my second visit, in January. People ask how we first met, and I feel hesitant to tell them we met, of all places, at a dive bar, on a slow Tuesday night that advertised a "killer" open mic. "But he was the manager," I offer as an attempt to save face, "and I wasn't drunk or anything."

As soon as I walked through the door in my bright royal blue coat that would become his favorite, we locked eyes. As soon as we laid eyes on each other, I knew I *had* to talk to him. I wanted to know everything about him: where he was from, and where had he been, how many siblings and pets and family members he had, and if he preferred vodka or beer or neither. He sat on a small stage near the back of the bar, messing around on a deep cherry red acoustic guitar. His hair was spiked and he wore black slacks and a black fitted shirt that showed off his muscular torso. I turned to my friend Lauren—it had been her idea to grab some beers that night—and told her I wasn't leaving until I talked to that Asian guy. A few hours later, we did talk, and couldn't stop talking, and talked even after the bar closed, and then called each other on the phone that day, and the next, and scheduled our first date for that weekend. We went to brunch at Artie's on Sunday and had eggs Benedict and sugary mimosas. Later he would tell me he wanted to take me out for Vietnamese food on our first date, but didn't think that I was ready for the "real thing" yet.

I'm not sure why I jumped into things so quickly with Alan. Perhaps it has to do with being lonely, being bored, wanting something new, wanting to be with someone who had absolutely no connection to my past, who didn't know my mother. Someone who was a welcome disruption, an ear to listen, a partner to drink with, a guy who played guitar well enough to distract me and a guy available enough to take up all my free time.

Nothing scared me more than Alan's mother. She is a small Vietnamese woman, nearly sixty years old, barely five feet tall. Her name is Bernadette, but she insisted I call her mom, or *Ma*, in Vietnamese. I found it odd that a woman I hardly knew pushed me to call her my mother, but I wanted to please her. After all, I didn't have anyone else to call mom anymore, so I didn't feel I was offending the woman who gave birth to me. In the back of my mind I wondered what my mom would think—calling a near stranger “mom” because it made her feel wanted, or important—but I dismissed it since my mom wasn't there. She would think it was odd, and maybe even funny. “What a *weirdo*,” I imagined her saying, rolling her eyes. “Whatever—just go with it for now.”

Bernadette had a slew of names for me: Traci, of course, but also *con* (child), girl, honey, baby, daughter, future wife of my handsome son, future daughter in law and bride of my handsome son, the girlfriend of my very handsome son, and, if she was in a rush, just “you.” She is a beautiful woman—petite and strong, with smooth, glowing skin and deep, dark eyes her son inherited. Every time I saw her she was completely made up with false eyelashes, heavily drawn angular black eyebrows, heeled shoes, curled, recently dyed hair and a freshly painted set of gel nails. She was very tiny, but incredibly

intimidating. Her perfectly white veneers shone supernaturally bright, simultaneously with interest and disdain. One look from her put me on edge, questioning everything about myself: what I was wearing, how my hair was styled, the things I said. I'm usually a confident and poised person, but Bernadette had the ability to make me feel weak and simple in a quick glance.

The first time I had dinner at Alan's parents' house, about two months after we began dating, Bernadette handed me a steak knife during the soup course. "Spread your left hand fingers apart on the table and hold this knife in your right hand," she instructed me. I did as I was told. "Now, as fast as you can, move the blade of the knife between each space of your fingers, and answer the following questions." I wondered if this was some kind of trick, some test that all of Alan's previous girlfriends had to pass to get into the family's circle of trust. I wondered if she learned this interrogation tactic from a soldier who lived in the jungles of Vietnam, or in a prison. Or, maybe, even more frighteningly, she just made it up. For fun.

"Is your name Traci?"

The knife bounced between my pointer, middle, and ring fingers. I held my breath, counting a second as the knife tapped the tabletop between each finger.

"Yes."

"Do you love my son?"

"Umm—yes." The space between my fingers seemed too small, my fingers too big.

"Are you going to marry him?"



I faltered. I thought I should say yes—Alan and I had already briefly talked about it once—but I didn't want to give her the wrong answer.

“Er—yes—well, I think maybe one day, yes,” I replied, grazing the inside of my thumb with the blade.

Bernadette nodded. “Ok. And, last question—are you crazy?”

“No,” I replied. (Yeah, *I'm* the crazy one, I thought.) Thankful that the question and answer part of the evening was finally over, I looked up at the face of what I imagined would be my future mother-in-law to see if I had passed, or failed.

“THEN WHY YOU HAVE A KNIFE IN YO HAND?! WHY YOU TRY CHOP YO FINGERS OFF?! YOU CRAZY!!!” She began laughing maniacally, tossing her head back so far I thought her tiny frame would topple over backwards. Alan's white, retired Naval officer stepdad Gordon (or “Papa G” as he liked to be called) joined in on the joke, and Alan, laughing, disappeared into the bathroom. I stared at her beaming face, and Papa G's, and knew that I had passed.

When I look back at this cruel hazing ritual of Bernadette's I realize just how intimidated I was by her. At the time I was so invested in getting Alan's family to not only approve, but to adore, me. Relieved and excited to have been the center of attention I was delighted to have become “part of the family,” as Bernadette said after I handed her back the knife. Now I see that this was just some sort of demented litmus test to see just how much shit I would put up with.

My parents and I were never chopstick users. We ate our Chinese food with forks, usually lo mein or beef and broccoli or General Tso's chicken, in front of the TV. It was as exotic as the idea of international food in our family would get. I had never eaten authentic Chinese or Vietnamese food before or cared about the cultural importance of chopsticks to Asian cuisine until meeting Alan and his family.

On a spring day in April 2011, about three months into our relationship, Alan, his Vietnamese-Laotian cousin Anthony, and I decided to order Chinese takeout for lunch. Anthony took down his and his cousin's orders—what they were, I do not remember, but I do remember not knowing what the dishes consisted of. They sounded spicy and strange. Anthony asked what I would like, and I replied with my standard Chinese food order: beef and broccoli.

Alan and Anthony looked at each other and simultaneously began laughing.

"*Mi trang, mi trang!*" they repeated, barely breathing through guffaws. "She order the beefuh an bwoccowi, the mi trang!" Imitating a Chinese accent, Anthony slapped his knees a few times, and Alan turned bright red, neither of them attempting to hold in their laughter.

"What does *mi trang* mean?" I asked. I felt like an idiot; I was neither "in" on the joke, nor part of their club. While I brushed off Anthony and Alan's laughter as immature and unimportant, this would be the first instance of many where I felt alienated and ignorant in the midst of their family.

This moment, much to my chagrin, is when I learned my first Vietnamese word. *Mi trang* means "white girl" in Vietnamese, and whenever I attended family gatherings, I

knew when Alan's family members were talking about me—the white girl, in a sea of...well, *non*-white girls. I clearly stood out; I am blonde, freckled, blue-eyed, and possess a few curves, and at 5' 4" I am rather tall in comparison to his female relatives. He assured me they weren't saying anything *bad*—it was quite the opposite, he promised, although I shouldn't have been so naive. Aging aunts, their hair tied up into a high bun on their heads, complimented my servitude as I cleared dishes from an overcrowded table, or refilled wine glasses when I saw they were empty. I was just being polite, a kind dinner guest, but they saw these actions as prerequisite wife behavior. At the end of large family meals, Thanksgiving or someone's birthday celebration, I stood at the end of the assembly line of Vietnamese women of all ages and dried dishes with a ragged, bleach-stained towel. Alan would stand in the other room, enjoying a drink or watching TV. "She good girl," they'd tell him later, patting him on the shoulder. "Very pretty *mi trang*. She good wife for you, you make a good choice." And while it always went unsaid, or unacknowledged, I thought I had made a pretty good choice, too.

Family gatherings for meals out with Alan's giant Vietnamese family posed three problems: first, I could not read the Vietnamese menu; second, if I could read it, I still wouldn't know what to order; and third, once I received my meal, I never knew how to go about eating it. There are rolls, soups, salads, things that look like soups but are appetizers, things that look like rolls but aren't to be picked up, things that look like steak but are to be put in rolls. And then there are the sauces: fish sauce, soy sauce, peanut sauce, brown sauce, red sauce, spicy sauce. And then there are combinations of the sauces. And sauce for the sauce.

Once when I went out to dinner with Alan's family, we ate at a new restaurant called Rice Paper at the local Vietnamese-run shopping mall, Eden Center—or, what I like to call “Little Saigon”—and Bernadette ordered Viet snails. I was picturing something akin to escargot, covered in butter and herbs and oozing all things gourmet, but the reality was a bowl of brown, muddy soup, flavored with coconut milk. Poking out of its surface was a sea of brown tiny striped shells.

“Di an!” She yelled at me. *Go eat!* Alan's mom seemed to yell a lot, and for no apparent reason. She could easily ask for the butter, or a napkin, or say “pardon me” in a normal tone of voice, but it seemed as though the members of Alan's Vietnamese family enjoyed yelling at one another frequently.

“DI AN CON!” I reached for my chopsticks and she slapped them away. “With your finger,” she instructed. I fished around in the sauce for a small snail and scooped it out of its murky juice.

“Suck it,” she told me. “You suck it hard.”

I placed my lips around the opening of the shell and attempted to coerce the minuscule cooked snail out of its home. I received a mouthful of coconut milk and what I think might have been sea dirt or sand, but the snail did not budge.

“I can't get it out,” I told her. “It's stuck in there.”

“YOU SUCK HARDER! SUCK IT!” she yelled. People in the restaurant began to notice our table, and the elderly Vietnamese woman sitting across from us gave me a wary look.

“You no good at sucking,” Bernadette frowned. “You fail.”

This was not my first failure with Vietnamese cuisine. I had failed once before, at Bernadette's Mother's Day meal at China Garden, an authentic Chinese restaurant in D.C. known for its dim sum. There were six of us at brunch, and we were all given chopsticks. No forks were provided, or requested, by other members of the table. Bernadette loaded up my plate with rice, rolls, dumplings, tofu and chicken, and ordered me to eat before my food got cold.

I stared at my silver chopsticks like I would a loathed enemy or fierce competitor. "You will not defeat me," I informed the two long, thin utensils sitting on my napkin. "You are under my command now." I had never learned to use chopsticks, and didn't really care to; I was content with a simple, four-pronged utensil.

"Eat! Eat!" Bernadette pushed, and I picked up the two rods carefully with my right hand, remembering the hand-drawn diagram of proper placement that I saw once on a package of takeout chopsticks. I went for what I thought would be the easiest thing to grab first—the dumpling—and attempted to grasp onto its slimy, oiled surface. It slipped this way and that, but with concentration and willpower I managed to keep it on my plate. I finally picked it up and placed it in my mouth, only to realize that it was much too large to fit inside. *I should have cut it, I should have cut it first*, I thought, but it was too late. I had a giant mouthful of Chinese pork dumpling and hardly any room to chew it. I waited a while until the dough softened enough that I could begin to masticate at its edges, and about two minutes later I managed to swallow it nearly whole.

"Yummy," I said, reaching, cautiously, for the chicken. It was smaller, and did not need to be cut, but its uneven, bumpy shape was difficult to grasp with the ends of the

sticks. I briefly contemplated stabbing its orange crust with the sharp end of a chopstick like a spear honing in on its prey, but I was sure this action to be rude, or even barbaric. Instead, I looked to Alan in desperation. He understood, and shook his head in mock exasperation, and once the waitress made her next pass around the table he requested a fork for his *mi trang* girlfriend. His family pretended not to notice.

