

WINTER LEGS GIVE ME HEART ATTACKS

by

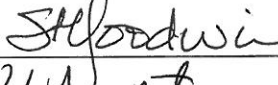
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Winter Legs Give Me Heart Attacks

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

by

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DEDICATION

To my mother, father, and brother.

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ABSTRACT

WINTER LEGS GIVE ME HEART ATTACKS

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George Mason University, 2013

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This thesis collects a series of short stories that deal with the despondency and isolation of plain characters in their fantastic worlds. The plainness of these characters is not in their normalcy, but in perhaps their lack of one or more of the following: love, connectivity, compassion. And these fantastic worlds are only fantastic in their ruthless nature, in their unsettling sense of heart in despair. The stories in this collection circle around the fractured elements of the modern American family, as told by the members of these families that never felt like they belonged. Or maybe they belong the most? In twenty-three stories, there is brevity to the construction of these worlds, as the standard conventions of prose are pulled out like a game of Operation – trying ever so hard to not touch the metal edges of the wounds. There are children who lie, others who kill each other, and others who merely hold their breath. There are parents who jump off bridges, give up too easily, or never try at all. And then there are all the people in between who are searching for a connection but have trouble even connecting with themselves.

WINTER LEGS GIVE ME HEART ATTACKS

Mothers usually tuck away their fine china in dusty, oak credenzas. The eggshell plates with delicate etchings of Chinese willows and geishas that find themselves in wedding registries when the monogrammed linen and crockpot ideas run dry. The hope of most mothers is to one-day pass down these useless artifacts of familial stability to the first daughter to crawl out of their loins and start their own family.

The women that I call my mother and my grandmother -- and several incarnations further down the lineage -- have a similar tradition, but it involves a worsted wool blanket that's handed down from mother to daughter when the marriages in our family begin to fall apart. When a wife learns that their husband can no longer love them, they also learn how to knit.

I'd known this blanket, when I was little, as a tacky piece of decor in my grandmother's house that hung steadily on the wicker rocking chair that sat catty-corner from the grey brick slab of a wall that passed for a fireplace when the ranch house was built in the 1960s. It was a plain green in every sense of plain, the kind of green that peeks out of the mud and melting snow around March in Langley, a small coastal town on Whidbey Island that sits on the edge of Puget Sound and where my family has resided since my mother's great grandparents opened up a pharmacy on Second Street. A green that's defeated and rubbed dull by the weather.

When I was six or seven I'd pull down the blanket from its high back perch and parachute it flat atop the beige carpet where it would, for hours and hours, become a forested wilderness of thicketed brush and rows of pine for my Barbie dolls to traverse.

"Stacey, where are you? Your trail of breadcrumbs ended miles ago! Can you hear me!?" Barbie would scream until hoarse. Or until I was hoarse or my grandmother would call in from the other room to keep it down. Her friend Stacey was never found and I presumed her dead, stuffed in a floral couch cushion.

The pattern of the worsted wool blanket was divided into square sections of zigzagging lines that alternated between vertical and horizontal. This gave the forest a realistic texture so it was easy to imagine Barbie pioneering through this world, alone and lost. The most potent smells in my grandmother's house were mothballs and dry rot, which added an air of travesty to Barbie's journeys. The third smell prevalent at the time was a hint of cotton swabs and ointment. The house smelled like bandages because everyone in it was dying.

I was born in the middle of the '80s when Megan was still a popular name to give to a child. My dad was still clinging to the possibility of a botched sonogram by the time I arrived, so my masculine middle name came straight from his own father, who horribly and coincidentally shared a name with a governor from Alabama. My birth certificate reads: Megan George Wallace.

In the early '90s, when I was sprawled out on the green blanket with Barbie traipsing through the pine trees, my grandmother was slowly losing the battle with liver

cancer. Her poodle, Chancey, had an erratic bladder due to a growing tumor next to her stomach. Both would pass by the time I was eight. Chancey first.

My grandfather didn't live in the same house that smelled like bandages and dry rot. He, along with his fifty-year-old girlfriend, resided across town in a condominium, which had a heated pool, although it might as well hadn't since my mother never let me visit. She and her father didn't speak once he left my grandmother.

It was a few years before I came out of my mother, Lorrie, that my grandfather got out of his marriage. He fought in World War II, leaving the Pacific as a blind navy gunner with a purple heart in 1942. Returning to Langley and to Maple, my grandmother, they married later that year and she took care of him like a pediatric nurse for forty years. She was never a stunning woman, something that's also passed down in our family, but she had a fit build and flowing locks of auburn hair as a teenager. The four decades of caring for a blind husband, along with raising my mother, naturally took their toll on her frame and hair and firm skin. In 1980, she was somewhere around two-hundred pounds, hair cut short and brittle, and skin creased and folded like a leather jacket that was improperly stored, wadded up in a ball in the corner of an attic. This was when my grandfather was given the opportunity to undergo an experimental procedure to regain partial sight.

"Now keep in mind," the doctor said at the time, "the probability of you having any significant restoration of vision is very small."

"Yes, Henry. Keep that in mind. I don't want you to get your hopes up. I'll still be here to take care of you no matter what happens." My grandmother kept a heavy hand on

my grandfather's shoulder as the doctor began to remove the gauze and wrapping that had stayed on his face the previous week since the initial surgery.

"It couldn't get worse." He had a penchant for meaningless quips that steamrolled any attempt at an honest conversation.

The doctor continued to unwrap my grandfather's face in steady and intentional clockwise arm movements. "Let me know if you experience any reactions to the light in the room." Maple told the story later that the doctor looked like he was taking the dressings off a Christmas tree, unwinding the tinsel with delicate precision to make sure it didn't tangle.

"I can barely lift up my damn eyelids, they feel so sore. What did you do to me here, doctor?"

"Henry," Maple tried to reassure him, "this isn't an overnight thing. It's going to take time to heal."

My grandfather slowly quivered his swollen eyelids until a small portion of his pupils were exposed to the room.

"It's goddamn bright in here, that's what it is. Could you turn it down a notch?"

"Can you feel the overhead lights? Are you seeing any bright color?" The doctor pulled out a small flashlight and strobed a bright beam into my grandfather's eyeballs. The dilation of his pupils indicated that there must have been some success with the operation.

"Jesus Christ! Are you trying to blind me again?"

Over several weeks, my grandfather slowly regained a large portion of his sight. He could now make out objects that he hadn't seen in almost fifty years and other things that he had never seen before in his life. If he got up close enough to something, its edges were sharp and crisp, his picture of it clear. Inches from Maple's face, he would end up saying, "Boy, you sure got old."

He would leave my grandmother months later, moving into the condo with the pool and eventually meeting a woman who never had to cut his sirloin tips into manageable pieces or help him aim while going to the bathroom. Maple immediately took up knitting, adding hundreds of rows to the green blanket by the time I was throwing it onto the ground in her lonely house, by the time she had a biopsy then chemo and more and more of the same.

Once my grandmother passed, the rocking chair came to stay in the den of our house, by which I mean my parents' house. The green blanket hung lifeless on the worn chair back as I grew out of my doll stage and started spending most of the time in my bedroom, door closed and feet propped up on my wrought iron headboard, listening to music that was angry or sad or too fast to tap out a beat. I covered every inch of my walls with pictures, posters or pages cut out of magazines; by the time I was sixteen. Boys with mopy heads of hair and eyeliner consumed a lot of the square footage, though I'd yet to have any physical interaction with this kind or any kind of boy. I would, however, spend many late afternoons with the door locked, touching myself as my eyes roamed the plastered surfaces of my room, looking for an intimate connection.

While the rocking chair was one of the few items of my grandmother's that didn't get donated to a thrift store or tossed in the trash because of mildew growth, my mother never touched the blanket, as long as she was still happily, for lack of a better term, married to my father. They were never happy people, but they did seem to get along. They went on monthly dates to the local seafood restaurant a few blocks away from our house and sat together at the table every morning while my father glanced through the paper and my mother scribbled in the crosswords.

I surprised my parents with sticky toast and sunny-side-up eggs on their anniversary ever since I'd been allowed to use the skillet. Then, at sixteen, when I was learning about the contours of my own body while wishing these hands were not my own, my father began sleeping with a woman named Denise who worked in his office building. My mother began skipping breakfast and running five miles every morning.

She, like Maple and the other women before her, was not a natural beauty. But my mother fancied herself fashionable and layered on makeup in a six-step process that kept her ageless ever since I realized that other mothers were getting marked by wrinkles. The only blemish on her face were her crows feet, impossible to cover with the thickest of foundations and deep like canyons. She squinted her way through most days, exacerbating the lines, not wanting to give in to the thought of glasses. This only made things worse. She said her face wasn't built to hold up any type of frames. She blamed it on her skinny nose, which is something I shared with her and Meryl Streep.

"It just wouldn't look natural," she'd say. "It'd be like balancing a spoon on a toothpick."

I never got her analogies.

“Whatever, Mom. I’m just saying that you wouldn’t have to squint all the time if you just went and got your eyes checked, that’s all.”

“Maybe you should be focusing more on yourself, Meg. Why don’t you go running with me tomorrow morning? You could stand to lose a few pounds.” She made a grab for my waist. I huffed and spun to the side, avoiding her clutch.

Having a cheating husband didn’t seem to bring my mother down. She started to look fitter than I’d ever seen her, and I might have actually thought she looked happy if I didn’t know her well. But that all came to a halt when my father didn’t come home from the office one afternoon, sent some movers to the house the next day to collect his things, and promptly delivered divorce papers to our front door. After that day, my mother stopped running and started shopping for dull colored green yarn and knitting needles.

It was a Tuesday sometime in the following few weeks after my father had completely moved out of the house. I was throwing notebooks and bobby pins into my backpack minutes before the school bus stopped at the end of our cul-de-sac, where the circular concrete combined two parallel rows of Victorian homes that the homeowner’s association suggested could only be painted the follow colors: blue-grey, grey-blue, pale yellow, or grey-grey. When I stepped into the kitchen, my mother was sitting at the counter, perched on a barstool, unwinding a ball of knotted yarn while nursing a glass of brandy, filled to the brim with ice cubes.

“Morning,” I said, shuffling across the tile while grabbing the closest and easiest food in sight. I landed on an overripe banana.

My mother failed to acknowledge my greeting until I flung my bag down in the chair next to her to put on my sneakers.

“Yes? Oh yes, morning, Meg. Did you get something to eat? What about your lunch?”

I flashed her my browning fruit like a middle finger.

“Why don’t you go for a run today, Mom? The rain has all dried up, I think.”

“I’m busy with this, dear,” she said, motioning to the clump of green splayed out in front of her chest.

“That’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen anyways. If you’re going to knit, why don’t you make something new?”

“This was your grandmother’s. And her mom before that. Hopefully it won’t be yours, but I wish I could say that for certain. You’ll understand sooner or later. We’re made this way.”

“Well if I was made to turn out like that, God strike me with hairy legs and a mustache.” I hurried out the door before she could say anything else. I was about to miss the bus anyway.

HOW TO BREAK THE NEWS, PART I

Anna was in her late twenties and didn't like to leave her house. Also, her father was dying of cancer.

It was late in autumn. Anna lived only a few miles across town from her parents, but the telephone was how they communicated. Her father was retired, balding to a horseshoe, and breathed through tiny tubes of oxygen. He told Anna's mother that it smelled like ski slopes, the air from the oxygen tanks - sharp like cheddar - and Anna's mother, in turn, overfed him oatmeal. Their marriage was one of the ones that lasted for too long, outliving a cocker spaniel, two Labradors, and four business partners.

Anna was the younger of two daughters, the one who didn't need braces. Her sister, Jenny, didn't need braces either, but wanted them anyway. They were now all adults with teeth that fell into three categories: almost perfect but yellow, crooked with an under bite, and dentures in a glass on the bedside table. It hadn't been summer for what seemed like several years, but in reality was only a few months. The air was turning crisp, as pollen no longer clung to the particles floating around and the leaves wilted on various hard surfaces. The whole town started to smell like ski slopes, but Anna didn't notice. She only noticed the cold.

