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DISASTER SALSA

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DISASTER SALSA

By

Linda A. H. Sirois

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

DISASTER SALSA

By

Linda A. H. Sirois

Disaster Salsa is an interrelated collage of essays, poems, letters, recipes, and stories that are juxtaposed to tell a narrative of what it is like to be the mother of a child who struggles with mental disorder. Our oldest son has had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) all his life; at the age of 11 he was struck with a baseball bat, which resulted in a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

Services that address, diagnose, and treat mental disorders have been abysmal for many years in parts of our country, and ten years ago in northern Michigan, “TBI” was not an injury that was commonly considered or discussed by medical practitioners. As a result, it was seven years before our son was correctly diagnosed with a brain injury. During those seven years, one of my coping mechanisms was researching information about various forms of mental disorder, in order to try to identify a true diagnosis. This reliance on research and definition is symbolized by my use of definitions as an organizing structure to contain and narrate emotional chapters of our family life during the time our son’s illness was acute and uncategorized, as well as the aftermath for him.

This collection presents a series of glimpses into the messiness and pain of daily life for those who suffer from mental disorder, their resilience, and the occasional dark humor of those who, through love, are forced to witness.

DEDICATION

For Lucas, who said, “Mom, write about it! I’m giving you my permission to write about me and my OCD.”

PREFACE

A school report written by Luke, at the start of 7th grade (all spelling, etc. is unchanged):

Me overcoming OCD

By

Lucas

One day last summer I said I'm going to beat OCD so I did. First of all I needed to say no to OCD(Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). I got my grades up and got Therapy help and Medication, I also got help from my parents, friends, and family. I had to get rid of those junk thoughts and then I learned more about it (OCD), so I could fight. For instants one of my obsessions is looking back or touching stuff, but I'm over that. You can get help from medication and therapy but mostly it's all up to you. OCD is when some cords in your brain don't quit work right (they don't get the message clearly). It's kind of interesting learning about OCD, the way I look at it it makes life more interesting, more actioned packed. I have had OCD since I was born, it's not the worst sickness but there are related sickness's like ADHD, ADD, and Otisam. There is no proven cause of OCD or other realated symptoms.

“Information is not knowledge.” ~ Albert Einstein

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

(Why)

“Definition of *Mental Disorder*

Although this volume is titled the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM-IV]*, the term *mental disorder* unfortunately implies a distinction between ‘mental’ disorders and ‘physical’ disorders that is a reductionistic anachronism of mind/body dualism.

A compelling literature documents that there is much ‘physical’ in ‘mental’ disorders and much ‘mental’ in ‘physical’ disorders.

The problem raised by the term ‘mental’ disorders has been much clearer than its solution, and, unfortunately, the term persists in the title of DSM-IV because we have not found an appropriate substitute.

Moreover, although this manual provides a classification of mental disorders, it must be admitted that no definition adequately specifies precise boundaries for the concept of ‘mental disorder’” (Introduction to *DSM-IV* xxi, xxii).

* * *

why for what reason, cause, or purpose? with what motive? used in direct, indirect, and implied questions **1** because of which; on account of which **2** the reason for which; the reason, cause, motive, purpose, etc.

1 used to express surprise, impatience, indignation, etc. **2** used as an expletive, to preface a remark

Only one photo of our son exists from the worst year—the year of Bad. It’s a picture of a young boy viewed from behind, the photographer—me—shooting his back because he refused to turn around, even though it was Christmas, and I’m sure that at the time I was pushing the shutter button, I was also saying, “Luke, turn around, honey.

Luke! Lucas, come on, turn around so I can get a picture of you and your present.”
Because normal families having normal holidays take pictures of the children.

And he would not turn around because of the hinky notions he had of cameras, among many other things, that year that the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) completely overtook him. In the picture, there is the head, neck, and shoulders of my son playing a video game, hunched over, cross-legged, bent toward his new portable 12 inch television with a built-in VCR, delivered by Santa. I’m glad, now, to have this photo of him, even though it makes things in my stomach shift when I see the thin stalk of his neck, the pale skin smudged with the mysterious grime that 12-year-old boys’ necks acquire, especially when it was almost time for him to have his weekly scrub—when we could negotiate a weekly scrub. His neck and one knobby shoulder emerge from the oversized collar, of a faded black tee shirt that I was happy to burn, later. His head is erect, engaged, interested—or so he appears from behind—the large and elfin ears he inherited from my father and hadn’t yet grown into, flare like the handles of the black game controller he clutches. His straight brown hair is long and gluey with days-old gel to keep aloft, bleached blond highlights erect as exclamation points, erect as bottle rockets leaching specks of neurons directly from his fragile skull and into another space.

Of course we had to have some family photos of Christmas because that’s what families do at holidays and we were, above all, a family celebrating a holiday with a tree and wrapped gifts and stockings and jollity with one eye cast on Luke—ten years ago, just before digital cameras were everywhere, this particular photo was printed out at Walmart, in January, maybe when his younger sister, Sadie, and I went into town so she could spend some of her gift cards at places like Claire’s and Bath and Body Works, and

on discounted clearance animals at Shopko, probably leaving Luke behind, at home, because by then he was becoming difficult to take places: he might shoplift or make a small scene, could no longer eat at public places because someone might put three of something on his plate which would poison it all, might cough where his straw had sat in the dispenser which was, in any case, over near the trash container which would have contaminated it, might have a mole or chipped nail polish or something on the hands or face or person of someone who might have touched any part of anything he might ingest so that he could not, could not, eat it. Or drink it.

* * *

Here is an introduction to a research paper I wrote just after the year Lucas became lost in OCD, titled “From ABC to OCD”:

Amber light slants through the pines, and the fragrance of tomato plants perfumes the evening air. Laughing children play in the distance, their excited after-dinner shouts mixed with occasional yips from the sled dogs when their games bring the dogs and the kids near collision. Two women methodically pick beans and pull stray weeds, but these activities are secondary to their conversation.

There is a sudden shout and two sun-browned, laughing boys race past the sprawled garden, one is blond, one is brown haired, both have sweaty bangs plastered to their flushed faces. The women pause, hands filled with greens and their eyes follow the boys as they careen away toward the barn.

“And look at the two of them now. Can you believe it?” said the first woman, blue eyes shining, as she gazes after her son, Tucker.

“I know,” the other woman shakes her head in disbelief. “It’s like a miracle.” She recalls the pale, blank countenance of her son, Lucas, as recently as a couple of months ago. She closes her eyes for a moment.

The women shared a communal garden, located at the house with the most dogs in order to discourage the local deer. Hours spent weeding and planting and harvesting gave them time to compare experiences, especially their shared experience of nearly losing each of their sons to two different illnesses.

It began early, for both boys:

“It was such a shock to realize that my baby was ill,” the first woman said as she relived their family’s agony at the rapid diagnosis of their three year old son, Tucker.

Lucas was ill, too, when he was a baby, except no one knew it. By the time he was three, there were signs, but no one understood them. His family wasn’t aware of the time bomb inside of him, set to detonate around early puberty.

Tucker’s illness set off, from the first day, an established chain of events geared toward encompassing him in a swift, supportive line of defense against the disease that would try to ravage him, and by extension, his family. Social workers descended, specialists were alerted, a network of empathic and compassionate support was activated.

Lucas was encompassed in parental frustration and disapproval as he experienced difficulty, agitation, and sometimes terror, at simple transitions—whether daily: moving from activity to activity; or developmental: making the change from crib to toddler bed, toilet training, adjusting to his new baby sister.

As Tucker's illness progressed, their family was given a four-wheeler by good friends, to cheer and entertain them. Their environment became geared toward their child's encouragement and support. The special playrooms at the hospital were filled with other boys and girls dealing with the same illness. Smiling art therapists assisted the families in allaying their fears and providing encouragement. The parents met, gathered, wept, commiserated, and formed close, supportive alliances. Sports figures and mascots dropped in to greet and cheer them, and the overflow of toys, clothing, and stuffed animals had to be donated to other worthy organizations.

As Lucas's illness progressed, his parents became increasingly bewildered and frustrated at the impossibility of their leaving the house unless his shoelaces were perfectly aligned, his shoes the correct "tightness." There were the heated battles about tooth brushing, the continuing toileting difficulties, the agitation he showed if they tried to interrupt a repetitive speech he needed to complete, once begun. He functioned well away from home, adding to their confusion and self-blame.

In Tucker's case, he endured painful tests and procedures; he and his family had to spend weeks away from home and in hospitals. Can-a-thons and benefits were organized to offset the financial and emotional drain, and to express the community's care for him and his family. Autographs and a "Make-A-Wish" trip to Disney World were an attempt to compensate the child for his ordeal.

In Lucas's case, in the absence of other information, his parents assumed his difficulties were behavioral: willful stubbornness. They became more strict, increased discipline and consequences for him, and tried to talk with a well-meaning but unhelpful family physician, seeking answers. They searched parenting magazines, in vain, for

similar problems and ultimately began to conclude that they weren't "doing it right." Their marriage experienced serious strain as they couldn't agree on the best course of action, and as his ratcheted up behavior impacted all their family time. Schoolwork and school behavior began to present difficulties and homework issues became a nightmare. He wasn't "outgrowing" what they had always considered his "quirks." The simplest parental directive could backfire: "Wash your hands." And he might comply, until, days later—they noticed his hands were chapped, and his knuckles raw from repeated, incessant washing. His mother began to suspect what might be causing these behaviors, but her mind immediately wanted to shy away from it.

During the darkest days of Tucker's illness, the telephone rang frequently, to offer prayers, encouragement, and support. The daily mail brought Tucker's mother to tears, as message after message and gift upon gift soothed her hurting spirit. There were tears and sympathy from friends, strangers, and the community over her child's *bad luck* in not being like all the other kids. The prevailing thought from the outside looking in, was—"God is responsible for this."

During the darkest days of Lucas's illness, the telephone rang often to tell all the ways he had messed up and fallen short that day at school, the mail was full of disciplinary actions from the adults he'd annoyed or irritated that week. His detachment and constant distraction (which prevented him from doing any schoolwork at all) convinced some school authorities that he was a danger who should be dealt with. There was great anger over Lucas's *refusal* to be like all the other kids. The prevailing thought from the outside looking in, was—"His parents are responsible for this."

As the prayer circles gathered for Tucker, Lucas's family found, to their dismay, some of the most devoutly professed people of faith in their world were the first to condemn Lucas's seriously unkempt appearance, wary demeanor, and apparent "willfulness."

These people didn't understand and thought they did, thereby causing a lot of needless hurt to an already devastated family.

Tucker is my friend's son, and he had cancer.

Lucas is my son, and he has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Tucker's illness, like heart disease or diabetes, is organic and biological.

Lucas's illness, like heart disease or diabetes, is organic and biological.

Tucker's illness, while "cured" (he has passed his five year checkup) leaves him with lifelong risks and after-effects.

Lucas's illness, while now "controlled" with medication and therapy, is chronic and incurable.

There is little difference in these two family journeys in one sense...in another sense, they are worlds apart. One of these illnesses called forth a sympathetic, clear-cut, well organized response—while the other illness, from its inception, remained mired in confusion, misinformation, and clouded with moral, retributory inferences."

* * *

The segment above is excerpted from a paper I wrote for a class I took while working on my associate degree, the year after the Bad year. Reading it again, I can see

that I felt there weren't enough adverbs and adjectives in the English language to express our journey with Lucas. For the first time, I was trying to release the pain of what we'd been through as a family and how Luke had struggled; I discovered that telling the story of what hurt was so many good things: a catharsis, an arranging, a testimony, a witnessing. There was also something about articulating Luke's symptoms and his story in words that was reassuring and clean; writing and then reading the words cut through the murk of trying to understand what had happened and it allowed me to categorize, dissect, explain, research, made the unreasonable feel, if not reasonable, at least understandable. The act of writing, I think, helped me to imagine that I had a measure of control over the whole messy episode—we thought we had answers about why our son had been psychotic, about why he was out of control for a while.

“Why?” was the question we asked over and over while Luke was 11, then 12. Why is this happening, why is he acting like this? Why has the OCD gone through the roof, now? It's been an unwelcome but manageable presence in our family life up until this summer, and now it has blown up into psychosis—why?

There was more we didn't know, more the doctors didn't recognize, another condition that would not only exacerbate Luke's existing OCD, but would cause an entirely different and more disabling set of symptoms. We didn't know that Luke had sustained a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). It would be seven years, thousands of dollars, and the adolescence from hell before Luke would be correctly diagnosed.

* * *

An excerpt from the *DSM-IV*:

“Limitations of the Categorical Approach- In *DSM-IV*, there is no assumption that each category of mental disorder is a completely discrete entity with absolute boundaries dividing it from other mental disorders or from no mental disorder. There is also no assumption that all individuals described as having the same mental disorder are alike in all important ways. [...] Individuals sharing a diagnosis are likely to be heterogeneous even in regard to the defining features of the diagnosis and that boundary cases will be difficult to diagnose in any but a probabilistic fashion” (xxi, xxii Introduction *DSM-IV*).

And what is mental disorder, anyway? How is it defined? What is the lexicon of this world? It is spoken by the many professionals that we encountered, tossed around, casually voiced with an air of assumption that we would understand the nuances, and we realized that we needed to learn this language, if we could just pick ourselves up off the couch, get my nose out of an escape novel, my husband leave his garage workshop, stop asking “Why?” and start asking “What?” What is this? What is understood about it? What can we do? What can *you* do? What can Luke be expected to do?

From the *DSM-IV*:

“The concept of mental disorder, like many other concepts in medicine and science, lacks a consistent operational definition that covers all situations. All medical conditions are defined on various levels of abstraction [...] Mental disorders have also been defined by a variety of concepts (e.g., distress, dyscontrol, disadvantage, disability, inflexibility, irrationality, syndromal pattern, etiology, and statistical deviation). Each is a useful indicator for a mental disorder, but none is equivalent to the concept, and different situations call for different definitions” (xxi, xxii Introduction *DSM-IV*).

I had such faith in answers, until I discovered that even knowledgeable professionals can make mistakes, that the field of mental disorder is constantly evolving, and that if your child is engaging in behaviors that the experts, who see him or her once a

week or once a month, or once only, tell you is one thing and your heart and your mind and all your reasoning and research and readings tell you that what the experts are saying doesn't match with or account for what you see at night, in those quiet moments, or during family time, then you need to hold fast and know what you know about your child. And you will need to learn a new language—maybe several new languages—with terms like IEP and frontal lobes and antipsychotics. With concepts like cognitive impairment and cascade effect. And crisis-intervention.

And maybe you will need to learn a new way to communicate with your child, depending on whether they have become lost or disordered or muted, on whether you are competing with the voices in their heads. Maybe you will need to learn to slow down and be explicit, and to explain thoroughly—to model think-aloud processes and step-by-step processes (which has had the accidental benefit, we think, of helping him to rebuild neural pathways). And to interpret the world for your child and, most thorny, to interpret your child to the world.

Here is *DSM-IV*'s blanket definition of mental disorder:

“In *DSM-IV*, each of the mental disorders is conceptualized as a clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual and that is associated with present distress (e.g., a painful symptom) or disability (i.e., impairment in one or more important areas of functioning) or with a significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom. In addition, this syndrome or pattern must not be merely an expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event, for example, the death of a loved one. Whatever its original cause, it must currently be considered a manifestation of a behavioral, psychological, or biological dysfunction in the individual” (xxi, xxii Introduction *DSM-IV*).

* * *

Why would someone write about their living, cognizant, adult son who is just trying to make his own way in the world? Why would I write about his circumcision and his dreams, scenes from around our kitchen table? His private conversations with me, his mistakes? In 1580, Michel de Montaigne wrote an essay, “Of a Monstrous Child,” in which he pondered the showing of persons who are different from the norm. He reasons:

“Those that we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of His work the infinite forms that He has comprehended therein; and it is to be believed that this figure which astonishes us has relation to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man. From His all wisdom nothing but good, common, and regular proceeds, but we do not discern the disposition and relation” (Montaigne).

The conclusion that Montaigne arrives at is simple: what we consider unnatural and strange in people is merely another form of nature manifesting itself, and he urges us all to “expel the error and astonishment that novelty brings along with it.” The only way that the world can understand those who differ from them is for the stories and experiences to be shared.

I read that the author Sapphire, author of *Push*, adheres to the same practice that Toni Morrison uses when trying to determine how much to reveal in her writing. They ask themselves what the people they are writing about—their own characters—would think about the disclosures being made. And they determine that they are really writing their books as if for the characters they are narrating. My own reading list of Jodi Picoult and Oprah’s Book Club selections attests to the deep comfort I found when reading about others’ traumas as I sought to discover the secret of how the characters emerged, alive,

after the chaos. And I wanted to participate in the offering of commonality and information.

But the most powerful reason to write springs from my rejection of the stigma and shame that flourishes within the silence and secrecy about matters like mental disorder, and abuse, and addiction. This concealment causes more harm than some of the difficulties that are being hidden, nurturing isolation and loneliness and despair.

I heard a Saginaw spoken-word poet named Michael Reyes perform his story at a local venue. His words gave me courage:

“If left unsaid, I would rather be dead. If left...unsaid...I...would rather...be...dead.”

Why He is a Cat

Imagine your cat grew up. Stood upright and lost her tail.

Then she got hit on the head playing hard with another cat, and it made her even more quirky...

But the world was filled with dog people and they didn't understand the ways her mind worked, her deficits and her history. Her love of catnip. Her essential cat-ness.

It's not our fault, we say, as we show up at another meeting in our button down shirts and pressed pants, foundation spackled on, attentive, receptive, non-toxic. Looking to see if there are any cat people in the room.

It's not your fault, we tell the 9 M.D.s, the 3 nurses, the 5 social workers, the 4 psychologists, and the 4 psychiatrists who couldn't recognize or help. Certainly it is not, they say. Furthermore, if we don't know what it is, it must be his fault. And furthermore, he is a cat and we are dog people who practice cat medicine.

It's not my fault, I say. It could happen to your cat, out there in a world of highways and bombs, pucks and rocks and baseball bats.

It's not his fault, either. We are soft things.

Recipe for Disaster Salsa

Disaster Salsa can happen anywhere. All you need are a few common ingredients and some tools to access them and mix them up. Variations on the basics are endless: you can use canned, frozen, or fresh ingredients—all that's needed is some way to get into the canned goods, to open and drain off the liquid, and although the least desirable of raw materials, canned goods can get the job done. Frozen is convenient because we all have bits and pieces of frozen things tucked away that we forget about or that look like they couldn't be brought back to life. A handful of frozen corn, a little leftover container of black beans, some frosty chopped green pepper from last summer's backyard garden, and there you have the basic structure of Disaster Salsa. Fresh ingredients are, of course, the most desirable of ingredients. But who among us has constant access to fresh, juicy, affordable fixings? And, don't forget, "fresh" requires extra processing on your part—but if you have the time, money, and/or energy, fresh can't be beat!

Tools:

A good, *sharp knife* is essential when you are ready to take on Disaster Salsa. You will feel better having it nearby, just in case you come across a tough hank of corn cob, a bit of onion that wants trimming. Some way to get into canned materials will be handy: a *manual or electric opener*—even your knife—can get you in, in a pinch. Frozen things simply need the time and patience on your part to allow them to thaw and reconstitute themselves—some warm water, even boiling water, will hasten this process. A *large spoon* for tossing the blend. A colorful *bowl* to showcase the array of colors and impress your guests will complete the list.

Ingredients:

As to the contents of your pretty bowl, only you need to know the origins! Basically, you will need:

Corn (I use generic canned corn)

Beans (not green, but in the kidney bean family-black, red, pinto, Great Northern, black-eyed peas, or any combination) (I use whatever is on sale or I have in the pantry, or if we're really broke, I cook up some dried beans to use for several meals)

Onion (chopped green onions are ideal, but use whatever you have on hand)

Peppers (chopped red and yellow have great eye appeal, but they are expensive; green bell peppers are cheaper)

Tomatoes (Roma tomatoes are least expensive in our area of the country, and red, unlike most pink tomatoes in the winter here)

Vinaigrette (ideally, you will use a bottle of Kraft Zesty Italian dressing, but I've had fine results with store brand or generic Italian dressings, too)

Tortilla chips or corn chips for scooping (Blue, or multi-grain stone ground, generic or flavored, all of them work)

Method:

Open, drain, thaw, as needed for the first two ingredients. Remove the ribs from the tomatoes, and the liquid-y seed part. Chop the next three ingredients. Pour vinaigrette over all. Toss. I've done this at a campsite, on a picnic table at cook-outs, a day ahead, or five minutes before serving.

Serving:

Eye appeal is key when serving Disaster Salsa. The components can be surprisingly humble, even cheap, but the exciting colors and freshness are universally appealing. A vividly colored bowl dazzles the eye, and, surrounded by crunchy chips, the dish is a guest magnet.

Some guests don't understand that the salsa is for scooping up as a dip, so be sure to place a few chips into the edges of the bowl as a hint, and keep the rest nearby. A small serving of Disaster Salsa, as an hors d'oeuvre or accompaniment will be enough for most, although there will always be the rare guest that will enjoy it to the exclusion of the other dishes.

Lexicon

Wood fell softly in the Lopi stove. A dog napped on a rug near the stone hearth, sunlight bathed the pine walls; even the ticking of the anniversary clock seemed muted. In the cabin nestled into the maple and cedar of the riverbank, the new mother rocked her baby. She cradled him, a plump and silken armful, drinking in the swoop of his lashes, the delicious tint of his cheeks. He was perfect.

The small creaks of the old oak rocking chair didn't stir the sleeping baby. His memories-before-memories carried that rhythm of chair and woman as he grew beneath her beating heart; she rocked, parenting books and detective novels propped on her pregnant belly. Dr. Spock and T. Berry Brazelton coached her on labor and mothering—James Patterson and Jonathan Kellerman provided bloody relief to hours spent trimming drawer liners printed with pink rosebuds and washing and folding impossibly small newborn sleepers and onesies.

* * *

It had been hard for the woman to get to a state of calm, capable motherhood. She and her husband started their family when they were in their 30s. The woman battled a phobic fear of bearing a child with a disability, until she wanted a baby so much that it ceased to matter. It took a full moon and an extra two weeks after his due date to persuade her first-born to start his journey; it took an entire day of labor, four hours of pushing, and a suction device which pulled his dark head, finally, from her—all 10 pounds of him deeply reluctant to emerge into the world. She was shocked to find that Sarah Elizabeth was a large and lusty boy, squalling and gnawing his fists—his face

swollen, eyes slanted and dark as a warrior son of Ghengis Khan. The nurses worked a newborn sized knit cap over his head; too small, it flew across the room at his first sneeze.

The woman sobbed and called her husband from her hospital bed the next day when they took the baby away for the circumcision—horrified that they had given their consent for the doctor to lay a blade to his new flesh. Then, the baby didn't urinate and they had to wait several agonizing hours to see if his plumbing worked properly.

“You can only stay for two days, that's what your insurance covers,” the nurse told the woman. “If he doesn't urinate by 11:30 tonight, you'll have to check out and leave him here until he does.” At 11:45, the woman had her bag packed, and was walking bow-legged toward the door; the baby gushed urine and her husband bundled him up for the 40 mile trip home.

The couple argued about how to buckle in the car seat and the woman rode in the back, watching the baby as the huge moon lit his sleeping face. They stopped at the store to get her Dial soap and maxi-pads. Her husband turned as he unbuckled and said, “I think I'll get some guys together and throw the frame for that pole barn up this week.” She said that she thought that his paternity leave would be better spent hanging out with her and the baby. “Just because you had a baby, that doesn't mean the whole world has changed,” he told her, stung. She looked out the window at the front doors of Econo Foods. A few midnight shoppers wandered out with their plastic bags and twelve packs of beer.

“Yes,” she said to him. “The whole world has changed. Even the grocery store looks different to me. The moon isn’t the same.”

A Filipino nurse at their birthing class had sternly advocated cloth diapers and clean, warm washcloths as the caring parent’s way to clean tender skin and protect the environment at the same time. The stench of ammonia and Ivory Snow soon permeated the area around their washing machine in the back hallway.

Her first days with the baby were completely filled with figuring out the dance of warm, wet washcloths, urine-heavy diapers, cleaning his circumcision, cleaning his umbilical cord stump at every wet diaper, cleaning her episiotomy each time she peed, both of them like liquid recycling factories: him nursing nearly constantly, as she gulped the ice water she couldn’t seem to get enough of. Her sister came to visit, bringing armloads of disposable diapers and persuaded the woman, weeping with exhaustion, hair hanging lank, that disposable baby wipes hadn’t damaged either of her own girls and that even good mothers gave themselves a break sometimes and did it the easy way and that, yes, it was normal to sometimes not be able to get herself and the baby dressed before 3:00 p.m.

A week later, the woman noticed that the tiny rim of the head of her son’s penis seemed to be stuck to the plump shaft. She stared, thinking that this looked different than the baby’s father’s. The doctor was kind, explaining that she had to pull apart the two areas each and every diaper change and swab them with Vaseline so they didn’t adhere as his circumcision healed. “Don’t worry, I’ve actually done the same thing with my son,” he told her. “You get busy and don’t realize...” She held the baby and cried with him while the doctor wrapped his fingers in gauze and gently pulled apart the adhesion. On

the drive home, the baby sobbed himself to sleep. She stared woodenly at the yellow lines on the pavement.

* * *

Within a month or two, the days took on a sameness and the woman discovered a certain zen state in the repetitive folding of armloads of cloth diapers pulled from the dryer after the baby was put to bed and her husband was asleep. She watched VH-1, watched the women sing and the men dance around their supple forms.

* * *

But on this afternoon, there was only stillness as she gazed at her son, rocking him through the brief nap he sometimes took after his afternoon nursing. The boy opened his milky blue eyes and slowly focused on her intent face. It was a rare moment. Woman and baby...mother and child gazed into each other's eyes. She blinked back tears and the baby shifted, seemingly in response, as she murmured to him and kissed his small fist. His diminutive hand reached up as if to touch her face and she savored the notion that she and her boy were communing in the wordless depths of their special bond.

His miniature fingers touched her smiling mouth...and then swiftly slipped into the woman's flaring nostrils. The baby's tiny crescent fingernails hooked into her septum—that exquisitely sensitive bridge of flesh—and he flexed his wee fingers and held on. She was reminded of a tiny kitten with sheathed claws that batted delicately until the innocuous needles of claw emerged and drew a pinhead of blood. “Shit!” she burst out, so soon breaking her intention of never swearing or using bad language in front of her child; she wanted to hit him, knock that little paw away, make the needle sharp pain

stop. She froze. So this is how that happens, she thought. He pulled, testing his new grip, and watched, pellucid eyes fixed on her face as she grunted and grabbed his hand, prying each tiny finger from out of her flesh, one by one. The baby's eyes widened and focused on the play of the expressions on his mother's face, the cause and effect of action and reaction. The baby would grow and learn that he and mother were separate. He would understand this sooner and better than his mother would.

She grabbed the burp cloth and dabbed at the mucous starting from her nose, as she and the baby stared at each other. Her eyes may have narrowed slightly, or they may have simply been watering. The baby's lips drew back from his tiny toothless gums. It could have been gas; it could have been his first smile. Either one called for an appropriate response from her. She had read only recently: "The baby will require appropriate mirroring from his mother in order to form healthy personal interactions." Which was it to be?

She bared her teeth back at him. Just in case.