Although we may have lived in an “Asian household,” the ethnic majority of our apartment was actually white. Alan is half Vietnamese; his white father met his mother in Vietnam during the war, brought her back to the United States to marry her, and Alan was born a year later. His biological dad Paul, from whom he is now estranged for reasons still unclear to me, also brought the rest of Bernadette’s family over, and now they are mostly scattered around the DC area. Although Alan is only half, he always identified himself as Vietnamese—not white—and jokesd about having to check the “other” box on various bureaucratic forms.

He was quick to identify something that is “white” versus something that is “Asian,” and this black-and-white outlook bothered me. On our move-in day in August of 2011, before lugging our clothes and few pieces of furniture up three flights of stairs, we brought up a box of cleaning supplies and went room by room through our new apartment. Our Caucasian landlord did a slapdash job of preparing the place for us, and while the bathroom wasn’t dirty, it certainly wasn’t sparkling, either.

“*White people*,” Alan said, shaking his head. “Look at this tub. Filthy. And the tile’s all messed up.”

“Why ‘white people’? Why do you do that?” I asked him, offended. “You’re *white*, remember.”

“Asian people would never let this tub get to this scummy state in the first place,” he told me. “You watch. You go into any Asian house and look behind the shower curtain—you’ll see.”

So, of course, I started looking. Each time we were invited to a family member’s house or a Vietnamese friend’s apartment, I’d sneak away from the conversation to find the bathroom, and casually peek behind a typically silk color-coordinated shower curtain and see a shiny, freshly scrubbed bathtub.

We went through a lot of sponges and Tilex in our apartment. That shower hadn’t been so clean since it was installed in 1973, although I can’t give Alan or his Asian side any credit for that.

I could take Bernadette in five to six hour doses. Longer than that, and I’d want to rip my hair out. Perhaps because I called her *Ma*, she felt like she knew what was best for me, or that she could tell me what to do. She once bought me a new shampoo that she promised would work wonders with my “damaged, too-blond hair.” After Bernadette and I devoured half a wheel of Brie cheese once while watching a football game on TV, Bernadette printed out a diet plan from the Internet and began planning meals for us to lose weight so we could look sexy again. “Alan likes curves, but *thin* curves,” she whispered. “*Thin*.” Every few Fridays she’d call me and ask to meet up for lunch, usually something healthy and Vietnamese. She eventually leveraged two-hour lunches

into four-hour grocery shopping trips at H-Mart (the Korean grocery store) or Great Wall (the Chinese grocery store), and would tell me what food to prepare for dinner. These “mother-daughter” outings were filled with life lessons about grooming me to be a good wife, where and how to shop for food, and how to plan a budget and meals. She attempted to turn me into her, convinced that a perfect woman who can cook, clean, shop and look flawless—and nothing else—was the only kind of woman Alan wanted. I learned a lot of amazing cooking tips, and I credit most of my ability in the kitchen to Bernadette’s expertise and skills. But aside from a handful of culinary lessons on how to make clams casino or homemade salsa, Bernadette didn’t teach me anything; in fact, she was a model for the type of woman I *didn’t* want to become—pushy, judgmental and condescending. If this was the type of woman Alan wanted to be married to, as Bernadette suggested—a woman like his mother—than I was definitely the wrong person for him.

One mother-daughter day around Christmastime in 2011, Bernadette handed me a pair of thin, hand sewn black silk pajamas. She had had them designed for her in Vietnam on her last trip there. They’d already been worn, but were beautiful and embroidered and I was happy to have them. I felt honored that she would give me such an intimate gift.

“You wear these at night,” she told me. “But you have to promise to wash.”

“I do laundry every week,” I told her. “Our apartment has brand new washers and dryers.”

“Not the *clothes*,” she told me. “You wash *you*.”



I wasn't sure what to make of this comment. I wondered if she thought I was dirty, or smelled weird, or wouldn't take care of her gift.

"I shower every week too," I said. "Actually, almost every day."

"When do you wash?" she wanted to know.

"Depends—but usually before bedtime."

"That's very *Asian* of you," Bernadette cooed. "Very clean, very good. Asian women are clean women. Especially before bed, for your husband. Do it for Alan."

It struck me as odd that Bernadette continually referred to Alan as my husband—yes, we lived together, but we were nowhere close to engaged. After being together for nearly a year, we had discussed marriage once or twice, but nothing serious. I thought of all the times Alan came home after a twelve-hour workday—he co-owned a remodeling and building company—and walked in the door covered in paint, bits of drywall stuck to the copious pomade in his hair, his boots and the bottoms of his Armani jeans caked in mud. Exhausted, he'd climb into bed, unwashed, without proper pajamas. Sometimes I'd find paint chips between the comforter and the sheets; I didn't complain. For all these lessons I received on cleanliness, both in my home and with my body, I was struck by the double-standard. Why should I clean, or cook, or wash for Alan, and not myself? Or for us both? Or, maybe, he for me? I wondered if my boyfriend ever received lessons on these relationship matters; Bernadette's comments about my hygiene felt sexist and invasive. She told me to wear fake eyelashes; she told me to lose weight; she told me not to be angry when Alan is home late from work. She told me to make French toast on Saturday because he'd like it, and to buy grapefruit because it's his favorite, and to

handle the checkbook because he's too busy. I'd nod, and listen, and make the French toast on Saturday morning, and buy the grapefruit for the fruit bowl, and do my share of the bills.

"These are women's things," she told me. "This is our job, *con*."

But I never really thought of it as a job. I like French toast and grapefruit, too.

"Traci, I really need to talk to you about something important, and I don't want to say this on the phone, but I don't know when I'll see you next, so I will just tell you now before you leave on vacation," Bernadette said. It was a few days before 2012 was to begin, and Alan and I were packing for a week-long Eastern Caribbean cruise that weekend.

I thought one of her siblings was ill, or in an accident, or something happened to Papa G. I never expected her say that it was me who needed help.

"*Con*, are you unhappy?" she asked.

"Unhappy? What? No, I'm great, I'm really happy," I responded, taken aback at her unusual question.

"Are you sure? The reason I ask is—people are *talking*," she whispered into the phone. "Talking about *you*."

She explained the situation to me. The evening before this phone conversation, we attended a family dinner at Eden Center. There were about 20 family members present, scattered at three different tables, divvied up according to age. Alan and I sat with his cousins, all in their twenties and thirties. I'd met all of them before and felt

comfortable enough to eat a Vietnamese meal with a fork in my hand and not feel completely ashamed in front of them. To be honest, I wasn't in the mood to be around a couple dozen people; I was coming down with a sinus infection and had worked an exhausting ten-hour day at an educational childcare program. But, I was invited to this special dinner, so I felt it my responsibility to attend. I wanted to do the right thing.

Alan and I arrived on time, made small talk, greeted every relative. I was tired but chatty, joked with Alan's cousins, thanked aunts and uncles for Christmas presents given the week prior. It was casual and quick, and we left a bit early so I could get a prescription for my clogged sinuses before the pharmacy closed.

"Why did you leave dinner early?" Bernadette demanded. "People at your table said you were unhappy, and you made Alan unhappy, so you decided to leave. Are you two alright?"

"We're fine. I was sick, and didn't want to make a big deal out of it."

"Well, you need to say that next time. Or just don't come to dinner. You cannot assume *anything*. You do not understand Asian culture yet. You say what you mean; don't let people think, not for one second. Especially in this family. People will always think the worst about you." Before that moment, I had bought into the whole "Asian culture" lectures from Bernadette and Alan about cleanliness, shoes off in the house, and roles of women, among others. But when she said it on the phone that night, it struck me as trite, an offensive typecast that really meant nothing. *I may not understand Asian culture*, I thought, but *I think I'm beginning to understand you*.

“I don’t understand what I did wrong?” I asked her. I was surprised to find myself on the verge of tears. I thought I was doing so well—washing dishes, dressing up, cooking meals, taking care of the house, spending time with my future mother-in-law who I wanted to impress. To hear that Alan’s family members were speaking badly about me behind my back was devastating. And what wasn’t revealed—what Bernadette *wasn’t* telling me—plagued my mind. What else was said? What other faux-pas had I committed?

“First, you need to be more positive. No more negative comments about anything or anyone. Second, you need to smile more. Smile bigger. Always be pleasant and nice. You have had a hard year, baby girl, and the family loves you. We want to make sure you are happy, and that you make our son happy. I want to teach you these things because you are my daughter.”

Bernadette left me confused and reeling. Why should I care so deeply what these people—almost strangers—think of me? She gossiped behind her friends’ and families’ backs all the time. Why did I want to impress someone that I never really warmed up to in the first place, and was beginning to despise? I thanked her for the advice and hung up the phone. I remembered the first night I met her, when I gave into her ridiculous knife-wielding quiz. “Are you crazy?” she had asked me. *Of course not*, I’d thought to myself. Bernadette was the crazy one. But at this point in my relationship with Alan, after trying to impress his mother and be perfect for him, while balancing my schoolwork and housework and teaching thirty hours a week, I felt like I was going a little crazy, too.

Before moving in with Alan, I received a litany of caveats from my friends and family warning against taking “the next step.” Many thought it was too soon to move in together. “Wait a year,” they’d say. Some thought we hadn’t known each other well enough yet, or that our age difference of eleven years would begin to strain the relationship once we shared the same address. I was tired of living at home, and wanted to try something new. At twenty-four I had been considering moving out anyway on my own, and to move out with someone I cared about was just good luck and convenient timing. While my family discouraged our cohabitation, Alan’s family pushed us to get married as soon as I was debuted to the clan. “Why wait?” they’d implore. They’d tease him frequently, calling him an old man, and tell him he must have a family soon or else it’ll be too late. Perhaps that’s why they brought it up to him so often, albeit jokingly: they believed I was his last chance. At thirty-six, with a new struggling business and exhausting workweek, he was running out of time. It didn’t matter what my goals were or what my personality was like; as long as I could have children, take care of the house, and donned heels and an expensive designer bag around town, I was as good a candidate as any.

“Sometimes we have to be let go to find our way. The very thing we think is our anchor is really just holding us to a place we no longer belong.”

—Anonymous

## SHIFTING

When I met Alan in January of 2011, it was the most welcome distraction—and excuse to be out of the house and away from my grieving, negative father—that I had found yet. After my mom died in April 2010, my home life fell apart—my father became increasingly depressed and reclusive, and our house itself became cluttered and oppressive with memories, but still felt empty and hollow. I couldn't wait to move out, to begin again, to start my own family now that my own had altered so drastically. Characteristic of the first few months of romance, I was completely swept up in the frenzy of new love and getting to know Alan. In April of 2011—three months after our meeting and a year since my mom had passed—I had basically moved into in the townhouse in Burke, Virginia, that he shared with his cousin Anthony. It felt completely natural, not rushed at all. By August, we had our own apartment in Fairfax, and I began my second year of graduate school feeling complete, settled, and content. I thought this chapter of my life would end here—deeply in love with Alan, a new member of his family, happily taking care of him and the house and my new Chihuahua puppy, Wendy, and assuming the role that my mom once possessed as the mother and driving force of a household. I thought settling down would bring me closer to my mother, as though her past and my present could be cemented. My mom and dad met at Scan furniture in 1984,

where they both worked, when they were twenty-five. My dad moved into my mom's apartment a few months after their first date, and they married one year later. A year after that I was born, and they were completely happy together for their entire twenty-five years of their marriage. My parents never felt they had rushed.

While my dad seemingly didn't need me at home—he made this perfectly clear in statements like, “This is a good dinner, but it would be better if your mom was here” and “It was a pretty fun day, but not as fun as it would've been if your mom had been with me”—I felt needed and important with Alan. I wasn't openly angry at my father. I took his unsympathetic attitude in stride and felt that moving out with an older, more experienced man was a necessary and expected stage of maturation for me. I was twenty-four; I could take care of myself, or, at least, didn't need to be taken care of by my father. Alan would take care of me when I needed him; he symbolized my future, my family. I stepped out of the role as daughter and into the role as an almost-wife.