Anna had never remembered a colder October, but she was sure they existed. She could distinctly recall two or three Halloween nights where she and her fellow trick-or-

treaters were not only covered in enough sugar cause instant diabetes, but a light dusting of snow as well. And it hadn't snowed this October. Just to be sure, she checked the previous day's forecast every afternoon. It hadn't snowed for even half a minute. Though once the calendar flipped to November, give or take a few days, Anna realized that she never felt colder, and it had nothing to do with October or the temperature.

Anna didn't have a husband to sleep next to her, so she was free to sprawl across the entire mattress, tangling her feet in and out of the sheets. She was also free to sleep in most days, as her work-at-home editing job offered flexible hours from the comfort of her own computer. Her paychecks were directly deposited into her account so she didn't even have to go to the bank. Casually leaving her nonexistent bed partner sometime around noon, she'd put on a tea kettle and pour a generous bowl of sugary cereal artificially dyed in bright, primary colors to resemble fruits that were as real as her lover.

She wasn't overweight or too thin. Her once blonde hair was gradually getting darker as her twenties began to disappear, and she was now confident that no one would mistake her and her sister, whose hair had stayed almost white even though she was thirty-five, for sisters anymore.

It had been almost two years since Anna last left her house for anything other than groceries or cleaning products, and those were purchased well after midnight at one of the megastores that never close, when crowds were at their minimum. Anna kept her house tidy, but not much effort was needed to keep it that way since very little was done to make it unkempt. She'd usually answer the phone when her sister or parents would

call, yet even this was starting to become tedious, as her sister barraged questions at her that she didn't know that answer to and didn't think anyone in the world knew the answer to either.

"So, what do you do all day?"

"Try to stay alive." This was either the most logical and deductive answer Anna could think of or a snide remark to shut her sister up. Her sister usually took it as the latter.

"Have you heard from Mark recently?"

"What you do consider recent? He sent me a wedding invitation last summer, I think."

"You never told me Mark got married," her sister responded.

"Maybe he didn't. You know how those things go."

"What things?"

"You know, life things."

"Come on now. I'm being serious." Her sister was being serious. "Why didn't you two ever get married?"

"Why aren't you married?"

"I am. You were in the wedding."

"Oh. Yeah, I forgot."

Given her stagnant life at the moment, Anna's mother often suggested that she talk to someone.

"I'm talking to you right now."

"You know what I mean," her mother said, "a professional."

"I'm not depressed, Mom. And I'm not psychotic, I don't think. Do you think I am?"

"No, no. I'm just worried about you. You're my daughter. And with everything going on with your father right now, I just think that maybe it would be beneficial to talk to someone who was trained to listen. Someone who could help you."

Anna's mother called her every afternoon as she sat at the kitchen counter and ate her breakfast, making loud crunching noises into the phone as she chewed.

"Your father is dying. It would mean a lot if you would come to the hospital and visit with him."

"I think I'm dying too."

"Then doesn't a hospital seem like a good place to be?"

"It's too cold to go outside."

"So you want me to go tell your father that his own daughter won't come and visit him in the hospital because there may or may not be a chance of snow flurries?"

"I love you from my toes to the top of my heart." Anna sounded like a child. Her voice fluttered up an octave and caught her mother off guard.

"What are you talking about?"

"Sorry. Wrong person."

Anna loved her father. She told him so. She told him she loved him from her toes to the top of her heart. All that space in between - her shins and kneecaps and stomach and gallbladder. He never said it back. He was an old-fashioned man who tucked his feelings away like a folded up handkerchief in his pocket. But there was always a smile that broke across his face.

When Anna was still little, he would come home from whatever town on whatever business he was on, after spending weeks on the road. And he always brought her a souvenir, a flattened penny embossed with a picture of whatever famous thing had happened in whatever town.

"How'd it get so flat?" Anna used to ask.

"The weight of the world, kiddo. Everything around us just crushes it down until it's as thin as a piece of paper."

"That's how pennies feel?"

He said yes.

"I think I'm a penny."

"I know the feeling," he said, "It's all you can do to not get flattened."

She smiled and so did he.

The next day the phone rang as Anna was putting away the milk. She sat down at the barstool and shoved a large spoonful of cereal into her mouth while pushing talk on the receiver.

"Hi, Mom."

This more than likely sounded like herrrphh-mmmirm on the other end.

"Your father passed away this morning."

"Oh."

"I tried to call your sister but I couldn't reach her yet. He would have liked to have seen you one last time."

Anna took a deep breath and heavily exhaled into the telephone. Little bits of fruit-flavored granules sprayed all over the countertop.

She finished her bowl of cereal and drank the remainder of the milk in a long slurp. She wondered how long it would be before she'd have to go to the grocery store. Milk seemed to always be the first thing to go, besides her father. But Anna couldn't imagine purchasing him in a supermarket at one in the morning. She then thought about her sister and the things that her sister didn't know.

Anna showered and changed into her first pair of clean slacks in weeks, shoving her hands into the shallow pockets for comfort. The sky had been filling up with pillow clouds all day and by the time she opened the front door to walk out and leave her house, tiny snowflakes were swirling around in the air and coming to rest on the pavement, a thin blanket over everything.

She got in her car and headed over to her sister's house, glancing down at the road with every turn to make sure she was still planted firmly on asphalt, and not on some precious metal that could be easily crushed.

Anna arrived at her sister's house half an hour later. Jenny answered the door in a sweatshirt and flannel pajama pants, apparently woken up by the doorbell. She had stayed late at the hospital last night, a contributing factor to sleeping until the mid-afternoon.

"What are you doing here?" Jenny rubbed her eyes to adjust to the daylight.

Anna walked passed Jenny and led her into the living room, where they both took a seat on the couch. Anna began talking.

"I don't know how to tell you this, but let me get everything out before you say anything, okay?"

Jenny remained silent for the rest of the conversation.

DROWNING LESSONS

A year ago, my father decided to take some time off. He just kind of laid there, rubbing his nose around, circular motions where cartilage clicked like distant lumberjacks. My mother took it one step further and tapped her heels, jumping off the West End Bridge. Left was a greeting card, kittens and a scribbled heart, while she sprawled the bank, her sweater soaked and unraveled, her braided hair tossed and wrapped around her face.

TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS

Kathy rarely flew.

She had been on a plane a total of four times in twenty-five years. The first two were hardly by choice, as they occurred before she could talk, which prevented her from politely asking if perhaps her parents would prefer taking a bus across the Midwestern states to attend her great gammy's funeral. She had no say in the travel arrangements or the dark blue dress her mother bought for her to wear -- because, as her mother put it, babies don't wear black -- or the decision to even show up at a funeral for a woman she had never met and a woman who hated her father for running the family business into the ground. But she protested as best she could, crying in agony on both legs of the trip as the pressure in her ears increased with the high altitude. The other passengers shot looks of disdain and scoffed at the eighteen-month old Kathy and her mother and her father and her brother Pete, who was trying to read a comic book and hated Kathy as much as everyone else.

The glaring faces of the other passengers were eerily similar to the likeness of her great gammy at the funeral home they'd eventually arrive at. It was an open casket viewing, and the mortician was made to follow the strict guidelines of her last will and testament, leaving gammy's eyes wide open. Her deadly stare, coupled with the fact that she was dead, frightened poor little Kathy as her father was holding her as he walked past

the haunting figure. She began crying again, as her great gammy stared down her father, a final judging look at the man who tarnished the family name. Pete tugged at his father's jacket. He knew that Kathy was causing a scene like on the plane and he'd rather be back at the hotel room finishing his comic and why does she always have to be a pain. His glares at Kathy grew to be just as deadly as their great gammy's. This caused Kathy, as she began to walk and talk and think somewhat for herself, to never protest again if she could help it. There was no reason to cry if it was going to upset others around you.

She flew twice after that. These two flights, round trip from Minneapolis to a country in West Africa that had very few letters in its name but was surprisingly difficult to remember, happened the winter after she graduated from college. She was in love with a tall boy named Rob and he had joined the Peace Corps. She agreed for the both of them that she should visit in December. The trip took thirteen-hours each way and Kathy was sandwiched between a severely overweight man in a business suit and the window, which she kept closed. The overweight man sweated through his suit during the entire flight, giving off a smell that was a mixture of a stagnant pond and a hamper full of dirty underwear. Pretty much a fifty-fifty split. Kathy fidgeted with the air knobs in the most unobtrusive way possible. This only blew the scent directly into her face.

She thought about flying over the Atlantic, how there was nothing underneath them but a dark sea and how difficult a water rescue would be if the plane were to crash. Although the overweight man on business would finally be cooled off and wouldn't have to blot at the beads of sweat and pomade collecting on his brow with a discolored handkerchief, Kathy didn't know how to swim. The man most certainly couldn't swim

either, so this was an added stress to Kathy. She would have to be his caretaker as the ocean tried to drown him, assisting in making sure he found a proper flotation device in the wreckage that could hold up his girth. If they both survived, if she didn't get pushed beneath the waves by his sporadic kicking and flailing of his arms, he wouldn't show any gratitude for her efforts. And she wouldn't expect a thank you note signed by his once-again sweaty hand when they were finally on dry land. She would thank him for keeping her company in the black and frigid water, after most of the other passengers died from hypothermia before they could be rescued. His screaming and pleading to God that he spare him and take the stringy girl, Kathy, who didn't have a wife or kids or a mortgage or a girlfriend on the side or a secret savings account that his wife or girlfriend knew nothing about really kept things lively and made the hours fly by. Kathy also began to sweat, though her nerves smelled more pleasant than the leaking pores of excessive fat and starchy foods.

The plane landed with several bumps and loud noises, startling Kathy from a near sleep that she was only able to achieve minutes before. As everyone exited the plane, the overweight man shimmied out of his chair and retrieved his briefcase, stirring up an aroma that hit Kathy square in the nose. She smiled at him while trying to stand up and wished him a safe visit, to which he responded, "Uh huh."

Upon arriving in Africa, in less than twenty-four hours since she left Minnesota, Kathy had been dumped by the tall boy named Rob and was all alone in a small village for the rest of her stay. She didn't even know the language that the kids were screaming in the village as they ran past her. She frightened them. They cried whenever she came

near them, believing she was some sort of devil woman. It wasn't true, of course, but they had never seen someone with braces before, and since Kathy couldn't speak to them and explain what they were, they ran away in tears. Kathy was an outcast in a town where no one wore shoes. When it was time for her to go home, a bus came to the village at the end of the week to pick her up. She waved goodbye to all the kids that gathered around to see what all the commotion was about. They saw her and ran back to their mothers, crying.

At the airport she waited for her plane to begin boarding. She noticed a few of the same passengers that had been on the previous flight. Her seat was 10F, and the seat next to her was 10E, where the severely overweight businessman sat down with a twist to fit between the arm rests. What were the odds? she thought. He had on a similar suit than before, or maybe it was the same exact suit. The stripes seemed farther apart, and maybe the other one was dark blue and this was more of a navy. He didn't acknowledge Kathy as an old friend or the girl who would save his life if they again went down in the middle of Atlantic after faulty wiring caused the engines to malfunction. He only pulled out a discolored handkerchief and patted his brow, which had already begun leaking sweat from its pores.

That musky smell wafted toward Kathy's face. It was somehow stronger than before, a larger pile of soiled underwear next to a stagnant lake ripe with algae. It was disgusting but it was comforting to Kathy. It was a smell that had come back to her; it didn't leave her alone in a far away land while it was busy saving the world. It didn't forget about her or have sex with other girls while she held on to a love that was more like misery and loneliness. Kathy didn't hate the smell. She didn't hate the overweight

businessman or Rob or the African children who thought she was the devil. She was too polite to hate these things. She knew when to hold her tongue and pretend to be asleep so she wouldn't be a bother to anyone else.