The anniversary clock chimed three o'clock as a large log fell with a sudden loud thump and a shower of sparks flared behind the glass door of the stove. The dog raised his head and woofed, once, before closing his eyes again.

* * *

As I was writing this, Luke walked in the door and threw his backpack down.

"I withdrew from math," he said. He shook his head. "I'm going to get drunk."

"Good luck. There are three bottles of beer in there."

"It's been driving me crazy, making me so stressed. The teacher said I'm too far behind, there's no way I can make up the work. I sit there in class and I try, I try to

concentrate and to focus and then I'm just gone. Gone. It's just a rant, another one of the voices in my head. It kills me because at the beginning of the class I had it, I was on top of it. The fuck am I going to do with my life? I can't even get this pre-college shit so I can drive a fucking timber harvesting machine?"

I sat at the table with him, tracing the grain in the maple butcher block with my eyes. He vented, I listened and felt each word. I had spent the afternoon writing about his circumcision and his baby penis. In G. Thomas Couser's *Memoir: An Introduction*, there is a chapter entitled "Memoir's Ethics":

The relationships that should concern us most are those that involve structural inequality: those between parents and children [and] those between disabled and nondisabled family members. The subjects of these memoirs. . . may lack the opportunity or the capability to represent themselves in their own words, on their own terms. . . Memoir *always* impinges on the real world in a way that fiction does not, and therein lies both its power to do good and its ability to cause harm (104, 105, 107).

Four flies taptapped against the glass of the kitchen window, crazily circling each other, dropping to the sill and trying to fly back up again. "What a dance," I thought. I reached for the swatter, hanging on its own hook on the right wall beneath the sink. The plastic business end of the tool was green, the same color as the kitchen walls. Sadie's swatter was pink, Luke's blue, with little fly cut-outs, purchased at Ikea. I had a leather one that I had bought on a tourist excursion with my sister, Nancy, near the Las Cheneaux islands. I kept it in our bedroom, the brown leather showing handsomely, the hide side spotted with fly mayhem. Fly violence.

Display

display **1** to unfold to the eye; put or spread out so as to be seen; exhibit **2** to unfold to the mind; disclose; reveal

Lines of student art greeted me as I walked down the elementary school hall. The smell of crayons mingled with damp snow pants, taking me back to the years when my son and daughter had attended this school. Snow scenes constructed of cotton balls and crooked lines of text taped to the cinderblock walls, blue construction paper dotted with snowflakes, glittery sparkles sifting to the linoleum as I passed by. Twenty different versions of one small story: the pencil printing wavered on the dotted lines, the stick figures acting out the children's individual narratives.

I made my way to a large classroom where I was to volunteer at a toddler play group. Two, three, and four year olds with some sibling babies swarmed the soft carpeted surfaces. Play stations were set up at different tables: a smooth table where a few drops of Dawn and some splashes of water transformed a Formica surface into a field of bubbles. A sand table: a 10 pound bag of flour and some baby oil yielded a sensory treat called "silky sand." New plastic cat litter boxes from Family Dollar were heaped with the stuff, and Matchbox trucks and bulldozers sat ready to rearrange the mounds. Another table displayed a long throw rug with rolled towels bunched beneath for mountain ranges that imitated a topography of the United States. Masking tape criss-crossed the surface serving as highways for Hot Wheels and tiny trucks, blue painter's tape traced the route of the Mississippi River and the Missouri River. An indoor

hockey/golf set was constructed of a paint stirrer, cardboard, paper towels and wrapped in plenty of duct tape.

A visceral stir of excitement in my stomach at all of this creativity. I was reminded of the homemade playthings we delighted in making for and with Lucas and Sadie when they were small; no money, two children with unlimited imagination—it was our fun.

* * *

Dick made a dagger and sheath from corrugated cardboard with an old belt when Luke was about three so he could imitate his dad and uncles during hunting season. On Tuesdays when the trucks came in to our little town and delivered groceries to the Farmer's Co-op, I could have my choice of empty cardboard boxes before they were flattened for recycling. I regularly loaded up my van as the smell of cardboard pressed close: small boxes that had been used for cans of tuna, medium boxes that had cradled cellophane bags of wide noodles. Giant boxes from packages of paper towels and toilet paper were large enough for two little kids to crawl inside of; all were transformed into Paul Bunyan building blocks on the shaggy carpet of our dining room. Our antique table was shoved against the wall under the window and Luke claimed it as his pole barn. He parked his trucks underneath and Sadie stabled her plastic horses near one massive, carved oak leg.

As I was nearby reading or working in the kitchen I could eavesdrop on their play. I witnessed elaborate scenes of cardboard creation: semi-trucks and castles, skyscrapers and trains. Forts and barns and bridges—there was no end to where they went with those

battered boxes, until, flattened, taped, and torn, windows and doors flapping, strands of twine dangling from slices and pencil holes as they were hauled away, we would burn them and I would get a fresh van load.

My husband, Dick, carved a chain saw from a block of log, attached an old spark plug and gas cap, fashioned a handle wrapped in black electrical tape. Lucas was a miniature lumberjack in size 2 black wellingtons and a stocking cap; he clear cut the maple woods surrounding our home. On the bottom of the saw, Dick wrote with the wood burner: “For Luke on his 2nd birthday from Dada. Because you are a working man.”

* * *

Looking back, one of the first identifiers that hinted of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder was Luke’s habit of repetitive speech. We thought it charming and assigned it to the lengthening list of Luke’s little quirks.

“What are you up to, Luke?”

“I am cutting down this tree acuz I will need the firewood. To burn. In my home.”

“Oh, that’s good. You’re a hard worker.”

“Yes. Ask me why, Mama.”

“Why, Luke?”

“Acuz acuz acuz I am a working man.”

He and Sadie had repetitive word exchanges they would do together. There was often a rhythmic flow to their dialogue:

Sadie: “Luke! Let’s do play dinosaurs and let’s do play wats [rats] and let’s do play all of the creatures that God did made.”

Luke: “Sadie! Let’s not just talk about it, let’s just do it.”

Or:

Luke: “Sadie, my name is Black-eye and I am a bat that goes scratch scratch and I am a bat that goes squeak squeak and I am a bat that goes rarr! Rarr!”

Sadie: “Okay Luke! Let’s us play bats and let’s do play cats and animals and we will play all of the creatures that God did made.”

Luke: “Okay Sadie! Let’s not talk about it, let’s just do it!”

Their phrasing and word choice made them sound like diminutive immigrants. Once they fulfilled their verbal rituals, they plunged into the imaginary play they had mapped out. Lucas, two years older and boundlessly enthusiastic, was the leader and Sadie the eager participant. When we watch old videos of them at play, Sadie and Luke now crack up at the odd phrasing and cadence of their preschool selves.

“Mom! Why did you let us talk like that?” Sadie asks. “We were weird little kids! We sound like we’re from some other country or something.”

* * *

Luke was intractable with his speech patterns as a very young child. We might question or tease him gently, but it mostly seemed like a sweet bit of toddlerhood. Less sweet was his difficulty with transitions when leaving our house to go anywhere. While we still dressed him, there was no problem. When Luke began to dress himself, there were long, stormy delays while first he, then we, tried to get his shoelaces tightened and aligned to his satisfaction: he stubbornly refused to budge until they were right—no matter the raised voices, irritation or urgency on our part. We discovered Velcro sneakers and kept him in those until they ran out of his size; we knew other children who had odd sensory discomfort with articles of clothing.

But there were other confusing situations surrounding toilet training, tooth brushing, and hand washing. Luke would either dig in and refuse to participate—especially as a toddler with toilet training—or wash his hands until his little knuckles were chapped and red or brush his teeth until his gums showed tiny spots of blood. Or refuse to do either. He was cheerful and loving, boundlessly enthusiastic but capricious. He had a certain way of standing, head cocked to the side, eyes faraway beneath the curtain of his brown bangs. Another look we came to recognize was an excited, watchful gleam from under his long lashes that usually preceded impulsive, ill-advised action. When I saw that look, I would most often sweep an arm out to corral him and derail the dash. “Hey buddy, what do you think?” I’d ask him. “How about a hug?” Or, “How about a tickle?” He would wiggle and laugh and sometimes confess what he was about to do so I could talk him out of it. When he got older and was trapped in a repetitive speech pattern, he would usually say, after a couple of cycles:

“Say ‘stop,’ Mom.”

“Stop, Luke.”

He spent many minutes in a little time-out chair in a corner of the kitchen, starting at about 18 months old. According to the parenting books (Penelope Leach was my favorite), the parent was to sit the child gently in the chair and explain that they had to stay seated quietly for a small time period, say 30 seconds for a really tiny child, then if they complied, the parent would tell the child why they had been placed in the time out chair, correct the behavior, and give them a hug and send the toddler on his or her way. In a move that I came to recognize as symbolic of my long quest for information about how to best parent Luke, as soon as I sat him in the chair, he would jump up and run away—often laughing. Was I supposed to tie him to the chair? The Big Bird chair we used had no openings that lent themselves to baby bondage. The books stopped frustratingly short—the implication being that, of course the child will stay in the chair and it wasn’t necessary to advise parents beyond that point. Was I actually supposed to hold him down in the chair, even if he was kicking and screaming, for the allotted time in order to satisfy the “time out” requirements? What if he wasn’t quiet for any of the 30 seconds?

Crack

crack (krak) to break or split, usually without complete separation of parts *b*) a slight defect; flaw

crack (krak) a moment; instant

I recently spent an afternoon at the home of three-year-old Will. He is the change-of-life baby of my good friend, Kim, and spending time with him reminds me of the soft, slow years as a full time mom to my own two toddlers. Blond, precocious, Will had a plan; he told me exactly how he wanted us to spend our time together: first, we would play Hot Wheels, second we would play basketball with his Little Tykes hoop in the dining room.

“When we are all tired out, we can watch Pongo and Perdida Disney Sing-a-Long. Otay, Linda?”

“Otay, Will.”

We snuggled up on the thick carpet in front of the TV, my head propped on a stuffed dog, Will’s held up by his favorite soft pony—juice boxes and a bowl of popcorn nearby. Their pellet stove hissed, the wind blew against the old windows, the sled dogs barked briefly outside. The old VHS tape wobbled in the VCR, then ran smoothly. Big red letters: *Walt Disney Home Video*.

The screen showed an idyllic farm setting, rooster crowing, close-up of hummingbirds sipping nectar from a hanging fuschia, soporific sound of bumble bees and birdsong. Sunshine.

Zippedy doo dah, zippedy aaayyy...

A blissed out woman in black and white spotted pajamas awakes, stretching. She stands up and joyously greets her two adult Dalmatians and their puppies. “Today is the day of the Bow Wow Ball!” she announces. This feels like a caricature of all I wished for, for my children and for myself, complete with a smiling dog who puts her paws up on the kitchen counter and starts the coffeemaker for the happy woman. The woman has changed to overalls with spots and is a little gangly, not yet into the middle-aged spread, in sneakers with her hair up on top of her head in a leftover 80s scrunchie.

I had tried hard, right down to the happy rooster and the scrunchie.

A parade of laughing children comes to the farm for the Ball. One of the boys, Bobby, has a shy smile and wears a baggy football jersey, like Lucas’s favorite shirt when he was ten. Brett, a strong looking boy, has a striped tee shirt, enormous white sneakers and straight brown hair like Lucas’s friend, Caleb. Rebecca, Clarisse, and other boys and girls dance into the scene, cavorting and singing from activity to activity. They wear full protective gear as their roller skates crack and rumble on the walkways and patios—helmets and pads—all safe and whistling. Dress-up is next. Rummaging through a trunk of costumes, the children put on caps and bonnets and pirate hats and mug for photos taken by the smiling woman who is now dressed in a spotted ball gown.

“Hey!” said Brett, reaching into the trunk. “Look what I found! A baseball!”

“Throw it over here!” said Bobby. Brett tossed it and Will and I watched it arc across the television screen.

“Watch this part,” Will turned to me. “It’s funny.”

Onscreen, the baseball hits Bobby in his frontal lobes, knocking him unconscious; he falls to the ground amid the alarmed soprano voices of the other Bow Wow Ball attendees: “Bobby!” “Bobby!” Twinkly cartoon stars appear and dance around Bobby’s head as he lays face up on the tiled patio. His mouth is ajar, his bangs fell back from his forehead, “baseball...baseball...” a voice says in his mind.

“Baseball baseball...” Will chortled in my ear.

We are ushered into Bobby’s Disney dreamscape: misty, a baseball game is in progress among the friends, they sing “Take me out to the baaall game...” dancing smartly across the infield. Bobby comes up to bat, wearing a black and white spotted helmet. “Can we play baseball, please?” calls the agitated but smiling woman to the dancing children. “What about baseball?” she frowns. Crack! Bobby hits a ball down the infield, winning the game for his team. As the cheers swell, then fade, Bobby rises from his unconscious dream of victory as the Dalmatian puppies lick his face and he hears his friends call him through the mist...”Bobby!” “Bobby!”

“I’m okay, everybody, I’m alright,” Bobby tells them as he comes to. “I’m alright, don’t worry!” He hops up from the hard masonry.

“He’s otay, Linda! Don’t worry!” Will patted my arm and snuggled closer to me as we watched.

“You’re fine. Good,” the woman tells Bobby, brushing back his long bangs. How did she know? He seemed fine, but what if he really wasn’t fine at all? She whirls, smiling, “Does anyone want to play hide-and-seek?”

Bobby seems fine, but he is one of the last to be found although he is hiding in plain view right off of the main path.

A part of me noticed that small skits about head injuries now horrify me, especially when they are incorporated as comedy in children's programs. The crazy Dalmatian woman responsible for all those singing, dancing children has no knowledge of what is called the "cascade" effect of brain injury.

* * *

It's a soft May evening 10 years ago, and our family—Dick, Luke, Sadie, and I, are attending a gathering of several families of close friends. The kids have all eaten and scattered outside to play in the barns and the greening fields. We parents are just sitting down at the table in the old farmhouse to enjoy a second glass of wine, grilled chicken and brats, colorful spring salads spread across the pine sideboard.

A group of the boys—10, 11, 12 years old—hang out in the pasture west of the house, talking about who-knows-what. Friends since the beginning of their toddler play group, they laugh, jostle, brag—full of spring energy. School is almost over, the summer stretches before them. They boast about their athletic abilities on the baseball field, about the strength of their swing, their speed; they tease each other, they heft a hardwood baseball bat to demonstrate.

In my mind, I see the wooden baseball bat move through the rose-tinted evening air. Caleb holds it tightly, bragging up his strong swing. I see the bat swing in slow motion, the lowering sun shining off the impervious finish of the oak. I see my 11 year

old son, Lucas, turn away from his friend Ben, laughing and nudging him, and pivot toward Caleb and...

* * *

Lucas had a question for me last week when I came home from my afternoon at Will's house. He was standing in the kitchen, his six foot frame looming over the butcher block counter we use as a kitchen table. His head was level with the dusty cast iron pots that hang from the rough beams above the block—he has a habit sometimes of pulling on his dark beard when he's talking.

“Mom, did you know the front part of the brain helps you like be in control?”

“Yes.”

“And it helps you to like make good decisions and to figure things out and to kind of like...kind of like...run things.”

“Yes. It's called the executive function.”

“Yeah.” He looked at me. “Huh.”

I looked at him. “Yeah.”

“I watched a show last night about the brain.”

“That's cool, Luke.”

* * *

At 11, Caleb is powerfully built. He wrestles at home; he and his sister are the first members of the new wrestling team in middle school—coached by his father. He

puts his all into this swing—he's Babe Ruth, he's Mickey Mantle, he's...who? He's some amazing player, batter, I don't know their names. Maybe Caleb, like Bobby, is hearing imaginary cheers. Maybe, like Brett, he is proud to be a strong boy.

Lucas steps full on into Caleb's swing, leading with his forehead.

crack 1 loud sound, usually from hitting; [v3] hit very hard, says my Roget's

Thesaurus, and supplies ridiculous graphic elaboration:

bang, bash, belt, blast, blow, boom, buffet, burst, clap, clip, clout, crash, cuff, explosion, go, noise, pop, report, shot, slam, slap, smack, smash, snap, splintering, splitting, stab, stroke, thump, thunder, thwack, wallop, whack, wham; SEE CONCEPTS **189**, **595** (Roget's concepts do not enlighten.)

The skin in the middle of Luke's forehead bursts: the jagged scar near his hairline will trace a crooked map of undoing.

crack 2 lose self-control

(Childhood shatters; the world narrows and blurs. He will lose most of the next year as he slowly descends into a state of psychosis from this brain injury.) become deranged, become insane, blow one's mind*, blow up, break down, bug out*, collapse, flip*, give way*, go bonkers*, go crazy, go to pieces*, lose it*, succumb, yield; SEE CONCEPT **189** (No, I will not.)

* * *

Lucas will remain there for one year. We will all go there with him.

mother sends Christmas cards with chatty newsletters to Bobby's mother, which go unanswered, and high school graduation announcements which go unacknowledged. Maybe Bobby's mother doesn't fully know why she never answers Brett's mother's missives of success. Maybe, after a while, she does.

Cascade

“Brain injuries unfold in stages. Seemingly mild injuries can set in motion a series of neurological changes that can result in various levels of impairment and even death. The brain is approximately three pounds of matter that is similar to unset Jello and is very sensitive to abrupt movement like shakes, blows, and shock waves. The initial injury—the “primary injury”—is the trauma-induced tearing and sloshing that occurs in the brain. Secondary injury develops as a result of a kind of chain reaction of breakdown and chemical response over the course of days and weeks as the brain reacts to the primary injury” (Clemmit, Marcia. “Brain Trauma Often Unfolds in Stages.” *CQ Researcher*. June 1, 2012. Vol. 22, No. 20. p 488.)

Maybe

maybe perhaps

I remember the other boys bringing Luke into the dining room where we had begun to help ourselves to grilled chicken. We would have been laughing with the sheer joy of being together on a Saturday night, our kids all too busy playing together to need anything from us, and just being out of our own houses at the end of a long Upper Peninsula winter and a first spring time barbecue, a couple of drinks under our belts. Maybe I had brought a big bowl of what we called “Disaster Salsa”; a mix of canned corn and black eyed peas and raw veggies, tossed with the bottled Italian dressing that would have been readily available at the local Farmer’s Co-op which wasn’t nearly as cool as it sounds.

I remember them half supporting and half dragging him in: on his feet, someone was laughing a little and someone was shouting and I heard one of the boys calling my name in his husky 11 year old voice and the boys were preceded by their loud voices, a wave of noise as each tried to tell the story of what happened. I remember turning to look and seeing Luke with his face completely covered in blood and panic rising up in my throat, jumping up from the table.

“Oh my God what happened? What happened?”

Several voices talking at once as the boys tried to tell the room full of parents. One of the moms, Amy, stood up and began to bring the tone of insipient hysteria down

to normalcy. Using her long-time RN skills, she put her hand on my shoulder and laughed a little and said, “Looks like someone’s going to need a couple of stitches.”

She may have asked Luke if he’d lost consciousness and he may have said “Naah.”

This was our first experience with big blood. As an only boy with a little sister, Luke had learned early on to temper his boisterousness. He and his best friend, another boy with sisters, used to circle each other in slow motion, crouched, squinting, young testosterone urging them to a wrestling match, parental training and personality urging them to gentleness.

We had thus far dodged broken bones and bloody heads, and my husband and I didn’t know what to do. Did we go to the emergency room? To the Walk-In Clinic? Out where we lived, everything was 35 to 40 miles away. We were, all of us parents in the room, of a generation where boys would be boys and if someone was standing there, however wobbly, and laughing about it—maybe you washed his face up and continued with dinner. Maybe you went the route of the least invasive care in order not to act like a rookie parent. Maybe you had crappy medical insurance and high co-pays and deductibles and a small stack of partially paid doctor’s bills on your kitchen table at that very moment. Maybe you were in the habit of downplaying medical issues when you were raised by someone who perseverated on every throb of her varicose veins and owned her own blood pressure pump. Maybe we all had brothers—maybe 25 or 30, if you counted the men sitting at the table-- who were in the habit of being dragged in bleeding and woozy all during our respective childhoods, and who were fine, after all. Just fine.

Maybe you were a person who always had trouble making decisions about child health care: either travelling in on a Friday night during a snowstorm, kids bundled in their snowsuits, writing a tenuous check for gas, for a possible ear infection only to find that there was none—that they had some wax poking in their ear or were just fretful with the dragging on of a long cold. Or waiting out another Friday night's (it always happens on a weekend night) crying child's incoherent complaints and finding out two days later that they had strep and bronchitis. Or maybe your son always freaked at any kind of medical intervention like routine shots and ear wax and taking Robitussin for his coughs.

Maybe you were a mother whose son had always had some odd issues not covered in parenting books or magazines—and you'd read them, by the dozen: *Parents* and *Parenting* and Penelope Leach and Dr. Spock and T. Barry Brazelton and since there wasn't really Internet at that time and in that county, that was about as far as you could go. And maybe your sister-in-law had researched odd quirks like having to always have his shoelaces tied exactly the same and with the same degree of tightness or he could not, would not budge from the house. And his repetitive speeches and need to have certain scripted responses to those speeches. And his early inexplicable difficulties with toilet training. And maybe you began to suspect that he had something really strange and frightening, like an actual mental illness. And maybe you were so frightened by that, so frozen and in denial about your fear and about the possibility that you wouldn't even look, for two years, at the pile of articles printed out from the new Internet that your sister-in-law put in a big manila envelope for you and you duly placed in a desk drawer where you would come upon it occasionally and freeze and your mind would go blank and you would quickly close that drawer.

Maybe you were a someone who had judged other parents in the past, and poohed diagnoses of ADHD, and other invisible illnesses that you suspected had more to do with the mother's issues than the child's actual problems. Maybe you were determined, and maybe you were known for your determination and your strong will, that your son would be different. He would be raised right and he would have no problems that other people could judge and suspect that you and your husband hadn't done it right. Above all, other people shouldn't think you hadn't done it right, made the right choices, the correct decisions, hadn't taught your boy to be respectful and kind and seen to his mental and physical health. Although, really, you had never raised any kids and you were just kind of figuring it out as you went and so were all the other parents in the room, some of whom had older kids and had done okay so far, the toddler play group now grown to a mid-sized kid play group and a parent's lifeline of friendly faces and laughter and support.

So, when the table's consensus was "Maybe the Walk-In Clinic for stitches and a look?" it was easy to feel comfortable and to load us all in the car and take off for Marquette. Maybe we left the bowl of Disaster Salsa behind, maybe we took it with us because we always felt short of resources.

I was driving and Dick was in the back seat with Luke, and Sadie was back there, too. The police car flagged me down on M-94 and I pulled over, feeling a little important like a parent finally justified for speeding and thinking, "Really officer, what is the problem? Can you see I have an injured child here?" And of course, he let us go and offered to escort us to town, but as we were comfortable in the consensus of the Walk-In Clinic, we refused, politely. And Luke was excited about having had this small bit of

drama surround him, although his head was seriously throbbing by now and he was a little apprehensive about what might happen at the clinic. So was I—our last experience with needles had been bad, involving three nurses and a few subsequent dirty looks.

I remember sitting at the table in the clinic where Luke was lying down. His head was at the end which jutted out into the room and the doctor was swabbing it and asking him questions. I remember one of the questions, maybe the first question, was “Did you lose consciousness? Like, get knocked out at all?” And Luke said, “Not me!”

Recipe for Crack

Crack is a distinctive treat composed of the most ordinary ingredients you can imagine. Saltine crackers, butter, sugar, and a few chocolate chips: ordinary as apple pie, as American flags, as baseball on a spring day. The skill level is simple, the results happen almost instantly as the magic of science converts the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Tools:

Pull out a couple of *cookie sheets* and line them with *aluminum foil*. *Spray* the foil thoroughly so that very little will stick. A medium *saucepan* will work fine for dissolving and melting the ingredients together, thereby converting our old friends butter and sugar into an unrecognizable new mixture that will shatter, that will snap: Crack!

Ingredients:

You'll need one packet of the cheapest *saltine crackers* available, because they will be unrecognizable after Crack happens, so no need to spend the extra 69 cents.

2 sticks of butter or margarine—go cheap, again, for the reason listed above

8 ounces of semisweet chocolate chips—see above

1 cup of light brown sugar—be sure it's soft and malleable; fresh

Method:

Lay the saltines out flat, nearly touching each other. Atop the foil that covers the cookie sheet, you will have row after row of saltines lying there, in a single layer. It doesn't matter if they are face up or face down. Either way will be fine.

Melt the butter or margarine and the sugar together and—this is important—boil them for around 5 minutes. (Note: After roiling for the full time, the sugary mixture will become supersaturated: an unstable state that results in the sweet ingredients being transformed, ultimately, into a sheet that is brittle enough to splinter.) Carefully pour the boiling mixture over the crackers.

Get your oven hot—425 degrees will quickly (2-4 minutes) take these simple ingredients to an entirely new state where the top will bubble—watch carefully. After removing the cookie sheets, sprinkle with the chocolate chips because, as we know, chocolate makes nearly everything better. When the chocolate dissolves and softens, spread it around with a dull knife.

Serving:

I predict your guests will be amazed, as you have been, at the transformation of the ordinary and the expected into...Crack. When the Crack has set for a while, to cool, it will be in one large, intact piece. Break it up into little pieces; it will most likely break itself apart when you try to hold it. For best results, seal Crack up in an airtight container; you may even want to hide Crack from everyone else!

*Note: I have failed miserably at Crack, due to my inability to let the pot boil for the prescribed amount of time, having instead felt compelled to watch it worriedly, stir it compulsively, and remove it prematurely. Imagine my confusion when, instead of a proper Crack, I ended up with a sticky, oily, indeterminate ooze which refused to harden

and behave properly and, instead, soaked into the saltines, staining them in an unappetizing manner.

Bad

bad 1 not good; not as it should be

It was the year of Bad.

Like the definition itself, bad began innocuously (below standard; not pleasant; unfavorable; disagreeable). Bad worsened, like falling down a dark elevator shaft, hurtling down and bouncing off of a series of ledges: (rotten; spoiled; faulty; erroneous), then (wicked; immoral; causing injury; harmful) and on to (severe; ill; offensive; disgusting; unpaid and not collectible); each new place we found ourselves was mind-blowingly worse than the one that preceded it.

* * *

3 not pleasant; disagreeable

The year of bad began in May of 2003, right after the baseball bat to the frontal lobes, when Luke was 11 and formally concluded as such in May of 2004, when he was 12 and under the care of a local mental health agency. I have a small journal which tracked his response to psychotropic medications that begins “May 1, ’04 began 5 mg. Zyprexa at bedtime. Very sleepy. Hard to wake up. Shoes not in usual spot, tossed carelessly.”

Moments stand out from that year. The first that we began to understand the change in Luke was in June on a car trip to Florida to see my mother. Luke and Sadie and I, along with my sister, Nancy, and her 15 year old daughter. At some point I noticed

that while sitting in the back seat, Luke was pulling out clumps of his long eyelashes. I was horrified but not unfamiliar with the practice of pulling out a person's own hair: trichotillomania. I had ventured to take a look at OCD and related disorders and found out about this. Dick and I had just had marriage counseling that spring and winter and were feeling smoother. Our therapist said that perhaps Luke felt safe enough to come apart now and that it was time to turn our attention to him.