The summer of 2011, Alan quit his job as the manager of the Old Fire Station #3 and decided to start his own remodeling business with his cousin Anthony. Getting the company on its feet was slow going, and most of the summer Alan was at leisure. We helped his cousin get the townhouse yard in shape, made dinner every night, went for walks with Wendy, and although we were both poor—I, a grad student, and he, living off his meager savings—we had a wonderful summer together.

Alan and I decided to find a place of our own, because the townhouse was so tiny. We stumbled across a beautiful top-floor, two-bedroom condominium in Fairfax, Virginia. The rent was expensive—\$1,350 a month plus utilities—but we decided to



share the financial burden, with him paying slightly more than me since I was still in the middle of graduate school.

“Do you want this place?” he asked me as we stood looking up at the flowerboxes on the condo’s balcony. The condo’s inside was beautiful, but it was the large, third-story balcony that I had fallen in love with. I imagined us sitting outside together, drinking beer and talking on a balmy summer evening, Wendy at our feet.

“More than anything,” I told him. “It’s perfect.”

“Let’s do it. I’ll take care of you,” he said. “We’ll make it work.”

My dad gave me one condition on moving in with Alan that August: that I didn’t sign the lease. Alan was annoyed by my father’s pessimistic attitude, but in the end he acquiesced and I did not need to sign. Upon move-in day, we were asked to pay the first month’s rent plus a security deposit. Alan and I agreed that I’d pay the deposit while he paid the first month’s rent. But as we drove to drop off the first of our belongings at our new home, Alan asked me to stop at the bank.

“Traci—my money’s tied up at the moment. We’re in the middle of a job, and I had to buy supplies.”

“But shouldn’t the homeowner pay you half or something before you begin? How can you have all your money tied up in one kitchen remodeling job?” I asked.

“You wouldn’t understand how it works, but I don’t have the money today. Can you pay both the rent and the deposit, and I’ll pay you back next week when the job is over?” he asked, brushing a piece of hair away from my face. “I’ll even pay you interest,” he said playfully, squeezing my leg.

“This isn’t what we agreed,” I told him. “That’s all my savings.”

“You’ll get it back. Come on, we’re a team. We’re living together. We have to share everything now.”

I pushed down the flash of anger that arose in me. It was our move-in day, and he wasn’t financially prepared. However, I didn’t want to ruin the moment, so I withdrew an extra thousand dollars from my bank account to hand over to the landlord. My intuition tugged at me—how does a thirty-six-year-old man not have enough money for rent?—but I ignored it, too excited at the promise of having a place of our own.

Life wasn’t so different than it had been at Anthony’s townhouse. Most weeknights I attempted to make Alan a delicious, healthy dinner before he came home, just like my mom had done for my father during my childhood years. Cleaning was never my (or my mom’s) forte, but I didn’t mind vacuuming or dusting because I knew Alan would appreciate a tidy house. I would have cleaned anyway if I lived alone, but I got a certain satisfaction from cleaning for two. If it wasn’t for me, who would take care of the house, or the wash, or the grocery shopping, or our dog, Wendy? Alan was much too busy working fourteen-hour days for his new remodeling company, which had gained multiple new clients in September. I wholly embraced the responsibility of playing his wife, wondering if this is how my mom felt when she had just moved in with my dad back in 1984.

I can’t put my finger on exactly when the shift began, but I imagine it happened sometime early in the fall, in early October of 2011. We had only been living together for a couple months. Alan had become increasingly stressed and busy at work, and he

was supposedly working oftentimes all night long in office buildings laying down carpet or painting an office that needed to be finished by the next workday. We began fighting; it wasn't how I pictured playing house to be, but for a while I told myself that no couple is perfect. One night in early fall, Alan and I were enjoying a drink after dinner. He began to speak about his childhood—a sensitive topic since his wasn't a happy one—and he told me that he began getting in trouble when his mother began working in real estate. “She was never home, so I could do whatever I wanted,” he confessed. He stole, vandalized cars, and began drinking and doing drugs at a young age. I could tell he was remorseful about being a rebellious child.

“It's not your fault,” I told him. “Your father wasn't around. Your mom did the best she could. She should be proud to have such a hard-working son today, even if she wasn't around when you were younger. At least you're close now.”

Alan stared at me for a moment, suddenly furious, and then slammed his fists onto the tabletop. “Fuck you!” he yelled, and threw his glass down. “Fuck you—you don't understand. How dare you talk about my mother that way.”

“Alan—wait, I didn't mean—I was giving her a compliment, I wasn't saying—”

He grabbed his jacket and stormed out the front door of the apartment. Right before he slammed the door he yelled, “No one insults my family!” I put down my glass and ran after him, calling his name as he walked furiously down the sidewalk. I felt stupid, as if we were cliché actors in some B-movie, but I hurried after him anyway.

“Alan, please, come home. This is silly; your mom is great, she's a wonderful mom. You are lucky to have her. I wish my mom was here to see us together today.

Please, don't do this. You don't mean it. Don't be angry, please, just turn around." We walked almost half a mile, me trailing behind him, until he finally stopped and turned around. Without a word he walked back to the apartment, and I followed quietly behind.

That night, he slept on the couch, refusing to say a word to me, no matter how many times I apologized—for what I was apologizing, exactly, I wasn't sure. But I felt terrible, guilty even. I lay awake in bed and cried, questioning what I did to make him abhor me so abruptly and intensely. The next morning he came into the bedroom with a smile on his face. "I love you," he said. Half-asleep, looking at his gleaming face, I wondered if I had dreamed everything that had happened the night before. I wanted to talk about what transpired, about how he snapped so quickly and irrationally but I stayed silent. I reciprocated his hug. "Let's have breakfast," he said. I got out of bed and walked to the kitchen, praying that we had the right ingredients to make his favorite—French toast.

Alan and I began to fight a few times a week, but the arguments weren't anything serious at first. Instead of staying irritated with him I grew to live day-to-day for his acknowledgment and appreciation, much as our eager-to-please Chihuahua puppy, Wendy, tried to entertain me any way she could. If I put the effort into making dinner, I expected him to show up, or at least apologize for being late—or missing the dinner altogether. I grew accustomed to eating alone, standing up in the kitchen.

"You're late again?" I'd ask on the phone, the disappointment evident in my voice.

“Not all of us have such an easy life as you, Traci,” he’d snap back. “Not all of us have the luxury of staying at home and typing stories on the computer all day.”

“I’m sorry—it’s just that you’d said you’d be home by seven, and it’s already nine and dinner’s been ready, and I thought you said—”

“Don’t you get it? I’m late. I have to work. Get used to it. I told you going into this that you’d feel like a widow for a year while I start up my company.”

“You never said that,” I’d reply. “You could at least call.”

“I don’t have time for this. I’ll be home when I’m home.” And with that he would hang up, and I’d sit down at our kitchen table alone. Maybe I’d try calling back a few times, but I knew he wouldn’t answer. I’d just leave pathetic, apologetic voicemails, reminding him I loved him and that I couldn’t wait until he was home with me again. As I put back the unused place setting and boxed up leftovers, I wondered if my mom would’ve been so forgiving to a guy like that. In my heart, I knew the answer was *no*. I began to no longer recognize myself, a woman who was educated, well traveled, and ambitious, but I needed my best friend—my mirror, in a way—to remind me who I was again. The one person I wanted to talk to was unable to talk back. “Don’t waste your time on some jerk,” I imagine her saying. “Who does he think he is, anyway? You tell him that I know nineteen ways to kill a man with a needle. Really—I learned it in nursing school. Get out of there and move back home, and find yourself a real man. A thirty-six-year-old without a real job? Come on. He can’t promise you anything. He won’t take you to get our oil changed, but he thinks he’ll hit it big in the stock market? Traci, don’t be such an idiot. Move on.” I knew my mom’s voice—the voice of my

intuition, perhaps—was right. But I wanted to give him another chance; I wanted to be sure that when I walked out, it was on my own terms, and that I could walk out forever and not look back with regret.

Friends ask me why I stayed in it with Alan for an entire year after the signs began, and I have a difficult time explaining why. It's embarrassing, and makes me feel weak and stupid. I'd felt so strong in Slovakia, and even after my mom passed—I hardly cried, and if I did it was in my room, alone, when my dad wasn't home. I'd say things like, "Well, she's in a better place now," and "Things always happen for a reason" when people asked me about my mom. I had munitions of half-truths in my pocket for situations like these, and I'd simply plant a small smile on my face and avoid any advance of a conversation about her. "You're such a smart girl—why would you stay with an idiot like that?" I've been asked multiple times by girlfriends, and even my father. Part of me was so tethered to this idea of making a home for myself, of being my mom, of making her proud in some way, that I couldn't let it go. Part of me was scared at the idea of returning to the townhouse where my dad still lived and slept on the couch every night. Part of me was afraid I'd turn into my father eventually. Part of me had already been pushing down feelings of doubt, guilt, depression, and confusion for a year after my mom's passing that other negative emotions just added to the stockpile that sat in my unconscious, waiting to be let out. Like a stereotypical 1950s housewife, I planted a smile on my face and put dinner on the table yet again, hoping that I wouldn't say the wrong thing, that everything would be perfect.

Arguments that started with Alan's complaints about "you didn't do this" or "why did you do that" escalated into personal assaults on my character. No matter if I was the one initially angry or disappointed at something he did, somehow he was always able to put the fault back onto me. I've kept a journal since I was six, and while my inclination is to rip out every entry from my year living with Alan, I save them because I want to remind myself of how dangerously close I came to losing myself.

**February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

Wrong, so wrong

Overly sensitive and emotional

Ridiculous

You don't listen

Crazy

Dramatic, drama, always drama

Causes problems—I started it

Selfish, it's all about me

I am the problem

I need medicine, you are depressed

Fuck off / fuck yourself

Shut up, go away

You don't get it

This isn't working

You bring it on yourself

You are not a happy person

**April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

He said, “So what, you got a flat? So what, you got lost? You found your way eventually, get over it.”

He said, “Learn how to change a fucking tire and fucking learn how to get around.”

He said, “It’s always about you. What if I needed something? It’s always about you. You always bring up your mom, and that’s still all about you. Stop talking about it, I don’t care.”

He said, “You are a child, and I call people idiots who are idiots. When I come home from a long day I need peace of mind, not this.”

I think that I shouldn’t have to beg my boyfriend to hug me after a bad day, but when I do he walks out of the room. If I got sick he’d say I should’ve washed my hands better, and if I got hit by a car he’d say I should have never crossed the street.

I am the girl who knows better, but.

Four months later, I would still be writing the same things, but more and more frequently.



Whenever I'd confront Alan about being late, or not calling, or about making a promise and breaking it (like my birthday party, or a weekend trip we were supposed to take, or even paying me back for groceries) he would completely blow up. He punched holes in the drywall of our bedroom door and closet. He broke a delicate green lamp that I inherited from my mom. He pulled the curtains out of the wall. When I overcooked a pizza once (because it was in the oven too long, I was trying to keep it warm for when he arrived home hours late) he threw it at the wall of the dining room, and I was never fully able to get the red sauce stains off the flat white paint. But because I had already been with him for nearly a year and because we lived together and because I was in love with him and I needed someone to care for after caring for my mom for so long, I somehow convinced myself that I was the one in the wrong—that I deserved it, even. I thought I was so mature and independent, but in reality I was the complete opposite.