HOW TO BREAK THE NEWS, PART II

Anna continued, “Sometimes I find it's helpful to just stop for a few seconds and think about something entirely unrelated before you try to say something that you don't know how to say. Like, would it be horrible to eat at a soup kitchen if you weren't homeless? There's just something about hot soup that's so comforting. I could eat it everyday. Couldn't you? Wait, never mind, don't answer that. I asked you not to say anything. Okay, I'm sorry. I think I'm ready. Okay, I'll try to explain this to you like I'd tell it to a child. Let's just pretend, okay? Pretend for a minute that you're my daughter. I know. I know, I don't have a daughter or a lover or many friends but for the sake of me telling you this I have a wonderful lover. We're best friends. We got married in the spring when everything was blooming and your birth wasn't planned or anything but when I saw your face, that beautiful face of yours, I knew it was all worth it. It doesn't matter that you're five years older than me. Right now you're my daughter. Now come here. Come sit down beside me, let me run my hands through your hair. You have such beautiful hair. It used to be so long and it flowed forever like jet streams on those perfect days in the springtime until I tried to cut your bangs. Mommy's sorry, I never had any baby dolls to practice on when I was your age. I love your short hair, though, I promise. Wait, I'm getting distracted. I'll just get to the point. I have something to tell you, honey. This isn't easy for me but I wanted to be the one who told you. You're getting to be such a big girl.

It's about Grandpa. Remember when your daddy and I took you to the waterfront last summer? We saw all those sailboats and you got that pretzel that was as big as your whole head. I'm getting off topic again. Okay. Here it goes. Grandpa had to leave us. He's not with us anymore. It's okay to be sad, sweetheart. I'm so sad that I could burst. It's okay to be mad too. It's okay to be so mad that you just want to scream at the top of your lungs until all the air is sucked out and you collapse on the floor, achy and covered in sweat. You can try it. Just scream. I'll do it first so you can watch me."

The room was quiet and neither sister made a sound.

"There, I did it," Anna said, breaking the silence. "Okay, you're right, I didn't do it. Are you still pretending? You don't look like my daughter anymore. Yes, Dad is dead, Jenny. Mom called me this morning. You didn't answer the phone, I guess. You were still in bed. I was eating breakfast, so it was more like early afternoon. I can't talk to you about this. Let's pretend again. You're my husband, okay? Okay. Our daughter is playing outside on the swing set. She took the news better than I expected her to. She's a little trooper. She takes after you. I didn't see any of this coming. Dad was doing so much better when we went down to visit for the Fourth of July, and that wasn't even six months ago. He was out in the backyard playing with the kids and he looked so full of life. What are we going to do? What am I going to do without him? Hold me, please. We're still pretending, you don't have to give me a hug. I know. I know I haven't seen Dad or Mom since your wedding, Jenny. When was that, a year ago? Two? Okay, it's been two years. You know I'm not good at doing things. I'm not good with hospitals either. I know what

cancer does. I have a television. Let's pretend again for a minute. Don't cry. Let's just pretend. You be Dad."

There was silence underneath the sobbing. Anna was quiet. Jenny was sobbing.

The sky continued to deliver snowflakes, even though it was warm inside, warm enough to never want to go outside again. The blanket of snow got heavier and heavier, its weight crushing everything that laid underneath, from precious metals and not-so-precious metals to common asphalt.

HEIR

Their mother said, while standing on the peeling linoleum, “Whoever pulls this kitchen knife out of his neck is the rightful heir to the throne and can clean up this mess before taking out the trash.”

THE GREAT PLAIN INDIANS, PART I

Maggie's hatred toward Martha stemmed from their inability to sit Indian-style on their plush living room carpet. It wasn't because Martha insisted on calling it Native-American-style and rejected this form of leisure as kin to genocide, which forced Maggie to call her sister a cunt. And Maggie wasn't against the plight of these people, the Indians; she merely thought her sister was constantly being a cunt. They simply couldn't sit this way, leaving pretzel impressions on the floor, because they were conjoined twins and had three legs. They connected all the way up the torso to their shoulder blades, separating to two heads. They did have two names, obviously, which goes along with having two heads, but they shared most of their other vital organs. Outside of their body, they shared very little else.

CARTOGRAPHY

He was fifty-two and he had hair but not a lot of it and the hair he did have was more gray than blonde, matted to the skull with a licked palm or sometimes a loogie that had a yellow tint because of phlegm from a smoker's cough, and he would be the first to tell you on a scale of one to ten with one being a job and a family and a roof over his head and ten being the lack of all these things he was a conservative nine because he was the type of person to tell it like it is, maybe not exactly like it is but maybe more like how he saw it, and his mother used to tell him An honest man don't got nothing to hide but his birthday suit, though he came to learn that in all reality an honest man doesn't have anything and that is why he slept on an inflatable raft in the back of a storage closet at First Baptist Church, two blocks off of Main Street, the one with the stained glass that was real stained glass and it depicted a scene from Hebrews 12:1 -- which says something like run with patience the race that is set before us -- and he has undoubtedly been patient but maybe he missed the word run because the race was over years ago and he has been stealing bananas from the church kitchen -- eighty-seven in a span of fifty days from June to July -- while Bobby, who sat in front of him in twelfth grade homeroom and got a scholarship from Villanova to play some sport with his hands and met a girl with hips wide enough to naturally birth three boys with cantaloupe heads, drinks double malt scotch in front of his television set but that is not to say that life is without blessings

because he found a package of meat sometime around the end of June, and he kept the meat in a microwave that he used as a fridge next to his raft and next to the three dozen Gatorade bottles full of piss lining the floor even though a functional bathroom was adjacent to the closet door and this made his living arrangement reek of stale salt water and ammonia (the Gatorade bottles were collected in a bin to be recycled until he found a use for them and a single bottle could last over a day because he never drank too much) and the microwave was not plugged in he wasn't stupid it was just for storage, a sense of privacy and definition as if to say valuables do not belong next to piss and for good reason the smell of urine and raw meat does nothing for an appetite and everything had a place in the closet and he knew where everything was, like he planted a garden and could pick out the tulips lined in the back row or the marigolds clumped in the middle, and he had amassed a small collection of items intended for the homeless and needy and he thought that although he was not homeless -- he did have a closet with a raft that only had a slow leak and a microwave that could hold a twenty ounce sirloin -- he surely needed a plastic keyboard from the Toys For Tots box which did not have batteries but he liked the way the keys felt when he pushed them down and he could close his eyes and turn the click of a black key that he did not know as a sharp into a sound that was more reminiscent of a trumpet, unsure of how a piano actually sounded, and he imagined what his mother would say if she could see him composing like Bartok if she knew who Bartok was and she would probably say Boy you got my toes tappin' like a dog's tail on hardwood floor and sometimes when he was not waiting for a spring to reload underneath a plastic piano key or looking through assembly instructions for a coffee maker that had

never been used he wondered if he gave his mother too much credit and maybe he blocked out all the god awful things she had said to him before falling over dead from a brain aneurysm when he was fourteen years old but it was hard to complain when he rested his head down on the green inflatable raft, pulling his shirt up to expose a bare stomach and rubbing the curly hair of his torso in circular motions like a relaxed man applying suntan lotion at the beach belly up to the clouds and it was hard to complain because he was not homeless or he was not homeless until a diminutive Peruvian man began yelling in his general direction You can't be here! You can't be here! and there was a moment of confusion as he felt as though he was being harassed by an intruder in his own house and questions ran through his head Who are you? What are you doing in my home? until he realized that he was actually the intruder and this was not a house this was a storage closet in a church and he gathered up all of his essential belongings in a backpack which he wore high and tight for no other reason than it was a child's backpack and that was the only way he could wear it and there was a waddle to his walk like a mallard or more like an penguin with the weight of his entire body quickly shifting from one side to the other as he raced past the small man wearing a carpenter's belt and holding a hammer and in the hysteria he knocked over a stack of folding tables which he would have avoided if he had time to grab his cardboard map of all the items placed throughout the closet; even in the dark he knew where everything was because a map was the only honest thing he had left anymore and he did not have many things except for what could fit in a bag made for a child.

EATING CAKE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

My neighbor said, "I'm sorry your mother died." I said that one was my fault but I'm sorry anybody dies at all these days.

Then she said, "We all make claims."

There was a long day at the graveyard and an evening corralling some sweets.

Maybe exceptions to this claim can be made or maybe there was a lump in my throat from that one bite of cake and I about threw up.

CONVENIENCE

It ended with my first grade teacher, Miss Roberts, sitting in a cardboard refrigerator box that was taped to the Sesame Street swing set in my backyard. It started two weeks earlier on a Monday.

That Monday the trees were finally getting green again and the wind was being extra tough. It pushed the clouds around like bullies who were too tall or too thick to think of anything nice to do for anyone else. This was the same wind that blew crinkled cigarette packs from the ditches along the highway onto the playground in the back of our elementary school. When the bigger kids found them they carried the empty packages in their breast pockets, if they were wearing a shirt that buttoned up in the front, and gained instant notoriety, as if they got kissed on the lips by the girl who everyone said went around and kissed boys like that.

I sat on the front edge of my chair, counting my fingers to see how many I could count to until I forgot the next number. I think my record was something like fifty-nine because for some reason I always said seventy right after that.

Then the bell rang before I even got to twenty and Miss Roberts asked, “Now who has a story they’d like to share with us?” This is how she started each week. Something exciting to tell the rest of the first graders. Impress them with a funny little thing. That’s where I came in. I had it in the bag. I could tell them about a place they’d never even

been before but I was there Saturday afternoon and the most amazing thing happened that they wouldn't believe was real except they know it's real because I said it in front of Miss Roberts and the whole class. Or the crazy thing my sister did yesterday. They'd eat that up like jelly beans.

I shot up my hand and wiggled it around in the air to best present my case that I had the most interesting story. No one else could match my enthusiasm, especially if their parents didn't allow any sugary cereals in the house, so I was naturally the first and only choice in this situation.

"Charlene," Miss Roberts said, acknowledging my spastic motions, "What would you like to share?"

I took a deep breath and tugged at the bottom of my shirt and stretched it past the seat bottom.

"Yesterday," I started, not knowing yet what I was going to tell the class but only that I knew it had to be a good one. I repeated myself and continued, "Yesterday, on Sunday, after church, my little sister Jenny stood on Daddy's belly while he was laying on the couch and she had her arm up, straight up with a vanilla ice cream cone in her hand, and she looked just like the Statue of Liberty."

My grin grew wider than my cheeks were actually able to hold as everyone's ears and eyes were pointed at me. I finished with a victory lap sentence: "It was probably the best thing ever."

And with that I nailed it.

“Thank you for that wonderful story,” Miss Roberts said, “I’m sure we all wish we could have been there to see it.”

I then told her, “Daddy was in his boxer-shorts, but maybe next time I’ll tell him to put on some pants and then you could come over and see for yourself.”

Miss Roberts laughed and that’s when I knew I’d be the first one picked at recess. That was big time stuff. I would’ve taken a bow if Marcus hadn’t already started rambling about some gigantic dog he saw at the park. I was sure I’d seen bigger.

Well, it could have been the same size that I’d seen. Or I knew that I’d at least seen a dog before. I’m sure of that. There used to be a grey cat that always looked like he was just forced to take a bath and never dried off and he used to come around to our backyard looking for leftovers or mice or both. He was probably smaller than a dog but that’s just an example of something I’d seen at the time.

To tell you the honest truth, most of the stories I told weren’t really things that ever happened to me in real life or anything. I don’t know who they’ve happened to if they’ve happened to anybody at all, but to get Miss Roberts to laugh is like wearing a brand new pair of shoes that are that new kind of white and the laces are a neon color that hurts your eyes if you stare at them for too long and everyone asks where you got them and they keep asking questions because it’s the most important thing in the world. You get picked first then too, but you don’t dare line up to kick the ball and scuff up that new white.

I don’t think my daddy could afford a new pair of shoes every week, but each Monday I was usually the first one picked for kick ball because I always had something

to share with Miss Roberts and she always knew it was the best thing that could've happened to someone over the course of that week.

Timmy had the privilege of being the captain with the first pick at recess and asked, "Charlie, will you please be on our team?"

My pants were a few sizes too big because I hadn't gotten a chance to grow into them yet, so I hitched them up way above my belly button like I was getting ready to strut up on stage to accept an award that could only be awarded to me. My socks were now visible and they were a good blue to be on a day like this. More blue than the sky when the clouds took a break from hovering over everything. I said, "Sure, I wouldn't mind one bit," and walked across the concrete to join Timmy as the rest of the class quickly divided in two.

Monday was undeniably a good day, or it started out that way. After school it took a turn for the absolute worst. Most days of the week Jenny and I spent the time between school being out and supper at the day care at church because Daddy was still at work and it was just me and Jenny and him. Me, I could've watched myself, but Jenny was still in preschool and last time we were left alone for any good amount of time somehow all her clothes ended up covered in milk and chocolate syrup.