His blue gray eyes gazed out at me with a reptilian cast, by the time we were on the return trip, all of his eyelashes were gone. I told him not to, asked him not to, tried to get him to talk about it, to stop, offered incentives. Nothing helped and I was not able to stop him from doing what he wanted to do to his eyelashes. That was another big ledge: that we couldn't make our child do what he didn't want to do. No matter what. He was acting strange on the trip, the OCD seemed to be escalating and manifesting itself in pronounced ways. Luke took longer than ever to put his shoes on, aligning the laces, starting over, straightening his socks, quietly and stubbornly resisting all urging to hurry up.

“Oh for God's sake,” my mother said. “Here, Lucas. Let Grandma. So we can get out the door.”

“Mom, please. Let me handle this, okay? Luke, can I help you? What's going on? We don't want to be late to meet Uncle Greg.”

He blended in with his cousins and his sister while we remained in Florida—going to the beach, to the mall, out to lunch at the waterside restaurants. There was the usual tension with him being the only boy, surrounded by a mother, an aunt, a

grandmother, a sister, and a girl cousin. But I remember him sitting by the fire with his uncle while the cousins had a campout on the beach.

On the way home from Florida, we stopped in Indianapolis at the Children's Museum. He refused to get back into the car. What kind of consequences? The experts would say to use natural consequences but what would those be in downtown Indianapolis in mid-summer? Drive off without him?

“Luke, what's going on? C'mon, get in the van. Buckle up, knucklehead.”

I asked, cajoled, ordered, was stern with him: “Luke get in the van right now. C'mon, we're going to go get something to eat. You must be hungry, right? Well we can't go until you get in.”

He stood there, outside, turning his head away from me.

“Luke! Now! Oh my God...get...in...the...damn...van. Now.” I had to push him and wrestle him into the van.

Other moments from that summer of change:

On the way home from the trip to Grandma's, I needed to stop for gas in the van.

“Mom! Stop here stop here stop here!” Luke was pointing to a small station where we didn't usually stop.

“No, I'll just go to the Holiday up ahead.”

“No Mom! There's something I want to get at this one, please! Please!” He begged and wouldn't let it go, was on the verge of tears, so I said, “Fine,” and stopped and filled the van. Luke took the last of his vacation money into the small store and came

out with a black nylon “do-rag” head scarf. He had started noticing and wanting to emulate hip hop culture—I wasn’t ready for him to enter what I perceived as edgy teen culture. He didn’t watch MTV, didn’t know any hip hop people, indeed didn’t know any kind of culture outside of our small, northern Midwest community of snowmobiles, basketball, and tree forts. He was just out of 5th grade—I wanted him to stay a kid as long as he could.

He wore that black rag on his head for months. Picture a young boy. Slender and getting slimmer monthly, dirty, skinny neck sticking up through a faded oversized black tee shirt, gel spiked hair that smells bad because he only showers once a week because OCD says he can’t shower. He was flitting away from us, dancing, distracted, secretive, distant, with his strange detached lizard gaze and his cold statement many times each day:

“You know I hate you all.”

“Well, but we love you, Luke.”

“Yes, but you know I hate you.”

“Okay, whatever, Luke.”

He began to refuse to go to church with any of us—back in the days when we still attached such importance to weekly church attendance. In August, he was supposed to have a sleepover with friends for his 12th birthday. A couple of days before that, I was trying to get him to go to church with us and he flatly refused. This was different from his younger self—he wasn’t a kid who easily said “No” to adults; his way was more

avoidant. “If you and the child argue, you must win definitively” said the parenting books.

I began with small consequences: in your room for this afternoon, no TV, no playing outside. The battle of wills soon escalated; he wasn’t budging.

“Luke, you are not allowed to tell me ‘no.’ If you refuse to go with us, you will not be able to have your birthday party. Did you hear me? No birthday sleepover.”

I had brought out the biggest of big guns and had no doubt that he would comply. He didn’t go with us. I couldn’t believe it, couldn’t believe that he would give up his birthday sleepover in order to not go to church for an hour. We began to understand that there was a new implacability to his will that we hadn’t seen before.

He shrugged and turned away, lashless eyes downcast.

2 showing a lack of talent, judgment, aptitude

“The good news is that [. . .] brain-injured patients manage to come through their accidents with many of their other cognitive abilities intact. The bad news is that their personalities go through tremendous changes because of the damaged brain structures involved. Neuronal connections that used to relay information to other parts of the brain that were essential to inhibiting emotional outbursts or initiating behavior have been disrupted” (*Mindstorms: The Complete Guide for Families living with Traumatic Brain Injury* 91).

* * *

On the day I was born, the nurses all gathered 'round
And they gazed in wide wonder, at the joy they had found
The head nurse spoke up, and she said leave this one alone
She could tell right away, that I was bad to the bone

Bad to the bone

Bad to the bone

B-B-B-B-Bad to the bone ~ ZZ Top from *Bad to the Bone*

* * *

In August, before sixth grade started, Luke made an announcement to us.

“This year, I’m going to be bad,” he said.

“Oh, no, Luke. You don’t want to be bad, you’re a good kid. Bad won’t work out well for you, honey.”

He smiled his new smile—the secretive, distant smile—and didn’t say anything else.

* * *

“Some form of aggressive behavior is also common in the first few months of rehabilitation. Studies have found that anywhere from 11 percent to 96 percent of all TBI victims will become at least temporarily violent; while this is quite a large spread, these data demonstrate the difficulty that even trained professionals have in defining exactly what constitutes an act of aggression. For some, cursing alone counts as aggressive; for others, an act is considered aggressive only if someone actually gets physically hurt” (*Mindstorms* 93).

* * *

“Some psychosocial symptoms of frontal lobe syndrome may include:

- Lack of motivation
- Impaired social judgment
- Increased risk taking
- A lack of regard for future consequences—a ‘live for today’ mentality
- Failure to recognize the effect of one’s behavior on others
- Poor grooming and daily hygiene

- Loudness
- Perseveration (repeatedly asking for the same thing over and over again, even though the request has been granted, as if the person is stuck in the same groove of a vinyl record album)
- Indifference to the needs of others” (Mindstorms 91, 92).

A Plan for Difficult Times

At the local mental health agency, I was handed a pamphlet with the Pooh-esque title: “A Plan for Difficult Times.”

Inside were instructions telling clients and their families how to pre-plan for a crisis. Unspoken was the assumption that there would be Difficult Times and prudent people make a Plan to deal with those Times. When the Plan is discussed, formed, and committed to writing, it will—in theory—give the surprised client and his or her family something concrete to guide them.

And there is surprise. Every time. Not the kind of surprise that accompanies birthdays and presents wrapped in gilded paper and tied with a joyous spray of ribbon, but the kind of surprise when you’re driving along, maybe singing along with Taylor Swift, and a deer abruptly leaps out of the woods and into your windshield. And you hear, first, a loud BANG like you were just shot in the face, or the world has just ended, and your heart leaps like the deer into your throat. And something comes out of your mouth in the shock of the moment, like, maybe, “Oh God!” Or “Oh Fuck!” Or “Oh No!” or even just “Oh!” And you try to wrest the car over to the side of the road so you don’t get rear-ended on top of a deer through the windshield; you are running on pure instinct and experience now, your body knowledge of how to drive a car. It helps if you’ve been driving for a while. You try to understand what just happened. Then, in a little bit, you try to figure out what you should do next. What steps need to be taken. The first thing you always ask is: “Has anyone been hurt?”

Hard

hard *adj.* **1** not easily dented, pierced, cut, or crushed; resistant to pressure; firm and unyielding to the touch; rigid; solid and compact

Luke said, “I remember when I was little that I was really smart and I got things right away. Sometimes I wonder what I would have been if I had stayed like that, like how I was supposed to be.” He looked straight ahead, both big hands holding the steering wheel per my request.

I looked out the window at the iron ore boat approaching far below and to the west, at the gulls drafting past, as the bridge’s rust pitted rails gave way to smooth green paint.

He added: “Everyone always underestimates me.” He turned briefly to look at me.

I noticed that the water beneath us, surrounding us, was the same color as Luke’s eyes, just as variable, just as hard to read.

It was summer and we were crossing the Mackinac Bridge, a five mile long, five hundred foot high suspension bridge that links the Upper Peninsula of Michigan with the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. We who live in Michigan, especially those of us who live in the U.P. and regularly drive over the long arcing comma of Big Mac, always “cross” the bridge, instead of “driving over” the bridge. The crossing is an event, a separation, a divider within the isolation of tamarack and cedar lined like soldiers and the chamois flash of deer, road-killed porcupines, and too few rest stops. The crossing is a leaving home and a going toward the outside world where there is more than one mall per 60

square miles and P.F. Chang and Barnes and Noble and art museums (plural) and more than two Starbucks per 100,000 residents and University of Michigan medical experts.

The crossing is also a joyful re-entry point to our rugged and difficult domicile where we breathe more deeply from our diaphragms and we imagine that the toll booth workers on the St. Ignace side welcome us home in pleased recognition, and the wind never stops and the air is always, always colder than anywhere else and scented with pine. The crossing is a cultural division between the economically challenged north which depends on tourism and figuring out how to afford to live there, and the more prosperous south, which has, still, cities and industry and farms that have more than the 70 or 80 frost-free production days that U.P. growers have.

The Straits of Mackinac gleam a festival blue but act like a cement wall when a human body hits from the 200 foot high roadway. The steel railings are more of a visual solace than actual protection from going over. The open rail is maybe three feet high. There are two lanes northbound and two lanes southbound, with no shoulder or breakdown lanes. The two center lanes are openwork steel grid which makes for a startling view when you first cross on a motorcycle and look straight down at the turbulent lake beneath your boots.

Crossing speeds are tightly controlled, with trucks only allowed to drive at 20 miles per hour. When the winds are high enough, they close the bridge until it's safe to traverse; this happens frequently in all seasons. The views while crossing are superb, unless it's snowing, unless it's foggy, with outlooks to Mackinac Island, Bois Blanc Island, and both peninsulas. Two of the Great Lakes meet in the 300 foot depths of churning water beneath Big Mac: Lake Huron, and Lake Michigan. Lake Superior

bounds the northern half of the U.P. an hour's drive straight ahead. For those who are too frightened to drive across Big Mac, the Mackinac Bridge Authority offers drivers for those whom the workers gently term "timids."

Crossing the bridge is also a rite of passage for Michigan drivers and on this day my 20-year-old son, Lucas, was driving me across for the first time. Although he has driven across at other times, with friends and alone, I am a timid.

* * *

For most people who have a Traumatic Brain Injury, or TBI, there is a disconnect in their brain function that makes them have random gaps. The axons that carry the signals to neurons, which do the thinking, get damaged and delay the processing signals that govern thought and action. Even with so-called "mild" TBIs, the wiring damage compromises activities and thought processes that used to come easily and quickly.

Some things people with TBIs get, some things they miss, and the person inside there can be aware of the gaps and remember how they used to be and feel angry or frustrated or sad about those blanks or delays. Or maybe they don't remember how they used to be because that was part of their damage, and their closest people are the repository of all of that anger, frustration, and sadness on the injured person's behalf. Sometimes, everyone grieves: a grief free-for-all.

* * *

When a person has a pre-existing mental disorder, such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or OCD, a TBI often exacerbates that condition so that what was manageable

before, say, a blow to the frontal lobes of the head with a baseball bat, becomes unmanageable. Becomes, for a time, psychosis.

If a family lives in a backwoods rural area that has a several year time lag for new ways and products and ideas to creep north and cross over, something like a TBI can be missed and remain undiagnosed for seven years while medical personnel focus obsessively on trying to figure out and tame a young boy's pre-existing mental disorder, even when the symptoms expand out from the manual's descriptions, like the swelling cascade of a chemical reaction in a jostled brain. These families will find few community resources, all expensive and usually not covered by insurance. The families will likely hear, as we did, that their child will not qualify for help until the child hurts themselves or someone else: the societal criteria for diagnosing and treating, via imprisonment and bitter hindsight, of children with emerging mental disorder.

* * *

It was hard to know how to be Luke's mom. And then it got harder. TBI stuff. It's been a toss-up what has made things the hardest for Luke; it fluctuates—this week, this day, this task: OCD kicks it. This week, this day, this task: TBI kicks it. He has always had a lot of battles going on in his head. The victor varies.

It's hard to watch. Harder for him to live.

* * *

Tamar Chansky, in *Freeing Your Child from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*, writes:

“Living in the land of OCD changes everything. The once tried-and-true parental tricks to soothe or redirect no longer work. Your power has been zapped. The rules of daily

life that you took for granted don't seem to apply here. Safe isn't safe enough, clean isn't clean enough [. . .] your 7-year-old is repeatedly asking to check that his pants aren't ripped and that they aren't going to rip, or your teenager is going through three bottles of soap in a week and making a lake on the bathroom floor. What do you do? If saying 'stop' worked, there would be no OCD. OCD can wreak havoc on a family."

But wait.

Dr. John Cassidy in his book *Mindstorms: The Complete Guide for Families*

Living with Traumatic Brain Injury writes:

"As a whole, families strive to maintain homeostasis—a balance between its members that keeps things safe and secure. But when a family member becomes brain-injured, this homeostasis is irrevocably disrupted—with implications that may drive many families apart. Think of it. There is no finality, no death, no moving on. Instead, there are events, an ebb and flow of potential struggle."

* * *

I collect women's stories. Being a woman, mother, wife, daughter, sister, having women friends and sisters and nieces and a daughter: women's stories are what I know best. Many of the men have gone: left or been asked to leave or told to leave, gone out for cigarettes and never come back. I'm grateful that my husband, Dick, is still here, but we've been through most of the "gone" variations mentioned above.

Part of what makes "hard" harder is figuring out the dance between the two partners through a war zone. Someone asked me recently if my husband is my soul mate, and I told her that we are like old war buddies covered in mud and blood and it's raining and mortars are going off all around us and one of us is screaming *FUUUCK go on! Just go! Fucking leave me here motherfucker I give up I can't take it anymore!* And the other grabs them and drags them and says *No motherfucker!! No man left behind get up GET UP SOLDIER get your ass UP NOW We're getting out of here* and the one who's feeling

strong that day grabs the tired one and smacks them and says *c'mon C'MON you MOOOOVE SOLDIER MOVE IT! I'm not leaving your ass!* And they slog forward, clutching and fighting each other, and no one can ever know what they've seen together and been through together. And the next time they trade places. Offspring of warriors that we are, of Vietnam and Korea, this scenario suits us.

* * *

I sat at Marquette's Lower Harbor on a bench overlooking the rocky shore on the first warm day this spring. Grayed snowbanks were pocked with holes and flecked with blown sand and grit, gulls walked on the jutting rocks that emerged from the melting drifts. I was having a conversation with a friend about hard things, about sons with brain injuries and about young adults with mental illness and about unplanned babies.

And I related to her a recent phone conversation that I had had with another friend, Julie, who said, "You know what they say: 'That which doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.'"

"'They'? Who is this 'They'? We are 'They'; 'They' are us, Julie," I told her.

Julie laughed. "Okay," she said, "*Linda* says, 'That which doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.'"

The friend I told that small story to shook her head and said, "No." She said, "That which doesn't kill you, erodes you bit by bit. Pieces chip off of you and you start to break apart."

* * *

Google query: “How much force does it take to break a human skull?”

Answers.com says: “About the same amount of force it takes to hit a baseball with a baseball bat.”

* * *

The research writing about brain injury uses terms like “not-quite-set-Jello” and “Silly Putty” in explanations of properties of our brains. This also begins to show how and why brains get injured within the domes of our skulls. Some areas of the brain are stiffer and less flexible—denser—while other areas are flexible and elastic. The skull protects the brain from damage through “its hard unyieldingness,” as it is termed on one internet site. The inside of the frontal bone of the human skull is ridged. A cross-section view looks stony, like weathered ledges of rock. That very unyieldingness injures brains when they slosh against the implacable bones of their domain.

Brain fact: The brain makes up 2% of body weight but uses about 20-25% of your body’s total energy just for basic activity.

* * *

hard *adj.* **2** demanding great physical or mental effort or labor; fatiguing; difficult; specif., *a*) difficult to do *b*) difficult to understand, explain, or answer *c*) difficult to deal with

My closest women friends –I almost can't be fully connected to women who haven't had a kid who has nearly died, been in a psych ward, or jail or prison. Or one who broke their hand punching themselves in the head. Or was sexually molested or in a catastrophic car accident. The friend, of course, should also either have had a horrific divorce or deep marital problems, which often follows time spent with **hard**, as night follows day, and which in and of itself is a new abysmal chapter of **hard**. The friend should have alcoholic parents, or a child with substance abuse problems. These women know about hard; they walk alongside hard and mayhem and chaos with grace and chocolate and wine and, best of all, with each other.

Further definitions of **hard**:

- with strength, violence, or severity
- so as to withstand much wear, use, etc.
- close, near
- with vigor and to the fullest extent, used esp. in indicating direction.

I believe the entire meaning of life is in Webster's College Dictionary—a subtle and pithy literary work. With a giant Webster's I can extract a workable map for living from nearly every page. Yet, I have bemoaned the inadequacy and simplicity of the word "hard" as an adequate descriptor. I've yearned for a slasher of a word, a shocking, catastrophic slap of a word that would shock into electrified awareness all who heard it. Encountering, at last, a written passage which fully and completely expresses all of the possible meaning of "hard" is so satisfying.

There are 5 and $\frac{3}{4}$ inches of definitions of “hard” in my big Websters. So good. Here are people, at last, who understand and articulate every nuance.

“It’s so hard,” we say to each other, my women friends and I. Dick and I discuss it at night, on the couch, the cold glass of our beer bottles pressed against our thighs.

“This is sooooo. Hard.” “I know, this is hard.” We say, “Oh my God. This is so...so...*hard*.” “*So hard*.”

hard just goes on and on:

- energetic and persistent, steady and earnest—yes, the women are. My husband, too.
- containing a relatively high percentage of alcohol Ah yes. Either did it, use it, miss it, enjoy it, had it shoved into our faces and down our throats, bemoan it, despair it, crave it. Fear it.

Immediately following **hard** is **hard-ass**.

Definition of **hard**, also:

- having in solution mineral salts that interfere with the lathering and cleansing properties of soap, corrode metals, etc. : said of water Hard does interfere with cleansing of the soul and of the mind and of the body. Hard can corrode.

Synonyms listed below **hard** include: difficult, arduous, and laborious.

* * *

Dick thinks “hard” is the go-to word, complete in its simplicity.

He says: “There’s no more appropriate one word to say. Everyone knows what it means, it doesn’t need any elaboration. It’s just hard. You could use that word with anyone you’re talking to and it just means it’s very difficult in all kinds of ways. And when you say ‘hard’ it’s almost right that you don’t have any other word to use, it kind of encompasses it all, it’s a universal word. Probably no better word to use. That’s the first word to come to mind. Yep.”

This explanation is the perfect expression of my husband. He is thorough, thoughtful, and takes his own time about every word he says and every move he makes. He is good at cutting through those inches of hard to what is essential; he thinks out loud as he gets there.

* * *

“Hard” sounds so hard. Like hurt and help and hell and heartbreak. Those hard sounds, “aaarrrrrrr. d.”

“Soft,” its opposite, sounds very different...like sweet and silent and slippery and suffocate. Sibilant, like a snake: “sssssssof. T.” “T” is the sound Luke makes when he OCD “spits” in things before he can eat or drink them. Sneaky sounds like soft, too.

Haaaarrrrrd may be harsh, but it is a clean sound like a blow to the head, a quick thrust, a sudden impact. SSSsssssooffft may be smoother, but feels sneaky and slow

and subtle and subterranean. Hard gets in and gets out. Soft can pull you down, maybe forever, like sinking and swallowing water and slipping away. And silencing.

* * *

If you peeped into my bathroom window, you would see a rounded middle-aged woman submerged in a deep tub—motherly parts afloat in the bubbles. You would hear pleasant music coming from the Black Friday discount CD player: *Bird Songs of the Northwoods*, maybe, or *The Wellness Seeker: Celtic Music for Stress Relief* purchased from the stand at Target where you push a button and hear one minute’s worth of music and choose the discount CD. Punch a button and hear red-winged blackbirds, nuthatches, and common loons. Relax to *The Flower of Sweet Strabane* or *Fhir An Bhata*.

You would feel the steam and smell Johnson’s Body Care “Melt Away Stress Lavender & Chamomile Body Wash” billowing from the hot water. You’d see a soft green washcloth draped over her eyes and you might wonder what she was thinking as she lay there not moving a muscle, music flowing, lavender wafting. You imagine she is planning next week’s grocery list, maybe, or thinking fondly of her daughter, away at college. Looking at her, you think you could predict anything that might be trailing through her mind...baking homemade cookies or pondering the merits of rump roast versus hamburger.

Here is what she is thinking about as she lies limp and sweating: she is visualizing weapons of destruction and revenge—kitchen carving knives run amok. She imagines a different ending: long gleaming butcher knives slashing and sawing, flashing and plunging—doing a violence against the soft tissues of her throat. Blood spurting and

spraying, leaping like liquid flames—geysers of blood like fireworks, like Roman fountains—a proclamation, a protest, an alternative leave-taking on her terms and her own time. No small, quiet overdose, this. No. This would be self-slaughter of a magnitude befitting the depths of her protest against a reappearance of “hard.”

* * *

She scrubs the washcloth over her eyes, stands up, and tiredly dries herself. She would never dream of hurting herself beyond the trite violence of too many Doritos. Soft-soft thighs, soft belly, soft follows hard for some of us.

* * *

“Have you ever noticed that when everything in the family is right, life is easier? On the other hand, have you noticed that when things in the family aren’t going well, life seems harder?” *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: New Help for the Family*, Herbert L. Gravitz (164).

Letter to the Parent Support Group

Greetings to the Parent Support Group of children with challenges associated with Bipolar Disorder, ADD/ADHD, OCD, ODD, Anxiety, and related mental illnesses:

Hi, there! I'm a new member of the group and do some free-lance writing. My name is Linda Sirois. An article I recently researched and wrote was about Bay Cliff Health Camp, and the exciting changes they have going on up there. As I spoke with the director, Tim Bennett, I realized that their facility could offer our group an opportunity to set up some kind of event that might be really beneficial to us and our kids.

As we've all experienced, one of the hardest things about the disorders our kids have is the sense of isolation it can cause. These guys don't *appear* to have a disorder, and so people (school personnel, other adults, peers, even us parents!) can either forget or disregard that their mental state can differ from other people's. There is also an up and down cycle to most of these, too, that can be confusing to everyone. The kids feel different, isolated, and without a lot of tools to cope with the anxiety they feel. I know that we parents and the siblings feel isolated too, with our "different" kids and the struggle to advocate for them/explain them/guide them and (let's not forget) trying not to lose it with them ourselves!

Just like this support group, maybe an overnight or weekend retreat at the (beautiful) new Bay Cliff facility would be a great chance for us to connect, support, and get some new tools or education about coping with these kinds of disorders.

Some activity possibilities: PARENTS (moms AND dads) - support, socializing, and education via mental health professionals, special ed. advocates, maybe self-care, relaxation techniques, etc. YOUNGER KIDS – recreation, socializing, maybe some simple anxiety coping skills or helps on peer relationships TEENS – motivational speakers, socializing, anti-anxiety coping skills like meditation or exercise? maybe education about healthy habits for THEM to implement like monitoring caffeine, special substance abuse dangers for teens with their issues, lots of possibilities here SIBLINGS – we all know they fade to the background when things get hairy, how about socializing, recreation, self-care techniques? How about if everyone could come away feeling less isolated?

We need an affiliation with a national non-profit group, which we have: NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness). The program (speakers, events, activities) would need to be developed by us, and Bay Cliff would partner as the "hosts" of the gathering.

We'd need people to staff it (we need lots of supervision for our kids) if we wanted to have separate parent time for speakers, socializing, etc. As to cost, they recommended that we charge families something, even a minimal fee, in order to help people feel more ownership of the gathering and to increase the likelihood that they will indeed attend. Other groups have been able to get funding from drug companies to cover many or most of the costs associated with these kinds of retreats. The gathering for people with hemophilia was apparently mostly paid for by the drug company that makes the medicine they need. With as many of us (kids AND parents) on SSRIs and antidepressants, etc. that should definitely be a possibility for us! I'm wondering if there may be grant possibilities, as well.

Teresa and Jolene thought it would be a good idea to type this up and forward it to all the parents we have addresses for. This way, you could all think it over and decide if this would be something you'd be interested in seeing happen.

* * *

My friend and I showed up one Tuesday evening at the community center and found the door locked. There was a handwritten note, from the former parent facilitators Teresa and Jolene, taped to the door of the room where we met.

To the Parent Support Group of Children with Challenges Associated with Bipolar Disorder, ADD/ADHD, OCD, ODD, Anxiety, and Related Mental Illnesses:

We regret that we will no longer be meeting as a group. Due to no one being able to step forward to schedule and run the support group meetings, and lack of regular attendance, we are

unable to continue as a group. The last parent facilitators have had unforeseen circumstances arise.

Thank you and good luck!

Reading between the lines, I saw that our little group of ten or twelve mothers was disbanding due to stress, exhaustion, and overwhelming sadness.

Herald

The woman hurled herself from a peopled darkness toward the bright electronic buzz, punched the alarm button and regained the warm spot beneath the blankets in practiced sequence.

She focused her eyes on a fat fly crawling on the window pane, then counted two more on the wood trim. She and her husband had built their bedroom together, had built the whole house, years and years of laboring and arguing and the clean rush of creation. She liked to think of his hands touching and bringing to life each detail of the rooms, like the way those blunt hands would move over her body—the smallest beveled edge and hidden curve known only to him; wiry tendons flexing the faded blue ink of the bulldog tattoo on his forearm. Semper Fi. Varnished pine surrounded her: the amber ceiling slanted overhead like a tribal tent. Large double windows faced the bed; the red pines outside wore icy pinpoints of light scattered in their boughs, telegraphing frantically with every toss of wind.

Her eyes fell again on the fly crawling across the window. Its small body was backlit by the bright sky, tiny, hairy threads of legs, opaque wing tips, head down, lumbering. She wondered where the flies came from every day. The windows in the yellow farmhouse were closed, sealed against the winter, caulked—how was it that upon opening her eyes she would see one—sometimes three or four flinging their dark bodies against the glass, or, like now, in the winter, moving slowly across the cold pane. She half remembered hearing that they were called “cluster flies” and that they lived in the

walls, cannibalizing one another's remains and breeding endlessly: entire lives spent populating buildings and crawling over glass peering at the outside world.

She hated their low buzz, ominous as an incoming enemy. She tested the tenor of her day by their presence and number. Portents, predictors. Taking sudden short flights to the corner of the window or suddenly diving to the sill, then working their way back up to the top, the flies were like miniscule fragments of marauding troops advancing by rote, controlled by a mindless machine of destruction, then receding, falling back.

She hated their miniature black corpses on her creamy carpet and belly up on her shellacked window sills; she hated the way they reappeared each day in her bedroom, no matter how many she had swatted or vacuumed the day before. She kept a small fan on at night, partly so she wouldn't wake with a salutatory subtle buzz assaulting her ears.

Each morning their bodies would be outlined against the backdrop of blue or gray or, like today, white. The small tick tick tick and their whispering drone sounded restless on sunny days, seeking in vain the sky and the treetops beyond the window. On other days the flies made a slow, turgid advance to the flecked golden wood—where the woman would try to watch all the knots at once, boneless as a coiled and camouflaged tigress, eyeing prey from beneath the sheets.