One day he could be the most charming, generous man—surprising me with dinners at delicious, expensive restaurants, paying to get my hair cut and colored at the salon—and the next, he would turn into someone I didn't recognize. He was funny in an off-kilter way. He dressed impeccably, even wearing Armani jeans while at work on a construction site, and was extremely handsome; women young and old would follow his tall, muscular frame while he walked across a room. Although he never went to college, he was interested in current events and read voraciously about the stock market, although his attempts to “get rich fast” seemed delusional and unrealistic. I was proud to be his girlfriend in public, but in private, I grew more and more scared of his physical power and rage. We'd be out at some fancy restaurant, having a lovely time, and I'd say

something wrong—perhaps question what was going on in his business or bring up the topic of money—and Alan would transform from adoring to furious before my eyes.

“You always do this,” he’d say. “You fucking ruin everything. You can never be happy; you’ll never be satisfied. What’s *wrong* with you?”

“I’m sorry—I didn’t know. It’s just that you told me you’d pay the electric bill, and this is the third notice I’ve received, and I know you don’t check the mail often so you wouldn’t know how many notices there were...”

“Shut up, just shut *up*. Can’t you just learn to keep your mouth shut? You are incapable have a normal, decent evening.”

“Well, it’s just that you always tell your family how much money you have, and how well your company is doing, and you work all the time, but I’m just confused because you don’t pay your cell phone or the electric bill, and—”

“Whatever, Traci. You’re so book smart, but you really don’t know *shit*.”

With a final, biting comment, he’d stop talking to me for the remainder of the meal. The more he ignored my pleas for him to speak, the more he would brush my arm or hand away from his, I’d grow increasingly desolate. He had a manipulative way of making me feel like I deserved his annoyance through this ruthless silent treatment; I should just shut up, I should simply be pleasant.

The red flags about money began on our move-in day, and arguments about finances only increased as we continued living together. It was the topic we most frequently fought about, but fights could really originate with anything, from an empty ketchup container to a wet bath towel. On a graduate student budget, I had hardly enough

money to support myself, never mind paying for another person. Alan promised he'd take care of me, but it was the other-way around. I paid for the Internet, the groceries, and the household supplies. He paid for the electric bill. His cell phone service was constantly being shut off because he didn't pay the bill. It wasn't because he was short on money, he promised, but because he was simply too busy to pay it. "Why don't you get a real job and then let me know how it goes," he'd say, discounting my teaching four three-credit undergraduate classes. The irony was that I technically worked part-time and made very little money, while he toiled away on jobsites eighty hours a week and brought home nothing. I didn't know where his money was going, but someone had to buy groceries, and he wasn't helping me out.

"You eat the groceries anyway," he'd say. "You're the one at home all the time."

"But what about sharing everything? Remember when we moved in together, you said we were a team, and we'd support one another?" I asked.

"When you start supporting me and my job, I'll start supporting you," he screamed back. "Get over yourself. Oh, for Christ's sakes, don't *cry*," he said as he watched my eyes fill with tears. "You're too freaking sensitive. There's seriously something wrong with you. Keep playing that sympathy card, and you'll lose it. Oh wait, you just did. Yeah, I don't have any sympathy for you anymore. Good job." I retreated to the bathroom and cried for an hour, my face pressed onto the cold linoleum, while Alan sat at the kitchen table and played on the computer. We'd spend the night apart, he on the couch and I in bed, and the next day all would be miraculously forgotten. He'd forget, perhaps, but I would never forget what he said—not ever.

One night after a similar conversation transpired over steaks at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse, I began to cry in the car while driving back to our apartment.

"I don't understand why you hate me so much," I said between sobs. "You say you love me and want to be with me forever while we're at dinner, and then you change your mind and say I'm crazy twenty minutes later. Why are you so angry with me?"

He didn't respond. He just looked out the window and shook his head slowly, like he was disgusted with something. I watched for the stoplight to turn from red to green.

"Why don't you love me like you used to when we first were dating? Is it your job? Did something happen with the business that I don't know about? Is your family doing okay? Are you worried about money?"

He shifted in his car seat, leaning his body aggressively over top of me as we waited for the light. When I looked up all I could see was his mouth, white spit settled in the right corner of his lips, crowding in front of my face. "Fuck you! Fuck *you*! You don't understand my day, you don't care about what I go through as the head of a company. I come home broken and exhausted and all you care about is an electric bill, you selfish little child. You don't understand my life and you're an *idiot*. Yes, I called you an idiot—that's what I call people who are stupid and ask *stupid* questions. Fuck you; we're done. I can't take this anymore. I need peace of mind, not this bullshit every fucking day when I come home from work. You *make* me act like this. You *make* me do it."

The couple in the car next to us looked in my direction. They could hear everything Alan was yelling, even with all the windows up in the cold December night; in my side mirror I could see them staring at me in disbelief as I sat shaking and crying in the driver's seat. I couldn't bear to look back at them. Part of me thought about what would happen if I unbuckled my seatbelt, jumped out of the car and banged on their windows. *Get me out, get me out*, I'd plead, and they'd let me into their cozy sedan, and Alan wouldn't be able to affect me anymore. I'd be safe.

But instead, the light turned green and I pressed on the gas. When we returned home, Alan jumped out of my car and ran up to our apartment while I continued to bawl my eyes out, attempting to make sense of the events that had transpired that night and many nights before. I recalled the man who used to serenade me with his guitar when I came home, or who would fill up the fridge with all the foods I loved, who would leave me flowers in the kitchen when he worked all night and would call me three times a day to check in. What went wrong?

That same night, late, I confronted Alan while he was walking into the bathroom for a shower. I asked him why he was so angry, and I begged him to talk to me about it. *Please, please open up to me*, I said. *Please tell me what you are thinking*.

"You heard me—we're done. Get away from me."

He slammed the door in my face; I leaned into it with both of my palms to try to keep it open. He pushed harder; I began crying again. *Please, please talk to me, tell me what I did, tell me what's wrong*.

I pushed, he pushed. After a few moments he gave up and pulled back the shower curtain; I stepped into the bathroom.

“Get out! Get the fuck out of my sight and leave me alone!”

He grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled my head down towards my right shoulder. I felt—almost heard—a hundred hairs rip out of their roots.

“Get out!”

He pushed me against the bathroom wall; I felt my shoulder blades make contact with a wooden picture frame I’d hung recently of a photo of us on a Caribbean cruise.

“Get the fuck out bitch!”

He pushed my face backwards and I lost my balance. I grabbed onto the doorframe to compose myself. Alan shut the door as I tried to steady my wobbling body.

“I was never like this before I met you. *You* are the one who turns me into a monster. *You are the problem.*”

*Slam.*

*Slam.*

*Slam.*

My leg was still in the doorway. I didn’t know what hurt more—the feeling of my thigh being compressed repeatedly between the frame and the wood, or the fact that the person I thought loved me wanted me to feel this pain. It wasn’t the first time he’d been physical with me, but it was the first time I became afraid of his overpowering strength—and his complete lack of concern for my welfare.

I wrote in my journal that night. “Just because he says *I love you*, doesn’t mean he loves you.” I scratched it out immediately.

Three weeks later my right thigh was still so swollen I couldn’t pull on my jeans without wincing. I bought three pairs of black spandex leggings and didn’t cross my legs for a month.

No other man I’ve dated ever treated me this way, but in my naive twenty-five years I had never been in love before and I went on far too long excusing his blaming and controlling. I lumped his anger in with his exhaustion and the fact that his business wasn’t pulling in any money. He was emasculated, I thought, and he needs me, a woman’s touch. He needed my bank account, too; I’d saved a few thousand dollars and within the first six months of our living together, the majority of my savings was drained. I so desperately wished I could call my mom and talk to her. I had a few close girlfriends, but I couldn’t talk to them about what I knew then, around April of 2012, after browsing websites about domestic violence, was verbal and occasionally physical abuse. It shocked me to label my situation, but simultaneously alleviated my worry; I’m not the only one. It’s not my fault.

*I’m a battered woman.* I never thought those words would be ones I’d associate with myself. Girls my age wouldn’t understand what it meant to be torn apart verbally, to be scared to speak because even your kindest praises might incite fury, and they wouldn’t want to hear about it. My mom would’ve convinced me to leave, that he was a completely immature asshole and that I deserved better. She’d confirm what I already

knew. But I stayed. I stayed and tried to be optimistic and hope he would change. That he'd see how patient and loving I was, and that I wouldn't leave him just because of an argument or two. He'd go back to how he was when we first met; he just needed someone to help him remember.

It wasn't until we were going to resign the lease in August 2012 that I finally understood that I had to leave Alan for my own safety. I called my dad on the phone, trying not to cry, with the intention of asking him if I could move back in.

"Traci, I'm glad you called," he said. "I have good news."

"What?" I asked. "Are you going to retire early, like we talked about?"

"No, no. But, I'm selling the house! I'm ready to leave Ashburn. I'm thinking about a condo, and I was wondering what you thought about these places..."

I didn't want to tell my dad he couldn't move out because I needed a place to live. He had no idea that Alan and I were having such serious problems, although the neighbors in the building were aware; by this point, the police had been called to the apartment three times by concerned families in the building. The officers always said the same thing after banging on the door: "We're here because of a complaint in your building that a man was yelling angrily at a female—the female's voice wasn't heard—and that there was a lot of noise, like something was being thrown or hit. Can we come in?"

"Sure," I'd say.

They'd take a few notes and write down information from our driver's licenses. The officers would pull Alan out into the hall to talk, and then they'd ask him to stay out



there while they spoke with me. Their presence in the apartment was an embarrassment; I was horrified that my neighbors—some of whom were even my friends—could hear what Alan was yelling. Part of me was relieved that, in case things ever got really bad—and what *really bad* entailed, I refused to consider—my anonymous listeners would alert the authorities.

“What’s going on here?”

“Nothing, officers. We just had a disagreement, and he was yelling. I’m so sorry you had to come out here tonight for such a silly reason.”

“You sure he didn’t touch you?”

I examined the smooth, black handgun at the officer’s waist. I wondered if Alan would be scared of it; he obviously wasn’t threatened by me.

“No, no, he’d never touch me. Don’t worry, it’s okay. We’re going to bed.”

The officers would only be there for about ten minutes or so. “You can’t get arrested for yelling,” one officer joked as he walked out the door. “But take a break, you two.”

As they walked back to their police cruisers, I’d briefly consider what would happen if I told them the reality of the situation. I imagined chasing down their vehicles, running down the pavement yelling the litany of wrongs I had endured.

My boyfriend slammed me into the bookcase last week.

My boyfriend shut the bedroom door so hard that the full-length mirror fell off and shattered at my feet. I spent the night picking glass off the floor.

My boyfriend grabbed my wrist and wouldn't let go. There are red half moons in my skin where his nails once were.

I want to get out, I want to move forward, but I don't want to leave him behind.

Alan said he would leave me if I didn't sign the lease for 2012-13. He promised it would be a month-to-month lease, but when the time came around to sign the piece of paper with our landlord present, I realized it was for the entire next year. He had tricked me. He had me right where he wanted me, and he knew it. I looked from him, to our landlord, and back to him, and I could see the look in his eye—that the past year battling for my slipping sense of self had just been won. I pictured ripping up the paper, walking out of the apartment, and never seeing him again. But I wasn't ready to leave the one person that seemed constant in my life. My father had been browsing the Internet for new places to live and getting ready to put his house on the market. I needed Alan because I felt I didn't really have anybody else, nowhere else to go. Foolishly, I signed the piece of paper and prayed that this year things would be different.

Of course, they weren't. As soon as the lease was signed Alan's verbal storms increased from weekly to almost daily. I recalled the story of a blonde, pretty UVA lacrosse player, Yardley Love, who was beaten to death in her dorm room by her irate and drunk boyfriend. He claimed it was an accident and that he never meant to kill her. While I didn't want to jump to conclusions, I didn't want to make headlines either, and I knew my father would rather me move back in with him and ruin his plans to sell the townhouse than end up like her.