So at day care it was the usual jigsaw puzzle to solve, and it's only like fifty pieces so it wasn't that hard. Jenny was building something stupid with the LEGO set so I called Sister Mary, the nun that watched all the kids, over to come look at the finished picture I made, once I got done fitting in the last piece.

“Sister Mary,” I yelled probably louder than I should have, “Come check this out!” She was old like most nuns, so she took her time getting places.

After a dozen seconds, she got over to me and said, “Charlie, that’s a great picture you put together.”

I wanted to show her I was paying attention to what she was teaching us last Sunday so I pointed to the guy pushing the giraffes onto the boat and said, “That’s Noah. And that’s his Arc.”

“That’s very good,” Sister Mary said, “And why did Noah build the Arc?”

I knew an answer that was partially right, or good enough by my standards, so I told that. I said, “Because it was going to rain or something.” I didn’t remember anything else from Sunday school but I thought it was necessary to keep talking. “He must have lost his house because he didn’t pay his taxes,” I said, “And he built a boat to steal all the animals to start a zoo in another town to make enough money to buy a new house.”

Sister Mary didn’t look like she had just heard the best thing ever and said, “Now Charlie, I don’t recall that part of the story. Are you sure that’s what I taught you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, “I mean, yes, Sister Mary, ma’am. That’s just what you said to us.” I didn’t really recall her telling us that part of the story either, but it was an impulse to always say yes ma’am to a nun. And Sister Mary was a nun, slow walk and all.

“It’s not okay to tell lies like that,” she said, “God says it’s a sin to lie and being a sinner is not a good thing to be.”

I didn’t know any of that and I told her so.

“I didn’t know that. What happens if I lie and become a sinner?”

Sister Mary said, “If you’re a sinner and don’t confess your sins then you can go to Hell. That’s where sinners go.”

I sure would have been better off learning that the week before than about some dumb boat. Daddy came to get us and before we got home we picked up our usual supper through the drive-thru. Jenny had to have extra-crispy chicken but I didn’t like the skin any way they made it. I’d pull it off, delicately like the wrong way to take off a Band-Aid, before I ate each piece. But that night I wasn’t hungry for skinless chicken in cardboard containers or even mashed potatoes. I did have a biscuit, but only one. I kept thinking about being on fire and how my shoes would probably end up melting.

Daddy asked how our days were and Jenny said she broke her green crayon but made a new one out of LEGOS.

I said, “That’s stupid.”

“Charlie!” Daddy snapped back, “Watch your language. Your sister just wanted to share something exciting that happened to her today. If you have more important news, then please share. And eat some chicken, honey, it’s going to get cold.”

I didn’t want to tell Daddy I was a sinner and if I said anything else it would just be a lie and now I knew what happened if I did any more of that. I said nothing and nibbled on a piece of thigh. I helped Daddy clean up the paper plates and leftovers as a way of saying sorry for calling Jenny stupid before he went into the living room with a beer to relax on the couch, where he spent the rest of the evening except for trips to the bathroom and back to the kitchen for another beer and another one after that. He usually

just slept on the couch the entire night with the TV on, but he was always up early enough to get us ready for school and make sure Jenny's hair wasn't a mess and pack us lunches. Maybe the morning cartoons woke him up.

When Monday went from that white of a new pair of shoes to a scuffed up mess, Tuesday continued on the trajectory of the latter. I had to confess that I wasn't all that I said I was and maybe, perhaps, Jenny never pretended to be the Statue of Liberty. Tuesday started with tears on the school bus and grew to full sobs of guilt and shame in Miss Roberts's room. I cried that it was a lie. I cried that it just wasn't true and Miss Roberts didn't remember what was even supposed to be untrue and I had to remind her about my sister and Daddy's belly and the boxer shorts. I said that it was all too good to be the real thing. I was ashamed of myself and so full of regret that if I were wearing new shoes they would have been covered from heel to toe in the blackest scuff marks imaginable.

After all that confessing on Tuesday I was pretty sure I wasn't going to Hell anymore, but I also wasn't going to get picked first ever again. I had no more stories to tell, not any good ones at least. What's interesting about my life? I didn't even have a dog.

Jenny was no help either. She could spell her name but that's about it. I could've spelled more names than I even knew, I bet. She spent most of her time watching videos on the TV with puppets and people talking to puppets and puppets talking to people. They'd spell out things like T-W-O and T-O-O. It wasn't even funny.

Daddy worked all the time, like what I said before. When he wasn't doing that he was mostly tired or thinking about being tired. He used to be a firefighter. It said that on his jacket. But after my mom died he couldn't do that anymore, so he became a mover. It didn't say that on his shirt but that's what he said he was. He took people's stuff from one place to another. He said people's stuff is a lot safer than fires. There was fire in Hell but I don't think there was people's stuff, so I'd have to agree with him.

Recess from then on didn't include me hitching up my pants or any strutting. No one made fun of me, I wasn't fat or funny looking or walked like a duck so there wasn't anything to make fun of, but nobody talked to me at all. I stopped lining up for teams to save them all the hassle of having to not pick me. To the left of the concrete pad where we played kick ball there was an area of grass that didn't have any swings or monkey bars. It was as good a place as any to be invisible when that's what I decided was the best thing to be. I didn't have to impress anybody because no one knew I was there anymore, and that meant I didn't have to be a sinner.

Miss Roberts must have caught a glimpse of my hair blowing sideways between sessions of invisibility on one of those really windy days - those bully days - because she found me sitting in the grass on Monday the next week.

“Charlene,” she said, “What are you doing over here all by yourself?”

Her skirt was puffed up and yellow and it looked like a giant tulip. She was younger than the other teachers seemed to be, probably less than forty. She was pretty like my mom was when she was here but only she had red hair, not brown.

I gave up being invisible. It wasn't worth all the hassle when somebody already saw where I was. So I responded.

"Just sitting," I said, "I was counting how many pieces of grass there was but math makes me tired."

Miss Robert asked, "Are you still upset about what happened last week? Nobody is mad at you, honey. We all tell stories sometimes."

"But none of my stories are real," I said, "They were all lies."

She said, "There's a difference between lying and make believe stories."

"I don't think so," I said, "Lying is a sin and that makes people who tell them sinners." I thought Miss Roberts would know that, being an adult and everything. Maybe she wasn't paying attention the day she was supposed to have learned that in church either.

She knelt down next to me and the bottom of her skirt flattened against the ground like a parachute landing.

"Is that what you're worried about?"

"Sister Mary says God makes liars go to Hell," I said.

"Charlene, making up stories doesn't make you a sinner. You can't go to Hell for that."

I told her it was a fact.

"I guess you didn't learn it either, Miss Roberts. You have to confess all your sins and not do any bad stuff like lying so you don't have to go to Hell. That's why I can't tell any more good stories."

She put her hand on my cheek and it wasn't cold. She said, "You don't have to worry about things like that. You're going to be just fine."

"I'd rather not risk it," I said. I remember being in Arizona once to visit one of Daddy's cousins. It was even too hot there.

I did used to have some stories that weren't all made up but that was before I was in Miss Roberts's class and before I even had recess. One time when my mom was still here she took us to the zoo and Jenny was still in a stroller and we saw all the animals there, probably even more than Noah had. I got the biggest ice cream sandwich I remember seeing and tried to feed it to a llama. Mom laughed a lot.

But most of the things we used to do we didn't do anymore. Daddy didn't laugh very much and I didn't see any elephants except on TV. Jenny didn't really remember any different so I couldn't blame her for being boring. Besides, she could only spell her name or maybe the number two or the too that meant also.

I wanted to be ready for any type of sinning situation I could be up against, so I made Sister Mary tell me everything she knew at day care. She told me about being nice to Daddy and not stealing and not using the Lord's name as a bad word and all the big ones like that. And she told me there was a place to go in church if you've been bad and needed to confess your sins so you didn't have to go crying on the school bus. Sister Mary said it was two small rooms that were side by side and the priest sat in one and listened to everyone's sins and then told them they were okay and didn't have to go to Hell anymore.

That's when I had the idea. It would be so much better than having to tell the best stories and everyone would want to talk to me and I would make everyone feel better. I got cardboard boxes from Daddy, because he was a mover and had all sorts of sizes of boxes. Two of them the size of refrigerators. He wouldn't let me use any big scissors, he said I'd end up slicing off a finger or two, so on Saturday he helped me cut out a window connecting them after I got done using an entire roll of brown tape making sure they stayed joined together like husband and wife. I taped them to the canary yellow poles of the swing set too, so if it were really windy they wouldn't blow over.

Daddy was mad about the tape and told me so.

He said, "This stuff isn't free, Charlie. If you go around using up everything then eventually I won't have anything left to move other people's stuff."

Even though I was glad he was helping me, I told Daddy it wasn't my fault and these boxes were important. They weren't just for playing. It was a confessional and I would be the judge of all the bad things people did. I could do what the priest men did at church but I had the convenience of being in my very own backyard next to the swing set.

After I set it up I added a bucket to each box so there'd be a place to sit down. Before I told the other kids at school about it, I had to test it out to make sure that it worked like it should. I volunteered Jenny. She was in her usual spot, in front of the TV and eating a bowl of purple grapes.

"Hey Jenny. Will you come outside with me for a minute?"

"No." Her eyes never veered from the screen.

I persisted.

“Why not? Please, I need your help.”

She said, “I’m watching Kermit.”

I pleaded.

“Please?”

She said, “No.”

“I’ll get you a popsicle from the freezer?”

She said, “No.”

“Two of them?”

“No.”

“They’re purple?”

She said, “Okay.”

Taking her into the backyard with a mouthful of frozen sugar and sticky hands, I told her to get in the one box and sit down. I went into the box the other box was connected to and asked Jenny to tell me her sins.

She asked what that was.

I said, “What’s a bad thing that you did?”

“It’s not a very pretty house you built,” she said, “There’s nothing in here but this chair. I can help you color on the walls.”

“Jenny, pay attention. This isn’t a house. It’s a place where you tell me a bad thing you did. Now tell me.”

Jenny became defensive.

She said, "But I didn't do anything. I've just been sitting on the floor and watching my videos."

She wasn't getting it.

"It doesn't have to be a bad thing you just did," I said, "Tell me something bad that you did from before."

She wrinkled up her brow and appeared to be in some great concentration. I wondered how many bad things she could've ever done. I'm sure she didn't know most of the sins anyway. I was two years older than her and didn't know all of them until the week before.

Then she hopped up a little out of her bucket and said, "I ate the piece of pie Daddy left in the frigerator."

She looked relieved to have finally thought of something.

"Good," I said, "See, that's stealing. That's a sin, Jenny."

Her face quickly changed.

"I'm sorry!" she yelled, "I'm sorry, don't tell Daddy!"

"It's okay. You told me and now I can make it better. It's okay now."

And just like that her worry was gone. Her face returned to a pink hue from the white shade of fear that lingered for only a few moments. Then Jenny said, "Oh. Okay." She wiped the blossoming tears around the bottoms of her eyes and blew her nose into the sleeve of her shirt.

"You're fixed," I said.

Jenny's only question then was, "Can I go watch Kermit now?"

I said, "Sure."

It seemed to work just fine. I fixed Jenny and now she didn't have to go to Hell because of a piece of pie she ate. Now I just had to tell everyone else about it and tell them how I can make them all okay again.

The next Monday, at recess, I rejoined the group on the kick ball field and left the grass alone to count itself. I only ever got up to one-hundred-and-four before I got too tired. Before the captains had a chance to start calling out names, I stepped into the middle of the playing field and started with my speech. I said everything I knew about sins and all the different kinds and how God can make you go to Hell because of them and about confessing all the bad stuff and how to make it okay and not go to Hell. I said Sister Mary taught it all to me and if they didn't believe me then they can go and ask her. I said that I made a real confessional in my backyard and it worked and it had seats. I ended with, "And I'm inviting you all to come and do your confessing."