She lay on her back, fleecy blankets pulled tight under her chin, patchwork squares aligned with the edges of the big bed, and her eyes flicked back and forth from the fly on the wood—or was that a knot?—to the slow fly on the glass. Weren't there three before? Where was the other one? She moved her head a little and thought she spotted it on the glass, camouflaged by the gesticulating pine branches beyond.

The woman climbed out of bed, pulled on her blue robe and reached for the fly swatter.

There were only two. She walked toward the stairs, pausing to tap the dead flies off the end of the swatter, bare feet sliding across the chilly hardwood, and her mind moved ahead to whether she would have French vanilla roast or Folger's; she could do half and half in the coffeemaker, although she really only liked plain coffee in the mornings. Of course, if she made the French vanilla, she could use up that last little bit of the Vanilla Bliss creamer she had bought for her sister's visit. She liked the way the two vanillas would go together—she never mixed flavors like Caramel Pecan Macchiato with hazelnut coffee, or, worse, chocolate mint, as her sister did. Why was she even thinking about flavored coffee? Her husband usually—okay, always—set the coffee pot for her before he left for work. Had done so for twenty years, but every morning she checked it before she turned it on. She lifted the lid and checked to see if the basket held a filter and dark grains of coffee. She checked the water level and sometimes even dipped her finger into the reservoir to make sure. Lately, he had even taken to leaving a napkin on the counter, with a spoon sitting on top to stir the pinch of sugar into her cup and swirl the pale lines of creamer into the perfect shade of café au lait.

The fly crawled slowly from behind the frame of another window and hummed briefly against the pane.

Letter

Written by Luke sometime while he was still in high school—10th or 11th grade, left when he took off for the night on the four-wheeler without permission

Mom & Dad & Sadie you will never understand how much I love you, but I feel that I have been embarrassed and also I think my life is Fucked. I am so sorry for all the shit I have put you through and all the shit I will still put you through. But you must look at it from my position a kid with ocd, everyday being annoyed and pissed off being told too do stuff that doesn't make sence and that will just get you in trouble. And starting fights within the household and making our family a Living hell. Also I feel I have embarrassed you guys (My family) because of the things that I have done to annoy & put you guys through like not doing good in school having ocd wasting your money for an illness, not cooperating, alway's getting in trouble, stealing, chewing, drinking, and not obeying your rules or anyone else's. And Sadie I am sorry for putting you in the position that I have, right in the middle of a fighting family, & not having a nice cool brother to look up to. But I will end this letter by saying I need some alone time and am going to do so but don't worry about me I will be back, I am sorry for everything Mom, Dad, my family, friends, and Sadie, I love you and all that stuff but I need to do this Sorry.

Touch

touch (transitive verb) to put the hand, the finger, or some other part of the body on, so as to feel to lay the hand on, supposedly to affect a cure to handle roughly or molest to hurt the feelings of; pain

touch (noun) 1 a touching or being touched 2 the sense by which physical objects are felt; tactile sense 3 a sensation caused by touching, esp. one that is characteristic of a particular substance or texture; tactile quality; feel 4 a mental capacity analogous to the sense of touch; mental or moral sensitivity 5 a special or characteristic quality, skill, or manner 6 an effect of being touched; specif., a mark, impression, etc. left by touching 8 contact or communication

Webster's lists 40 different ways of interpreting "touch."

* * *

For a whole year, that year of bad, Luke had a rule that we couldn't touch him.

We could not touch him. Not in any of Webster's 40 ways, not in any of our accustomed ways, not in love, not in jest, not in reassurance, not in "Okay, Buster, enough of this."

Not one of us. Not at all.

* * *

At first, I tried to push through it, jolly him out of it, make light of his dictates.

This was a boy who had loved to snuggle and sit close, to hop in our bed in the mornings with his sister and squirm around and laugh and be tickled. We had taught our kids early about "bad touch" and "good touch" and encouraged them to be the bosses of their own bodies. I knew about bad touches but I couldn't have imagined that my touches of Luke could be consigned to that category.

I would insist—the mother's prerogative—playfully grab him and give him a quick hug or touch his head in passing: "Oh, c'mon," I'd tease. "Let me give you a hug."

But his reaction was so extreme—he would shriek or thrash and glare hatred at me—that I quickly stopped all attempts at physical contact, astonished. Shocked. It became clear to us that he wasn't being coy or boyishly reluctant but was deadly serious that he didn't want any touch, at all. The smallest shoulder pat would elicit a sharp hiss and drawing in of his torso—Dick and I joked, bleakly, that he responded like a vampire sprinkled with holy water. It was clear that he felt violated, even (accosted) horrified, by our caresses. The OCD voices were telling him vile things about his family or about touch and contamination, and we couldn't reach him and he couldn't and wouldn't articulate what was going on in his head.

So we stopped. I, we, couldn't kiss him, hug him, or touch him for a year.

* * *

“Touching Compulsions. The urge to touch things in special or ritualistic ways to get either a feeling of having done it ‘just right,’ or else to get some kind of magical control” (*Obsessive Compulsive Disorders: A Complete Guide to Getting Well and Staying Well*, 403).

* * *

Interesting how deep seated was my mother's instinct to help or heal with a touch. From birth, from before birth when we rest our hands on our huge bellies and caress the bump, as soon as they emerge, we touch and hold, bundle and snuggle and smooth—it's like magic how the right touch—your touch—can soothe or heal, reassure or calm. And here was my eleven year old boy, a toucher from birth, going through something horrible in his head and I wasn't allowed to work my fall-back motherly magic.

It was weird how starved I became for him. My skin literally hungered to touch his skin—the casual arm thrown around his shoulder, the quick squeeze or kiss on the cheek, the hand, my hand, on top of his head were all denied me. My pores sought the reassurance of his pores, that cellular communication flesh to flesh: “Are you okay?” “I’m here.” “I love you.” “It will be alright.”

I realized that along with the tactile sense of his skin and the bony reassurance of his shoulders, I missed the smell of him. When we hug or kiss our children, we duck in for the brief scent of their hair, their skin, their breath: sweaty or shampoo sweet, salty or sticky or morning-breath, chocolate-y or unbathed—all aromatic and familiar. Because they are beloved in all of their forms, we scent them like four-legged mothers in the wild to check on their well-being and to get our daily dose of their entirety. I would press my cheek to his forehead to gauge a fever, I could smell on his breath when he was ill, his hot, salty hair told me he was happily playing and running around with the other kids. I was bereft of a significant portion of my motherly repertoire of mutual reassurance. I couldn’t get my whole-body fix of him.

* * *

We took turns getting lost in the hurt of our child so vehemently rejecting us and of the resulting sense of helplessness we felt as we watched Luke descend into psychosis: Dick with his head bowed, tears rolling down to disappear in his gray beard; me: hands over my eyes, hiding, weeping, cursing regularly and intermittently. (I was going to say “as in a bad caricature of the often-OCD-related disorder of Tourette’s Syndrome”; see how we do that? Cope with our kid’s mental illness and psychosis by joking about having another mental illness? How bad is that? Answer: bad. Adult Luke has said,

“Mom. People who say things like ‘Oh, I’m so OCD.’ I just go, ‘Yeah.’ And I think ‘I hope you never know what it’s like all day and all night, every day.’”)

Sadie abruptly lost the big brother who designed their play, who made treasure hunts for her, who, when he found out the truth about Santa, pretended to Sadie that he had caught a glimpse of an elf on Christmas Eve.

She turned away from her own pain and sense of rejection by turning toward friends; we felt like we threw her, the baby, up onto the beach into the waiting arms of Kim and Linda and their families while Luke, Dick, and I thrashed in the roiling waves together. We would not leave him, but we ran the risk of Sadie going down with us unless we found her a safe place out of the storm. Many times that year and subsequent years, I would call Kim or Linda and say, “Can Sadie be with your family today? Something’s going on down here and it would be better for her to be away—it’s bad.” And they would say, “Of course! She can just be with us, we aren’t sure what we’re doing yet, but she can just go along with whatever we do.” I would cry in gratitude that they would agree to foster-mother my daughter when we had chaos swirling around here.

I bought them flowers when Sadie graduated from high school (Linda backed away from the proffered basket and shook her head: “No. No. You’re going to get me crying”; Kim threw her wiry arms around me and laughed and hugged me hard as tears welled in her eyes.) I tried to thank them for mothering her when I could not.

* * *

Other parents, other mothers have to go without the touch of their child for a year, for longer, forever. I can only speak to the experience of having our son in front of us,

daily, watching him lose touch with the reality outside his head, and being as shut off from him as if he were displayed under a glass case. As Luke changed, our humor became darker and darker as we tried to adjust to a new normal that changed almost daily; we became weird, freakish, really, as we kept trying to find moments of humor to share. Strange as a son who got thinner and thinner, wore only one set of rank black clothes, couldn't leave one room without jumping and touching door jams and performing intricate rituals, wouldn't get his hair cut or washed, but instead wore it spiked with a heavy coat of gel, scalp showing in the front center of his head from pulling his own hair out, idly, while watching TV or sitting in the car, which the spikes hid, sometimes, eyelashes gone, eyebrows partially gone, sometimes the black do-rag compressed around his head, pulled down low onto his eyelids on some days, tightly, perhaps holding him together.

Our lowest point, maybe: Me, sobbing, voice rising in hysteria, "What are we going to do?" Dick, "Don't worry. If it gets bad enough, I'll move to the camp with him. I'll take care of him and maybe put a sign out on the highway and charge admission."

The Boy with the Silent Voice Speaks

Last night Luke slept on the couch in our living room. The couch is a huge cushy thing that wraps around the corner and has a chaise attached. Luke keeps sheets and a too-short quilt in the footstool that opens up for storage; we come downstairs to find his long frame in an “L” shape, sleeping hard, size 13 feet uncovered, watch and cell phone and empty cups and plates on the table next to him. The TV remote is always nearby. He comes unexpectedly, early in the morning or very late at night.

I wandered in around noon with a cup of coffee and found he was sitting up in a twist of sheets. We exchanged a few words as he stretched and headed for the coffeemaker.

“Mom, do you care if I finish off this pot?”

“Nope, you go right ahead.”

I could hear him in the kitchen, the clink of the metal sugar bowl as he up-ended it over his coffee, the opening of the refrigerator door as he grabbed the half and half. He walked back toward the couch, moving carefully with his too-full mug and settled back among the pillows; he often reminds me of my brothers at that age—tall and lean, chain hanging onto the dark chest hair that the fair men in my family would have killed for. They share that sleek young male animal vibe: all tawny shoulders and long calves as, first my brothers and now my son, have moved around their homes in sweatpants or boxers, shirtless, careless in their splendor. Their twenty-year-old unshaven faces and tousled hair gives them a dangerous bedroom look that refutes the morning teasing of sisters and bowls of Lucky Charms. The boy and the man seem to occupy equal interior

and external space; the contradictions are fascinating to watch as they transition into manhood. It is also confusing as we parent Lucas: what ideas and points of view are “very young man” and what parts are OCD-driven; what parts stem from the damage done by blows to the frontal lobes? Do each of these origins call for different responses from us, or the same response?

Lucas had that look that meant he was really *there* that morning, the essential Luke, attentive, seeing me and feeling talkative. His eyes were more blue than gray, clear and focused under his dark brows.

“Mom, you know that most of the time people talk to me, it’s not really me. Most of the time it’s like the OCD that’s talking. It’s only sometimes, like late at night when we talk that it’s really me.”

“I think I knew that, Luke. I can see when it’s really you and I feel happy when you just drop the defenses and show up.”

I sank back into the rocking chair. When he feels quiet and comfortable, just the two of us alone, we have our best connections. I decided to take this opportunity to sound him out again about writing about him: “If I’m going to do a writing project about you then I will have to commit to it shortly. I guess I need to ask you again how you feel about that and if it would be okay for me to write about you.”

“Do you mean the book about me having OCD?”

“Yes, but more—I wanted to write about you starting out with OCD and then getting a brain injury. I want to write about you having a brain injury. I want to help other people who are going through the same thing.”

“I don’t care, I’m fine with it. Would you change my name?”

“I don’t know, if that would make you more comfortable, we could do that. How about ‘Marcus’? My cousin who died, Mark, you know, my favorite cousin. And I’ve used that name for you before, I don’t know, it works for me: Lucas-Marcus. Luke-Marc.”

“Yeah, that’d work. Do you have a name for it yet?”

“You mean for the book?”

“Yeah.”

“No. Not yet.”

“I have a name.”

“What are you thinking?”

“*The Boy with the Silent Voice*. Because you know, I kept trying to tell people things about what was going on with me, you know, and nobody ever listened. Even now, like when I tried to sign up for unemployment, they’d say just fill this out and do this, and then do that. And I’m like, ‘I don’t understand’ and they’re like ‘Well I told you what to do’ and I’d start to get mad because I couldn’t understand it and they wouldn’t help me. And then they’d think I was an asshole. So I just said ‘Screw it’ and gave up. Thank God I’m working now or I’d be so messed up.”

“Yeah, and that’s pretty much the defense mechanism you developed to cover up and so people wouldn’t think you were dumb.”

“Yeah. Even now it’s really hard, you know? Like sometimes I get things mixed around in my head and someone will say something or ask me something and I literally can’t think of the words, the right words, and I know they’re waiting and I’ll open my mouth and something totally stupid will come out and they’ll like look at me and go ‘What?’ and I’ll feel like an idiot.” He shoved at a pillow.

“And having OCD and a fucked up brain makes it even more hard because I have a hard enough time doing stuff with voices in my head telling me what to do and then trying to make connections. . . it’s really hard.”

“I totally believe you, Luke. Damn, too bad the brain injury didn’t zap the voices and make them hard to remember, hey? That’d work, wouldn’t it?”

We laughed a little.

“I mean, thank God for roommates and all that because if I had to remember the bills myself I’d really be messed up. I try to remember shit and the voices are going on in my head on top of that and it’s hard. It’s noisy in there, like. And I forget a lot of stuff.”

“Some of us really get it, Luke. We really get how hard it all is for you and we’re really really proud of how hard you work to get along and do things. You’re fiercely independent and we’re so proud of you. Dad and I and some others, too. Nancy. Aunt Teresa. Some people get it, honey.”

He nodded as I rocked slowly, sipping the last of my coffee.

“And this is kind of sick to say, but it’s true. . .I’m thankful you’re so handsome because it makes life easier for you. If you were messed up looking or looked like Mr. Potato Head your life would be much harder.”

“Yeah, I know it. Life *is* easier for good looking people. But it’s also kind of a bad thing because girls look at me and think just because I look good and I’m tall and shit that I’ve got all the good stuff: smart and a good brain and successful and all that. Then they come up to me and I’m like not what they want.”

We looked at each other; I nodded slowly then turned my eyes to the blooming apple trees outside the patio doors. Robins circled and swooped as they scavenged materials for their nest-building. I leaned forward in my rocking chair as we went back to talking about the book.

“I want to tell people about how it is, Luke. There’s something called ‘stigma’ that means a feeling of like being ashamed. Like you should be ashamed of how you are or that we should be ashamed of how you are. As if you could help it! And as if it’s not the same as having diabetes or cancer or a heart murmur.”

“Well, I’m not ashamed. I’m just this way and that’s it. Everyone who knows me knows about my OCD—even in school I just talked about it.”

“I know, honey, and I admire that you just accept how you are. We’ve tried to follow your lead in that and in being as comfortable talking about it as you are. Some people seem to think that people with disordered brains should be ashamed and hide it. I think that’s bullshit because that just creates more problems and pain for them.”

“Yeah, sometimes. But that’s why I got so nuts about my back giving me problems because like first my brain and then the rest of me. The fuck am I supposed to do? How do I take care of myself?”

“I know.” I rocked a little faster in my chair, then caught myself and slowed back down.

“So Mom, I still want to try boxing. You know how you’re born to write or go to school? Well, I think I’m born to box.”

“What? Oh my God, Luke. We’ve talked about this. Like you need more blows to the frontal lobes—honey, no. Please.”

I got up and walked into the kitchen. Pulling down the can of coffee and the filters, I began to fill the coffee carafe. “Want some more?”

“C’mon Mom, would you come to watch me?”

“Oh, *hell* no.”

Laughing. “C’mon.”

“Honey, I beg of you, no.”

“I’m built for it, wide shoulders and I’m tall. And I’ve got long arms.”

“Yeah, and you’re quick. But no. It’s all about the repeated blows to the face—
bonk! bonk! Bonk! Damn, Luke, by the time you get your moves down...”

“I’ll be ducking, I’ll get good at dodging around...”

“Yeah, but how much more damage might be done before you get good? You don’t want that.”

“Yeah. When they show some of these old boxers on TV, they have to have like subtitles on there so you can understand what they’re saying.” Laughs.

“God.”

“I’m not afraid to die. Some people are but I’m not.”

“Yeah, I get that. Besides, I believe that when you die, you go to God. So.”

“Yeah, I believe that too, I guess. But God owes me one so I’m sure I’ll get there.”

“God doesn’t owe you that. That’s all your choice, where you end up. The thing is to keep your soul good. Keep it sweet.”

“Yeah.”

“Yours is good now. If something happened, you’d go straight to God. I believe that with all my heart.”

“Yeah. Did I tell you what happened at work the other day? I had a close call. Did Dad tell you?” He jumped up from the couch and opened the cabinet where we keep the cereal.

“No. God, no. Dad knows not to tell me.” I filled my U.P. Catholic Credit Union mug, added a pinch of sugar and half and half. “Do you want the milk?”

“Yeah, thank you. Well, we were pulling on a rope and trying to pull this big tree down. It was old and dead and got hung up in some branches in another tree. And we pull, then we run. Fast. So we were pulling and I guess Austin ran—we stand in a line—and I didn’t run, I just kept pulling because it was hung up in some other branches. And then it broke and I tried to run but I couldn’t get out fast enough. And the tree fell and I ended up in the fork between two big branches when it came down. It was on each side of me about this far away from me. The helmet wouldn’t have helped me.” He laughed a little.

“God, Luke.” I stirred my coffee, the spoon clanking against the ceramic. “I swear you have legions of guardian angels, a whole platoon or regiment of them that follow you around. They say ‘Oh Christ, why’d he have to take a job with a tree service company? Why does he have to be their climber?’ and ‘Oh shit, where’s he going now? Number 7 and number 12, after him quick!’ There are only half the angels on duty at a time because the other half need to go to a rest home to recover. There’s a whole bunch of them there from the tree incident last week. They lay like this, with their arm across their eyes and take naps. And they moan in their sleep.”

“Yeah,” laughing again.

“That’s what I pray, you know. That I can align my will with God’s where you’re concerned. That I can be okay with whatever happens with you, that I can handle it okay. It’s hard, but it’s the only way I can handle just being here for you. Being your mom. I know that God loves you even more than we do and has a plan for you. But so far, what the hell, God? Right?”

“Yeah, right,” shaking his head. “But I have been really mad at God. I’m pissed that he’s done these things or let this shit happen to me. He owes me a good one.”

“Yeah, I get that, Luke. Just don’t get stuck in the anger. . .”

“I’m not. I’m not stuck there really, but I do still think He owes me a break.” He was up and moving around the kitchen, changing focus, moving on to pouring cereal, finding what else looked good in the refrigerator.

“I understand. I was really mad at God for a long, long time, too. It’s good to try to move past it and to see the good things that have been given, too.”

“Huh. Yeah.”

“So Luke. It’d be really cool if your voice could be in the book too, just like this, when we talk and you tell me what it feels like for you. Adding your voice would be great. It’s always stronger to hear the person that things are happening to.”

“Yeah, that’d be okay.”

“So maybe this summer when I start to write, we could just meet sometimes and talk and you could tell me what you want and I could, like, take notes? Then we could all understand things better.”

He looked at me with those changeable eyes. “Yeah, okay.”

Alternate Ending #2: The Quick Fix

Traffic is rushing past the intersection of the shopping mall and Best Buy. The middle-aged woman is preparing to pull out onto the highway across several lanes of traffic. She is distracted, thinking about her son. She is so busy trying to figure out how to fix him that she pulls her Ford Escape into the oncoming lanes too soon and is hit by a speeding Dodge Ram. The last thing she sees is an eye-full of her favorite color as the red Boss snowplow mounted on the front of the truck jackhammers particles of her driver's door deep into her body, piercing her tired womb, ending her nervous stomach and her acid indigestion, melding molecules of flesh, paint, vinyl, and metal for all eternity or until she is reconfigured by cremation six days later.

She was busy trying to fix him. Then she did.

But that would be too easy.

Room

room 1 space, esp. enough space, to contain something or in which to do something **2** suitable scope or opportunity **3** a space within a building separated from other similar spaces by walls or partitions

2012

Opening the door to his room is opening a tomb—tattered school papers strewn on the floor; scattered *Off-Road* magazines with the covers torn off; spent Bic lighters; old birthday cards: “*For a Special Son*” and “**HEY, NEPHEW! IT’S YOUR BIRTHDAY!**”; fly specked windows. Discarded discs “Luke’s Fav Songs” and “Tunes for Luke” cut by his cousin for Christmas gifts, PlayStation game covers, cracked cassette cases. Dust motes drifting. Empty cardboard box, one side crushed, flaps gaping wide. Over all, a light dusting of dead flies like snowflakes, on their sides, on their backs, weightless husks, wiry legs thrust upward, wings disintegrating to dust at a touch.

The room of his childhood—Lucas has not spent one night in this room since he moved out two years ago. When he comes back home, he sleeps on the couch—raiding the linen cabinet and grabbing a blanket or some sheets to spread in his certain way across the seat and back cushions. I think I understand. The room is haunted.

* * *

1999

His father takes particular pleasure in crafting the details of the bedroom for eight-year-old Lucas. This would be Luke’s first bedroom of his own. They discussed how much wood to add, and where, busy with tape measures, Luke with a Menards nail

pouch tied twice around his waist, work cap cocked on his head at the same angle as his father's, pencil falling from behind his ear, following Dick, crouched, mumbling numbers to themselves.

We salvaged 70 year old tongue and groove pine from the old Queen City Motel in Manistique, just before they demolished it, spending 15 hours of a January day with pry bars and claw hammers, loading up a borrowed trailer with paneled wooden doors, bathroom hardware, a small mountain of gleaming pine boards. The amber depths of the varnished paneling glowed as wainscoting on one wall of Luke's room; his father fashioned trim for the windows and closets from the same wood. His bedroom was the warmest room in the house, and the smallest. "Snuggery," was one of Luke's favorite words when he was little, always seeking out small enclosed nooks and snugly spots to curl up, grinning, shoulders hugging his ears in pleasure. His windows face west, overlooking the driveway and the workshop and the garage—Luke's places. He chose his favorite blue for the remaining walls, and before I began painting the primed drywall, I had an idea.

"Luke, Sadie, come in here," I called. They thumped up the wooden stairs and slid into the bedroom on the polished floor, laughing and pushing each other. "Let's paint your shadows on the walls of your rooms before I paint all the walls." They looked at me. "I can shine this light at you and it will make your shadow appear on the wall and I can outline it." Wouldn't that be fun?

* * *

2012

The air is stale, shut up, smelling of boy, of must, of dirty socks, of moldy inches of beer in bottles hidden in closet corners, stubbed cigarette butts and rolling papers and stale crumbs of illicit Copenhagen. When I repainted it five years ago, Luke was 15. We wanted to help him get organized and wipe out that first bad storm of scarring that he and the blue walls had endured. To start over. We were big on starting over. When he was small, after a rough morning of trying to get him to comply—tempers stretched on both sides—he and I would be exhausted. I would remember: “Hey honey, let’s just take time-outs. Mom time-out and Luke time-out and then let’s hug and start over, okay?” His big eyes would light up. “Okay. Let’s start over.” And we would hug and go on.

I asked him about color and he said “Black.” (“Ask your teen what he or she wants in a bedroom. You’ll probably hear privacy first, followed by preferences for colors and phone service—hopefully a desire for storage and study areas” ~ *Decorating Kids’ Rooms: Nurseries to Teen Retreats* 79). I thought of him closed up in his black room, carving up the walls, carving up himself. I imagined the OCD voices loosed in the darkness.

And I said, “Oh, how about gray? Or dark green? Camo?” I could paint the rest dark green and do one camouflage accent wall with some brown and black and the green. Maybe we could do it together. He could paint as erratically as he wanted and it would be fine. Drips would be fine. Splatter would be fine.

“You could stand up against the camouflage wall and we couldn’t find you.” A flash of his unhappy 200 pound self, face round from psychotropic meds, eyelashes gone, blue eyes like dimmed headlights in his tanned face, superimposed on the exuberant outline beneath the painted layers.

“Camo,” he said.

* * *

In 2007, when Lucas was a high school freshman, we were still pretty sure we could reinvent him. Fix him. Help him to overcome whatever this was; it was just a matter of putting enough energy and creativity into the task.

It was becoming clear around this time that OCD was less of a problem for him than the other troubling characteristics he was displaying: disinhibition, missed social cues. Forgetfulness. Disorganization. Inability to follow through. Intermittent confusion. Impulse control. As he passed from middle school and stabilized after the year of bad, he seemed to be missing some of the steps that his peers were getting. We worried that he had never been properly or fully diagnosed. We knew that what psychologists and social workers had begun to label as oppositional and behavioral choices that stemmed from a deep well of anger, were not consistent with the boy we saw who was honestly bewildered by his behavior, and learning to cover by acting like he just didn’t care. Luke just wasn’t an angry person; we more often saw anxiety than aggression. We also saw him try hard and be completely unable to follow through, no matter what reward or privilege he was working toward. That’s when we knew there was something going on in his head besides the OCD. But what?

“He’s taken up by the OCD,” the school psychologist assured us when we asked about Asperger’s syndrome or ADHD, or some other emerging disorder that would account for why Luke couldn’t keep even simple lists of steps in his head, or kept losing his school books, missing assignments, opening people’s desk drawers, touching what shouldn’t be touched. Needing punch lines of jokes explained. “It’s not anything else. I’m sure it’s all due to the OCD.”

* * *

2007

I can’t believe what I’m finding as I empty his room to scrub and prep for painting. The walls are stabbed in small stabs. Tentative, narrow as small pocket knife blades, nearly apologetic or experimental. Behind the bed are stabs in the walls, in the ceiling above his loft bed, beneath posters. Under the dresser, in closet corners are knives. Lighters. Two empty beer bottles, the brand his father drinks. All the things I didn’t want to know. I would have rather found porn; I would rather have imagined my son lying in bed jacking off than stabbing his walls. Flicking lighters to heat up metal objects with which to brand himself. Continuing the family tradition of drinking, alone, hidden away.

With Luke’s OCD requirements, we had a kind of unspoken deal that his room was his. I darted in occasionally to vacuum around the piles of things on the floor and help him change his sheets. It’s hard to explain now. We were so necessarily intertwined in his business then, in his thoughts and in his school problems and trying to wake him up when the meds made it so difficult to wake up and the OCD made it so hard to go to sleep and with his psychologist appointments and even with his bowels because, again, of the

side effects of the medicines it seemed best for him to be on lest he descend back into psychosis like during the bad year. With all of that intrusion into every boundary and bit of privacy that Luke didn't have, it seemed indecent to regularly invade his room, too. I tried to respect the one area of space, of privacy that seemed the least dangerous to him — barring occasional sweeps for pocket knives and lighters, those pubescent weapons of mass destruction. Like cluster flies, knives and lighters always found their way back in.