One night in late August, Alan and I got into a confrontation. It began when I asked him if maybe we could move somewhere different next year—not far away, but not in Fairfax, either, perhaps DC or near the mountains where I went to college. I was ready for a change; I had been for some time. He began screaming at me—how ungrateful I was, how immature and stupid, how I didn’t appreciate his job or understand his life. I looked him in the eye, and uttered the last words that I would ever say to him: “If that’s how you really feel, then. I’ll miss dreaming about us more than I will actually miss us.”

He threw a glass candle at me in the kitchen, and it shattered by my feet. He told me to pack my shit, take my dog and get out of his apartment. He drove off in his van to his cousin’s townhome in Burke, and I didn’t follow him. So, I did what he said, and I wondered what took me so damn long. He would never change. I called my dad and he came to my apartment at 3 a.m. that night to help me move out.

“Traci, I’m different now,” my dad assured me as he piled suitcases into his car. “You will like living at home again.” My father never meant to hurt me with his comments about missing my mother or admitting that trips to the beach or the store or the movies would be better if she were still be with us. Alan, on the other hand, deliberately meant to wound me—permanently. As I walked out of the apartment for the last time, I took a look around at what I thought had been my freedom but was really a self-made jail. I wasn’t really *living* there, although it was my address for a time. When I left with my belongings I noticed how vacant the apartment was: a table, a couch, a bookshelf. No photographs, no candles, no art. It was cold, whitewashed, and blank.

“Your apartment is an empty shell now,” my dad told me as hot, thick tears made their way down my suntanned cheeks. “Alan is an empty person, and now his home will be, too.”

I haven’t heard from him since that day, and I don’t ever want to. Nervously, I called the landlord the following weekend and after I mentioned the police and the abuse, he quickly crossed my name off the lease—probably afraid to get in the middle of things.

“I’m sorry you went through all that. Did he do anything to the dog?” the landlord asked. “If he so much as touched your dog, I’ll kill him.”

I assured him that no, Wendy was fine. But I found it ironic—and insulting—that he was more concerned about the wellbeing of a canine over that of a woman.

Some of my things were left behind in the apartment: dishes, bed linens, a bookshelf, a blender. I simply couldn’t get them all out in time, and these objects were just that—objects, things that could be replaced. The day I moved out I pulled out all of the photos of Alan and me from the picture frames I’d placed on the walls around the apartment. There must have been half a dozen of them: us at the beach, us on the porch with Wendy, us dressed up for an event. I placed the photo album I’d made for him of our Caribbean cruise and left it, with all the other photos, on the dresser in the bedroom. Part of me thought about destroying the photographs—ripping them to shreds, or burning them. But instead I left them, out in the open, in a neatly stacked pile. I wanted Alan to see what I had left behind. I wanted him to be responsible for throwing it all away.

Alan would continue living there for a time, until he stopped paying rent and the eviction process began. The landlord called once a few months after I moved out to

apologize for everything that happened, and to make sure I was okay, especially after he saw the punched-in walls and torn curtains around the apartment.

“I’m glad that wasn’t you, and it was just the wall,” he said.

“Me, too,” I told him.

“Walls can be patched up, you know. But faces—not so easily.”

And what about souls? I wanted to ask him. What about my life? What about all of the screaming, the insults, the name-calling, the blaming, the guilt? Can all of those words be erased? Will I ever get his yelling voice out of my head?

I imagine what Alan’s face may have looked like when he walked back into the apartment after partying all night with his cousin. I picture his face, bloated and tired, scanning the empty walls. He probably believed, like all the other times he threatened to leave me, that he’d walk into the bedroom again and give me a hug and all would be forgotten. He’d ask me to make breakfast and I would. He never expected me to actually leave him.

The first week after breaking up, I grieved for the loss of eighteen months of my life that I shared with someone I thought I loved. It wasn’t love, I know now, not even close. I’d begun to feel like Alan, Wendy and I were a family, and I was part of his large Vietnamese family as well, and that entire fabric I’d spent so much time and effort weaving together was undone in a single night. He didn’t love me, but in the end he taught me one of the most imperative lessons of my adult life: I love myself more than anything he could ever promise me.

## CONSUMED

It wasn't until two years after her death, in April 2012, that I sincerely, truly, felt its effects. I stopped eating. I recalled the last days of my mother's life when she was not physically able to eat—her intestines were blocked, her stomach could burst—and I didn't want to eat, either, when her two-year “anniversary” rolled around. She so enjoyed food, and many of my memories of her are eating before she was in hospice. Red Lobster, Outback, Logan's Steakhouse, Olive Garden, Ruby Tuesday's, Red Robin—in her final month while she slowly passed away in our home of April 2010, she put in personal orders for all her favorite restaurants, which my dad and I would pick up at various restaurants in Northern Virginia and fill like prescriptions—chicken salads, lobster, rolls, crab cakes, filled pastas coated in creamy sauce. She'd only eat a few bites of each, and I'd finish the leftovers, wondering silently if she thought the food in her mouth might be the last she'd ever taste. I enjoyed every bite she left behind that much more—enjoyed it for her.

Food was something of an indulgence, something that one does when they are happy and alive and enjoying life, and I was not any of those things. In 2012 I was alone, trapped in an apartment and with a malicious person that I felt I deserved, because I let my mother die alone and let her die at all and maybe I was a bad daughter and maybe I

should never have left for Europe in the first place. Maybe I'm fucked up, I thought. I hadn't thought this the year before; I don't really know what I thought then. I don't remember because I blocked so much of reality out.

My relationship with food changed right before my mother's two-year anniversary—that is, the second anniversary of her death. It's funny how we say *anniversary* for weddings and relationships and the growth of businesses, but we say it for death also. I didn't want to eat because I didn't think I deserved food. Part of me wanted to experience what it was like to be deprived of all earthly pleasures, just as my mother was. I pictured her, lying in that small bed in Hospice House, craving Diet Dr. Pepper and juicy, salty sandwiches and lobster tails. I cut out carbs. I cut out sugar. I cut out soda and beer and fruit. I ate salad and chicken every day, strangely attracted to the monotony of my new diet. I took away any sensory palatal pleasures and wrote down in a small lined notebook each day what I ate, delighting in its simplicity and banality. I took delight in what little I consumed, what little mark I made on the world's food supply that day.

Food is as much about taste as it is about community. Because I lived with Alan at the time, who was never home, I ate most of my meals alone. I ate them standing up, at the kitchen counter, while watching a video on my laptop or reading a book. Eating lost its sense of pleasure and camaraderie; no one was there to share food with, to break bread with. I could cook for myself, but that was boring and wasteful. Some days I went as long as I could without eating, existing solely on caffeine and water. Until I got tired

or dizzy in the late afternoon I would enjoy the emptiness of my stomach, of feeling the tinge of discomfort and cramping that hunger produces. I enjoyed the pain.

I lost twenty-five pounds in four months. I ran all the time; I joined a gym and delighted as much in the copious sweat pouring off my body as I did the pounds falling from my frame. I transitioned swiftly from 152 pounds to 127 and delighted in the notice I got from my acquaintances. “You look so good,” they’d say. “You look amazing—how’d you do it?” they’d wonder. I’d tell them I was on the Atkins or South Beach diet—cut carbs and sugar and you’ll feel great too, I ensured. What they didn’t know was that I couldn’t eat those things because they tasted so good and sweet, and because my mother couldn’t eat them in her last few weeks and couldn’t eat them now that she was dead, I didn’t feel like I could eat them either. I was devoid of any pleasure in my life, both corporeal and romantic, and the more I limited myself, the less I had to look forward to.

Two months after leaving Alan, I began to reflect and write about the abuse I suffered. I’m frustrated that I didn’t leave sooner; what was I *thinking* staying with a monster like that? Of course, hindsight is 20/20; looking back, I wonder how I—a world traveler, an MFA candidate, a Fulbright Fellow—put up with his insults and manipulation. A thirty-seven-year-old man with a twenty-five-year-old woman; no wonder he couldn’t find a woman his age. Many women never leave abusive relationships, or decide to leave too late. Recently at a café I heard someone use the phrase “by the skin of my teeth.” “By the skin of my teeth did I get through that day,”



she said, circling the edge of her mug with her index finger. “I almost didn’t make it.” I don’t know what she was talking about, but her phrasing stuck me. I wanted to thank her for verbalizing a sentiment I had not quite been able to articulate, but instead I wrote it down on a napkin and put it in my purse. *By the skin of my teeth. But I got through. I almost didn’t make it.*

A nagging feeling continues to plague me about the whole situation. While I had no desire to ever see or contact Alan or his family again, I wondered about his often-repeated statement, “I was never like this until I met you. *You* do this to me.” Was I really the only one? Had his fiancée of six years—the woman he had been with only two months before we started dating—never instigated this fury?

I decided to find out. I found the fiancée, Karen, a beautiful and elegant Chinese woman, on Facebook and messaged her, briefly introducing myself and giving her a taste of the behavior I’d witnessed with Alan. I asked her to message me back if she felt comfortable, but I understood—even expected—that she may not answer. After all, judging by her posted photos, she had just gotten married and had clearly moved on.

Karen, a thirty-year-old physician’s assistant, responded almost immediately. She asked me to meet in person at a bar in Arlington, Virginia, that same week. I found her rapid response both unsettling and promising; she clearly had something to tell me, something pressing.

We met at Guapo’s in late October 2012, both nervous and awkward at first, chitchatting about the weather and our jobs. Emboldened by a margarita, I offered Karen

the twenty-minute version of my tumultuous relationship with Alan; she listened empathetically as she sipped a Corona.

“He was never abusive to me,” she said after I rehashed the events of the past year. “He never touched me or yelled at me. But Traci, that doesn’t mean he isn’t insane. You’re smart to get out of it when you did, before he took all your money and years of your life, like he did mine.”

I was unnerved at first to hear that, wondering if in fact it was me who instigated this vicious rage in Alan, but then Karen informed me that Alan began to show his personality problems after they had been dating for a year. She was in medical school and spent months away from South Carolina, where they owned a house together, on various medical campuses for training. While she was away she trusted Alan; he was supposed to be working for his cousin Vuong’s construction company, but one day she received a call from Vuong while she was in New York at a conference.

“So, where’s your future husband?” he asked Karen.

“Well, I assume he’s with you, right?” she said.

“Haven’t seen him at work in two weeks. I thought he might have gone away with you for your schooling, but I wanted to call and check.”

Karen was shocked. Her betrothed had told her that he was having financial trouble and Vuong apparently wasn’t paying him on time, but now she knew the truth: he wasn’t working at all.

“I called him and was so pissed off, but he gave me all these excuses about how frustrated he was with Vuong and how he wanted to quit and he was trying to get

remodeling jobs outside of the company. I was away so I couldn't do anything about it and let it roll off my back, but I should have known better," Karen told me. "It wasn't until almost a year later that I realized he was addicted to drugs. Yeah—he wasn't working during the day. He was doing other things—other people, too. I stayed with him though, stupidly."

She continued to tell me about the credit card debt, the marijuana stashed in the house, hours at his so-called job site that amounted to nothing. After she graduated and was working full-time as a physician's assistant in Bethesda, Maryland, she was so in debt that she had to get a second job at CVS just to stay afloat.

"And then he said he was sick of South Carolina, so we moved up here to Virginia into a townhouse with his cousin. I knew no one—all my friends and family were back in Charleston. But we were engaged, and I was committed to him, so I decided to help him start over. Biggest waste of time in my life."

Alan didn't work for a few months after moving to Burke, and Karen supported them, even though she had school loans and other debts—his car payment, for instance, and their mortgage in South Carolina—to pay off. He eventually got a job as a manager at the Old Fire Station #3, and that's when the problems began.