I'm not sure if it was all the scary talk about Hell or because it was merely a new thing in a small town, but just about everyone in earshot of my speech was on board for my judgment. I had a folded-up piece of paper in my back pocket and found a pencil somewhere behind my ear and I wrote down all the days of the week. I started making appointments, two per day, for right after supper. The entire week was booked solid in a few minutes. I made it clear that each visit would only be good for one sin, which made sure that it wouldn't ever get too late that the sun would start to go down and we'd have to go in before I could hear a full confession. It also ensured that everyone would have to

keep coming back if they had a lot of sins. And I'm sure they all did. If I didn't know I was a full-fledged sinner then no one else on the kick ball field had a clue either.

My clients began to show up that same day. Marcus, the dog showoff, was the first appointment off the list. After Daddy retired to the couch for the night I went outside and met Marcus, who pulled into our driveway in a blue scooter adorned in white lightning bolts. He pulled out a water bottle from the crossbar holster and took a big swig before waving at me.

"Hey Charlie," he said, "Where's this thing at?"

I motioned to the backyard and said, "Hi." Walking to the swing set, Marcus kicked at the grass like our yard was full of empty cans.

"Here it is," I said with an accompanying hand gesture, "This is my confessional."

"Nice," Marcus said, "Those must have been some big refrigerators."

I gave him a quick tour of both sides and asked him to take a seat if he was ready.

"So," I started, "What kind of sin have you done?"

"I watched a movie on the television with my older brother last week," Marcus said.

I said that I didn't think that was a sin unless he stole the movie.

"I wasn't finished," Marcus said, "I was saying that I watched a movie with my brother and it had all the cuss words in it and then later my little sister wouldn't stop bugging me so I screamed at her and said STOP IT GOD DAMMIT. The cop guy said it to his wife in the movie like a hundred times. I knew it was a cuss word but I didn't know it was a sin. You can fix that, right?"

“Well, that is a sin,” I said, “making God a cuss word, but you confessed it to me and since you did that now your sin is gone. It’s that easy.”

“Great. Can I come back over next week? I’ve been writing down all my sins that I could think of and I think it’s going to take a couple months to fix everything.”

I said, “That sounds cool with me, let me write your name in on the calendar.”

And with that it was off and running. A girl, Lisa, from my class was the second person that day and she confessed that she took all the candy from the bucket that the Murphy’s left on their front porch last Halloween. The whole thing went just as smooth as with Marcus, she was judged and forgiven in a little under ten minutes. The next few days followed suit, with two kids coming over and telling me a bad thing and I told them they’d be okay now. And everyone had way more than one sin to take care of. It turned out most of the class started to make lists of all the sins they could think of, like Marcus did, so they could check them off after each visit with me.

On Thursday I was just about to head out to recess to fill up my calendar with more names when Miss Roberts stopped me.

“Can I have a word with you, Charlene?”

“Okay,” I said, hoping she wasn’t in need of a laugh from a story of mine because those days were long gone. We were all alone in the classroom now; its blue carpet and green walls meant to mimic nature but for some reason it got reversed. All of our best pictures were taped to the walls in neat rows that were straighter and more even than any other classroom in the school.

Miss Roberts said, "I've been hearing talk from a lot of the other kids about sins and confessions. I noticed several people writing down things on a piece of paper like cussing and stealing, only not usually spelled right. I asked Marcus this morning what all this talk was about and he explained it to me that you have these boxes in your backyard and you've been inviting people over and telling them that all the bad things they've done will go away."

"It's called a confessional," I said.

"Charlene, the other kids in class are worried about going to Hell. We need to have a talk about this."

"We're talking right now," I said, "And I'm just trying to help everyone. I don't want anyone going to Hell. So I built a confessional to make it all better."

Miss Roberts didn't seem to understand.

"I'm going to call your dad later today," she said, "And maybe we can set up a parent-teacher conference for tomorrow and talk about all of this."

"Okay," I said, though I didn't know what Daddy had to do with it. "Can I go outside now?"

I had to cancel the two appointments for the next day because Miss Roberts came over to our house just around suppertime. Me and Daddy and Jenny were still tearing apart pieces of chicken when the doorbell rang. Daddy sent Jenny to play in her room, which made her upset because her room didn't have a TV and she couldn't watch her videos. He told me to play outside for a few minutes while he and Miss Roberts talked first. I'm not sure what they talked about in the house but I swung on the swings and

counted the pumps of my legs as I went higher and higher and counted them to fifty-nine and then seventy and then I had to start over again. Eventually Miss Roberts came out and I stopped pumping so I'd slow down.

“Where’s Daddy?” I asked.

“He asked and I thought it would be a good idea if I talked to you first,” she said, “Do you want to show me what you built over there?”

I led her over to the other side of the swing set and let her inspect my craftsmanship. I showed her how I taped everything together and the doors and the seats.

“Can you show me how it works?”

“Okay, here’s the side that you get in,” I said. I showed her the door to my confessional and the turned-over bucket. The box wasn’t the right fit for an adult, so she had to turn her legs so they stuck out of the back and she looked uncomfortable. She was either cramped or nervous about all the bad things she was going to have to confess about.

“So you made this all by yourself?”

“Daddy helped a bit,” I said, “With the hole cutting. I did just about everything else. It’s nice, huh?”

“Very nice.”

Miss Roberts’s dress was green today. A bright green like the patch of grass I tried to count when the sun was shining right down on it and I was invisible. It made her hair look even prettier than it was, and the way she was sitting filled the whole bottom of the box with her green. It looked like she was buried in the grass.

“So how do we start?” she asked.

“Okay,” I said, “Well, okay, first you have to tell me about the bad things that you did. But it’s okay. I’m not going to tell anybody about them.”

So Miss Roberts started, “Well when I was a little girl, my mother had this pair of earrings that I always adored. They were yellow tulips. They were only cheap plastic but for some reason they were my favorite. One morning I took them from her jewelry box and wore them to school. I thought I was the coolest.”

The wind was blowing through the back of the box where her legs stuck out and her dress rippled in the breeze. It was the tall blades of grass she was buried in, digging for a firm grip deep in the dirt but dancing with a careless intensity.

“Did you lose them?” I asked.

“No. I brought them home and put them back where I found them.”

“But you stole them,” I said, “That’s a sin.”

Miss Roberts smiled as if she stumbled upon a mental image of her in those earrings, young and gleaming.

“I didn’t steal them,” she said, “My mother said I could wear them anytime I wanted. She knew I loved them and she said they made me look like a garden.”

“And did you, Miss Roberts?”

She still looked lost in her own head before turning back to me.

“Did I what?” she said.

I rephrased my question.

“Did you look like a garden?”

Then I thought about the day at the zoo with my mom when Jenny was still in a stroller. We were at the exhibit with all the big cats - there were two tigers sleeping on a rock and they were side by side and my mom said they were probably husband and wife and they got to be together on that rock and just lay around all day. She thought that would be a nice life. I said, "And you got to roar." I let out my best roar and she laughed. Then after she got me the ice cream sandwich I had it all over my chin and cheeks and she said I grew a big white beard. She laughed again. But it wasn't true; I didn't really have a beard. It wasn't a real thing.

Miss Roberts wiped at her collecting tears and sniffled like a little child only because it's impossible to sound like a grown up and sniffle at the same time, even if you were a grown up. Then Miss Roberts told me that her mother had died like mine, a few months before she wore her tulip earrings to school. She never told Miss Roberts that she looked like a garden, but Miss Roberts said it's what she would have told her if she could. Her mother would have laid out her favorite green dress that poofed out around her hips and knees and sat on the edge of the bed and she would have braided her hair for school like she did every morning before walking over to her dresser and picking out the brightest yellow earrings from her jewelry box. It wasn't true, but it was a real thing.

With death, what's true starts to push around all the stories you think about that should've happened or might've happened like the wind and the clouds and really all that's there is the sky.

THE GREAT PLAINS INDIANS, PART II

On December 25th, Martha Small was brutally murdered in her family living room. She was thirteen-years old and found with multiple skull fractures and a hatchet stuck in her chest. The hatchet was apparently a Christmas gift, and included a full Native-American headdress. Maggie Small, her sister and suspected killer, died soon after. The body of the two girls was found in front of the family's couch, with their middle leg ravaged in an attempt, presumably, to chop it off. They are survived by their two parents, Patrick and Susan Small.

MEAT AND SUMMER

“She spent spring break in Haiti, delivering fresh water and rations. I’m so proud of her.”

Lauren’s mother was always the first to brag, mostly to her friends at work. Her daughter was turning into quite the little activist, although this was not something Lauren would call herself. She did not grow up in the 1960s. But Lauren did have a soft spot for human suffering, so while her best friends spent a week in March mixing Chinese takeout with tequila in a frigid rental two streets from the shore of Virginia Beach (with ocean temperatures peaking at 49°F), she handed out foil envelopes filled with peanut-butter in Port-au-Prince surrounded by children dying of cholera.

Lauren came home in June, twenty-years old and sunburned, to spend one last summer at her parent’s house. Her childhood room was unchanged: the same comforter on which she learned how to reach sexual climax by herself, and the same dresser where she hid her acceptance letter to Johns Hopkins three and a half years ago. The walls were a coral pink.

Her mother had her favorite meal ready when she pulled into the driveway at eight o’clock, fearing that she hadn’t taken the time to eat anything all day.

“Honey, leave your bags in the car. Your father can get them. I fixed you a plate of chicken with that alfredo sauce. You must be starving.”

“Chicken? I don’t eat meat anymore, Mom. I thought I told you that.”

CHEVY CHASE

This was before recess was over. Before the boys and girls lined up on either side of the hopscotch court, preparing to shuffle their muddy shoes into the Berber carpet of Miss Quinn's first grade classroom, their little fits of insolence dampened by the bonded urethane under-padding. A Mississippi for every step. That's how they were taught to walk in rows.

Samantha stood staring at the chalk squares, tugging at her skirt with hands balled up and red like tomatoes. She had freckles on her face - though too many freckles - so when Timmy dared Marcus to kiss her on the cheek he ended up swallowing a live cricket instead, to refute the status of chicken. Samantha stood there, holding her breath as she privately counted all the way to fifty-seven, yanking the khaki bottom of her uniform with spasms of oxygen deprivation, revealing the elastic band of her lime-green underwear that her polo shirt was tucked into.

She was out to prove a point.

It was a Monday in March, and Samantha hadn't spoken to a single person since Friday. That was when her cat, Chevy Chase, died. It wasn't a collective decision where the family fidgets in plastic chairs arranged neatly against the walls of a waiting room and a veterinarian pushes through a double-set of white doors, looking down at his tennis shoes until he's close enough to talk, discreetly.

“It doesn’t look good,” he would probably say. Followed by, “He’s in a lot of pain, putting him to sleep may be the best option.”

There was no veterinarian.

Chevy Chase wasn’t in an examination room, curled comfortably on a stainless steel table. Chevy Chase was hit by a Ford County Squire, a wood-paneled station wagon manufactured in 1975, and died instantly.

Samantha’s father, Walter, was a botanist. Her mother was not good at reading recipes. She was neither a botanist nor a good cook.

That Friday was Samantha’s show-and-tell, and her father brought in a basket of cape gooseberries, burning yellow in appearance and as tart as the dickens. The children gushed over his presentation and pined after these menacing treats with little arms and even smaller fingers. Their lips puckered as they pounced up and down in their seats, as if they’d inadvertently transformed into a calisthenics class at the YMCA. It was an act of bravery to see who could hold the longest soured expression.

Walter’s field of expertise was in the incubation period of fruit-bearing trees and bushes indigenous to South America, so he merely let out a chuckle at the reaction occurring in Miss Quinn’s classroom. In some areas of the world, cape gooseberries have been used as a treatment for cancer, malaria and hepatitis. Walter was using them as a parlor trick. A chubby red-haired boy in the second row said Walter was the coolest flower guy he had ever met, much cooler than the guy his father buys a dozen roses from after a fight with his fourth stepmother. Walter took this as a compliment, finding it

unnecessary to point out the difference between his occupation and that of Rick, of Rick's Florist Shop. Samantha's mother, Judy, was at home during all of this, overcooking a casserole and adding three tablespoons, rather than teaspoons, of salt to what should turn out to be a loaf of Italian bread.

It didn't.

Predicting the dinner they had waiting for them, Samantha and her father stopped at a pizza parlor after school. Each indulged in two slices of pepperoni and a medium soda, one of them leaving the crust. Walter let out a burp and Samantha giggled, then burped.