* * *

2012

I want to use the space that the emptiness of this room takes up in my head. Sadie will graduate from high school soon and I feel ready, two years after Luke has left home, to exorcise all that this bedroom represents. This was Luke's battleground; seat of power struggles, hidden place of rituals where, alone, he sought to appease the unappeasable, the unseen and the un-seeable.

At his doorway, parents say: "Luke! Why are you still up? You have to wake up in six hours—you're not going to be able to get up in the morning."

In his head, OCD says: "If you don't say the 'Our Father' for 20 minutes, a) you won't have any friends because they will hate you; b) you will make your father die tomorrow in his truck; c) you will be fat."

At his doorway, parents say: "I mean it. Turn that light off. Now." Interrupted the 'Our Father.' Now he has to start all over again. He needs the light on to see the clock.

In his head, OCD says: “Jump!” “No,” Luke whispers. “Jump, now.” No, Dad’s going to be mad. “Jump, three more times.”

Through the wall: “Luke, dammit! I’ve told you and told you to quit that jumping. You’re banging up against the wall and I have to get to sleep. I have to get up and drive tomorrow and I’m only going to get five hours of sleep as it is.”

At his doorway, parents: “Luke! Get up! You have school today/work today/welding class today/church/doctor’s appointment!”

Luke sleeps. The voices sleep, too.

At his doorway, parents: “Luke! Get up! You only have seven minutes until the bus comes! Noow!”

In his head, OCD. Or is it God? says: “I am so disappointed in you. You will go to hell. You are a bad boy. Bad.”

At his doorway, parents: “Get. Up. Now. Oh my god, I hate this!” the sound of feet turning away, pounding down the stairs in anger, in disappointment, in frustration, in fear.

* * *

There are all of these ghost children wandering around and running around and dancing away from us while we raise and love and worry about the bodies they left behind. Their physical bodies we (try) to help with their homework and (try) to tend and care for and I say try because these children are so difficult to care for because they are

hurt in some way. Not normal, “norms,” as they say in disability literature. Not the ghost children that we grieve.

These actual children who we live with and love and care for are not the children we might have had or would have had if not for baseball bats or car accidents or chemical imbalances or misplaced chromosomes or umbilical cords twined around necks or lack of oxygen or a hundred different things. A thousand different things.

* * *

Uneasy spirit—tending it, cleaning it, loving it and putting it to rest. I’ve stopped running from it.

Enshrined. Pain enshrined—I don’t want to do that. The pain and scars are still there but no longer the focal point. Concealing? No. Just reclaiming the space for happier things—better energy—creating, sewing, painting, sunshine, order. Pain excised, exorcised.

* * *

Grieving the ghost children is tricky because the actual children are alive, and, after all, is that not supposed to be the desired state? At any cost? I think it may be even worse—harder—when they are alive because isn’t there a tiny part of our minds that is so full of fear for their futures, and fear of when we will be gone and who will be there for our children then? That can imagine the relief that would be there if the children had died. Or would die. Because we are so afraid of what will happen to them in this life, we’d feel some measure of comfort if they were in the next life, those of us who believe in an afterlife with our version of God. Our children would be welcomed, embraced,

understood, if biblical tales are to be believed. Even those of us who don't believe in an afterlife, even those parents, for these, at least the struggle would be over. Finished Resolved in some way. We would know how it ends.

* * *

2012

The knife scars are larger this time around. Some are long and evil-looking slices, some blunt thrusts. There are no apologies. One hidden hole, so violently punched by that 17-year-old fist that the nails popped for a six inch radius surrounding the empty space, is ringed with crumbs of broken drywall. I, had at some point, taped a snowmobile poster over that spot. Luke's blow didn't demolish the ghostly outline; it landed slightly to the left and higher, although there's a good chance it grazed the small, sturdy, out-flung fingers.

Some of the marks are dots: where thumb tacks and nails grabbed from the plastic drawers on the basement workbench held his baseball cap collection, posters, a walking stick his Papa made for him when he was four, and broken antlers, signs of Luke's forays into home decorating.

One of Luke's obsessions was the idea that someone would enter our house while he was in his room, asleep, and attack us. Hence, the knives and his desperate need to feel he had protection. As with many of his obsessions, he didn't share this with us until later and was incredibly resistant to discussing the things that he knew wouldn't make sense to us, so we couldn't reassure him. And I don't know that reassurance would have helped; we just kept removing knives that we found and hid them in the barn and in

boxes shoved under benches in the basement because it seemed somehow dangerous to throw them in the trash. And we didn't know where they came from, which was also disturbing. As Bob, one of the good-guy psychologists, used to say, "People, if you come up against something he's saying or doing that doesn't make any sense to you... THAT is why it's called mental illness." Luke had also rigged up a homemade locking device involving large nails and cables that pierced and scarred the decades old wood surrounding his door. We made him remove it.

The old 1970s La-Z-Boy recliner that he hauled in from our old camp has arms that say "crime of passion." Stuffing bleeds from holes slashed down to the wood. The walls seem to have trails of tears running down them like the silent weeping of The Virgin of Medjugore, but the tears come from his lips: saliva spat upon the walls, one of his most persistent and trouble-causing compulsions. The OCD tells him that spitting is a kind of cleansing or sanitizing or co-opting exercise that he must engage in. He has often confined it to an empty cup or can or bottle, much like tobacco chewers spit into a container, but he is subject to OCD's rules and when I pulled his bed out, tried to peel posters off of his walls, I found them glued on with spittle. The north and south walls were the worst, mutely testifying to Luke's uneasy night rituals and watchfulness while his father and I and his sister slept unaware on the other side of the walls flanking him.

I begin scrubbing, and then scraping, the walls, working on a segment where the large white snowmobile poster is adhered like wallpaper over the fist hole. What is in his saliva? It seems to have the bonding power of construction adhesive—don't birds fashion stout nests using saliva to bind the mud and twigs? I dipped, wrung, scrubbed, the suburban aromatherapy of Mr. Clean replacing the odors of neglect.

As unpleasant as this sounds, I am calm as I begin. I feel patient, purposeful, sorrowful, like doing this is a kind of a privilege, like a penance, a *mea culpa* from the years when we didn't know what was going on with him, didn't know about the TBI and the ways it would compromise and confuse him. Funny that the most stubborn traces that cling are white bits from the snowmobile racing poster—he loves speed and motion—says they stop the voices in his head. “You know how reading kind of helps you escape, feel better?” Luke explains to me. “That’s what riding does for me.”

I wash, scrub, the trails of spittle and nameless crusted splotches, remnants of duct tape, unspeakable paths and puddles (spilled? thrown?) of his assault on this room and I feel, I swear, like I'm bathing the body of my dead son—the one who didn't make it. I see the long scars on his arms, the gouges and purpled lines, circles and ovals, dark and shocking. “Mom,” he'd tell me. “I'm fine.” Tenderly, as in a wake, lingering over the scars and wounds on the walls and wiping them, not sickened by them, grieving them and allowing all that realization that our best wasn't good enough, that the systems had failed him,

Like a stubborn shrine determined to catch the attention of those who would turn their faces away; the long traces couldn't be scrubbed away.

* * *

So these ghost children are the dream, the beings our beloved children would have been were it not for...*that*.

* * *

This is all starting to sound a bit like *Mothers Who Kill Their Children*, a darkly fascinating book that I read sometime before Luke became so sick. Before his wiring went crazy with the blows to his head and before he would tell us all, every day, “You know I hate you.” “You know I hate you all.” His OCD was complicated by the baseball bat to his frontal lobes and his inner workings went very, very dark for about a year.

I grabbed *Mothers Who Kill Their Children* off the New Book shelf at the library, and took it home with a pile of gardening books and travel books. I admit to being curious. Why *did* mothers kill their children? Why didn't we all kill our children?

One day the kids were fighting a little and being noisy and fractious in the kitchen as I sprawled on the couch reading.

“Hey you two,” I raised my voice. “Come here.” They both came in the room, looking at me with their father's big eyes, justified and defensive.

“Knock it off,” I told them. Then I held the book up so they could see the title. “Or else,” I said. They stared for a minute, reading the cover, then collapsed against each other, giggling. “I mean it,” I told them. “Settle down.” They ricocheted out of the room snickering and bumping up against each other.

“Hey Sadie, Mom's gonna kill you...”

“Luuke!”

* * *

2012

I like to turn up the music when I scrub and spackle and paint the interminable surfaces of our farmhouse. Lone Star's *Already There*. Favorite Hits of the 70s. Norah Jones and Magic 97 and Alison Kraus and the Beatles. *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be*. When I first heard songs like "Maxwell's Silver Hammer," and "The Long and Winding Road" in middle school, I couldn't have imagined any of this.

* * *

The world is busy telling us how much we have to be thankful for: that our children aren't worse off, that there are other children worse off (how is that comforting?) and that our children are here, aren't they? Still here? And that we should count our blessings and look for the rainbows and read all the articles in the magazines that tell of the triumphant overcoming of little Johnny who wouldn't let (fill in the blank) get him down, or young Mary who overcame (fill in the blank) and competed in The Big Game. And all the time it's like a splintery stick hitting you, the parent, over the head that you dare to grieve, still, the losses. The little stick says: whack "What's the matter with you?" whack "Just get over it" whack "Move on, get a life, they haven't died, have they?" And the world allows mothers who have lost their children to actual death, all manner of grief and mourning and few would think to tell them about the rainbows and how other people have it worse and how they need to get over it. The world doesn't tell them how lucky they are. Or how lucky their child is.

* * *

2012

Dick looked at the walls in Luke's room yesterday, as I spackled and sanded. "Why don't you sand this more? Can't you smooth this out?" he asked.

I could probably smooth some of this one out, but then what about this one? And this one? Scars pepper the dark walls. Places Luke had stuck knife blades in and I made him spackle and paint them ("When a child's actions cause physical damage, the consequence should include making good the damages...perhaps he can repair the damages himself: replaster the wall, recane the chair" ~ *Family Rules: Raising Responsible Children* 67). I will smooth them as well as I can but some scars can't be covered. Like the outline of his grandpa's Air Force pilot wings branded into Luke's upper arm. The purple circles where he heated the metal base of a shotgun shell with one of the stolen cigarette lighters and pressed it to his skin.

* * *

And for every magazine article about little Sally making it over the finish line, there are a hundred other children—no, a thousand—who don't have a community emoting over them or spaghetti dinners or Make-a-Wish. The children who are burning and cutting themselves and trying to hurt themselves and self-medicating and cursing their parents because these are the children who have strange obscure wiring problems and disconnects in their mental processes or damage to their self-control centers or who have developed chemical imbalances.

And for these thousand children there are two thousand parents and many thousand siblings who could sure use a spaghetti dinner and some community support instead of community judging. And community distancing. So we mourn the ghost children.

* * *

2012

The patching compound is stark, antiseptic, like gauze against the boreal green of the walls. The spackled patches make the scars on the walls more obvious, like a bad make-up job. I stopped counting after 44.

Under the dark a little boy's blue painted shadow is imprinted on the north wall, arms out flung, feet braced apart. The silhouette, shadow, figure is still there under the layers of darkness. Now cappuccino colored walls, coffee with hazelnut cream. Is there something—there is something about Sadie graduating, end of all childhood, end of an era, of school, of the status quo, of the past that is propelling me forward with this reclamation.

Luke's childhood hurt and confusion, wide eyes with no lashes, face rounded from psychotropic meds, spit painted walls, disappearing, slipping beneath a cloak of coffee. In its place is a tall, soft-hearted man with a carefully trimmed goatee who is sometimes easily confused by dates and details who fought savagely to get out of where he was stuck. He will sleep in here as in a different country, maybe with a woman he loves and their children.

This is a goodbye, an end. A giving up, a closing of a door, a putting away of the rack that we have stretched out upon, willingly, eagerly. I feel a tug, reluctance, this room of pain, the monument to all the ways we let him down and screwed him up, all the ways he felt entrapped and jailed—contained, painted, all slipping beneath a warm coat.

I sip my mug of cinnamon spice, with French vanilla cream and look at the two finished walls measuring, gauging, remembering, considering; his godmother will sleep in here, sit in the chair, read in the log bed. Good sleep will replace the troubled, warmth will prevail.

* * *

The ghost-child is a child who isn't in his body anymore. But his robust body is still here. It's the piece of your child who has been displaced by mental illness or eradicated by a brain injury. It's the piece of your child who has been ousted by addiction.

Parents who have a child like this know exactly what I mean. It's the mislaid puzzle piece of the child you knew that has been forcibly removed from the body they had inhabited all their life—not like a child who grows up and has left their childhood self behind. That's a case of the child as an apple blossom growing into a tiny green apple and then ripening and becoming their truest selves. This is like a luscious apple with a piece missing. And when a piece has been cut out, things can gain entry.

And we grieve these children endlessly. Sometimes we see them again, sometimes a little piece, sometimes not in this life, ever. Sometimes we catch a glimpse.

Always, we make do with whoever is left and cherish them and it is enough. But it's not the same and we are the only ones who know that.

* * *

2014

My work table faces the north wall which backs up to our bedroom's small sitting room where I read at night. My chair sits in the place where Luke's bed used to sit.

When they were little, we had nightly prayers in their rooms with Luke and Sadie. A little talking time, a hug, prayers we taught them from our Catholic childhoods. Luke would call me in sometimes, rarely, in the last years of high school. His battles with the OCD voices seemed, at times, reminiscent of my arguments with God in my head. Scrupulosity is one of the most common arenas for those who have OCD, and Luke has had his own battles with that. But sometimes, he would call out to me as I passed through the upstairs landing.

"Mom," he'd say, poised, as ever, to reverse himself, "Can you maybe say prayers with me?" He might then allow me to come in and perch on the foot of his bed or he might back away and say he was kidding, or he might thrash on the twin bed his father had made for him, feet dangling over the logs at the foot, his arms too long for the narrow mattress. If the OCD told him to, he would jump, a laid out full body jump, thrashing like a hooked brook trout or a wild creature caught in a trap.

Help

help **1** to make things easier or better for (a person); aid; assist; *a*) to give (one in need or trouble) something necessary, as relief, succor, money, etc. *b*) to do part of the work of; ease or share the labor of *c*) to aid in getting

2 to make it easier for (something) to exist, happen, develop, improve, etc.; *a*) to make more effective, larger, more intense, etc.; aid the growth of; promote *b*) to cause improvement in; remedy; alleviate; relieve

* * *

helper *n.* a person or thing that helps; esp., an assisting worker who is more or less unskilled

* * *

“Now if you had a huge gaping wound that was bleeding and everybody could see it, then they’d know that it needed treatment,” Judy, nurse practitioner.

* * *

Insurance

“Mental health care can be difficult to get and manage...not to mention expensive [. . .] the [insurance] system can be hard to deal with under the best of circumstances”

(Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Help for Children and Adolescents 198).

“Hi, this is Linda Sirois. I’m calling on behalf of my son to see what coverage we have to treat a disorder he has.”

“Hello, ma’am, how are you today? And how can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m trying to see what kind of treatment options there are for my son. He has a neurological disorder.”

“Oh. I see, and I’m sorry to hear that ma’am. What kind of disorder does he have?”

“Well, it’s kind of mental health and neurological, combined.”

“I see...I have a child with that kind of problem, too. What is your son’s disorder?”

“He has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and he needs some kind of treatment like therapy or something.”

“Oh, my daughter has OCD, too. It’s terrible, so hard. She has all these rituals...”

“Oh, I’m sorry! That’s so hard, isn’t it? So what kind of treatment is covered?”

“Actually, ma’am, this company won’t pay for OCD treatment because they class it as an emotional disorder, which they don’t cover.”

“What? But it’s not just an emotional disorder, it’s also biological. And he needs some kind of help, some kind of therapy or something. My husband is a truck driver and we don’t make that much and we need to get him some help, he’s falling apart.”

“Oh, I know! My daughter is nine and has these rituals that keep her up all night and she cries and cries when I try to tell her good night and she doesn’t want me to go because she says the OCD says she has to hear one more story or I have to hug her a certain number of times or something bad will happen and it’s wearing me out. She is just so caught up in it all the time and we can’t figure out what to do for her...”

“Wow, my son’s eleven. So what are you doing for her or for you?”

“We don’t know what to do for her and it’s so hard to tell her no and not to participate with her because she gets so upset, she just pitches a fit. I’m worn out and there’s no one I can even talk to about it...”

“So this company doesn’t do anything to help? There’s no help I can get for my son?”

“No ma’am, and I’m so sorry.”

* * *

Educators

“I don’t believe in those kinds of things,” school principal, referring to OCD.

“Have you read parenting books? Are you firm enough with him?”

“Linda, what do you want from me?” special education teacher.

“When he stops acting like that, then we’ll help him,” special education teacher.

“Yes, I know *you say* he has a brain injury, but he’s still losing his charts so he’s going to fail my class,” teacher.

“He’s not doing the work. I’ve never seen this before. Not in all my years of teaching,” special education teacher.

“He keeps losing his papers. He never has a pencil. Where is his book?” teacher.

“Have you ever considered having him tested?” teacher. After testing: “Well, I just can’t work with him. He’s resisting me. And I’m a good teacher.” Next year, at a teacher conference for his sibling, same teacher: “Linda! *Sadie’s* really *nice!*” Me: “Yes. She is. And so is Lucas.”

* * *

Medical practitioners (including, but not limited to: psychologists, general practitioners, pediatricians, physician’s assistants, psychiatrists, social workers, therapists, neuropsychologists, nurses)

Helpful information from a book about children with OCD:

On one hand, “Money is a motivator for doctors and other healthcare providers, but most of them also care about helping their patients. Your providers are the most powerful allies you have” (Waltz 202).

But on the other hand, “Don’t rely on your providers completely. They have many patients [. . .] Another staff member, such as a nurse or office assistant, may be able to keep your provider on track, but you will have to be persistently involved as well” (Waltz 203).

Head psychiatrist for a local mental health agency, addressing Luke: “When I first saw you, I thought you were cognitively impaired. Now I just think we have a boy who’s

been overindulged.” The doctor twirled in his desk chair for emphasis, toes barely touching the floor, fluorescent light reflecting off the bald spot above his gray ponytail.

* * *

Family

Q. “What is the disorder that can affect the family [of those with OCD] called?”

A. OCD is not only a personal illness, but also a family illness. It is no wonder that OCD, like alcoholism and other serious disorders, can create a traumatized family. Such a home or ‘family culture’ can be characterized by *chronic shock, chronic loss, chronic grief, and chronic exhaustion*” (Gravitz 58).

“Given this atmosphere of ongoing stress, loss, grief, and exhaustion permeating the family, it is easy to understand why family members under the influence of OCD can feel any or all of the following: helpless, confused, frightened, angry, manipulated, controlled, terrified, hesitant, tentative, cautious, indecisive, guilty, humiliated, sad, bad, crazy, protective, embarrassed, ashamed, distant, and worried” (Gravitz 59).

Collections

collection 1 the act or process of collecting **2** things collected; as in a hobby **3** a mass or pile; accumulation **4** money

“If this is...Linda Seerows...please press one. Now. If this is not...Linda Seerows...or the spouse of...Linda Seerows...please do not listen to this message. This is a confidential message for...Linda Seerows. If you are not...Linda Seerows...please hang up now. This message will pause for three seconds so the message can be listened to in privacy. Beep. Beep. Beep. The following message is for...Linda Seerows...or spouse only. This is Credit Check. This phone call is an attempt to collect a debt. Please return this call in the next...24 hours...”

* * *

I just got off the phone with Robert, my favorite debt collector from Credit Check where all of our late and unpaid medical bills end up. He hums a little, sounding like he might break into the theme song for Jeopardy—his voice is high and light, but gravelly like a good country and western singer. I imagine him as slight in build, pale, with light brown hair parted on the side, receding hairline. He wears short sleeved, pastel button down shirts in January, and his slacks—he calls them slacks—are pressed above his polished brown loafers. He is comforting to hear on the phone as if a pleasant sounding person with a measure of warmth could not be the instrument of our financial destruction, wouldn't dream of setting into motion whatever comes after the bills are in the hands of the collection agencies. He talks to himself while he looks up our information: “Okay, Robert, it would help if you typed it in right.” “Okay Robert, it would help if you

opened the right file.” Why, Robert is just like me and I would never, for example, take someone to court because they couldn’t pay a bill or two or even seven. I mean, couldn’t pay it in full at the time the medical practitioners would most like it paid in full—at the time of service or within 30 days, at most. I felt giddy with relief that, today, it was Robert on the phone.

On impulse, I said, “Robert, you are my favorite debt collector. You sound so, like, cheerful on the phone with your humming and your talking to yourself. Not scary like that one guy who works there who calls sometimes. He has this disembodied voice like from beyond the grave: ‘Helloooo. This is Clint from Credit Check.’ He scares the shit out of me.”

Robert laughed and laughed, cackled, really, then said, “I don’t even know how to respond to that.”

“You don’t have to,” I said. “I’m just entertaining myself here.” Later he said, you know the humming is probably the thing that would really bug the next person who calls. And I said yeah, I can see that.

“Is this Linda Sirrhosis?”

“...Yes...”

“This is Clint at Credit Check. You have a balance of \$893 owing on your account. It’s seriously past due. You really need to take care of this matter—it’s been owing since March of 2011. Can you go ahead and take care of that balance today?”

“Believe me, Clint, I’d love to. If I could, I would.”

“Well, can you put something toward that amount today?”

“Okay. I think, um, let’s see. I can do \$35 today.”

“Fine, Mrs. Sirkhosis, and just so you know, we are a debt collection agency and anything you say can be used in an attempt to collect that debt. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Thank God for the insurance we do have, but the co-pays and the deductibles are so high that we’re chronically in debt to Marquette General Hospital, the U.P. Rehab people, the dentist, the gynecologist—we pay off a handful and another group crops up.

* * *

2 things collected; as in a hobby

We are surrounded:

Stacked SPAM cans from Guam with flavors like “Island, limited edition,” and “Jalapeno,” and “Hot & Spicy”; red glass dishes and vases and candlesticks; other glass colored cobalt blue, like a vase from my grandmother’s house, grass green and variegated amber and swirled turquoise; a cut glass candy dish from my parents’ house—I was upset with Lucas, yelling or fretting or instructing—and I dropped the thick lid of the candy jar. The knob handle snapped off and rolled under the couch. I keep the knob somewhere strange that I can’t remember—a box in my office, maybe, or the kitchen hot pad drawer—and I come across it once or twice a year and wonder why I keep it and revisit the helpless notion that I can’t throw away anything of the handful of items I brought home when my mom died. Cookbooks: *Fantastically Finnish*, and *The Modern Family*

Cookbook by Meta Givens, 1958 edition, and *365 Easy One-Dish Recipes*, and *A Man, a Can, and a Plan*. Red and white enameled kitchen ware from the turn of the century, bread boxes and canisters and cake plates. A child's sand pail filled with kitchen utensils. Baskets. Coffee mugs that say things like "Coffee makes me smart," and "A mother's love is forever growing." And that's just the kitchen.

Books. Thin Emilie Loring paper back romances with titles like *Hilltops Clear*, texts from a 1970s community college philosophy course, the *Firefox* series, *Oh, the Thinks You Can Think*, and *Parenting Isn't For Cowards*, and *Writing True* and *Beloved*, and *Little Women* and *A Simple Plan* and *The Literature of Reality* and *The Readers Digest Complete Guide to Gardening* and teetering stacks of murder mysteries passed on by my sister who lives alone and keeps her screen doors latched during daylight hours. *Vernacular Eloquence* and *Stigma* and *The American College Encyclopedic Dictionary* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*. And those are only a few of the ones I can see from where I sit as I write this; oh, and *Chesapeake* and *The Fountainhead* and a shelf of Jodi Picoult books, *Mere Christianity* and *Half a Life* and *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So...* I collect other people's words: scraps of paper torn from magazines and newspapers, quotations and lyrics, prayers and pronouncements.

I sit down at the antique secretary desk in the living room—the drop front is sagging a little because of our habit of parking the unopened mail on there. The glass hutch holds small items that remind me of my childhood like tiny ceramic ashtrays from Turkey and part of my Great-Aunt Anne's salt and pepper collection that my sister and I played with when we slept over on the Murphy bed in her third floor walk-up in Kansas

City. A few pieces of my mother's collection of demitasse cups, sent by her brothers from Korea and Japan.

Balanced on the top of the pile of paper is a red vinyl book entitled "Monthly Planner." Sticky notes fret from the cover: "Pay parts ADVENTURE CENTER" and "elec. Disconnect next Fri!" and "Don't forget! Lagasco due! Budget plan payment late, pay next check!" "7/5/13 (Direct TV) 95.06 past due" and "call Robert at Credit Check." "300.00 Verizon has to come out I must call it in" "\$\$\$ (early Nov.) 280.00 auto parts due."

I try every year to reorganize our debt, thinking that if I can somehow corral it and categorize it all that it will lessen the actual amount owed. To that end, I've experimented with a white beadboard organizer with a different slot for each day of the month, red plastic file trays from IKEA, cardboard in and out trays printed with a cheerful border of lace and cherries, green wire stand up manila file holders, and other various bins and filing paraphernalia in an attempt to get on top of it all. They are all full and piled on top of the drop front desk in the living room. My latest system is a sturdy, handmade Amish basket with four compartments. It is woven of split oak and boasts stout legs. When turned upside down, the wooden base says: "The Troyers Basket Shop / Made April 2-2013 / 9493 E. Beaverton Rd. Clare Mi 48617," hand written in cursive, in blue ball point pen. It weighs at least 15 pounds empty. God knows what it weighs today, compartments stuffed with handfuls of legal envelopes opened and unopened because I already know what they will say and I just can't hear it on this sunny Monday morning or dreary Wednesday afternoon.

As I trace the signature with my finger, I wish to be one of the Troyer family. I want to be a frugal Amish woman who wears impeccable integrity like a warm black cloak, who makes pie baskets and paper towel holders and quilts like the ones we looked at on the day I bought this newest “bills” basket from the buggy in the downstate Burger King parking lot. The people who sold us their goods were dressed in black and royal blue and deep violet, barefoot, bonneted and blond, sans deodorant, on that warm Labor Day weekend. I imagine, in my Amish life, awakening on that sweltering day in the cool of dawn. My strapping husband, Ephraim, wishes to make reverent love, and I submit even though the hour grows late and I must be about my tasks. He smells of cows. I arise, twisting my hair up on my head, splashing water on my face, looking plainly attractive with no concealer or eyeliner, singing “Tis a Gift to be Simple” as I fry eggs and wash the breakfast dishes. As I gently urge the children, “Make haste, Sarah, make haste, Zachariah,” we pack the buggy full of wares crafted during twilight hours of winter and summer afternoons in the side yard under the willow. Young Sarah signs each piece with a blue Bic purchased from the local Walmart with her egg money. No one raises their voices and they are excited about the ham sandwiches on thick grain bread that await the noon hour under the blue checked towel in our picnic basket. We quench our gentle thirst with milk drawn from our own cow and kept cool in the glazed stoneware vessel fashioned by our friends/cousins/siblings, the Yoders.

The Troyers don’t have insurance because they help each other rebuild burned barns and cyclone-scoured houses; does that apply to medical insurance? Do they have community doctors who set their legs and stitch up their farming gashes? Do they pay with eggs or a side of beef or an Amish Star quilt? And what about TBIs and OCD and

such in the plain folks' world? Do hurt brains matter? Young Zachariah could still help on the family farm, split oak into strips for weaving, and climb on the roof of the shed to make necessary repairs. Does he find a bride within the quiet community, someone who has different expectations about income and career and perhaps a different lens through which to measure what comprises a successful life?