"He'd work until two, three in the morning, and wouldn't call, or said his phone wasn't working," she told me, nearly done with her third Corona at this point. "I eventually got suspicious and went through his phone. I found photos of half-naked girls, texts from random chicks...he made me sick."

“When I confronted him about it, he told me that it was over. He said that this was ‘who he is,’ and he couldn’t help it. He is insane, Traci. I wish you had gotten in touch with me sooner. Him and his family, all completely nuts. His mother used to call me all the time and get offended if I called her ‘Mrs.’ instead of ‘Ma.’ One Christmas she sent me a full set of pots and pans, even though she knows I don’t have time to cook. Alan said he wasn’t made to be tied down, that he needed to be free, and that I should move out the next day.”

Karen did move out, and never looked back. When she came to retrieve the last of her belongings that evening, she found Alan and a girl she recognized from the bar passed out in their bed. He had no regrets or doubts that she made the right decision; the only thing she regretted was waiting so long to leave.

Meeting with Karen alleviated many of my concerns—where his money was going, his odd family, the long, late night hours at work. I never went through Alan’s phone, but he used to go through mine; a total invasion of privacy, I knew, but it was the least of my concerns at the time. I had nothing to hide, but now I knew he probably did.

“Did you hear he has a new girlfriend?” she asked me.

“No—who is she?” I wondered.

“They started dating the week after you two broke up. She is a bartender at the Old Fire Station. Ironical, huh?”

I was stunned to hear that Karen had known details of Alan’s life even though she was now married (and would soon be pregnant). She was still in touch with a few of Alan’s relatives via Facebook, whereas I had immediately removed every trace of Alan

and his family the day I moved out. I wanted nothing to do with him or his family, and I certainly didn't want his friends or cousins keeping tabs on me.

“Wow. I guess we shouldn't be surprised,” I said.

“Better keep checking your Facebook messages. You'll probably be getting one from her in a year or so, wondering if you were also beat up all the time.”

Karen was right: there is a very real possibility that one day, another of Alan's love interests—a girlfriend, a fiancée, a wife even—could be having drinks with me while providing details of his psychotic, egotistical behavior. It disgusts me to imagine he could make another woman feel the way I did—trapped, worthless, abused. My mother often said, “what goes around, comes around”; she wholly believed in karma, and in many ways I do, too. I can only hope that the next girl will be wiser than me—and Karen—and will escape from his clutches before he steals her money and her sense of self, although I'm not so sure that will ever happen.

Karen left the restaurant before I did. The two of us only met on this one isolated occasion, although we still stay in touch from time to time with a brief virtual hello on Facebook. I stayed in the restaurant for a while alone, nursing the remainder of my margarita while reading a book.

“This is on the house,” the waiter said, placing a large plate of deep fried ice cream bathed in hot fudge in front of me. “Enjoy,” he said with a smile and a wink as he walked back to the kitchen. I blushed, wondering if he perhaps heard our conversation and felt bad, or was simply hitting on me.

Without hesitating I dug my spoon into the dessert. I finished the entire plate within minutes, licking the remnants of sticky fudge off the utensil. A dab of ice cream landed on the cover of my book, and I used the tip of my pinky finger to remove it, licking it off. I relished its sugariness, the indulgence of devouring a rich treat by myself. With each bite I took, I was returning to tasting the sweetness of life.

“So, *so* delicious,” I told the same young waiter when he came to pick up my emptied dish. “You just made my day.”

“No problem, miss,” he smiled, leaving my check on the table. “You looked like you really enjoyed it.”

I licked the corners of my lips, tasting some syrupy residue left there. I couldn’t remember the last time I had eaten ice cream, or when I had enjoyed food so much. Not since my childhood, probably; certainly not in the last few years.

“Thank you. I did.”

## PALMS TELL ME

When Juan and I saw the neon sign in a basement window of a dilapidated olive-green building on U-Street in Washington, D.C., we laughed at the advertised special in the window: “Buy your future for \$10, today’s deal.” A bright orange flickering palm faced out at us, almost as if the sign were giving us a high-five. How could one simply *buy* their future with a ten-dollar bill? Who would be gullible enough to believe in a cardboard sign with a cheap picture of some Hindi goddess taped to its front? We lingered at the doorway to the palm reader’s small storefront. It was early October and beginning to rain, and because we didn’t have an umbrella and partially because curiosity got the better of us, we decided to ring the doorbell and see what would happen. Ten dollars seemed a fair price for an evening of hilarity. Plus, since we are both writers, we thought that the experience might be rapt with interesting, quirky material we could use later.

Juan and I met in the fall of 2011 in a graduate school literature class. He retrieved my email off the class list after the course was completed and invited me to coffee. We emailed back and forth a few times, exchanging pieces of writing with one another, and eventually met in person on campus. I was paranoid that Alan, my boyfriend at the time, would find out, but I convinced myself that it was just two

friends—not even friends, just classmates—having coffee and talking about literature and films, and our meeting was completely innocent. I had an inkling that Juan was interested in me more than just as a friend, but I didn't care; he was interesting and we had the same tastes.

An every-few-weeks coffee meeting turned into drinks, which eventually turned into dinners. We remained friends and kept our distance, but we both grew more attracted to each other as time passed and we spent hours speaking across various tables. Because I was still with Alan, I told myself I had no feelings for Juan, even though that was untrue. He was handsome, intelligent, kind, well traveled. He had a girlfriend, too, but his not-so-serious relationship and mine both unraveled and ended around the same time. I was excited but also ambivalent too; I didn't want to rush into another disastrous relationship out of grief or confusion. But Juan and I had so much in common and had been friends for months already. I had fallen for Juan in spite of my original friendly intentions, naturally and gradually, unlike falling for Alan who I quickly and desperately wanted to fall in love with.

On our first date Juan took me to see *La Notte*, a 1961 Italian film by Antonioni that he had seen and loved but I had never seen, at The National Gallery. We went out for burgers and drinks that night at a small bar called The Pinch. Outside of the restaurant he kissed me on the street corner, palm pressed to the small of my back; he tasted like pumpkin ale. To me, it was a perfect first date: art, cinema, burgers and beer. After all of those emails, all of the talks across tables in cafes and diners and pubs, we had been slowly falling in love with one another. One month after our first kiss we



returned to DC for an evening out, and that's when, while walking around U-Street, we stumbled upon a fortune telling shop.

It took almost three full minutes before someone answered the door. Like miscreant teenagers, Juan and I laughed childishly as if we were playing ding-dong-ditch at a crotchety old neighbor's house while we waited. We heard the click of the deadbolt and a small, plain woman answered the door. She was shorter than me, barely hitting five feet tall, and had her mousy brown hair pulled back in a messy bun. She wore no makeup and donned a lumpy green sweater and long, shapeless black skirt. I'm not sure who I expected—an older woman in tie-dye smelling like patchouli, or a lady in a turban with too much black eyeliner—but I was taken aback by how sweet and nonthreatening she appeared. All of a sudden, what started out as a hapless joke turned into something more serious.

“Can I help you?” she asked. “I'm with a client right now, but I'll be available in ten minutes or so.”

We asked her for the special, which was not quite as advertised—for ten dollars, you could ask her for answers to three specific questions. I wanted the real deal—after all, if I was going to do this silly thing, I was going to do it right—and I asked for the full-price thirty-dollar palm reading.

Juan and I waited in the stairwell of the building, watching the passers-by with their newspapers and handbags over their heads to protect them from the late afternoon rainstorm.

“What are you going to ask her?” I wanted to know. Juan had opted for the three-question bargain option.

“I don’t know. What are you thinking?” Juan asked me. We were holding hands at this point, our childlike giggles having turned into somber pensiveness.

“I’m kind-of nervous,” I confessed. While I didn’t declare my true emotions to Juan at the time, my mind became preoccupied with thoughts of the paranormal. Perhaps the woman could communicate with my mom or something. I’d recently read Mary Roach’s *Spook* and Richard Masterson’s *What Dreams May Come* and had been thinking often about the possibility of communication with the dead. Maybe the fortuneteller would know where my mother was, or what she wanted to tell me from behind the veil of death. I hadn’t anticipated this swell of emotion, this wondering about a psychic’s ability to speak with the dead, but all of a sudden I couldn’t stop. *How much would a three-minute conversation with my mom cost?* I thought about asking. Would she see my mom’s absence in my palms, or my eyes? What if she told me something I did not want to hear? I second-guessed my impulsive decision to have an amusing time, wondering if I had irrevocably crossed a dangerous line.

I looked on as her client left—a black woman, a bit overweight, with short hair and an enormous purse—and watched as Amy, as she introduced herself, beckoned me into her small shop. I sat down at a wobbly folding card table big enough only for two people. She asked me for my first name only, and told me to put my hands on the table, palms up. I revealed no other information about myself.

Her office was about the size of my bedroom at home. There wasn't anything particularly special about it; the wall facing me displayed a large mirror, and to the right was a closet. A yoga mat was draped across the center of the floor, and in the corner stood an empty coat rack. Nothing about the place screamed new-age, or witch, or crazy-person; I had nothing to compare it to, though, since this was my first time ever having my fortune or palms read.

Amy glanced at my hands for a brief moment and pointed to a long crease that extended from the center of my palm to the middle of my wrist. "This is your life line," she told me. "It is very, very long. You will live until old age, into your 90s, and you will be healthy—but you'll have to take care of yourself. Keep exercising and running."

My great-grandfather, Harold Cox, is alive and at age 96 still mows the grass on his farm in West Virginia once a week. I always felt sorry for him—he must be so lonely, having been widowed thirty years prior and never remarried. He lives in a rural area and few people come to visit him. I dreaded the thought of turning out like him, waiting to die, for my body to finally wear out, lose one function, and then another. Filling up the day with television and newspapers and naps. People would feel obligated to make the long trip to see me. Although my mother died when she was only fifty—too young, too soon—I wondered which would be worse.

Wait—keep running? How did she know I was a runner? I thought. She must be able to tell because of my figure or shapely calves or something. She's been trained to spot these things.

“Palms tell me that you are not supposed to live in this country,” Amy continued. I was shocked. Juan and I had barely exchanged a few words with this woman; how could she know such a thing? The skeptical side of my brain was fighting to understand, to look for signs on my person that would reveal her intuitive responses. Do my flip-flops show that I’m relaxed and enjoy new experiences? Does my bag confirm that I live an active lifestyle? Is the fact that I don’t style my long, tangled hair a hint that I’m a free spirit?

“Traci—you are a born leader. You’re a teacher, no?” I stared at her. “You will continue on this path, and will be self-employed in that field. Writing, perhaps. But it will be successful.”

My stomach began to drop, and what began as a passing interest in psychic ability quickly evolved into a need to hear and know everything Amy would reveal to me. It’s odd—the idea of hearing someone else confirm to you who you are, and what you should do—but it is a strange, urgent need for your life to be authenticated by a complete stranger develops while sitting at that tiny card table.

Thoughts of my mother entered my mind again, and Amy continued. “You will have lots of creativity in the next year—2013—especially after December. Palms say you’ll be finishing a big project that you’ve been working on recently, and although you are very stressed, this will turn out to be a good thing.” My thesis, I thought. But, doesn’t everyone have big projects? I’m taking this too seriously. I have to stay objective. “In two years, after traveling abroad, you will have settled in a foreign place and found your path.

“In terms of your family,” Amy began, “an event has separated you. Those relationships are gone and you will never get them back. Don’t expect to talk to them again. You will move on and create your own family.”