"We don't do that in front of your mother," Walter explained. "It's not becoming of a lady."

They nodded in agreement and wiped any stray tomato sauce from their cheeks.

The table in their own dining room was set by the time they returned home. It wasn't the good china; it never was. The everyday plates were a cream or eggshell, with blue stripes navigating the circumference.

"What took so long?" Judy's voice didn't have an accusing tone, but Walter couldn't help but cycle through his mental list of oh-shit excuses, a comprehensive document compiled from fifteen years of marriage. "Walter, did you get sent to the principal's office?"

She smiled and kissed her husband en route to the table, potholders protecting her hands from the extra-large casserole dish swinging from her extended arms.

Choosing number thirty-three of his list, Walter responded, “Traffic.” He patted her rear-end as Samantha ran upstairs to discard her backpack and change out of the mandatory uniform her school required.

“I should have guessed,” Judy said. “That construction on Maple has been terrible all month. Go and wash your hands before dinner.”

“Smells good.” Walter ducked into their bedroom to change out of his charcoal grey suit.

Judy continued the conversation through multiple rooms and hallways. “Don’t take too long. Dinner’s ready.”

She cut and served the baked ziti casserole to her family. Having a growing child and an expanding husband, she knew to be generous with her portions. Walter leant a helping hand and began dishing out the asparagus, limp and no longer green. Before grace was even uttered, the three plates were piled high.

Judy spoke in a monotone reserved for church services and the pledge of allegiance.

Walter and Samantha were able to take their suspicious eyes away from the bounties laid before them long enough to say, “Through Christ our Lord, Amen.”

An archeological dig of courtesy began as Walter used his fork to excavate the untouched area under the burnt cheese, on top of the soft noodles. Samantha quickly followed suit.

Judy asked about their day. For the most part, they recounted it with exacting detail.

“And then, Dad told my class about the time that he was in Peru and almost got eaten alive by mosquitoes. Isn’t that right, Dad? And then he gave everybody grape geese berries. You shoulda seen it.”

Walter corrected, “Cape gooseberries. I let them all have a handful to taste. Boy, that was a hoot.”

“No wonder Samantha barely ate her dinner.” Judy began carrying the hardly empty plates back into the kitchen. “I bet those things ruined her appetite.”

Judy eyed up the correct size container to fit the remaining baked ziti. It was roughly the length and width of her extra-large casserole dish.

The plastic Tupperware let out a squeak as she pushed on the lid to seal the leftovers. The remaining air in the kitchen was thick, perhaps too thick for the unused butter knife to cut. It sagged from the light fixtures and dripped onto the granite tiles until the yelling started.

“What’s the matter?” Walter meant to ask this question but instead he asked, “What’s your problem?”

Judy didn’t translate his intentions as well as he would have liked. The following phrases were then thrown around the house, starting in the kitchen and making their way through the dining room, down the carpeted hallway and into their master bedroom:

“I spend all day working my ass off.”

“I feel like you don’t appreciate the things I contribute to our family.”

“Are you even listening to yourself?”

“What’s wrong with my meatloaf?”

“What the hell does your brother have to do with any of this?”

“Pizza. We ate pizza.”

Samantha sat at the foot of her bed while the air filled with sirens of polite obscenities, likely constrained for the fact that they had a young daughter in the house. She held her cat, Chevy Chase, and stroked his long salt-and-pepper fur with the pressure of scrubbing blood off one’s knee, singing fragments of a fictional theme song about a moose.

There was an acknowledging purr.

He purred with curled r’s and attempted to bury his head in the crevice between Samantha’s hip and elbow. Then the petting increased in physical force as a door would slam and another would open ad nauseum. Chevy Chase apparently disliked the type of massage he was receiving and jumped off Samantha’s lap, sprinting from the room.

“I need to get out of here for awhile.” Walter flung open the front door without bothering to close, lock, and deadbolt it.

The early spring air rushed into the house in attempts to dilute the tension. Walter headed for his car in the driveway, hoping to go over to his brother’s apartment for a few hours or at least browse a bookstore until cooler heads prevailed. Chevy Chase had similar ideas and continued his exodus from Samantha’s room, running out of the wide-open front door and into the street.

Samantha made it to the front yard just in time to see the Ford County Squire pass by their house, unfazed by what they must have thought to be a pothole in the road, or at the very most a squirrel.

Judy was outside by now, and Walter had all but forgotten the relatively large nature section at the local bookstore. There were two entire shelves devoted to South American botanical studies. Both sets of parental eyes were now glued on Samantha. All six legs rushed onto the paved street where Chevy Chase lay in the same manner as he laid on their leather sofa. And he looked just as comfortable, maybe even more so if it wasn't painfully obvious that he was no longer breathing.

Judy clutched her arms around Samantha's head. She started sobbing or had been sobbing and continued and ran manicured fingers through her daughter's curled locks. Samantha tried to twist free but was caught in her mother's protection.

"Daddy. Is Chevy Chase hurt? Call 9-1-1."

Walter was on his knees next to the cat; coming to the conclusion he already knew and had no idea how say to a six year old.

"Why isn't he purring? What's wrong with him, Daddy?"

Samantha corkscrewed her body in novice ballerina spins until she was finally able to break away from Judy's grip. She stood directly over Chevy Chase in the middle of the street at eight o'clock at night on a Friday evening.

"He looks like he's sleeping. Daddy, where's the ambulance?"

Walter looked up at his daughter, his eyes trying to dig inside her brain, hoping that telepathy was possible so she could hear his thoughts and understand what had actually occurred. He then attempted to answer her questions with the following sentences, which spilled out of his mouth in any given order:

"He's holding his breath, honey."

“They’re on the way.”

“You and Mom go wait for them inside.”

Even a six year old can figure out pretty quickly that something is dead and not merely holding its breath. It took Samantha no more than an hour, watching from the window as Walter brought an old sweater to the street and wrapped up Chevy Chase and then carried him to the backseat of his car. Judy explained that he was taking him to the doctor. The ambulance must be stuck in traffic.

Samantha’s questions about Chevy Chase’s condition were answered with a flat and hushed, “We don’t know yet, sweetie.”

Walter returned forty-five minutes later, met at the door like he had been away for a quarter of a century.

That Friday then came to include two sets of yelling fits. Walter was condemned by his daughter for ever thinking of such a horrible lie. He knew Chevy Chase wasn’t holding his breath. He was the worst father in the world. Samantha said all of these things in between sobs and squeals. Screams turned into tears and then screams again.

Finally Samantha had become quiet, her door closed and not even a creaking floorboard escaping her bedroom walls. Walter and Judy gave it until eleven o’clock and went in to check on their daughter. She was sitting up in her bed.

She would not speak. She did not speak all weekend. When Monday rolled around she had not said a word by the time she got on the school bus. Show-and-tell was a distant memory to Samantha, but her classmates were still reveling in her father’s

presentation. When they were dismissed to recess the chubby red-haired boy came up to Samantha, who was standing cool.”

Samantha didn't move. A stray kickball distracted the boy before he could realize that she was trying to ignore him and everyone else in the world. He ran off after it. She continued to stare at the ground, chalk squares drawn on the pavement.

She would eventually talk, of course.

After recess she was carried to the nurse's office, taking in gulps of air after being given mouth to mouth by the new second grade teacher. It would mostly all be forgotten, and she would have more pizza trips with her father.

But before recess was over, she was out to prove the difference between holding your breath and dying.

THE GREAT PLAINS INDIANS, PART III

It took several days to clean the room. Their father had worked on a neighboring family's farm growing up in Nebraska, and the carpet reminded him of the days in the far barn when cows were turned to beef and bales of hay were stained cherry underneath the carnage. He scrubbed until his knees were either red from kneeling or red from blood.

SIGNS OF THE APOCALYPSE

No one else knew about it then. Or if they did know about it, they kept a really tight lid on it. Maybe Cynthia, an overweight redhead who sat behind me in study hall, had some magical insight into it all. She was sure being very loud about her breathing that entire year. But I don't think anybody had a clue.

There was no gradual indication or anything noteworthy coming at us from the inclement weather team on Chanel 7 News. It would just happen and then we'd all find out at once that it had happened, a beehive mentality where the sweet, sweet honey was the end of the world as we'd come to know it. In November it started snowing, not anything out of the ordinary, until it didn't stop snowing. Then we all knew about it. And the honey tasted like shit, or more aptly, frozen shit.

REASONS FOR LEFTOVERS, PART I

The District of Columbia was covered in a dusting of snow for most of the winter. The usual congregation of people in the streets dwindled by almost forty percent. Henry enjoyed watching groups gather at the foot of his building, even when they were too loud and it was too late in the evening.

Henry didn't have many friends.

He was twenty-seven, working as a junior copywriter at the Department of Agriculture. He sat in a half-walled cubicle, undecorated and oblong, and penned heart wrenching articles about the plight of southern sharecroppers in Reconstruction-era United States history. He was reprimanded several times a week for using too many subjective sentences and shedding a negative light on the Lincoln established Freedmen's Bureau. He secretly accused his boss of being a racist. His boss openly referred to him as a faggot, causing him to alter his accusation to include a homophobe as well. But the job paid his rent.

Henry lived in a two-bedroom apartment in the southern most section of Capitol Hill. After ten months on the job he began to worry that Gill, his boss, would wise up and fire him -- the "queer magazine writer" -- for one too many portrayals of the 16th President as anything other than Christ-like.

"We want people to read these things, not piss all over them."

“I don’t want people to piss on them either.”

“I’m sure you don’t.”

Gill had a hairstyle far too young for his wood-grained skin, deep wrinkles cutting across his forehead and drooping underneath his disappointed eyes. His senior high school portrait probably contained the perfect swoop and bounce in his once auburn hair, and he’s been holding on to it ever since. Every suit he owned was cut too wide and long, so he looked like an aged little boy, playing dress up in his father’s closet. Henry didn’t know why he started referring to him in homophobic slurs, especially since Henry wasn’t gay. He thought it might be because of the slight speech impediment he never grew out of in elementary school.

Henry tried to put some extra money away every month, fearing the worst, until he finally decided to advertise for a roommate. Even though the apartment was small, it did have two bedrooms, the second being used as a minimal office space and library for the sizable collection of books he acquired during college. He could move most of that to the living room and set up a little desk in his bedroom, which was the larger of the two. Henry had yet taken the time to decorate, most of the furniture being a mix of hand-me-downs and IKEA purchases.

“Take this couch, Henry. It just sits in the basement collecting dust. Your father never goes down there anymore.”

“But it’s ugly.”

“We all can’t afford big city things like you and your sister.”

“I’m broke, Mom, and Jen lives in New Jersey.”

“Then take the couch.”

Henry left Akron, Ohio with a pale blue sectional, a maple dining table, four oak chairs and a recliner that’s plush upholstery appeared to have been matted down with shoe polish.

The kitchen in his apartment felt comfortable, if only because it reminded him of his parent’s house, still reveling in 1970s innovation. A linoleum floor masqueraded as granite tile, curling up around the edges from having been improperly installed thirty years ago.

Henry placed an ad in several online classifieds around the city. He told the world he was a young/clean/professional male, which sounded more like he was describing a purebred puppy for sale. They charged by the word, so he kept it short. Henry was looking for a roommate to split the cost of his place, utilities included. He neglected to mention that he placed every item in a specific spot in the bathroom vanity, spent Saturday nights listening to Elton John records on repeat, and paced back and forth throughout the apartment reading -- out loud -- historical reference books detailing the destruction of American cities in the Civil War and A Field Guide to Birds of North America. He didn’t want to sound off putting.

The first person to respond to the ad was a forty-year old single dad named Oliver. He had two little girls, four and seven, and judging by the pictures in his wallet, they looked just like their mother. She had them most of the time, except for every other Saturday and Sunday. Those were his days. Contrary to the actual circumstance, he looked like a single dad who had to take care of his children full-time, his face smothered

and drooping with responsibility and his Macintosh red hair balding with lapsed ambition. He wore a suit jacket and said he worked for the sanitation department.

“So this is the place?” he asked.

Henry thought about playing along with the bad joke and tell him that, “No, my place is actually two blocks down. I just come here to unwind,” but he responded with, “Yep.”

Henry showed him the vacant bedroom.