* * *

Our dog, Kobe, half Chihuahua and half miniature pinscher, hides egg shells and corn cobs stolen from the compost bucket under the curtained alcove beneath the sink. The cobs are dragged across the hardwood floor to his kennel, where he secrets them beneath the folds of his monkey blanket. The only signs of these raids are dried flecks of corn and specks of shell tracked out onto the linoleum, days later; sometimes corn appears in the small turds we gather from the yard with the spring loaded pooper scooper.

Dick gathers discarded metal bedrails and old paneled doors, rusted hinges and horseshoes, blown mud flaps, and odd screws. Out of these, some peeled logs, and truckloads of lumber from Menards and Anderson Lumber, he has built our house and much of our furniture: a day bed for the small sitting room that adjoins our bedroom where I read myself to sleep most nights, cabinets for dry goods, bookcases and a cedar log bed with rusted chains that he and Luke designed together for Luke's room when he was still in high school and which has never been large enough for his long legs. My husband spends his free time in his workshop garage, repairing things and inventing new uses for junk, welding torches lit in a thin blue stream, grinder shedding a spray of sparks, content in a cloud of sawdust, eyes blank behind his goggles.

Sadie has papered her bedroom walls with magazine pages of long gleaming calves in high heels with a bottle of Skyy vodka, an Aretha Franklin look-a-like enraptured with a bottle of PineSol, grouped women with captions like “Feel Fabulous,” photos of the moment just before that first kiss—couples touching one another’s face tenderly. Six-packed shirtless athletes, abs gleaming with oil. She has an Arctic Cat snowmobile poster, her grandfather’s cowboy boots, and drawers full of girly things gifted to her by doting aunties: unopened Bath and Body gift sets, eye shadow palettes, Tutti Dolce bath powder, spa masks and manicure sets. She is everywhere in there and she is nowhere around.

At the height of his OCD rituals, during the year of Bad, Lucas hoarded bent paper clips and mutilated pen caps, combustibles and sharp objects and Bic lighters by the bagful. Broken and chewed yellow pencils with the erasers gouged off. He was helpless about wrappers and scraps of papers which bulged into nests filling the worn pockets of the only pair of faded black jeans that he would wear. I thought of squirrels constructing soft warm places to hide, of small frightened mice pulling shreds of paper over their heads to shut out the world.

Now he gathers phone numbers with no names attached, bank slips and matchbooks and official forms like an invoice for lodging at the county jail for \$600, 30 days past due, folded many times so they can be stuffed into his pockets. His place at the long breakfast bar in our kitchen has a basket to corral his life. The basket bristles and spills pill bottles and watches and envelopes and a coffee cup with change in it and papers and I carry it into my office and set it on the loveseat when we have company.

* * *

3 a mass or pile; accumulation

I have a brass letter opener with a sea shell on the handle, purchased as a souvenir from Key West when we were carefree and in our 20s, with never a clue that I would someday use it for marathon bill opening sessions lasting several hours, ending with us splitting a bottle of \$5.99 wine and watching reruns of *Friends* in stunned silence.

During a recent session, with my sea shell letter opener, I opened:

A bill for \$160 from U.P. Rehab Associates

A flyer from the U.S. Postal Service

A two day sale event flyer from Younkers

A cancellation notice from the auto insurance company

An ominous unmarked envelope from somewhere in Louisville, Kentucky that turned out to be a bill from the hospital for \$250 but for which they would accept \$83.33 for now

A reinstatement notice from the auto insurance company

An urgent notice from Quicken Loans offering to refinance our mortgage for us for 30 years in order to take advantage of low rates and make our budgeting easier

A statement from the Trenary Federal Credit Union showing my account balance as \$5.93

Assorted past due medical bills of \$1609.34, \$984.58, \$56.35, \$166.36

Another application from AARP.

* * *

Ours is a tale of middle class, middle aged angst—of having medical insurance through my husband’s job but with high co-pays and high deductibles totaling thousands per year. With spending time the last two years trying to pin down and treat some of Luke’s medical issues, we’ve fallen behind. Lucas and I have had two MRIs, which were partially paid for but still left us with a balance of 2 x \$1800, another round of neuropsychological testing for Luke for concentration and focus to see what they could find out...\$1609.00. Back therapies testing, physical therapy, and medicine management— all costly and sort of covered by our policy, but not until things careen over into catastrophe.

When Dick had some pains last winter at 2:00 a.m., we knew that it would be bad. It’s 40 miles one way into town where the nearest hospital is, and the icy December roads are always another deterrent. Damn. We were stressing about oh no, do we go in or not because you know this will be an expensive proposition. I ran down and got the laptop and we sat up in bed and googled shoulder pain and indigestion. I had to grab the modem too, so we could get service up there in our room, and so on December 30th, as the wind howled around the eaves, we sat up in bed for two hours trying to decide if his discomfort was a heart attack or just shoulder pain and indigestion, which, interestingly, are two major indicators of a heart attack.

“Okay, do you feel light headed? Tired? Nauseous? Are you sweating?”

“Well, I do feel tired.”

“Okay, but it’s 2:00 in the morning...do you think you feel tired because you haven’t slept all night yet or because you’re having a heart attack?”

“I don’t know. Come to think of it, I do feel kind of sweaty, but I have long underwear on and you keep asking me all these questions...”

“Are you clammy? Is it a cold sweat or a regular sweat?” I felt his forehead, which felt exactly as it always feels.

“I don’t know, maybe it’s not really a sweat, maybe I just laid wrong on my bad shoulder earlier and ate too much at dinner. I don’t know!”

“Well *I* don’t know!”

“Well, what do you think we should do?”

“God, I don’t know—what do you want to do?”

Our friends Bessie and Randee, the local First Responders, came to check him out and we ended up laughing so hard in the kitchen that it woke Sadie up. She dreamed that we were having a play group party downstairs, then she saw the reflection of the flashing lights and looked at the clock and realized that it was 4:30 a.m. It cost \$835 for the unnecessary and uninsured ambulance ride to town, a bargain compared to the charges racked up by the hospital as they ascertained that he had absolutely no trace of heart difficulty either that night or at any time in his past. We felt both nauseous and light headed when we opened the bill.

When I tripped up the basement stairs due to over-sized fuzzy slippers and had to get nine stitches in my knee, when I thought I was having spleen pain because my sister

helpfully Googled “abdominal pain on upper left side” for me, when I tripped over the dog gate in the entryway and sprained my ankle...all expensive and unreimbursed.

We’ve had a couple of years of dealing with the kinds of medical emergencies that are scripted into situation comedies.

“This is a message for Lucas Soriasis if you are not Lucas Soriasis, please hang up, disconnect, or press the “9” key now on this phone or please listen to this message if you are Lucas Soriasis. By continuing to listen to this message you agree that you are Lucas Soriasis...this is a message from Pinnacle Financial...call 1-800-...your reference number is XTQ0487329...please ask to speak to Sean...”

Luke is in his very early 20s right now and has no medical insurance, no job, and no resources. Except us. He has chronic back pain which requires a prescription, a need for psychotropic medication to reduce his anxiety and treat the OCD, and periodic check-ups to manage the medications. These two prescriptions are the end result of the past two years of tests and discussions by a wide variety of practitioners. We have to fight—with the medical community, not Luke—regularly to have access to his medical records in order to manage his medical bills, which are sort of covered under our health insurance, or, at least, more covered than he is able to guarantee. To do this, I have to take Luke around and get releases to fill out and sign and then get returned to various medical personnel across the area, including the billing departments. We do these on a rotating basis, so that it often turns out that some one or another of these has expired just at the time that I need to have access to discuss, make a payment, make an appointment, refer, or otherwise engage with someone on Luke’s behalf. It makes me sick that our inability to pay off his large bills is trashing his credit.

I feel ashamed that he is tied to us financially and that we aren't able to take care of his medical bills in a timely way. My parents, my husband's parents, Air Force retirees all—with supplemental medical insurance—would be horrified that I banter with Robert every third Thursday of the month. The only thing worse is calling Shawn, the kid who guards our dwindling IRA annuity to tell him we need to make what I like to call a “reverse investment” and which we do twice or three times each year to clean the debt slate and start over.

The creditor goes through the spiel every time I call to make a payment: “This communication is an attempt to collect a debt, everything you say will be used to try to collect a debt and this phone call may be recorded or monitored...” and I'm thinking, hey, Credit Check, I'm trying to make a payment here. What do I have to do? Yes. I'm paying. Let me. I'm sorry, okay?

* * *

4 money

Today was bill opening day. I called several agencies: Credit Check to talk with Robert because I've been avoiding him since November 15th when I told him I would call but we had no money so I didn't. As a live-in-the-moment kind of person, avoiding debtors makes me feel like they're no longer there. So I called Robert, but saved him for last on the stack.

First, I called Pinnacle Financial and tried to talk to them about why they keep sending bills from this physical therapy deep nerve sensor thing for Lucas that the physical therapist said would only cost a small amount but they keep sending large,

larger, and larger bills to us—this is what happens when we let Luke take care of his own business out in the medical world—the physical therapist asked him if he would use it and he said yes and used it for a time but said it didn't work and then I guess it was lost or dragged off into the basement crawl space by the pet rats of Luke's roommates Austin and Ashley, into their den, or stepped on and piled with dirty dishes by any one of the people, or peed on by the new puppy that Ashley and Austin got after they found the rats to be secretive and unsatisfactory as pets—cold and furtive and not as snuggly as Ashley had hoped.

So that company, Empire, has sent a series of bills for the past two years and then last summer Pinnacle Financial got into the act and sent a special offer to settle the whole amount for \$287.43 and so I sent a check for that amount and they assured me that they would follow with a letter that confirmed that the amount had been settled in full and I watched for a while but never saw the letter, meanwhile at the end of July, Luke went to jail for eleven days and I was so busy grieving and numb, shocked and horrified and terrified and just every kind of _____-fied you can imagine and I forgot to watch for the special letter and then the school year began and Sadie had issues and Luke and his little fam were in and out and so I forgot to watch for the confirmation letter.

So I'm noticing that I continue to get the same bills from the back pain nerve sensor machine from both Empire and Pinnacle Financial and, now that I have the energy again, I wonder why, since I paid them \$287.43 last summer. So I called. And the woman asked what I was calling about and I gave her the patient number and she said but is this Lucas Serious? I really thought of all the time it would save if I just lied and said, yes, this is Lucas Sirois, and spoke in a deepened voice like when I used to play Barbie

dolls with Sadie and had to be Malibu Ken but I chickened out and said no, this is his mother and we take care of his medical bills. And she asked if he is a minor and, since I'm unable to lie to anyone my reptilian brain reads as an authority figure, I said no, he's 22 but he has no insurance and no resources, no job and that if they want to see any money, they will need to talk with me. And she said that she can't discuss private matters with me because she could lose her job if she does and she said can't he just come to the phone and give permission for me, his mother, to talk about his bills? And I said he's not here, he's rarely here and he lives 40 miles away. And I said, also, I paid you guys \$287.43 with a check stamped with our name last summer and you cashed it, so doesn't that give me any right to at least know what company is seeking payment? And you also called my cell phone a few days ago, so, again, doesn't that involve me? And she said well, can't you just call him and have him call our offices and give permission? My name is Connie, he could just call and say he's giving permission to us to talk with his mother about his bills. And I said what kind of hours are you open? Because he is nocturnal right now. And she said oh, we're open from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Central time here at Pinnacle Financial and I hung up. I said, "Fuck," loudly and dialed the number from the top of the next bill.

This one was from the ambulance company that was called the night of the big mess at his girlfriend's house that landed him in jail this summer. They want \$1880 for reviving him.

They also want \$2352.55 which I've avoided looking at closely because the whole thing still freaks me out. But looking now, they have two different bills—the woman who answered said "He must have sent the ambulance away and then called it

back,” and I said “Well, he was unconscious at the time of all of this and that’s why they called the ambulance.” And so the bills are a mystery—what happens if the EMTs call themselves back? And re-send themselves back to Dart St. where it all happened? The whole thing has a recursive, nightmarish feel. And she said “Well, I don’t know,” doubtful, grudging, then said “Okay, we can run it through the insurance. But we will send the bills right back if you have any co-pay and we can be pretty sure that will be the case.”

I tried to log into our Health Reimbursement Account but the site wouldn’t let me. Eight times I tried the passwords and username I had, the default one, everything, and it wouldn’t let me log on. I tried to call the company and there was nothing on the menu about tech support or talking with a person, so when the menu came up for me to speak about what I wanted, I said clearly: “I need tech support. Website help.” And the voice switched me back to the main menu where I listened carefully again to the eight options listed and, still, none fit, so when the beep went off I said “Talk to A Real Person” and it kicked me back again to the main menu and I hung up. “Shit,” I said loudly and looked at the pointy lead of my pencil and imagined stabbing it into the soft wood of the desk near me. And I imagined stabbing it into something softer. Something that would give and retain a small six-sided hole, darkened with the lead tip I would twirl around in there.

So that’s when I called Robert.

“You have reached the offices of Credit Check. We are a collection agency and this call may be recorded.” I sighed. “Hello, this is Clint.”

“May I speak with Robert please?”

“...Yes. May I tell him who’s calling?”

“This is Linda Sirois, he called me yesterday.”

“Certainly.”

Ring ring. “Hello, this is Robert.”

“Hi Robert, it’s me, Linda Sirois. You called me yesterday and I couldn’t talk.”

“Oh yes, hi, Linda. And how are you doing today?” he asked, sounding as if he actually cared a little.

Blink, blink. “Pretty well Robert, I’m doing okay.”

“Good, good, I’m glad to hear that.” And I almost believe that he is. “And, thank you, by the way,” he continued, “for calling me back. I really appreciate that you are trying to take care of matters here at Credit Check. I see here that we’ve talked before. At least five times.”

“Yes, we have, many times. I have to tell you that I have no money right now until Friday and I don’t know how much I can pay then because we have big bills due right now. So I know I was supposed to call 10 days ago, but we didn’t have any extra then, so I didn’t.”

“Of course, of course, I completely understand. I do just want to let you know that we have a new attorney who is now associated with Credit Check and we’re telling all of our regular people, you know, the ones who are trying to pay, that legal action will now be going up from five per week to 50 per week, about a 1000% increase.”

“God.”

“Yes, so we want people to know, especially as you have an amount that’s right about where they might focus on it, just about at that point, that unless you pay *something* each month, your account *might be* targeted by the legal department. Just so you pay a little, so they can see that you’re trying to work with us. Okay? Do you know what I mean?”

“Wow, that’s scary. What does that mean, legal action? Like court? I could pay something on Friday, I guess, when we get paid.”

“Of course, of course, but we won’t be in the office on Friday of this week, because of Thanksgiving...and then we’ll be into December...”

“Oh, can I pay so that it comes out then, automatically? On Friday? This Friday?”

“Of course, of course, great idea! And we’ve done this before, I think, at least five times.”

“At least.”

“Okay! Let’s do it!” And he flew into his Robert area of expertise, untangling and finding our accounts and seeing which amount should be zapped first by the \$70 I’m releasing. On Friday, three days from now. \$35 for my account and \$35 for Luke’s account, I reminded him.

“Do you have Lucas’s account number handy? So we don’t get the bookkeeper confused about which account and which \$35,” he chuckled to himself. “Okay,” he

talked to himself in his delightful Robert way: “823823...Nothing new for him...okay, enter it...okay...” A momentary hum.

“Hey,” he said, “let me do what’s called a data match...no, nothing...no new bills have come in in the past 30 days in Lucas’s name...okay, so we’re good there...” I relaxed and left it all in Roberts’ capable hands. Illogically, I wanted to tell Robert that he is one of the things I’m so thankful for during this holiday season and to have a blessed Thanksgiving and to enjoy his Friday off.

“Okay, I’ll let you go and we’ll talk next month,” he said.

“Bye, Robert.” Happy Holidays, Robert.

* * *

According to Webster’s, the final definition of “debt” is: “a sin.”

* * *

Two days later, after 5:00 p.m., my bank card was declined, twice, with sad eyes, by a young man with pimples at the McDonald’s drive through window. I only wanted a seasonal Peppermint Mocha Latte, medium, to celebrate the impending holiday season.

When I checked our account later, online, I found that Credit Check had somehow electronically withdrawn the \$70 three days early, thus bouncing three of our checks of \$6.97, \$23.44, and \$16.01, respectively. There was also a \$19 courtesy fee charged to our account for each of those NSF checks.

Oh, Robert.

One Moment

moment **1** an instant **2** a definite point in time or in a series of events **3** a brief time of being important or outstanding

* * *

Exchange with Luke during his second summer of job hunting:

“How’s it going with the job hunting, Luke?”

“Not that great. Actually, it sucks. It’s the same thing every day when I go look for a job: I put on a smile and lie to them a few times, then they put on a smile and lie right back to me.”

Alternate Ending #3: Cat

Excited by the smell of vanilla yogurt, the barnwood colored cat nudged the middle-aged woman's leg as she tried to type on her laptop. The heavy feline leaped onto the picnic table, then twined around the laptop, narrowly missing spilling the woman's water and stepping across the keys, knocking the woman's hand as she guided a spoonful of yogurt to her mouth.

"Git, PeeWee," the woman said irritably to the cat, pushing her off the edge of the picnic table. The woman wiped globs of yogurt from her shirt and the ends of her hair. "Leave it alone, go on." The cat landed in the grass with a cold look over her shoulder. The woman took her bowl and water glass into the house.

The cat strolled across the keyboard: ?"/;/////////p,i0000000,hyeZw2a 1~A
aaazsq`

"PeeWee, damnit! Get off!" She came back and shoved the cat off the laptop keys. It annoyed the woman the way the cat thought she could dip her head into the woman's coffee cup and lick drops of half and half off the rim, leap from lawn chairs to try and get at grilled food. Damn barn cats, she thought. Go catch a mouse.

The woman strolled down the road, leading her Chihuahua-Mini Pinscher on a retractable leash that was sized for an 80 pound black lab, now deceased. The dog's thin neck drooped a little from the weight of the clip that kept him tethered to the woman; still, he looked around, wagging his tail. The woman thought it was good to get out from paperwork and household chores into the tangy autumn air. Glancing back, as she was in

the habit of doing in order to stay vigilant about possible wildlife sightings and approaching cars, she saw that the two barn cats had joined them on the walk, as was their habit. PeeWee and Queen Latifah followed ten feet behind the woman and the house dog, like a hierarchy of field hands following the house servants as they accompanied their mistress on her outings.

She hummed as she walked, a droning dirge-like hum of some indeterminate refrain, then realized it was the same song she had been releasing from her lungs for some weeks: "...tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la la la la" over and over. "Hmm hm hm with hm hm hm hm" The woman had had this tune in her head ever since her son was released from jail on a Personal Recognizance Bond and under her direct supervision under penalty of up to 93 days in jail if he screwed up and she didn't report him. She found herself humming tonelessly or whistling low: "...don we now our gay apparel, hmm hm hm fa la la, la la hm" and was weeks into it before she recognized the song. So she hummed now, automatically; in the northern woods and swamps where she lived, in every season it was prudent to make a little noise, to announce one's arrival when proceeding through wild habitat and she was, above all, a prudent woman.

The October breeze rustled intermittently through dried grasses and cattails at the edge of the gravel road, making the woman swivel her head—just to check. She was sure that the cougar that the neighbor had seen last week wasn't causing that particular patch of shrubbery to shake, sure that it was the rogue breeze sliding down from Lake Superior that touched the dried foliage here and there causing it to shake and rattle and whisper as she passed.

The woman had long ago set her terms about coexisting with bears and wolves and skunks, bobcats who screamed like eviscerated women, raccoons who bared their teeth and hissed when her flashlight beam hit their incisors at night as she made her way to the barn. Her husband walked easily in the darkness during hunting season, camped in the woods and told her not to worry, that the animals were more afraid of her than she was of them; she didn't believe that at all—did not believe it was possible for them to be more afraid than she was.

She had read advice about coming upon a bear: scream loudly, make noise and stand tall while backing away, facing the bear. The woman had imagined the moment so many times that she felt she would remember the sequence pretty well; in fact, the older she got, the more she felt that she was equal to a show of aggression to any wild being, animal or human, who stood up in her face. She imagined herself baring her own teeth, spreading her arms to make herself larger, screaming from a deep well of disappointment and fear and fury that had been built up layer upon layer and simmering for years. In the depths roiled all of her fears for her son, her sarcastic replies to her husband, her exhaustion. She thought that once that well was tapped, she would have a stream of noise and emotion stockpiled and fermented into a frightening spew, repellant to any creature who stood in the path of that rank and fermented stream.

Sand hill cranes sounded across the field and four confused geese flew north as the small parade of woman and dog and cats walked. She thought she saw an eagle hanging in the air over the spruce tops, but realized it was a gleaming black crow—joined by another and then a third.

“Good boy, Kob,” she said as her dog trotted beside her, and “Leave it,” as he lingered too long over a flattened frog stiffening in the dust. She glanced behind her, hummed and turned her face up to the sun.

Cougars were new to the neighborhood. There were sightings here and there: the seven-year-old son of her friend, Meredith, who lived across the field south of them, was playing on the trampoline in their backyard with his friend after school. Little Evan and his buddy looked up and saw a cougar standing just back in the tree line watching them. They yelled excitedly and, being seven-year-old boys, went to the edge of the trampoline for a closer look, before deciding to run into the house, through the garage door ten feet away. As Evan described the curve and length of the tail and the head shape to his mother and his grandfather, they knew it was a cougar. Three weeks ago, another neighbor was driving past the swamp where the woman was now walking and saw a cougar leap from the swamp side of the gravel road, land in the center of the road, and with one more jump enter the woods on the other side. It was 8:30 in the morning at that sighting. Her sister saw one last month on her drive up from downstate and said it was surreal, the silent way the cougar seemed to glide across the road in front of the hood of her car, huge—there and then gone—impossibly fast.

The woman was hit from behind, no rustle or sound prefacing the strike. She felt claws digging into her neck and something sharp tearing at the shirt covering her shoulder. She screamed, what she imagined to be a cougar scream, shrill and louder than any sound she could ever remember making as her bladder let go, finding all the holes in the seams of her old cotton panties and splashing into the tan dust of the road. Her heart, tired of loving and forgiving and hating and changing and fearing and growing and

making allowances and absorbing pain and trying to give back light and care, gave one last convulsive heave and burst—its muscular elasticity finally sprung, exploding aorta bursting and stopping the flow of blood to the woman's brain and cells and she slumped down under the blue October sky, sprawled face down in the rutted gravel, PeeWee attached to the back of her neck, claws dug deep licking a drying patch of yogurt from the woman's collar.

Swooping crows cawed loudly, in triumph or despair. The small dog sniffed the woman's still form, barked once at the cat and lifted his leg.

Cant

Luke came home one day around noon. His face was battered...

batter strikes, **1** a) to beat or strike with blow after blow; pound b) to subject (a small or weaker person) to frequent beatings **2** to break to bits by pounding **3** to injure by pounding, hard wear, or use

...a bloody scrape on his nose, his right eye bruised and swollen and scraped up on the lid, the right side of his face scraped. Most frightening to me was a big bump and scrape on his middle-of-the-forehead scar. His frontal lobe. Another blow to the frontal lobe is always a matter of concern, because successive head injuries have a cumulative effect.

I asked him what happened—wondering if he had gotten into a fight. He laughed and said, “I guess I got so drunk last night that I just fell off a porch somewhere.” I cringed. He was quiet, sick, ate some eggs and took a nap. When he woke up he asked for some Tylenol. I worry about him a lot; this is sickeningly familiar territory.

First there was the OCD, then there was the baseball bat. Now there is alcohol.

bat **1** any stout club, stick, or cudgel **8** a blow or hit **9** a drinking bout; spree

* * *

batter—to slope gradually upward and backward—a gradual upward and backward slope, as of the outer face of a wall

to bat around: to travel or roam about **2** to consider or discuss (an idea, plan, etc.) freely and informally

blind as a bat: quite blind

have bats in the belfry: to be insane; have crazy notions

* * *

I'm wondering where God is in the lives of mentally ill people—especially those with the most debilitating forms of mental illness, like schizophrenia. The books define the word “schizophrenia” as “broken mind” or “fractured mind.” But where is God even for those with the so-called milder forms of mental illness, such as my grandmother, who had depression which was treated in her time by electric shock treatments. She was regularly hospitalized—spending time away from her four small kids, back in the 1940s. My mother had a level of anxiety which I now suspect was Generalized Anxiety Disorder, which one of my sisters also suffers from. She told me once that she suffered from full-blown panic attacks that kept her house-bound at times; she coped by asking God to make them stop, and when He didn't comply, upping her alcohol consumption. I have a panic disorder which makes driving across the five mile Mackinac Bridge pure hell. How can people plug into God with a distortion of what's real and what isn't? It's hard enough for any of us to determine what's real and what isn't. I've had flashes of it (unreal-ness) when I've had panic attacks and felt like I was out of time and place—that must be the terror of feeling unplugged from reality. From the world as they think they know it. Where is God in all of that for those people? Churches have been known to confuse severe mental illness with possession by demons. Perhaps to those who have it, that doesn't feel wrong.

With Luke's OCD, we have always been participants as well. OCD specialist Barbara Van Noppen is quoted in a book about OCD and the family as stating that families of those with OCD are "inexorably brought into the patient's illness." In reading about OCD, I came across Herbert L. Gravitz, who likened living with a person with OCD to living with a person who has alcoholism. That somehow OCD and alcoholism consist of both illness and choice.

* * *

Watched a television show about an experimental housing project in Seattle where they shelter homeless alcoholics. These addicted people pay about \$150 per month to have a studio apartment and are given an allotment of the alcohol of their choice; it can be doled out regularly like medication. The people who run it say there is an actual decrease in the amount of alcohol that the resident consume when they've lived there for a while. In many cases a drastic reduction. There must be something about being safe and warm and accepted and having some human dignity that allows the drinkers to, according to the report, cease drinking to intoxication each day. Having a safe place, a community, where no one is trying to change them or force them to do anything, but rather accepting them and meeting them where they are. That place opens doors in my mind about acceptance. I didn't accept Mom, blamed her, and regretted her. Almost everything but accepted her as she was: lonely, afraid, and anxious. Self-medicating. I believe she had a major anxiety disorder and spent years taming it with martinis. I think if she had a place like the dream of sharing a house with one of us, that she might not have died when she did. But who am I kidding? I was ready for her to die

because it was easier for me emotionally, to know how her story ended than to witness any more of it and to continue to live with the fear of “What if she...?”

* * *

Lucas and I talk; I’m honest with him about my fears of alcohol and how it affects lives. I’m very honest about my pain about living and worrying as my mother’s daughter. And my father’s daughter, who died of lung cancer before drinking became an issue. My grandpa, experiencing small strokes from alcohol use, frequently wandered out the suburban front door of his children’s houses to pee on the geraniums or the tended lawns. I wonder if that’s why, deep down, I think it wouldn’t kill me if. If. I can’t even write it. Because in my experience, a no-longer-living loved one is less painful than an addicted loved one. A confused, not-there loved one; a mentally damaged loved one. I was raised by people who poured a martini right after 11:00 a.m. Mass and said “Goddammit!” when they hit their thumb with a hammer; served wine to the kids at Christmas dinner and blindly blamed God for taking their loved one home. The basic faith is there, right?