It wasn’t what I wanted to hear; I wanted something specific and pointed that proved Amy was aware of my mother’s presence, or absence, rather, and even some suggestion about where my mother was. “You are in a relationship right now that will work out, and you have always been someone who’s often in love. Palms tell me that you are an unusual case; you have two soul mates, which is very unusual. But, also lucky. You will be married twice. The first time will not work out—he will be taken from you. But your second marriage will last until your end.” An image of Juan sitting on the steps outside, completely oblivious to the events transpiring behind Amy’s frosted glass door, came into my mind. I had pictured him in my future before—even though we had only just started seriously dating—and hoped Amy was right. When I first heard her say he’d be “taken from me,” I considered death. Perhaps I would be forced to endure the debilitating grief my father had undergone for the past two years. But then I thought again—maybe Juan *is* the one for me, and I’ve already met that first “husband” who was taken away: Alan. Taken away by greed, anger, lust, hatred. We may not have been married, exactly, but I acted like we were. Or, at least, I hoped this was the case.

As the palm reading session came to an end—it must have only lasted ten minutes or so—Amy asked if I had any questions. I had a million, but I didn’t say anything. If I felt the desire, I could always come back to see her, but for now I already had too much

to digest, too many possibilities and questions and butterflies in my stomach to come up with a coherent inquiry for her.

“Thank you,” I said, picking up my purse from the carpeted floor. “That was...surprising.” Handing me a colorful business card, she unlocked her office door and Juan and I exchanged a brief glance. “You’re really in for something else,” I warned him.

Ten minutes later, Juan, too, exited her office looking slightly dazed. He paid for us, and we walked back out onto the street together. The rain had stopped, and the sun had begun peeking through low clouds. As we looked around U-Street for a restaurant or bar to bide the time until the Saturday nightlife began, I thought about everything that had transpired during those ten minutes. I can’t make sense of it; I wrote down what Amy said immediately after the reading was over in an attempt to memorialize every prediction, every hint, every truth. I sat on a step and scribbled furiously on a crumpled index card from the bottom of my purse. The whole event made me feel conflicted, and as I grabbed onto Juan’s hand while entering the crosswalk, palms told me that I didn’t want to be anywhere else but next to him, right then, living in the moment.

"His father guessed what he was thinking, and spoke of what it had meant to them to leave their own land and seek new horizons: the courage that was needed to confront suffering; how they had fallen, and gathered strength, and risen again, time after time, while learning to adapt and survive among strangers. Everyplace they had stopped, they made a home with vigor and determination, even if only for a week or a month, because nothing wears down inner strength as quickly as living from day to day. 'All you will have is the present. Waste no energy crying over yesterday or dreaming of tomorrow. Nostalgia is fatiguing and destructive; it is the vice of the expatriate. You must put down roots as if they were forever, you must have a sense of permanence...'"

—Isabelle Allende, *Of Love and Shadows*

## SONGS OF SWALLOWS

As soon as the needle penetrated my skin, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Finally, three weeks before turning 26, I was getting the tattoo I'd really wanted. Although I had two other tattoos already, both inconspicuously done on my left hip (one of a Sanskrit *Om* symbol and the other of a Hindi henna-inspired leaf), I'd long contemplated having a bird tattooed onto my left wrist. I combed through ornithology books, field guides, paintings, online portfolios of tattoo artists, and looked up in trees for birds that caught my eye until I found the one I liked best. From what I could tell after a small amount of amateur research on birds, the one I had selected was a small bird with a wider wingspan and a tiny, narrow body. It was a personal variation on another tattoo I found on the Internet and it would be drawn in a black outline with some slightly gray shading on the bird's wings and belly. About the size of two quarters side-by-side, it would be unobtrusive enough to be modest in a professional atmosphere but clearly visible to me on a day-to-day basis. I could cover it with bracelets or a watch if need be. I wanted to have immediate access to it always, unlike my hip tattoos, which even a string bikini covers up. Hardly anyone has seen my first two tattoos, unless I consciously decided to reveal their whereabouts. Part of me liked this secrecy. But I wanted to be



reminded of my bird tattoo and the decision that led me to have it imprinted onto my skin for the rest of my life. I wanted it where I could see it.

At first, the species of bird wasn't so much of a concern to me; it was the symbolism of birds in general that influenced me enough to tattoo its likeness on my body. Birds represent freedom, journeys, and are creatures that linger between land and sky—or, in a way, between earth and heaven. They have multiple homes depending on the season and are free to roam the world—in fact, migration is key to their survival, and without this movement from place to place, birds would simply be unable to flourish. They would be unable to live.

Until the week before she died, my mother kept a small birdfeeder hanging on the balcony of our townhome. She was filled it up weekly, and while she was cooped up in our house for so many years due to her incapacitating illness, she enjoyed looking outside and catching a glimpse of various birds that would visit her feeder. I imagine she must've been simultaneously in awe and envious of them; birds were capable of so many things she was not. They lived outdoors, wild, had the freedom to move around at leisure, to enjoy the open, fresh and limitless air. She was no avian expert; she mostly identified them by color or sound—"The Big Blue One", "The One with the Red Chest", "The Loud Ones." Sometimes, when I was up in my room, I'd hear her call me from downstairs. "Traci, Traci, come here, quick!" I'd drop whatever I was doing and sprint downstairs to find her looking out the back door. "*Shhhh*. Look over there. Do you see it? That bird is so beautiful! I've never seen anything like it." I'd stand by her side, both of us watching this tiny creature sway on the perch of the feeder. The bird would

eventually fly away, like birds always do, but I took comfort in the fact that it would probably, one day, return.

“I think I want to get a tattoo,” I mentioned to Juan, my boyfriend of only two months, one chilly Friday night in late October as we stuffed ourselves with takeout sushi. Although we had known each other for over a year and had spent many evenings across a table from one another in coffee shops and bars and restaurants as close friends, our relationship was still very new. We were just getting to know each other as a couple, and while we had discussed possible future plans—like moving to Korea together to teach English, or moving in together when the new year came around—we were patiently and tenderly watching our relationship unfold.

“I’ll get one with you,” he replied quickly, taking me off guard. “Do you want to go tonight?”

I loved his spontaneity and passion for adventure and new experiences—it’s what attracted me to him in the first place. Our first conversations were often about traveling, about the places we’ve seen and want to see, the people we’ve met and desire to meet. Juan is from Colombia, and hearing his stories of growing up in gritty and vibrant Bogota captivated me. He also desired to move back overseas after completing graduate school, like me. So when he said he wanted to get tattoos together, I wasn’t completely surprised, but very intrigued.

And so we went, not that night, but exactly a week later. We chose Marlowe Ink, a well-known parlor in Fairfax, Virginia, because we had a \$25 off coupon, and that

appealed greatly to our graduate student budgets. I showed him my design of the small bird, and he chose to have it also tattooed onto him—but on his left bicep, about three times as large, and facing the other direction. Although I had imagined my bird to fly alone, I took comfort in the fact that she would have a partner. Knowing Juan had opted for the same tattoo didn't offend me; even if we split up, the bird's significance wouldn't change. He'd had a tattoo before as well—on his other bicep, of a sun—so we both knew what we were getting into: the pain, the instant thrill, the slightly off-putting awareness that ink is permanent. We joked that it would be the “best date ever,” and that even if we broke up one day, it would be difficult to top such a moment with another person on another Friday night.

Marlowe Ink is a small shop tucked away on the second floor of an historic three-story building. When we arrived, the waiting area was filled with patrons—a group of three young boys, barely legal, sat in one corner pouring over tattoo portfolios and magazines.

“What tattoo are you going to get, man?” asked one of the guys, baseball cap pulled down low over his brow.

“I don't know, I haven't really thought about it. Maybe something on my neck.”

The other friend, with shoulder-length blonde hair tucked behind his ears, piped in. “You should get a tiger or something! That'd be *sick*.”

“Yeah, I might get that. A tiger would be cool.”

As I listened to their conversation, I rolled my eyes. Stupid teenagers, getting tattoos just for the hell of it. They'll regret it in ten years when they have some

cartoonish teeth-bearing feline plastered on the side of their neck. To me, tattooing is an immensely personal experience. It is aesthetic and spiritual, painful yet cathartic. It would become part of my body. Even after I take my last breath and my heart beats for the last time, my tattoos will still exist, permanent and unique markings on my body. There was something almost spiritual about tattoos, and yet these young boys gave their body art no premeditative consideration. It took me by surprise that I felt such resentment towards them. To me, tattoos should have a story behind them, a meaning. Something significant, something transcendental—not a youthful indiscretion done on a whim. Even though Juan impetuously decided to get a tattoo with me, there was thought and tenderness behind it, and it wasn't done on a whim; it was a commitment.

A couple in their mid-thirties sat on the opposite wall. The woman browsed dully through her cell phone while the man excitedly described his design for a large tattoo of some kind of hellish scene that would be inscribed upon his right calf. In his lap he held a pair of rolled-up khaki shorts—he brought them with him to wear during the tattooing, to replace his baggy blue jeans. He tightly wrapped his hands around the shorts, spinning them between his palms repeatedly, like he was wringing out a sopping wet dishtowel.

“But the skull—I mean, should it be white? If the white doesn't show up, would that look bad? You know? Because, I think, maybe it would be better gray. And if it was gray, it would contrast with the red flames from hell, and then with a black outline I think that would really stand out. But what do you think? I mean do you think it would look okay?” He was clearly anxious, and I watched as his leg—the one about to be tattooed—bounced up and down nervously.

I was not nervous. I knew the drill—sign the waivers, wait for an artist, give them the design, wait for the stencil to be made. More than anything, I was excited to finally get the bird tattoo. Many people (usually those who have not undergone the process, I've found) believe tattoos are addictive; once you have one, you get another, and another, until your arms are covered in sleeves and even the pads of your fingers are tattooed. I disagree, although I do think tattoos are a beautiful expression of individuality and a fascinating type of body modification. Perhaps I'd get another in the future, but only if it really meant something to me.

This parlor did not allow anyone but the person being tattooed into the private rooms. Juan and I were separated; he went with a female artist, and I went with Corey, a redhead with long wavy hair pulled back into a messy ponytail. He told me he'd been tattooing for seventeen years. I'd never been alone during this experience before; my best friend Kim was there to hold my hand for both previous tattoos. Strangely, I was relieved that Juan wouldn't be with me. It is an intimate thing—another human being marking your skin for the rest of your life. This time, I enjoyed the idea of it being solely *my* experience, *my* memory. Juan and I would be getting similar tattoo designs, but they weren't completely identical, and the symbol didn't mean the same thing to him as it did to me.

While I waited for Corey to prep the needle and ink, I thought about the events that had led me to this point, to this chair, to my cleanly shaven and sterilized wrist facing up towards the bright fluorescent lights.

“You ready?” Corey asked. He buzzed the needle a few times in the air before dipping it into the black ink. “I’ll do one long line for you, just so you can remember how it feels. Get you back in the flow of it.”

As soon as the needle penetrated the top layers of my skin, I exhaled. Kate Chopin’s “Story of an Hour” came to mind—I’d just taught it to my English 112 literature students the week before. I recalled the poignant image of Mrs. Mallard at the window, finally excited to live the rest of her life alone after her husband’s supposed death, reciting the words “*Free, free, free!*” I remembered then what she was looking at just outside her bedroom window: birds. Flying sparrows against a blue sky. “*Body and soul free!*”

It baffles me when people ask the question, “Did it hurt?” Yes—tattoos *hurt*. The process entails a vibrating needle that enters in and out of your skin over and over again, like a miniature jackhammer. The needle doesn’t look like the kind one would find at a doctor’s office; it almost resembles the tip of a fountain pen. I can’t compare the sensation to anything I’ve ever felt before; some liken it to a bee sting, but it’s not quite like that. A bee only stings once. The needle kept penetrating my skin over and over for fifteen minutes.