“It’s not very big. That’s city life for ya. Do you think we could fit a fold-up mattress in here?”

This is when Oliver told Henry about his children. Henry pulled out a tape measure from the odds-and-ends drawer in the kitchen and gave the room a good sizing, pretending to know how much space things actually took up. Oliver used his arm span as a measuring tool, fluctuating by at least a foot every time he turned into a new position. After minutes of deliberation, it was mutually agreed upon that there just wasn’t enough room for him here, and Oliver apologized for taking up Henry’s time. Henry told him not to worry, and that he liked his blazer.

A day after Oliver had deemed the room too small, Henry got a phone call from another interested party. The caller was a female, in the same age demographic as Henry judging by her voice, which was almost singsongy, lazy in annunciation. She made an appointment to stop over and look at the place that Thursday, sometime around six o’clock.

He buzzed her up to the apartment at six twenty-seven. She took off her toggle-clasped peacoat after coming through the door, exposing a floral print dress, the sort of flowers Henry imagined finding in the rural villages surrounding Helsinki in the spring, stopping high on her upper thighs. Her hair was the color of burnt toast, in huge ringlet curls that fell onto her exposed shoulders. Freckles landed sporadically over her pale skin, and Henry felt like he had been staring at her for hours before she finally spoke.

“My name’s Winnie. It’s so great to meet you.”

“Henry.”

She gave me a short hug as Henry extended his hand.

“Henry, what number are you, the ninth?”

“The apartment number is, um, 415.”

“No.” She started giggling. “I meant, the kings. King Henry. Nevermind. I make the worst jokes.”

Her cheeks were turning into pomegranates as he started laughing too. Henry was also embarrassed for not getting the bad joke. His cranberry face seemed to offer her some relief.

They walked into the advertised room. Winnie looked around, her head tilted up and absorbing the spectacle of it all like a child’s first visit to Times Square.

“The place gets great light,” she said. “Do you paint?”

“No. I’m a writer. Well, a copywriter.”

“Me either. Maybe I should start.”

They headed into the kitchen area.

Winnie pulled out a chair at the breakfast nook and took a seat. “So this is where all your romantic dinners take place?”

“I wouldn’t quite call them that.” Henry walked over to the refrigerator and opened it. The shelves were stacked with medium and small Tupperware containers, from mashed potatoes to spaghetti and meatballs. “Most packaged meals are too much for one person. So I just save the rest for the next day.”

“What if you don’t want the same thing two days in a row?”

“I never thought of it like that.”

Henry closed the refrigerator and showed Winnie the rest of the apartment, making it a point to show her the view of the street below; people huddled together in groups of threes and fives.

LETTER FROM THE SPACE NEEDLE

Dear Mr. Armstrong,

This is my second time writing you; the first was two decades ago and my seven-year-old self told you my mother saw you on the moon on TV when she was a little girl. You and she were still alive and probably it was your publicist who sent me back an 8x10 glossy. I wanted to be an astronaut. Didn't we all?

I'm sitting here in the Space Needle right now. The droplets of water beating against the glass are making a rumbling vibration like we are preparing to lift off or tumble down. Are the creepy crawlers planting their eggs like flags in the craters of your eye sockets?

I'd like to formally request an interview; does this letter suffice or should I also send a query to your next of kin? I am trying to get in touch with the moon and after many drinks, on the rocks, it doesn't seem out of the question. I could use your expertise on this matter. Or are you rotting? Where did the sea take your ashes? I'm a pretty good dancer and I'd pay for your meal if you'd like to stop over here for chitchat.

Best wishes,

BAMBI

Every year, for my birthday, I asked for an Indian headdress. You know, the featherhead kind like I saw on TV when I was really little and said *How* around the house with one hand raised up. When I learned about genocide I started grinding my teeth at night and wetting the cowboy sheets.

CONVERSATION WITH A TIGER SCOUT ON FLIGHT 243

I learned how to tie a knot last week. It's hard. Can you tie a knot? It's really cool. I could show you sometime. I can tie them so tight that you could never ever get it untied. We learned last week. We're not allowed to camp outside though. We had a sleepover in the gym last summer. There were tents and everything. Have you have camped outside? I bet it's scary, huh. Are there bears in the woods? I saw bears at the zoo before. But they were sleeping. Mommy took me to the zoo. She takes me to Tiger Scout meetings after school sometimes too. She said the bears just pretend to be tired because they don't want us to look at them. Sometimes she can't take me. But Aunt Lisa takes me instead. Aunt Lisa got me this for pendant thing for Christmas! Cool, huh? It's a tiger. She said they're the bravest animals out of all the other animals in the world. She's our next-door neighbor, not really Mommy's sister. But I call her Aunt Lisa. She watches me sometimes when Mommy has to work late. You know what I can spell? Jack! That's my dad's name. Aunt Lisa said I had to learn it. She says the best way to learn something is by practicing. That's how I learned how to tie a knot. I can tie them super tight. I'm going to stay with Dad for a while. That's what Aunt Lisa said. Mommy had to go away. Aunt Lisa said Dad would watch me now. I practiced and practiced and I know his name now. Jack! I learned other things too, like the capital of Florida. Do you know what it is? Tallahassee. I can spell it too. It's T - A - L - A - H - ummm - S. Wait. I forget. I didn't practice enough. I

can tie a knot super duper tight though. Wanna see? I wanted to show Mommy. Do you think Jack can tie a knot? Do you think so? I practiced and practiced and now I can do it really good. Do you think they have Tiger Scouts in Florida? Do you think they do? Do you think so?

REASONS FOR LEFTOVERS, PART II

Because of a strictly self-imposed daily routine of vacuuming and dusting, as household chores hold their highest priority when attempting to stave off misery, there was nothing to be settled. Everything was already dusted. It'd been a year since Winnie had moved out. The house now had too many rooms.

I experimented with the arrangement of my own items, limited as they were. Maybe six waist-high bookshelves, spread out over three rooms, could work in transforming this place back into a home where two large bookcases would fail. Along with this horizontal integration of my ephemeral belongings, I bought several potted plants of varying heights to overtake the rooms with cheap substitutes for nature and life. It didn't take long to realize that these were only shortsighted attempts to bandage a Derringer shot that entered and exited the grey brain matter of a sad, aging man. If this were actually possible, Andrew Johnson would have never taken a seat alone in the oval office.

Many of these nights were spent in the living room, dozing off in the plush reclining chair, head slumped and titled to the side. In my dreams I hadn't quite ruined everything yet; I was still dignified, an heir of royalty as a presidential theater box replaced the La-Z-Boy. My worries were still present but they were lofty, the concerns of nation, not the struggle between my carnal instincts and the hemline of the nineteen-year-

old students who could quote passages from my book. I'd often jostle awake, as dawn pounced from the balcony to the stage floor, feeling dead, with strawberry jam drying hard and red on my collar.

Comparing myself to Lincoln, one of our greatest leaders, regardless of my own feelings towards him or the fact that I was envisioning his death as my own, should be seen as an admission to my own illusions of grandeur. Besides a detailed knowledge of Civil War casualties and pointless statistics like the incubation period of fruit bearing trees indigenous to North America, I was nothing more than average. Anywhere that Winnie would go, she would make it her home. My mundanity was beautiful, not a workaround. She saw leftovers as a new meal. I saw them as reasons to have Tupperware and empty space in the fridge. It'd been almost two years when I stopped being sad. I found comfort in my mediocrity; leftover pasta still tasted good two days later.

I decided to take an ad out, or place one online -- to update my idioms. I told the Internet I was a mature and professional male seeking a roommate to share a three-bedroom/two-house house that was too big for only him. I kept it short, out of habit. I neglected to mention that I placed every item in a specific spot in the bathroom vanity, still spent Saturday nights listening to Elton John records on rotation, *and had once found the love of his life by happenstance from a similar ad, so please, I am not ready for that again, so if you could leave a message with your name and phone number and current number of appendages, I'd really appreciate it.* I didn't want to sound off putting.

Within a few days time, my inbox was full of responses. Some were even actual, real life people that were looking for a place. Most were men, and based on the sample

size of the three that came to look at the house, all had two hands and the underlying sense of defeat that comes along with that. Jonathan, who was recently divorced and didn't have visitation rights with his three children, moved in shortly after. His belonging mixed with the leftovers of a former home, co-inhabiting the miniature bookcases and dying plants.

The next few months turned the fall into winter. The city was covered in a dusting of snow for the most part. The usual congregation of people in the streets dwindled by almost forty percent. I enjoyed watching groups gather at the foot of the building, even when they were too loud and it was too late in the evening.

This was a different view, and I had a mortgage and many more wrinkles now, but the people still huddled in groups. For the moment, while they are outside in the cold, rubbing their hands and huddled close, they need the warmth.

FAMILY TIES

My grandfather either taught me how to make fun of girls and still be cute, or it was my grandmother who persuaded me to believe that all lovers need to be good at rolling their eyes.

I had a dead cat when I was eight and remember wringing my hands as if debarking a pine tree and my face dumping buckets of water on the wood to reduce friction. My grandfather's desk in the study laid out open Bibles that held little interest to me but he let me play with his typewriter and the sound of a hard return was all the divinity I needed to forgive death.

I recently learned how to say sorry in sign language. But if I did it fast enough, it would like I was mocking him, same right hand shaking uncontrollably. I picture him as if he was a pine and my eyes do whatever they can to water down the wood.

TELLING YOU ALL THE THINGS

I want to tell you this now because I love you. Maybe you never loved me, but I like to think that there was a moment when you did. You used to hold me so tight when I had to leave you at the 10th Street station. During those five-hour bus rides I used to draw pictures of us as one of those inseparable old couples. We had a fat cat and you had cane. Yes, you did love me. I'm fairly sure of it now. And I regret never telling you these things. You asked me repeatedly and I always shrugged you off, maybe out of insecurities or maybe out of fear that you would stop loving me. You eventually stopped loving me anyway, but seeing you here, I want to tell you everything I couldn't tell you before.

[Question]?

I'm sure there were things that you never told me, and you can tell them to me if you want. You probably don't care about anything that I'm about to tell you anymore, but I want to leave here knowing that there is this one person that knows everything there is to know about me.

[Comment].

Please let me get it all out.

[Comment].

Please?

[Comment].

Okay. When I was nineteen my best friend was a fifty-five year old gay man named Keith. I wasn't just a college dropout like my father told everyone – everyone being mostly his friends, who had equally disappointing children, looking for stories to make their own lower middle class existence seem more worthwhile. Maybe he had wanted a son, but I don't have a degree in psychotherapy or anything like that. Anyway, I wasn't just an anecdote for my father and his drinking buddies; I was Keith's friend.

Keith worked with me at the factory job I had that year. The place made circuit boards for subway computer systems, the computers that run all the trains and rails. I think they worked exclusively for the DC Metro. I told you about that job before; I worked on the assembly line putting all the little electronic pieces onto the boards. You'd be surprised at how much a 60-volt resistor and a 120-volt resistor look alike and how swapping one for the other can completely fry a circuit board. I found out things like that during my year there. I didn't really know anything about electronics before I got the job, nor did I really care to know anything, but it's kind of fun to have those useless little bits of information in my head now. Maybe I'll make it on Jeopardy someday and the final category will be "Configurations for 300-Watt Transformers."

[Comment].

You don't know that. How does everyone else get on Jeopardy? What makes them so much different from me?

[Comment].

You promised you wouldn't interrupt.

[Apology].

Okay. Anyway, I put all the parts on the circuit boards and then they ran through this thing called a Wave Solder that attached all the components onto the board with molten solder. I know you know what soldering is, but this machine wasn't like anything you had to use in high school shop. It looked like a gigantic Easy Bake Oven, only a lot more frightening. Maybe an Easy Bake Oven that Stalin or Hitler would've had as a child.

[Question]?

No, he didn't work on the assembly line with me. Keith worked in quality control. After all the boards were totally assembled they'd be sent over to testing, where people would check all the connections and voltages and other things I probably never knew about, then they'd go to quality control, where Keith would go over everything to make sure everyone did their job right. When I was there, he'd already been there for 10+ years; I think it was exactly twelve years and four months by the time I left.

[Question]?