My friend, Kim, wrote of her experiences surrounding her toddler son’s diagnosis with a virulent form of cancer. She delves into her family’s faith journey, and entered her manuscript in a contest about real-life faith journeys conducted by the Christian witness publication, *Guideposts*. In Kim’s book, the fears all center on everyone dying. My fears have, for years, centered on Mom living, Dad living, Luke living. I have another friend who has a son with a debilitating brain injury. He has enough mobility to know how much he has lost and to keep trying to hurt himself. That’s quite a different experience; the exquisite pain of loving someone who is unstable and might possibly do

something unspeakable in their future like drink too much and drive or, unbeknownst to you, lose touch with reality and hurt someone but who is too functional to contain at this time.

To deeply love people like this is to always, always, be afraid of the present and of the future. Every phone call could be disaster. Every day you haven't heard from your loved one could mean they are dead in the bathtub, fallen and can't get up, lost, imprisoned, checked out on alcohol or drugs, hospitalized, on the run, hiding. Dead. Given those options, after a while, dead has an appeal in that it carries certainty and closure. Finality.

go to bat for: to intervene on behalf of; defend

You can finally level out on the fear and the guilt that you should be doing more, should have done more, should be able to find answers—better answers, definitive answers. More information, the most current information. The best information. Therapy? New medicines? Will your loved one agree to try them? And will they be able to endure the six to eight to twelve week window of physical adjustment to the new course of medicine in order to give it time to work? And cost? Cymbalta costs \$100 per month—just for our co-pay. Should he try it? Where will we find the extra \$100? Will the people your loved one is encountering today hurt them because they misunderstand and judge them? Reject them? Should you try to explain your loved one? Is that your business, your job? Should you just let things play out however they will? Do you have a choice? The fear and the guilt and the pain never leave you. Until they are dead. Ah. So that's how the story ends. Amen.

right off the bat: immediately

* * *

To the people who have so much faith: how could your loved one's death be your greatest fear? With whatever level of faith I find myself claiming, dying seems like the lesser of the two fears. All of Kim's problem people died. Gloriously, in God's love. Why must I sound snide when I say that?

Kim's basic premise was "Why, Lord? Why me? Why are you taking another person that I love?" And that is understandable and painful to face. To my shame, my plea would be, "Why, Lord? Why me? Why do I have to spend my life worrying about beloved alcoholics who won't stop and don't die? And loved ones with mental illnesses and how they are going to get along in the world and how the world will perceive them and misunderstand them and hurt them more? And by extension, me. Why can't you take all of these problem people Home to Your Loving Bosom? Or else take me?"

I tried for years to grow myself a tumor with no results. My therapist at the time said, "Of course you would wish for a cancerous tumor—all your loved ones gathered by the bedside, weeping and telling you how wonderful you are. How they will miss you. And you sailing away on a cloud of meds, with no more responsibilities to work on your marriage, figure out what's happening with Luke, no more bills or worries. Oblivion. Hell, why wouldn't that look good to you right now? The hard work is living."

The reality is, it would be convenient and immeasurably less painful *for me* if they conformed to the blueprint for what we consider normalcy. No addiction. No brain chemistry misfires or wiring issues. Or else go live with a Maker who is infinitely better

equipped to deal than I am. There's a certain relief in facing that I feel that way. And in knowing that it's ridiculous but understandable, like a two year old on a vast cosmic scale who wants what they want. Now. Like this. Or go away. No.

I felt incredibly angry as I read Kim's manuscript. When she asked God for clarification, He got right back to her. When their godly friends gathered to pray for a healing or a bit of help, He was on it, all over it. Rainbows popped up at the damndest times, her sign of God's covenant with them. "What the hell, Kim? This doesn't inspire me, this just pisses me off. I don't know this God you're writing about. Where is the God of the dung heap? That's the God I know. That's the only God I know."

Guideposts Magazine wouldn't touch a manuscript of mine. In their guidelines for prospective authors, they state that no profanity, no negativity will be considered. How do you write a story about your journey to God without saying "Fuck!" at least once?

* * *

bat out: to create or compose quickly or hastily

* * *

I spoke with my sister on the phone this morning and as we talked a bit I think I accidentally summarized my whole difficulty about my inability to get past the pain of having been my parent's sober daughter and my struggling son's mother.

"It's like I can't rest until I can explain the inexplicable," I told her.

"Hmm," she said.

So explaining the inexplicable is what I've always wanted. A Lifelong Theme:

From my husband—"Tell me why! Tell me what's wrong! Why are you mad? What did I do, why won't you talk to me?"

From my childhood—"Where is the rest of Uncle John's arm? Why do ladies have hair on their bottoms?"

And from my mother—"Why are you still drinking when you know it's killing you? Why can't you stop? Why don't you want to live when you have everything you need?"

From Luke—"Why can't you remember to bring your book home/to class/notebook/ pencil/to call/anything?!! Why are you doing that? It's almost like you're brain damaged! Why, after I get this set up for you, do you screw it up and make me look foolish?"

From the kitchen ceiling—"Why is it so hard to get along in our family, why do Dick and Luke and I do this toxic dance where one goes in well-rehearsed steps, then the next and then the last in a do-si-do pattern of anger and manipulation and frustration? Why do family dinners fall apart? Why is this all so hard?"

From the world at large—"Why don't you want to talk about it? Why is this hidden and shameful? Why won't you take my word that there is something else wrong with my son? Why won't you listen to me, to us? Why can't you allow the possibility that there is another issue that is causing his behavior? Why must you be mean? Why?"

Explain the inexplicable—the task of a lifetime. I can't rest.

Maybe what I need to get, really internalize, is that the reason I can't explain the inexplicable is that it is inexplicable. I must look closely at inexplicable...

Looking at "inadequate" and "inalterable" and "inane" and "inadvisable" and "inappeasable" on my way to inexplicable.

"Inappropriate" and "inarticulate" and "inasmuch as." Signposts on the way to inexplicable.

Thumbed through "incapacitate" and "incarcerate" and "incense" and "incertitude." "Inchoate." "Incipient" and "inclusive." Preludes, all. "Incoherent."

On my way to inexplicable, I spent time on "incompetent," and "incomplete," and "inconceivable." I paused at "Inconsolable."

Increasingly incredible. Incurable. Indenture and independent. Indisputable. Individuate. Inebriate; ineffable. Ineluctable, inequitable, inescapable, inexpiable. I finally arrived at my destination.

inexplicable not explicable; that cannot be explained, understood, or accounted for.

Yes. Did that really say "cannot"?

* * *

cannot can not: to be able to do otherwise than

To be able to do otherwise than explain, to be able to do otherwise than understand, to be able to do otherwise than to account for.

can't can not

cant 1 to set at an angle 2 to throw with a lurch 3 to pitch to one side 4 an oblique or slanting surface 5 to talk or beg in a whining sing-song manner 6 the phraseology peculiar to a religious class or sect 7 the expression or repetition of conventional or trite opinions or sentiments; esp: the insincere use of pious words.

God.

Moment 2

Conversation with Luke before I went out of town to a conference:

“At these conferences I go to, there are people who stand up in front of everyone and they tell us things, teach us things.”

“I could do that. I could travel around the country and tell people what it’s like to have OCD.”

“And what would you tell them?”

“I’d tell them that I spend a lot of time doing rituals and it’s time consuming. And annoying.”

Moment 3

Yesterday was Mother's Day. Warm sun, cool breeze—one of the blue sky days just before the bugs hatch. The pine-needled trail baking, fragrant in the new warmth.

We hiked in to Chapel Beach on a budget—drinks in the ice chest, a couple of bags of chips and some granola bars.

Luke was looking bad ass in his Alice Cooper tee shirt with the sleeves ripped off, tattoos on each bicep. Skull insignia on his hat, assassin shades, slouchy jeans, wallet on a chain. A study in black. Cigarette smoke curling from his lips.

He stood outside at the entrance to the empty restaurant where we stopped at 8:00 p.m. for dinner. He stood, eyes shaded, hands on hips, six feet tall, smoking. An old couple pulled up next to him and slowly climbed from their car, woman driving, heads down watching their steps, checking out the whereabouts of the curbs and the cracks. They shambled in slow motion toward the door and visibly faltered when they looked up from the sidewalk and encountered Lucas.

They carefully passed him. His dad, watching from the car window, wondered why Luke didn't hold the door for those old people.

Luke said, "I could see in their eyes what they thought about me, so why bother?"

His dad said, "Surprise people, Luke. Change their minds."

Cry, Crisis, Chrysalis

cry to make a loud vocal sound or utterance; call out, as for help

Cry. Oh Christ. Crisis. There's a crisis.

Day 1:

I can't.

What do I do with such pain? It roils through me, waves of it, cresting and receding, cresting and receding like the dark pains of labor. It's work, being in crisis. It's work to hurt this much, to fear this much, to regret and second guess and question and rage and rend and shriek, to wail from low roar of labor pain to rising crescendo. All silently. All inside. All that panicked careening grief, energy, packed into one head and one bleak heart.

How dare it be sunny today?

* * *

How to be Alive Tomorrow When You are in Crisis:

- 1) Believe that the first day is the worst. Hope that the first day is the worst.
- 2) The first morning of the second day when you peel your swollen eyes open and the realization hits you again like a tidal wave, like a brick wall, like a long dark fall down an elevator shaft—well, that's the first morning of the first day of your altered life and know that you will never have a first morning of the second day of this particular crisis again. When the pain and the fear and the darkness roll over your burgeoning consciousness like

a bulldozer, pinning you to your mattress, forcing your head beneath your pillow, making you clench your eyes shut and pray please don't wake up please don't wake up please go back to sleep please god let me go back to sleep.

3) Try to be horizontal sometimes, in a fetal position. You won't be able to achieve a full fetal state, desirable as that sounds, but it feels like a good position in which to leave yet have to remain in the world for a while.

4) Understand that you can't leave your skin which contains the ricocheting needles and daggers that exist within you right now. You are stuck in your skin, that too tight itchy pulsating tether that holds your soul in contact, like a hot pack, with the arcing throb of hurt that centers in your heart and your brain. Your head shakes of its own accord "No." "No." "No." "I can't believe it." "No." "This can't be happening." You realize your head is doing that. You stop it. After a while, you realize your head is doing that again.

Your body and your mind float between awareness and denial: your head is shaking no, no, not so, while your mind maybe tries to remember how to turn on the washing machine or looks dumbly at potatoes—"Potato. What is that?" How do I convert it into something we would eat because eating is good to do. Must remember how to make food happen.—Then your mind slams back into the remembrance of the crisis. Oh god. No. It's still there. It's still a nightmare. I thought if I thought of "potato" maybe "crisis" would go away. Potato is so ordinary, so everyday, so mundane. Crisis is so extraordinary: like an electric shock over and over and over again.

Later, you go to bed and it's really hard to go to sleep, first of all, really hard because you can't look at potatoes or out the window or at the TV so all of your mind comes violently

alive and awake and aware of the crisis, like a hungry prehistoric fish rising from the depths of a shadowed pool, and you see the face of your kid who is involved in the crisis, as a baby or a child and then you weep with profundity, from your depths, from your empty womb that your child rode into this world on and from the soles of your feet that would run hard and carry you away from this mess if they could—if you didn't have to take your skin and your neurons and your heart along too as you ran and ran. And this is when you don't—you *do not* want—to be in your skin. And then you fall asleep, suddenly, exhausted from all the turbulent forces within your one singular body, with your nose all stuffed and your head aching and your cheeks tight from dried salty trails.

Day 2:

And then it's the next morning, the second day. Probably too early, probably only four or five hours after you fell asleep because your body knows and bodies think you shouldn't sleep too long because there are always tasks with a crisis. Phone calls and discussions, decisions to be made. Courses of action to pursue. Teeth to gnash and hands to wring. Garments to rend. And as you float back to the world, surface from that blessed oblivion of sleep, your body knows before your mind does that you are in crisis because you wake up with your jaw clenched and your eyes glued shut. Your first conscious thought is "No." Nope. No, please. Before you are even fully aware of the bad thing, your mind is forming "no." But that fragile word can't stop the rush of awareness and then it floods all of your mind, pieces and pieces of it at a time until "click" the whole mess of the jigsaw puzzle of "crisis" is completely formed in your head and you wish you weren't the kind of person who would never kill yourself because you just want to die right there in your

soft bed with your blanket clenched in your fists and the pillow mashed over your head to cocoon you from crisis.

Heart! Stop beating.

Blood! Don't flow.

I'm trying to will myself to die. If I focus hard enough, just concentrate, I surely have the strength to kill myself with just the strength of my infamous will. Uuunnnh.

Uuunnnhhhhh. Hell. I've given birth to a 10 plus pound baby with no anesthesia; I can do this. Ask my dead mother; she will gladly attest to the awful power of my will.

How to narrate pain? Why to narrate pain? When I'm in pain, the only thing that makes me feel like I can live is to be with other people who know pain. If pain is a large deep muddy pit, then it makes sense that you want to find another pit dweller, another crisis survivor, who knows the landscape. Best of all is someone who has lived in the pit over and over and attests to how they climbed out, again and again. "Look," they'll say, "over here the mud is softer and less wet—you can settle your bones into the yielding muck and curl up into your all-important fetal position." Knows how to dig out a depression to curl up in, how to put the mud and the darkness to use. How to exist for a while on mud pies. Make mud pies. Reading about other people's large deep pits helps, affirms, details how one climbs out slipping and falling back at some future time. Or even how one fashions subsistence in the pit. Or if one sinks into the mud and dies, well, that resonates too.

Sheets. Luke's used sheets laying on the basement floor—picking them up and having the irresistible urge to hold them to my nose in case a sweaty trace of him remained.

They stink of a week on the damp basement floor. I hesitate, then throw them in the washer.

Day 3:

What is it about summer and young men and trouble? The sultry breezes, cold beers, long shadowed nights—the freedom? The hot blood made hotter by the boil of sunbaked days as they roam, shirtless and sharp eyed, hot sand on their feet and scoping half nude hotties with coconut scented skin? Words like “rove,” and “pack,” and “restless” come to mind. Hot trouble fueled by too much alcohol.

On Day 3, your body and your mind have coalesced in their conjoined pain which has been folded in to your awareness so that neither part engages in that herky-jerky dissonance of feeling crisis but forgetting crisis, or remembering crisis and then feeling your stomach drop anew or your heart hammer in your throat. There is some congruence as all parts get on board. Everybody knows we’re in crisis, and somehow CRISIS! has become crisis.

On Day 3, your people have surfaced by now—your sister, your best friend, the woman whose son had similar trouble has returned your call and given generously of her wisdom and sympathy. Your former therapist. You’ve talked to a lawyer or lawyers. You have enough information about the crisis to sleep and you will sleep tonight because your body hasn’t been in concert with your mind before this.

You’ve given up trying to mind-fuck yourself to death. Maybe you still forget to eat all day and cup after cup of your coffee grows cold as you return phone calls and do a chore

or two, disjointed, scattered, but still—you've loaded the dishwasher and remembered to pull something out for dinner. You actually feel hungry.

crisis to separate, discern **1** the turning point of a disease for better or worse, esp. a sudden recovery

You remember that God doesn't have it in for you, targeted you in all of the universe to suffer. Your child either. You start to allow the notion that God might be present to you in all the kind people who have supported and informed you during these first three days of the crisis.

chrysalis **1** pupa of a butterfly, the form between the larval and adult stages, a case or cocoon **2** a stage of development when something or someone is still protected

Alternate Ending #4: Climax

Debris litters a few of the neighboring yards, no one on the street appears to own a lawnmower. The middle aged woman and her husband pull up slowly to the multiplex unit where her son was involved in a big bad mess. She is driving because her husband is tired to the point of blurriness from driving a semi-truck all night. She tells him: “Gandhi. Be Gandhi. Whatever they say or do. We just leave if it gets at all weird, right?” Two men are replacing the front door, the old one is lying, window shattered, frame twisted, on the grass of the front yard. Children wheel their bikes around in the street nearby and a few near neighbors sit on their concrete steps, talking and flicking their cigarettes.

The woman sits in her car for a moment, gauging the two men. “Maybe I should just go up alone. I’m a woman, his mom. I’m old. I’m fat. No one is going to feel threatened by me, right?” The woman is worried that the two working men might be enraged relatives of the woman who had been involved in the big bad mess. Her husband is so tired that he is having a hard time thinking at all. “Besides,” she reminded him, “I just paid my life insurance—that envelope we dropped off.”

“That check for \$29.04?” he grunted. “Great.”

She thinks one of the work men looks fairly clean cut in a tee shirt and jeans, a tape measure stuck in his front pocket—her husband dresses just like that, right down to the tape measure. The clean cut workman looks at the couple in the car, watches them right back. He says something to his companion and it’s the companion who scares the woman. She thinks he must be well over six feet tall, and he is dressed in a dirty

muscleman tank stretched to distortion over his huge torso and hanging belly. His face is unshaven, and his dark teeth are bared as he squints toward the road. His eyes follow the woman as she slowly gets out of her car and walks over to where the two men are working.

She moves slowly across the handkerchief sized front yard. The men become very still. “Hi,” she says, approaching where they stood by the door frame. No answer. “I’m the mother of a guy who was apparently involved in this...?” She gestures at the empty door frame, the shards of glass.

Quickly, the large man in the tank top reaches around the corner into the house. She is confused by his movement and watches dumbly as his hand reappears holding a shotgun. He sneers and shoves it toward her face as the clean cut looking guy grabs her and shoves her against the brick of the building.

“You’re his mother? Eat this, bitch.” He shoves the muzzle of the rifle toward her mouth. She flings her head up and looks him in the eye. Without looking away, “Yes,” she says, and, “Yes” as she grabs the cold steel and licks it slowly and draws it into her mouth, closes her lips around it as a woman welcomes her lover. She pulls it closer, deeper, coquettishly caresses the steely length of it. Hard; so hard. Feels the unrelenting presence of the gun barrel lodge against her teeth. Tastes the acrid metallic tang on her tongue and closes her eyes.

How to Visit Your Son in Jail

He was wearing black and white cartoon stripes. The bullet-proof window that framed his head was about the size of a legal pad; the black telephone receiver that I used to speak to him was heavy and rigid in my sweaty hand. I tried to look only at his eyes, clear gray and tinged with baby blue, uncharacteristic tears welling in them and being shaken off, like the lake when it's calm but clouds are scudding overhead and random drops hit your face.

There was a disconcerting lag like old voice-over-ed Godzilla movies; his lips would move-pause-and then his voice would sound, tinny and distant in my ear. I tried to just watch his eyes. That's where we know each other best, that's where we connect. "Look at me, Luke. Luke, stop. Look at me." How many times had I said that as he ricocheted through his life?

"Hey Luke. Are you okay?"

"Hey Mom. Yeah, I'm doing okay."

"I only have five minutes, because, you know, Dad was talking." Luke's eyes met mine and he gave a little nod and the ghost of a smile; his dad famously forgets time and talks sometimes too long to Luke in his earnest desire to instruct and affirm him, forgetting that one of Luke's biggest deficits is as an attentive listener.

He looked me straight in the eye, then ducked his head a little, seemed embarrassed. Gave a brief, nervous laugh. "Mom that wasn't me there that night. That wasn't me."

“I know, Luke. I know it was the alcohol.”

He held up a torn piece of yellow legal pad with “Tammy,” “Matthew,” and a phone number on it, pressed it up to the window. I didn’t understand what I was seeing.

“Mom, would you call for this guy who’s in here? He can’t get in touch with his family to send him money, can you please? He really needs it, he can’t get in touch with her.”

I shook my head, trying to clear it. “Luke, I can’t take that in right now, please, I won’t remember the number now. Can you show me at the very end of our visit and then I can try to remember it?” I had nothing with me in the visiting room, had assumed that I had to go in empty handed, assumed that a pen or a key would not be allowed. We know nothing about how to do this. How to visit our son in jail.

“Oh. Okay.”

Four minutes left. I looked at him again, searching for his state of mind; I knew ahead of time that I would be able to read him when I saw him. Was he at all defiant? Was there any part of him that was defensive or thought this was somehow exciting or cool? Was he closed up tight?

When our eyes locked, I had all of my answers. He realized how bad it was. He was chastened, humbled, ready to be led. Perhaps broken and ready to rebuild. For me, this was the most important information of the whole episode. In the trenches, is his soul right? Is his soul okay? That’s the bottom line I cling to.

Was his face thinner? Was that possible after five days? He looked very, very young to me, his eyes the only spots of color on his face, his ears seeming to stick out farther from his head like the other Shepherds he was named after—both of whom had their own battles with alcohol. It hit me. Why had I, we, named him after two men who had drinking problems? For the first time that occurred to me and I felt as if I had cursed him somehow; I had only seen my Grandpa's laughter and love of the outdoors, only seen my father's fine intellect and integrity.

* * *

For Mothers: How to Visit *Your Son in Jail*

1) Walk in the Door

Walk in the large glass doors and immediately go into the restroom located to the right of the barred check-in window because you drank coffee and water on the 40 mile drive to the county jail and your bladder is so nervous that you must pee. Now.

2) Be Vigilant

Lay toilet paper all over the seat and squinch your eyes up searching for jail prisoner's families's cooties. Diseases. Germs. Oh. Wait. Wash your hands extra well and avoid your eyes in the mirror. Gingerly touch the door handle to leave.

3) Sign In

Sign in, in a book that lays on the counter. All of the visitors and inmates names are there, your husband's above yours. The columns: Name, Relationship to the Inmate, Inmate's Name. Drop your pretenses here. You are Linda Sirois, Mother to Lucas

Sirois, Inmate. Take a surreptitious look at the other visitors and inmates and their relationships: “mom,” “girlfriend,” “friend,” “girlfriend,” “girlfriend,” “sister”; there is only one father listed on the page. Experience yet another moment of gratitude at the fortitude and constancy of the man you married; if he isn’t there by your side, feel free to curse him. Silently.

4) Show Identification

Show your photo identification to the not unpleasant but definitely no-nonsense officer with the baby face and the Adams apple bobbing in his throat, slide it under the narrow slot of the safety window and watch as he enters you into a computer and checks that you don’t have a warrant out for your arrest or that you are not a felon. Hope that they don’t run your credit scores in case you have large medical bills from psychological testing and other related expenses for your son that you have taken responsibility for because he’s only 21, even though you can only pay on them over time and, yes, some of them are in collection agencies.

5) Wait Your Turn

Wait. Wait and wait until they “bring him in.” Oh God. He is only allowed 20 minutes of visit time on Thursday from 6-9 and on Sunday from 1-4 because he is a male inmate whose name is between N and Z. Only a few visitors can go through the swinging gate into the security door of the visitors’ room at one time and sit in the row of chairs so you have to wait for the previous inmate’s 20 minute time slot to end and a seat to open up.

6) Get Familiar with the Resources

Dare to lift your eyes and actually look around at the lobby as you wait. It's small. There seems to be linoleum. There are about eight chairs. Look at the rack of pamphlets for AA and MADD, for buckling up and for other alcohol and drug related information. Realize, really get, how many of the people who walk through here are here because of substance abuse and the impairment of their judgment and their impulses. Read the sign that says that visitors may not wear revealing clothing or clothing with offensive language, questionable jewelry, curse or speak loudly or profanely—look down at the blouse you are wearing that you often wear to church or to teach—a blouse you've worn in at work interviewing people and when you want to look like what you are: a nice, middle class, even educated, woman who loves her child and is trying to feel her way through this. You clutch your white middle class normalness closely, the same way you clutched your car key, your driver's license, and the \$20 bill you could put on your son's prison commissary account as you walked into the jail lobby. Clutched prayerfully, both hands close to your chest as shield and supplication.

7) But Don't Make Eye Contact

Avert your eyes from the other visitors who are entering the lobby, but look at them covertly and judge them (still, really?) and look away with an exhaled rush from the enormous grizzled man in a leather vest with a black scarf tied around his head and a cigarette smoke voice. His shoes are worn out and he slides into a chair opposite you and talks in a low voice with an older man in a clean button down shirt tucked in neatly over his pot belly. Arrange your mouth in a sad, yet prissy line that tells whoever looks at you that you don't belong here, not really, this isn't your natural place and that you are

shocked and grief-stricken. Possibly there has even been a mistake made...? Get a glimpse of yourself in the glass door facing you and wonder when the hell you will drop the pose. Wonder when you will understand that you aren't special or better than anyone-else-who -is-in-here's mother and that you are, in fact, extraordinarily fortunate to have your son's father to share this with, your white skin and college educated diction to hide behind, and abundant support from friends who have survived catastrophic parenting experiences. Tremble in humility. Bow your head as you wonder what this would be like if you were: a) in Detroit or other large urban area instead of a little northern tourist town; b) a woman of color whose son was a young man of a color which might predispose law enforcement people to make rash judgments out of bias or ignorance; c) poor or suffering from chronic depression or any kind of mental disorder yourself besides the anxiety that courses through your entire family; d) with few or no resources such as: some money, some friends, some sisters, some counseling. Realize that you are merely in a Halloween costume like a princess dress and mask but that underneath that costume the only difference that divides is that you are luckier. More lucky than some, less than others. That's all. Soften that mouth. Cast down those eyes, or, better yet, hold your head naturally, let your eyes connect. Breathe.

8) Keep an Eye on the Time

Look at your watch and realize that your husband has been in there for almost 15 minutes talking to your son, and that you need to figure out how to remind him that it's your turn or you will miss out on seeing your son face to face and thereby taking his emotional temperature so that you can know how he is situated in all of this.

9) Know Your Rights

Debate about whether you should just walk in through the swinging gate that says “Authorized Personnel Only” to tag your husband so you can have your turn or wait to see if there is some official legal timekeeper of visitation who will do that for you; as you debate, you notice that the big scary man in the corner and the older man with the neatly tucked shirt are telling each other about their daughters who they are there to visit, and their hopes for them after they are released. This seems sweet to you. Caring fathers to these young female inmates.

10) Be Brave

You decide to walk in and knock on the glass windowed security door and give your husband a look and point to your watch. He looks surprised and telegraphs you a look of apology, and holds the door for you as he steps out. You approach the chair nervously, fearing you will begin to cry, then the tickle in your throat and the prickle in your eyelids are swept away by the relief, and even, briefly a shot of joy, that your child is visible, that you can set your eyes on him and that he is, for the moment, safe and looking you in the eyes and seeming so happy to see you that he tells you he loves you for maybe the first time in a very, very long time and something in your chest eases and for that moment, it's just you and him again, like that first blurred look you exchanged when they placed him in your arms in the hospital, and like that afternoon he climbed down off the school bus for the first time and ran to you, to *you*, and you saw that he was good, he was okay—that he would be alright.

And then you sit in the little plastic chair and you pick up the old fashioned telephone receiver that looks like it came from a pay phone. After a moment, you lay your fingertips against the Plexiglas. He looks at them, and after a moment, presses a fingertip to yours. And you talk to your son.

Recipe for Trauma Pork Chops

Trauma Pork Chops can't be beat for a tasty family dinner. "Quick" and "easy" are irresistible ingredients when it comes to feeding a hungry household and you, the chef, are busy with the goings-on of your own life! Any cut of meat will probably pleasantly surprise you with the outcome of this dish: the secret is in the extra-long marinating time. In fact, the least expensive cuts of meat will yield the most gratifying results.