“This hurts a lot more than my other two tattoos,” I mentioned to Corey when he was about halfway through. “I feel...*everything*.” I watched him carve the first wing of the bird into my wrist.

“Yeah, the wrist is the most sensitive area to get tattooed. That and the top of the foot. Tons of nerve endings there,” he informed me.

“So, you decided to get some sparrow action, hmm?” Corey asked as he moved the needle slowly around the tail of the bird.

“Is it a sparrow, or a swallow?” I asked, taken aback. “I thought it was a swallow.” Corey made me panic: had I chosen the wrong bird? At the time I wasn’t overly concerned about what kind of bird it was—I thought swallows were more exotic than sparrows, according to my hasty research. They also were more elegant; swallows have a thinner body and longer wing shape compared to the stocky sparrow.

“Not sure, not sure,” he said. “Though a lot of people get tattoos like these when something really meaningful or fucked up happens to them. Yours looks a little different than any I’ve done before.”

“That seems about right,” I told him, watching the skin of my wrist evolve from flesh to art before my eyes.

Later, after doing more in-depth inquiry, I was happy to discover that the bird I had chosen really was a swallow. The origin of the swallow tattoo dates back over two hundred years. Sailors on long, dangerous passages—from Europe to the New World, for instance—would get a swallow tattoo to commemorate their overseas expeditions. A seaman with 5,000 nautical miles was deserving of a swallow tattoo; it was seen as a privilege, a right of passage, something that had to be earned. Before the days of GPS, sailors would follow birds to land. There is an old nautical legend about one captain who, after days and days lost at sea with dwindling supplies and an ailing crew, finally spotted the bird native to his land—the swallow. To him, the swallow was both his

savior and his guide; it is a bird known to always lead you home. Typically, the image of a swallow would be tattooed as a twosome—one swallow on one shoulder and one on the other, the two birds facing each other. The sailors' saying goes: "A swallow for a safe journey a swallow for a safe return."

Many men who are incarcerated often request a swallow tattoo after being released from their jail sentence. They typically have them inked onto their hands or wrists; many former gang members also possess this tattoo. The swallow symbolizes freedom, the escaping of a cage that contained them for so long—even though that cage was of their own making. They request the tattoo as a remembrance of the blessing of their freedom and how fortunate they are to have a second chance at life.

Another less known meaning of the pictorial image of the swallow dates back to ancient Egypt. Egyptians associated both sparrows and swallows with the stars. They believed the two birds caught the souls of those that had passed and would carry them to the stars, or "heaven." Perhaps swallows were tattooed onto bodies, but the symbols and hieroglyphs have been repeatedly discovered in tombs and pyramids. This explains the Egyptians' belief that their ancestors live on in the afterlife as stars in the night sky, looking down and protecting their loved ones.

There are also several references to swallows in the Bible. Like the dove, it is connoted with eternal hope and faith. For Native Americans, swallows can be seen carved into their totem poles for similar purposes. Swallows are masters of camouflage and for this they are known to be one of the most creative birds. They are a symbol of productivity—usually associated with the female—as she is vigilant in her goals, whether



gathering food, feeding her young, or nest-building. For such a tiny creature and for such a short life—usually no longer than an eight-year lifespan—swallows make the most of it.

Swallows are unique in that they are known for traveling great distances, but they always return to their respective homes. Swallows were biologically and anatomically built to travel and to survive long, exhausting journeys. They also mate for life, unlike almost all other birds. Once a year, they will migrate to their homeland—the Galapagos Islands—and will find their one partner amongst millions of other birds. Because of this, swallows are known to symbolize love, dedication and trust. Out of all those birds from all over the world, no matter the distance traveled to meet each other, the pair of swallows will always find their mate in the midst of this annual chaotic fray. They stay with this one bird until they die.

This is why swallows must always be tattooed in pairs.

While I didn't know any of this information before getting the tattoo, it all seems too coincidental to ignore.

The tattoo only took about twenty minutes to complete. Corey charged me \$80, but Juan refused to let me pay—“This is a date,” he joked. “I want to pay.” Since tattoos are immediately covered up with ointment and a bandage, for three hours Juan and I were unable to show each other our new ink. He told me he loved his, and I told him I loved mine—it turned out perfectly, just as I had hoped. We stumbled out into the cold October air, hand in hand, looking upwards at a starry autumn sky.

On the way back to Juan's house, I looked out the window and tried to recall what my life was like just a few months earlier. When I look at my swallow tattoo, I feel a myriad of things: happiness; pride; wisdom; strength; beauty. Such a tiny, quiet creature, but such a strong and enigmatic one. Most of all, it reminds me how dangerously close I came to losing myself forever. Perhaps I was caged by my own fear and grief; I felt I had nowhere else to go. And now, I am able to dream of flying again, and next to me sits a man who would cross oceans, search everywhere, wants so dearly to be with me. He wants to be a pair for life.

When I look upwards at leafy branches of trees, I try to spot a match to my tattoo. The swallow has reminded me of the person I truly am, and what I want out of this life: mostly, to travel overseas and experience everything I can. She has taught me a most important lesson that I will never forget; after all, each time I look down at my left wrist, she reminds me.

Like the swallow, we do not need to have the loudest voice to be heard.

## THE END

Sometimes, late at night, I pretend that I am about to die.

In my head I run through various events of my life: losing my first tooth; breaking my arm; my first kiss at the ice rink at age thirteen; being rejected and accepted to various colleges; cutting twelve inches off my hair, twice; traveling abroad in college; guitar lessons; a nasty splinter underneath my thumbnail from the wooden playground; learning a bit of five different languages, what wine in Bordeaux tastes like; my mother's cold body; meeting my best friend Kim freshman year of college; leaving an abusive relationship; finding my dog Wendy; the first time I went salsa dancing.

I wonder what all of these events will mean in the end.

I wonder what it will feel like, to die. Will it hurt? Will I be alone? Will it be like this, in a bed, late at night, when I can be by myself and go in peace? Or will others be hanging around, watching my chest rise and fall and rise again, anxiously awaiting the moment when it fails to move?

While in my bed contemplating my end, I picture only one person by my side—my future husband, face blurred, whose identity I'm not quite certain of, who is holding my hand with tears in his eyes. I can hardly open my own eyes because of fatigue and because of palliative drugs, but he knows I hear him. And I know he is there. I wonder

what he will say and I silently hope that I die first because I don't want to be left alone again, don't want to be the one left behind, don't want to endure the void that remains when the closest person to me leaves my life forever. Again, again. I cannot do it again. In my bed I imagine I am 32, or 56, or 73. I am sick or have suffered a terrible accident. But I am dying, and I will go first, and I will be leaving people behind this time.

As my body lies supine in my small twin bed, I hold my breath for as long as I can. Forty, fifty seconds, until my head begins to pound and my ribs beg to be expanded and released. Sometimes I wonder if twenty-five years were enough. Sometimes I can make myself a little dizzy. Sometimes I can forget that I am alive.

When I told Juan, my boyfriend, about my strange habit—after all, we'd begun sharing a bed on weekends, maybe he'd notice this ritual one night—he said, “I hope you die first too, partly to fulfill your wish; but only when we are very old, so I can spend the last years writing about you.” It is a dark thought, but a beautiful and romantic one. As I hold my breath and struggle to keep the air out, I pray he is right.

The reason I spend at least one night a week contemplating my end is because I never saw my mother's. She died alone; her end was silent, unobserved. I often wonder what went through her head during her last moments on earth. I imagine sometimes when I flip through my childhood photo albums rapidly, like film stills, that this is how she saw her life: snapshots, quickly drawn and quickly discarded, but full of meaning and importance and love.

But she was alone, and she had no one near her to recollect these snapshots with.

She would never have let me die alone, I think. She would have been there until the end.

There are a few childhood photographs that I continually gravitate towards. I've removed them from their plastic pockets and placed them in various places I see more often: stuck to my bathroom mirror; on the bulletin board above my desk; in my journal and in my daily planner. My favorite of them all was taken on my second birthday. I sit in a white plastic baby seat, one of those with the adjustable lip to rest a child's food upon while they are eating. The mini table is in front of me, and atop it rests a colorful paper plate with a piece of cake resting on its stained surface. The cake is yellow with chocolate frosting and by its shape and texture I can tell it was not store-bought but made by my mother, in our kitchen, just a few hours prior to this photo's taking. It is probably generic Safeway brand cake mix, not even Betty Crocker or Pillsbury. We didn't have money to buy a store-bought cake, I think. She did this for me.

In the photo I am smiling, mouth agape and tiny teeth showing, and looking towards my right. I wonder what I was laughing at; I will never know, because that entertaining thing is out of the frame of the picture. The photo makes me happy for many reasons, even though I don't remember the actual event itself. I don't remember being two, but when I look at my smiling face, chocolate frosting smeared around my mouth, my hair sticking up by static on the left side (it was November, and it was cold and static was everywhere), I feel an overwhelming sense of love for my mother and my childhood. I am so happy here, so content. I have cake and it's my birthday and there are people and things to look at, to amuse me.

It's funny how one of the most important memories of my childhood is one that I cannot actually recall. In another photo, taken immediately before this one, my mother is handing me the slice of yellow cake, and she is beautiful; long, blonde curls, bright eyes, a pink and black striped shirt. She is looking at my laughing face. I love her.

“There is a moment when any real journey begins. Sometimes it happens as you leave your house, sometimes it’s a long way from home.”

—Damon Galgut, *In a Strange Room*

## THE BEGINNING

This story began with an adventure abroad, and it will end with one. Ten months from now, in March of 2013, Juan—now my fiancé—and I will be moving to Mexico City together, the city we fell in love with—and fell in love in—during a trip to celebrate my twenty-sixth birthday last November. Like my journeys to Berlin and Slovakia, I am uncomfortable with the language, culture, customs or history. I'll be completely immersed in an environment I'm unfamiliar with, disoriented, often lost, unable to fully express myself—and I absolutely cannot wait.

Recently I've been having a recurring dream about my mom. I've had many dreams of her, but I don't give them much consideration, except for this one. We're driving in her Honda CR-V, the car I inherited after she died, and we're in a wooded area on a shady gravel road. We drive up a large hill; she looks healthy, her hair is freshly dyed, she is wearing a white Nike t-shirt I remember her wearing in my teenage years. Her manicured nails tap the steering wheel as we drive along under the canopy of trees. It is late spring, or summer, perhaps. At the top of the hill, she tells me to get out of the car and walk down the other side to the river there. I can't see the river, just the tops of trees. I ask her to come with me, and she says she can't; her legs can't make the trip; she must've been ill in this dream. I walk to the bottom of the hill and what awaits me is the



most beautiful river I have ever seen, glittering in the sunlight. There are multitudes of tiny, flat, slate-colored pebbles littering the banks, all perfect for skipping on top of the calm water. I throw a few and watch the water splatter. To my right is a tiny cave; inside, I hear laughter. I walk towards it and see dozens of children, some very young and some teenagers, splashing around in their bathing suits. They all are speaking different languages—Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Slovak, Swahili, French, Korean. But they are all communicating with one another. I jump in the river with all my clothes on and join them. After a few minutes I realize my mom is waiting for me, so I begin to run to the top of the hill to tell her what a beautiful scene I've just witnessed. She's not there; there's no sign of her car. She's left me alone. I walk back down to the river, pulled towards the water by sounds of laughter and some small child calling my name.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Traci Cox graduated with her B.A in English from James Madison University in 2008 and received her M.F.A. in Creative Nonfiction Writing from George Mason University in 2013. In 2009 she was awarded a J.W. Fulbright Fellowship and spent eight months teaching English to Slovak high school students in Zilina, Slovakia. Traci has taught English at various universities in the D.C. area. Currently Traci resides in Virginia with her fiancé, Juan. This is her first essay collection.