We met in the break room. By then I had worked there for a week and a half, yet hadn't been able to muster up a complete sentence that wasn't work related to anyone else. The break room was an elongated rectangle, with folding tables and chairs set up in eight rows. A refrigerator and microwave marked the front of the room and two vending machines rested beside the fridge – one for soda and the other full of candy with high sugar content and processed chocolate. The candy was usually gone before it had a chance to be refilled on Fridays, creating what was known around the factory as “Sugar Crash Thursdays.”

I sat in the very back row most days, securing a seat next to the wall that was really just one big window. You know I like to watch the birds outside while I eat. Row eight was usually all mine, but on this day, Keith arrived to the break room late and all other seats were occupied. It was a rainy day, so most of the smokers who ate their brown-bagged meals on the sidewalk packed inside and tapped their feet or cracked their knuckles to compensate for the loss of their mid-afternoon cigarettes. With the lunchroom overcrowded, Keith sat down next to me.

I tried to keep my eyes focused outside, but there were no birds fluttering around the parking lot to occupy my attention.

[Comment].

You'd be surprised at how many congregated outside when the sun was shining. And there was almost always this large cardinal that flew down to the parking lot at exactly 1:15.

[Comment].

I'm serious. Maybe he had OCD or something and had to stick to a very strict schedule. Do you think birds can have OCD?

[Comment].

Okay, maybe it wasn't always 1:15 on the dot. But I'm digressing anyway. Let me get to the point. So I was sitting there trying to pay attention to the rain crashing against windshields but my eyes kept making their own fleeting glances at Keith, who was now no more than two feet away from me, seated and eating noodles from a Tupperware container.

On glance number seven, his blue eyes met mine. Were his eyes trying to communicate with my own or was he just attempting to look out beyond me – beyond the window and beyond the parking lot to a wooded area where the leaves formed pools of rain until the weight of the drops forced them to collapse into a waterfall? Thousands of miniature waterfalls pounding the earth, unnoticed and unworthy. Keith's eyes caught mine though, and the next sixty seconds were spent attempting to conjure up a sentence, a little quip that would make him chuckle, maybe even full-on laugh. "You're a funny girl," he'd say, "Let's be friends."

That sentence never materialized. And his invitation to friendship didn't follow. After that awkward sixty seconds, Keith turned his entire torso towards me, not just a slight head turn, and said, "Do you have any parmesan cheese?" I didn't know if he was being serious or not, but I didn't want it to seem like I was ignoring him. I opened up my purple Rubbermaid Lunch-mate, shook my head, and said with a modest frown, "Sorry. Would you settle for Swiss?"

"Funny." Keith chuckled, this time for real. Our friendship didn't materialize immediately like I imagined, but it was a good start. The next few weeks consisted of break room one-liners and small talk that dealt with either the weather or the time clock that was always four minute too fast.

[Question]?

After about a month we had a lunch date at 12:30 every afternoon in the break room. We shared the room with everyone else who worked there, but our conversations belonged to only Keith and me. He was easy to talk to, and I probably told him things that I never would have told my friends in high school, let alone my mother or father. He thought I was a good listener too, and I learned all about his wild life in the 70's – never ending dance clubs in the city, cocaine and other things up his nose, and the eroticism of bathhouses. He lived close to the factory, only two or three blocks away, with his boyfriend. He loved talking about his mom too, and spent much of his free time caring

for the elderly woman. Keith looked good for his age, in my opinion. I was nineteen, so to think a fifty-five year old looked good is saying something.

[Comment].

I know. I could've never pictured myself at thirty-two back then. Keith was a young soul though. He still had that sparkle in his eyes that seems to fade as most of us become overwhelmed by the responsibilities and casualties of adulthood. He had a minor lisp, and I loved to listen to him talk – it was soothing and childlike. Our friendship blossomed beyond just the break room, and we started talking nights on the phone and eventually began spending time together outside of work. I didn't have many other friends; I left most of them at school and they couldn't be bothered to hang out with a philistine like me. But Keith was cultured – he liked the arts and black & white movies and music that didn't have the word “baby” in it. Keith was cultured and he liked me.

I learned a lot from Keith. I watched my first Audrey Hepburn movie with him and Jeffrey – his boyfriend. I also smoked my first joint and passed out from too many shots of vodka for the first time on Keith's living room sofa. But it was that other first, the whole point I'm telling you this story at all, that I want to talk about.

[Question]?

He was definitely gay. Trust me.

[Comment].

No, it wasn't like that. It was my decision; it was my idea. It was the holiday season. Keith had invited me to a Christmas party that he and Jeffrey were having at their house that year. A few other people from the factory were invited, but not many. Most of them didn't try to associate with Keith or me. That was fine with me though, Keith was my friend and you know I've never been very good at sharing. I had been working there for almost eleven months at that point, and we had grown really close. He called me Cardinal, because of my hair, and I called him Blue Jay, on account of his eyes. It turned out we both had an affinity for bird watching, or at least talking about bird watching.

I found the best Christmas present for him. It was a silver pocket watch that opened like a pendant to hold a circular photograph. I diligently drew a little picture of two birds, red and blue, with the words "BEST FRIENDS" written underneath. This is what went inside the watch, so whenever he wanted to see the time, he could also see us. I took more time wrapping it than I think I ever took wrapping a gift in my life, not wanting to bring a childish looking gift to my very first adult Christmas party. Yes, another first.

The house would have made Jolly Ol' Saint Nick proud. Garland hung from the stair railings and created crown molding in every living space. The tree was in the family room, fully decorated with a soft white twinkle that bounced around the room and reflected the metal sheen of hundreds of ornaments. Ceramic Santas and reindeer sat on bookshelves, while red and green plates served up candy cane cookies and other holiday

treats. Keith greeted me with a glass of eggnog, guiding me to the main party area to place my gift under the tree.

[Question]?

Around fifteen people. Most of them were older, I'd say around Keith's age. Yuletide songs played from a small CD player placed on the glass coffee table. It was mostly the classics, I remember hearing "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" at least two times; the disc was probably on repeat. Everyone seemed in good spirits, completely opposite of the stress induced short tempers I was met with at my own home during the holidays. I attempted to mingle, and after a few glasses of eggnog I mustered up enough courage to join a conversation that was going on in one corner of the room- three older men and a middle aged woman formed a tight circle around the fireplace.

"Merry Christmas, dear!" said the woman, "Are you one of Keith's nieces?"

I took another sip from my glass and tried to fake an endearing smile. "No, no. I'm his friend. We work together at the factory."

"Oh, lovely! You look so young dear. You can't be a day over eighteen. Aren't you in school?"

Before my eggnog inspired confidence completely deflated, Keith must have noticed my distressed body language and quickly swooped into the circle to save the day.

"Everyone downstairs! We're gonna start the holiday games!"

The circle quickly dissolved, not noticing my shaky disposition and frightened glare. I took a deep breath and polished off my drink. The party crashed in waves down the steps to continue the festive evening. Keith and I were alone in the family room, the tree looked even more exquisite than when I first noticed it, presents packed tightly around its severed trunk. This was the first chance we had to talk since I'd arrived.

“Are you having fun? You're not having fun, are you?” Keith seemed regretful.

“Don't be silly, Blue Jay! I'm having a great time. This party is great. Everyone seems,” I paused in search of the right word, “great.”

Keith led us into the kitchen to replenish our glasses. I was pretty tipsy at that point and it looked like he was pushing his limit as well.

“Did you try one of the brownies yet? I baked them myself.”

“I did, and they're great. Did you use the Easy Bake Oven at work?”

“The what?”

“The Wave Solder. Remember that one-day in the break room when we decided that it looked like a gigantic Easy Bake Oven. You said you wished you had one as a kid. I said you could have had mine, everything I ever tried to make turned out looking like charcoal.”

We both chuckled and Keith's face lit up like his beautifully decorated Christmas tree.

“I'm glad you came tonight.”

“Why wouldn’t I come? We’re best buds, BJ. BJ, get it!?” I started laughing uncontrollably – one of those laughs that by the time you catch your breath you forget what was so funny to begin with.

“You’re more than that.” His eyes looked so sincere. I always envisioned your eyes looking like that on the night you’d propose to me. You never did. “You’re like the daughter I never had, Cardinal.”

I immediately forged a smile. It took a few staggering seconds before the brevity of what he had just said hit me. What was he talking about? He thinks of me as a daughter? Is he fucking kidding me right now!? I wasn’t a little kid. I said the only words I could think of: “Thank you.”

[Question]?

He made his way downstairs to join the rest of the party. My feet were locked next to porcelain Mrs. Claus filled to the brim with miniature Reese’s cups in holiday foil. Tis the season, indeed. I couldn’t understand why he said that. He couldn’t think of me as a child; he just couldn’t. We were best friends – two adults.

I quickly swallowed the rest of the eggnog in my glass and refilled it just as fast. I stared at Mrs. Claus, her bloated face rosy red and grinning from ear to ear. How would she prove herself as a woman? Bake more cookies? No. I knew what I had to do. Four or five more glasses of eggnog were enough to put my plan into action, albeit in a zigzag motion.

The party was drawing to an anticlimactic conclusion; most of partygoers had either called it a night or passed out in various parts of the house. Jeffrey had appropriated the couch next to the tree in the family room, his shoes and socks still on his feet. I stumbled around the house to take tabs on the situation – along with Jeffrey, two others had passed out in the family room, four were downstairs on a reclining chair and pullout sofa bed, and one was locked in the upstairs bathroom.

None of these bodies resembled Keith, so I continued searching the morgue of festivities. The bedroom door was askew, so I popped my head in and saw a body sleeping on top of all the sheets. I immediately recognized Keith's tan loafers.

Leaning in to get a closer look, my current condition caused me to tumble over onto the ground. The plush carpeting cushioned my fall, but I still made a thudding crash. Yet Keith didn't stir at all. I knew this was my chance to show him that I was a woman. I slowly approached the queen size bed frame, less like a cheetah ambushing his prey in the African flatlands and more like a one year old stumbling over his first steps. Swallowing my last bit of decency, I undressed at the foot of the bed, halting at complete nakedness with a pair of overtly plain white athletic socks. Keith was still unaware of any of this, still face down with a small puddle of drool forming on his cream-colored pillow casing.

[Comment].

Of course I remembered that he was gay. Sexual attraction had nothing to do with the point I was trying to make. I needed him to know that I wasn't this little child who liked birds and chocolate. I was a fucking woman who liked birds and chocolate and I'd have to fuck him to prove it. At first he was confused and unwilling, but when you have enough alcohol in your system and a naked body straddling your torso, convincing is exponentially easier. I yanked Keith's pants down to his knees and he entered me with a flash of pain and soberness that seemed to illuminate the room even though we were still in the pitch black of winter's twilight. Suddenly everything seemed so wrong. I felt none of the womanly amour-propre associated with my decidedly feminist – “take action” – approach, only an incestuous nausea that began forming somewhere below my stomach, most likely in or near my vagina.

I was just a child, trying to be a woman.

[Question]?

I really don't remember much after that. My thoughts gained a voyeuristic clarity for only a few brief moments before returning to their rightfully impaired state. I crawled out of bed before Keith awoke in the morning, quickly redressed in the now vacant bathroom and slipped out of the house with the unopened present I had got for Keith.

[Question]?

He deserved a gift that reflected his feelings, not just mine.

[Comment].

Probably. But I quit my job at the factory the following week. The night before my last day, I rummaged through our attic at home and found my old Easy Bake Oven.

[Question]?

I avoided Keith that week, eating lunch with the smokers on the sidewalk and purposefully navigating my way to the bathroom that didn't pass his workbench whenever I got the urge. But I left ten minutes early that final day, giving myself time to place a much bigger wrapped gift in the passenger seat of Keith's car in the upper parking lot.

[Question]?

I never spoke to him after that.

[Question]?

My bus leaves in fifty-two minutes. I still have so much more to tell you.

[Comment].

I can catch the next one.

TERRIBLE

When I was eight I learned that Santa Claus didn't exist. I also learned that I was very good at making women cry. Both happened on Christmas Day, and the second of the two facts cemented my fate at being a terrible husband and a terrible father. The first one probably didn't help much either.

BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Salyers graduated from Butler Senior High School, Butler, Pennsylvania, in 2003. He received his Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Elizabethtown College in 2010. He taught undergraduate English courses at GMU and received his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2013.