Tools:

A deep *covered glass or plastic dish* for the marinating process. Plastic or glass will be most suitable, as the long term interaction between the vinegary marinade and a metal vessel is unknown. What a shame it would be, at the end of the marinating process, to open the dish and see something unpalatable! When your family is counting on a nutritious meat dish after days of "catch as catch can" for dinner, you won't want to be the one to tell them that it's Lucky Charms tonight.

Ingredients:

The makings for Trauma Pork Chops couldn't be simpler! Imagine your hungry 21-year-old son will soon be home for dinner—if not that day, then surely sometime over the next few days, because he usually stops in at some point although, come to think of it, he hasn't called at all for four days which gives you that swirly feeling deep in your stomach because once when he didn't call for a few days he was actually in jail. Buy up a good supply of whatever *favorite meat cuts* looks good that day and are on sale. Pork chops are ideal, and pick up plenty: two or three or even four packages will delight your hungry boy and, naturally, his father. To your shopping cart, add something acidic, like bottled

generic *Italian dressing*, or even beer, unless someone in your family should reduce their alcohol consumption or has a history of difficulties involving alcohol, in which case the bottled Italian dressing will serve nicely. If you, as hostess and chef, enjoy a beer before dinner, by all means do pick up a six-pack or even a twelve-pack to have on hand to offer to the responsible drinkers on your guest list.

Method:

Here is the part you will simply love. Leave the pork chops in the refrigerator for a couple of days, as you await your dinner guest: in this case, say, a hungry young man. Even if you find out that, for example, he *is* in jail again, and your life becomes hectic what with phone calls to lawyers, to the ex-girlfriend, to your friends who have experienced something similar, why those raw chops will be fine for a few days at 40 degrees. When you've tired of your "busy-day" dinners of beer and microwave popcorn, you can wander downstairs from your bedroom, peel off the packaging, toss the pork chops into an old Gordon Foods Mini Chocolate Topped Eclairs container which you found in the dish drainer, pour some Italian dressing over the top of all, and voila! You have all you need for a tasty dinner in a day, two days, three days, or even four days when you can bring yourself to go outside and turn on the grill. You will be astonished at the "melt-in-your-mouth" quality of Trauma Pork Chops.

A word of caution: It is unknown how much longer after three days in the refrigerator and four days marinating in the refrigerator the meat will be safe to eat. Err on the side of caution here, and try to make yourself be able to toss them if it gets upwards of, say, a week or ten days and you haven't found the right time to serve up this tasty dish. Yes, I know, meat is expensive.

Serving:

This dish will go a long way, as the extremely busy family will most likely have little appetite. There will be plenty for the well-wishers who may have stopped by to talk.

Instant mashed potatoes and canned green beans are an appropriate accompaniment.

Room and Board

This has been an historic winter, the coldest winter in 20 years since the winter of 1993-1994, which I remember well because that's the winter I drove Dick down to Gladstone every morning, in the dark, and came back home, still in the dark, with a newborn and a two year old strapped in their car seats in the back of a Honda. That winter, like this one, had night after night and many days that were 10 degrees below zero, 20 degrees below zero, even down to 38 below zero. We drove him 28 miles south, dropped him at his semi-truck and then I drove the three of us 28 miles back to the warmth of the woodstove and the reassuring chatter of Sesame Street and felt the vulnerability of all of us during each careful mile. How could I enfold both of them into my coat, close to my body, if something happened to halt our drive home? How could I figure out how to tuck them both close enough to save them? And in saving them, save me?

* * *

I sat at my desk, waiting for the peripatetic Mr. Coffee as it wheezed on the kitchen counter. First day of spring break, last day of February. I decided to tackle the series of sticky notes on my dollar store monthly planner. They screamed urgency, tinted the same color as the blaze hunting vests and \$2 stocking caps I used to make the kids wear when they played outside in the fall when we neared the succession of hunting seasons: small game, pheasant, duck, deer, it seems it was always open season on something. They ran, flame tipped specks bobbing like wooden kitchen matches across the hay fields that rimmed our house, heading toward the climbing tree, a four story

maple that stood alone in the field with mounded fieldstone staking its place among the grasses, cedar and maple forests their boundaries.

I dialed the number on the first sticky note and paid Luke's car insurance.

"Confirmation number: 1-4-5-0-9-5-2-6-1-8-6-1-6-3-6..." I scrambled for a pen.

"If you would like me to repeat the...con-fir-ma-tion...number... please press '1' now."

"What would you like to do next?"

"I'm sorry—I didn't catch that—what would you like to do next?"

"If you're finished, you can say 'goodbye' or simply hang up" said the automated voice. Crumpling the sticky note made a small crackle and I shot it toward the trash can.

* * *

The radio in the kitchen announced road closings for the day: M-28 was closed, sections of U.S. 2 had just closed due to blowing snow and whiteout conditions. "Be sure to call and check ahead," the voice advised, "As many events and businesses are postponed or cancelled due to the weather. And whaddya want to go out on those roads for, anyway?" Laughter. "Stay home, everybody, if you can."

I shifted a pile of bills over to the side of my desk and the top papers slid off, exposing a stapled sheaf of papers from the county jail. I looked at them; there were three notices: two 9x11 white pages, unfolded, and a bright red half page.

THIS INVOICE IS NOT INCLUDED IN FINES AND COSTS

November 13, 2013

Lucas Shepard Sirois

Re: OUTSTANDING ROOM AND BOARD Acct # - 28575-01

Dear Ms. Sirois:

According to our records your account at the Marquette County Jail is 30 days past due. The following amount is due and payable immediately.

ROOM AND BOARD	\$ <u>600.00</u>
MEDICAL EXPENSES	\$ <u>0.00</u>
TOTAL	\$ <u>600.00</u>

Your payment can be made in the form of money order, certified check, or cash. **NO PERSONAL CHECKS WILL BE ACCEPTED.** Money orders should be made payable to Marquette County Sheriff's Department.

If there are any questions or if you need to set up a payment plan, contact the Prisoner Reimbursement Officer at the number below.

**Return this notice with your payment to assure proper credit to your account.

Serving You Through Community Policing

FINAL NOTICE – PAST DUE ACCOUNT

January 30, 2014

Lucas Shepard Sirois

Dear Ms. Sirois:

According to our records your account at the Marquette County Jail is 60 days past due. The following amount is due and payable immediately.

ROOM AND BOARD	\$ <u>540.00</u>
MEDICAL EXPENSES	\$ <u>0.00</u>
TOTAL	\$ <u>540.00</u>

After sending statements for payment, we have not heard from you. If payment is not received within 10 days of the date of this notice, we will take legal action or your account will be placed with a collection agency at a higher cost. **THIS IS YOUR FINAL NOTICE.**

Your payment can be made in the form of money order, certified check, or cash. **NO PERSONAL CHECKS WILL BE ACCEPTED.** Money orders should be made payable to Marquette County Sheriff's Department.

Serving You Through Community Policing

And this last one, printed on the red paper:

Sirois 28575-01

- We are offering you a settlement for this outstanding account in the amount of
- \$ 260.00.
- Payment in full must be made within 30 days of given date.
- Your due date to take advantage of the discounted rate: 3-1-14.
- If this offer is not an option, you must contact our office within 30 days to arrange an affordable payment plan.
- If you fail to reimburse the County of Marquette for the required Housing Reimbursement your account will move forward at a higher rate to you.

I puzzled over the papers. Was this some kind of declining balance, akin to a reverse mortgage? If we waited until next month, would it go down more? I had wanted to pay the first one, but we didn't have the extra money then. Was this designed to fully penalize the rule-following population, moms and dads who were easily intimidated or fiscally sound? The whole idea of a penal system that bills people for locking them up was sufficiently puzzling; this series of bills compounded my confusion.

I wiped the greasy prints from the face of my cell phone on my sweat shirt, then punched in the contact numbers listed on the invoice.

“Hello, this is Tammy.”

“Hi Tammy, this is Linda Sirois, I'm calling about Lucas Sirois. I'm his mother.”

I read her the prisoner number from the white paper.

“I have a form in front of me that says that he owes for room and board for when he was in jail last summer...? And something about a settlement offer?”

“Yes, let me check here...hmm...oh, this is old, from 2013. I thought it was a new one. Okay. There was some credit that was applied, let me see...”

“He’s been doing a lot of community service...”

“No, that wouldn’t count here. Okay, I see. The amount that he would now owe for this settlement would be \$225.00.”

“Well I’d like to settle this bill for him—he’s been trying to find work for months, he has applications in all over, but he hasn’t been able to get anything. He has no income.”

“Sure, that would be fine.”

“I had planned to pay this yesterday—I work in town—but it was so stormy yesterday and I live in Trenary, so I didn’t end up coming in and now I won’t be in next week either because of spring break...”

“Oh, you can just mail it in then, I don’t want you to come in just for that.”

“Oh, thanks, so who do I make the check out to...?”

“Oh, no checks, no personal checks...”

“Of course, sorry, I mean the money order—made out to who?”

“The Sheriff’s office will be fine.”

“Okay. So I’m just wondering. Is this how it’s always done? With anyone who’s in jail owing money for staying there?”

“Well, in this state, the government allows counties to charge for room and board in their own jail systems. It’s discretionary, according to each county, and I don’t know, but I think a lot of them do.”

“Wow. Okay. And so then, if the prisoners can’t pay, does it then attach to their credit rating and follow them around?”

“Oh, yes, it becomes part of their credit score.”

“Wow. But how do they expect these people to get ahead? I mean, aren’t the people who go to jail usually the ones that have a lot of other issues anyway? Like, problems?”

“Un huh.”

“But doesn’t that seem kind of...punitive? How are they supposed to dig out?”

The silence was complete. It lasted so long that I wasn’t sure if Tammy had hung up. I wondered what went through her mind as we both waited. Did she think “What a pathetic, enabling mom, no wonder her kid is trouble.”? Did she think, “Hello! Punitive! Yes! They deserve all that and more.” Did she wonder, herself, how the parade of people who boarded at the county jail dug themselves out of the hole they had fallen into but knew that this was simply not, thank God, her problem? Was she looking at her nails, thinking she needed a new polish—maybe something in the aqua family in honor of the nearing of the end of this long-ass winter, because the deep red was feeling tired and overdue for a change—waiting for me to say ‘Goodbye’ as she thought of her own boys, good boys, who would never, ever, be one of these young men who wandered through the criminal justice system because she and her husband were raising them right? Had she

ventured into this kind of dangerous territory before with the relatives of imprisoned people who had agreed to help their loved ones dig out of this first big mess, but never again, no more, and who were frustrated as they watched their relatives apply for job after job and even have interviews but as soon as the interviewer said, “Looks good, we’ll just conduct a background check and get back to you” your relative knew that they would not hear from the interviewer again, and the relatives whose law-breaking loved ones were so busy with their mandatory appointments at Great Lakes Behavioral Substance Abuse Center and doing community service at Good Will to try to pay back as much of their fines as they could, and trying to keep track of their mandatory probation officer appointments, with memory problems that made it all so very very complicated, and these helping relatives, these parents and spouses, maybe, and these tired, broke, worried relatives couldn’t help it, couldn’t stop themselves sometimes, when they found one person in the vast criminal justice system who seemed nice, like Tammy had seemed nice, couldn’t help asking them...”Why?” “Why is this so hard? So expensive? So complicated? And what in the name of God would happen to them, our beloved relative, who, yes, has screwed up but really wants to do better, if we weren’t here and somewhat solvent and willing and able to help as they learn these lessons?”

And the silence stretched out on the other end of the phone.

And then I said, “Thank you for your help. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

* * *

My cell phone vibrated. I looked at the number and saw that it was a Marquette number and for a moment I wondered if it was Tammy calling back. Was she going to renege on the settlement offer? Find a mistake and return the amount due to \$260.00 or, oops, \$540.00 or, what the hell, even \$600.00 because I had stepped out of our agreed positioning—me, suppliant, and her, grantor, and questioned her? I blamed it on not having even one full cup of coffee in me yet that morning as I plunged into the waiting paperwork and desk chores. I picked up my cell phone.

“Hello?”

“Hiii...! How are you?”

“Um, hello?”

“It’s me! It’s Robert!”

“Oh, hey Robert.”

“How are you doing? It’s hard to believe it’s that time of the month again, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. I’m fine. Doing fine.” I looked out the window at the white sky, white ground, jagged line of charcoal at the intersection of earth and sky. The window shook a little.

“Okay, so I’m wondering if you will be able to make a payment today?”

“Yes, I think so. Let me just get online while we’re talking to check real quick. Yes, I can. I can actually pay \$100 each today.”

“Great! Okay, let me get into the program...hmm...come on computer...ah!
There we are, and \$100 on yours and is that other \$100 on the other account? On your
son’s account?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. There we go. Okay...done! Okay, and I’ll talk to you in about 30 days,
alright?”

“Thanks, Robert.”

“Okay, bye-bye, now.”

I walked into the kitchen, rinsed out my coffee cup, and scraped some wet cheese
off the top plate in the sink. The thermometer outside the kitchen window only went to
10 degrees below zero and had stayed stuck there intermittently for days this month.
Today it stood at ten degrees but it felt like nine below zero.

* * *

“...not much improvement is expected during the day Friday. Daytime high
temperatures are only expected to reach single digits across a large portion of central
Upper Michigan. Peak winds gusting to 30-40 mph along the Lake Superior shoreline
and somewhat calmer inland will generate blowing and drifting snow and reduce
visibility across the region...”

* * *

When Lucas and Sadie were small, we belonged to a home grown multi-family
play group that began as a socializing experience for toddlers who lived in our rural

county and turned into a socializing opportunity for conversation-starved moms who stayed home with a total of 28 children during the long Michigan winters. We began with activities for the toddlers, projects, and whatever field trips we could dream up in our isolated locale: the elementary school playground in summer, the fire-station in Marquette who kindly welcomed our kids until they discovered that we were from a different county and different tax base, the local Feed Mill to look at the baby chicks that had just been ordered for the area farmers. I don't remember who came up with this idea—I suspect it was me—but during one interminable winter we took a few mini vans full of our preschoolers over to the Alger County Sheriff's office for a look around.

We walked into the office with a trail of big-eyed three, four, and five-year-olds who whispered excitedly to each other. The boys would have been in the throes of “good guy versus bad guy” play at that age: Power Rangers, cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, Batman and the Joker, and I think we had a vague idea of aligning them from an early age with the good guys. We had envisioned a little talk about what a helper Mr. Sheriff is, maybe a few plastic badges or coloring pages, and then off to the local Pizza Hut for shared pizzas and pop. The baby girls we wore on our backs began to stir and fuss, wanting to toddle or be nursed after the 40 minute drive to the Sheriff's office, and we moms would have been ready for our weekly talk-fest where we laughed at ourselves, our husbands, and our kids in equal measure, and then left feeling not so alone.

It must have been a slow day at the Alger County Jail, because the uniformed officer invited us into the back to take a look.

“Hey kids, you want to see where the bad guys get locked up?”

A chorus of “Yeah!”s and “Cool!”s followed his question.

I have a memory of a cell like on the TV shows, open, barred, with bunks along the sides, a toilet, a sink. Nowhere to duck into or be private. I remember sun slanting in from somewhere outside the barred area. I remember orange jumpsuits. Did he really take us back there? Did I dream it, imagination supplying the open airy space I would most have liked if I spent time there? Did I imbue it with light? With hardwood floors and catered meals?

Lucas spent a few nights there, when he was 17 and then 18. I know I didn’t go back to the cell area then; I couldn’t have seen the light, the jumpsuits through blurred eyes. When one of the play group moms and I picked him up there the first time, I wondered if he had been “scared straight.”

“Well, Lucas?” I asked, my face swollen. Eyes, no doubt, accusing.

“Mom, they were nice to me there. It was a bunch of guys just like me but older. They played cards with me and gave me their milk from their dinners.”

* * *

The Mr. Coffee hissed as I poured another mug full. I felt unpleasantly awake, neurons sparkling.

My cell phone rang again. “Popple Tone” is my ringtone. Maybe it was time to change it to something else. It was Lucas. I had left him a message earlier about some kind of charges that came in from Verizon about a web purchase. We talked and I started to get impatient, as he told me hadn’t ordered anything through his phone. He

sounded tense and I could feel my anxiety mingle with his and it begin to escalate, as it often does when we are both stressed.

“Luke, I’ve been paying bills and I got that text about a web purchase from your number.”

“Yeah, I got one too, but I didn’t buy anything. The only things I’ve gotten were free.”

“Luke, sometimes it’s tricky, you can’t tell that they’re charging you.”

“I’m telling ya, I know, because then they ask you for all your information and stuff if it’s for sale.”

“Well, apparently there has been some kind of charge. They offered the option of just blocking web charges and I think I might just do that. It would be easier. Our Verizon bill was somehow almost \$100 higher this month.”

“They’re all a bunch of crooks, why don’t we just go to that One Touch thing that has unlimited text, talk, and data for \$45 a month? Jake and Heather have that, and so do all my other friends and they say that they get even better service than we do, all over.”

We argued a bit about whether this would work or not and wasn’t that through AT&T and he said no, people have Verizon phones and all his friends said it’s a lot better.

“Well okay, but for now, this is what we have. But I’ve been paying a lot of bills today, Luke, and we’re struggling here...medical bills and I paid that jail bill...”

“Mom! I told you that they don’t come after you for that bill that you don’t have to pay it.”

“Luke, I called the jail office and they said you do have to pay, that it will attach to your credit rating and hurt your credit.”

“Mom! Of course if you call them they’ll tell you that you have to pay. The people I talk to, lots of people who have actually been through it, say they haven’t paid and nothing happens to them.”

“Luke! Maybe they won’t come take you away, but it will hurt your credit so if you want to get a car or something it will follow you around. I’m telling you, these kinds of things don’t just go away. You’re trying to dig out from this, and that means that everything has to be paid off.”

“Mom, I don’t want for you to have to pay any more for me. You guys have done so much for me already, I wish so much I could just take care of the these things myself.”

“We know that you are a person who takes care of himself whenever you can. We are not worried that you are taking advantage of us or using us to get stuff. Every time you are able, you cover everything for yourself. We know this, Luke.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’m just so stressed right now...I just got to this woman’s house and I’m going to shovel for her and she’s going to pay me and I want to get it done today...”

“Oh, okay, then I’ll let you go. So, you have work, you will get some money; that’s a good thing. Life is good right now. Call me later, okay?”

“Okay, Mom, bye.”

* * *

I scrolled through the menu of my blue Samsung for a new ringtone. “Brain Wave” felt like pulsating blood, “Figure Out” felt like a reproach, “Imagine” was too sultry. “Indian Mask” was too exciting, like a stalker poised to pounce, a way I already felt much of the time. “Muzzy Tone” didn’t have the soft sound I had envisioned; “The Time is Now” was strident and pushy. “Whistle Your Cares Away” felt like an optimistic fit.

* * *

Frost lines are two to three feet deeper this winter than usual and they say that things are freezing as far down as 88 inches beneath the ground surface; at least that was the figure I heard last week. For all I know, the freezing has gone deeper by now. I think it has.

Like during the winter of 1993 and 1994, water lines are freezing and cracking, entire towns have broken water mains and are relying on garden hoses strung from building to building to share water flow. “Let run” orders are broadcast on televisions along with strings of school cancellations and road closings, scrolling like garland on the bottom of the screen. Last night was the coldest night of the year, so far.

Alternate Ending #5: Smoke

Hidden deep in the walls, something sparked. Something smoldered. It could have started with the mini refrigerator they had moved into their room, discarded by a college aged niece after graduation from U of M seven years ago, in which they now kept four or five bottles of beer cold and out of sight of their relatives who shouldn't drink beer and to whom even a couple of bottles rolling in the bottom of the kitchen refrigerator could be a reminder and a beckoning.

And the irony is that the more the problem-drinking relatives got into trouble with alcohol, the more the woman and her husband wanted that single, sweating cold beer—Molson's for him and Blue Moon with a wedge of orange for her, poured into a glass so it didn't cause her to burp—before dinner as they sat together, mostly silent but for the latest bulletins of chaos or deficit or defeat. Sometimes they joked about these things, sometimes they sat in a silence of solidarity. In the winter, they sat in the living room by the stove and looked out at the snow. In the summer, they sat outside in plastic lawn chairs beneath the apple trees.

“The first one who has an apple fall on them has to go grill the hamburgers,” she said. He looked at her, deadpan, and when she turned her head he leaned down to the grass, picked up a green apple, and tossed it at her.

Having a beer together was their ritual, their routine, as they said goodbye to the workday and hello to the long evenings of dishes and dinner, showers, and laundry and The History Channel and nearly adult children who went out to meet people at 11:30 p.m. or didn't come home until the next day. The parents collected the empty beer bottles in a

brown paper bag to recycle for 10 cents apiece and gave the bags to whichever of their children had the most pressing financial need. “The Circle of Life” they called it.

Sometimes, lately, the woman had two beers, instead of just the one.

Or perhaps the fire began when the overused cell phone charger sizzled and gave out, plugged in next to her side of the bed so that the nearly adult—mostly adult—children, out driving after midnight on the rural U.S. 41 could call if they had a problem or a breakdown or a car-deer collision. Or an arrest.

It might have been the porch light which failed, or the amber wall light just inside the door, which they left on for whoever was out late. The switch might have failed or the bulb might have overheated, finally, after years of shining in the dark.

The washer might have shorted out, undone by the years of his heavy layers of work clothes which he wore while trying in vain to keep everything working and fixed, their daughter’s thongs wrapped around the washer agitator. The woman’s size 2X pants churning sluggishly in the drum and the multiple loads of the obsessively, compulsively soiled.

Whatever started it, the spark caught, was fed, and burned.

* * *

The woman stirred and inhaled deeply of the sacred smoke of burning electrical wires and insulation. The pillow top Serta where she and her husband lay, too exhausted now to ever do anything there but sleep, was smoking tonight, baby. She drew in and held, like the ten thousandth toke of the burning hemp of hope. All the particles of the flammable piles of unread books and children’s’ artwork, baby pictures and love notes

ascended into the night sky. Piles of unpaid medical bills and the wooden trim on the old house that always, always, needed painting or patching or priming slumped into ash and charred indeterminate debris. The intricate woodwork that always needed dusting, the recipes that she could never find during the holidays, the files she could never quite organize—all tinder.

She inhaled the harsh burn of it, all of it, dragging the caustic smoke in deeper and deeper and holding it; feeling the head rush and the knife edge in her lungs and holding it holding it as long as she could, deeper and deeper to suck every last bit of burn and oblivion from the smoke. Then release and cough and again. Her tongue curled and her eyes squinted in her sleep as she drew in and arched up to meet it and inhaled again and again. Til there was nothing left, not even a roach.

Prodigal

prodigious 1 wonderful; amazing 2 of great size, power, extent; enormous, huge 3 portentous

Our clothes dryer died last week, after 23 years. We bought it, our first, when I was pregnant with Luke and wisely foresaw that hanging our clothes over a wooden rack in the hallway would soon be impractical. Empathic to the end, she (all my appliances are female) politely waited to die until I had dried the last load of the clothes that Sadie was packing to transfer colleges, the load that included fists full of dress socks lifted from my bedroom and multi-colored thongs like slingshots, and one day before my student loan overage check became available, during the post-Christmas appliance sales. As united as we had been in our efforts to keep the four of us clean, dry, and unwrinkled, still I was secretly excited about getting a new dryer. Larger, athletic, able to toss and tumble whole basketsful of heavy jeans. Able to open wide and care for our comforters. Quieter. She never knew.

The scratched and dented almond dryer was dutiful but tired; she trembled now, as she worked, and had developed a high pitched squeal over the past year or so, one which Dick tried to repair by changing the drum belt, but the occasional shriek would peel up from the basement, amplified by the stacked stone walls and the 100-year-old cement steps, winding up the stairwell to the second floor bedrooms where I could hear faint laboring as I brushed my teeth at night.

Visitors who were there while the dryer was running would look behind themselves and cock their heads and say, “What was that? That sound?” “Oh that’s just

the dryer,” we’d say. We wanted to tell them, “Don’t be afraid.” We wanted to tell them that it’s just an aural stigmata, the white noise of our lives. Instead, we looked at the mud room floor that needed sweeping, at the fingerprinted windows of the front door panes, and smiled and invited them in.

* * *

prodigal **1** exceedingly or recklessly wasteful **2** extremely generous; lavish **3** extremely abundant; profuse

The lint lurking in crevices and folds of the dusty coiled hose of the aged Kenmore dryer is made up of fuzzy wisps from our hundreds of loads of cloth diapers, milky nursing bras, squash stained rompers, thousands of loads of gritty jeans from our mud walks down the dirt road in the rain, diesel tinged navy work uniforms, from grass stained football jerseys, blood spattered tee shirts—boy’s size Large, then X-Large, panties stained with a virginal menstrual flow. That dryer tumbled blankets cleansed of saturated urine and vomit, sheets stiff with spots of semen; the bedding our daughter was conceived on was run through this dryer with specks of fifty percent of the genetic material of all of the people who weren’t conceived that night. Dog beds left the lint filter clogged with hair, mud room rugs drenched in 15-year-old Black Lab urine—three or four washed and dried that final week before we made the decision to have her, Sweet Sally, put to sleep. Waitress aprons smeared with slopped gravy were reborn from the mouth of that dryer, and women’s size 18 jeans with potting soil spilling from the pockets, little perlite pellets trapped in the filter. That dryer would faithfully yield a load of my teaching clothes, size 22, wrinkle free if I coaxed the knobs to a lower temperature

and showed up at the door promptly at the end of the cycle: she had no buzzer to signal the cycle's end.

The year of Bad, Luke ran the same set of black clothing through that dryer once a week in order to earn the privilege of having a sleepover with a friend. He cared for almost nothing that year except being allowed to have a sleepover once a week. We saw this desire as a tool to convince him of the necessity of civilized habits—his great joy, at 12, to be with friends, overcame the OCD voices and whatever erratic thought processes that were initiated by the head injury. “Luke,” we’d repeat each week, “you aren’t allowed to go to people’s houses all stinky. That’s just not polite. If you want to go over to Zach’s (to Ben’s, to Caleb’s) you know what you have to do. Shower, wash your hair, brush your teeth, and all clean clothes. Otherwise, you’re home.”

That year, the OCD overwhelmed him and he was a slave to irrationality. Like only slightly intrusive background music, the OCD, that year of bad, swelled and turned up to an unbearable pitch, joined by some kind of badass choir to result in a chorus of insanity that drowned out Luke’s history, his thoughts, his autonomy. We watched his oversized black tee shirt with a white Metal Mulisha skull fade and soften, from constant wear and weekly trips through the washer and dryer—only cared for by him, we weren’t allowed to touch his clothes—deteriorate around the neck, where other 12 year-olds would grab the loose fabric in their games and sling one another around by their shirts, stretching out the collar and seams from which his thin neck protruded, seams which were opening up as the thread disintegrated. The black jeans dimmed to charcoal, then shadow gray, tears in the knees fraying, widening, fibers loosened and set adrift in the hot

air, trapped in the lint filter to be thrown out or tossed out in the field for nesting material for birds.

The Hanes white work socks dissolved first, holes in the toes widening weekly because OCD made him cut a hole in the tip of each sock and each pair, that year, had to be replaced a couple of times, thin and grey and barely connected into a sock shape and he screamed when we tried to take them and substitute new ones. He screamed, with all the volume of the changing voice of a 12-year-old boy, screamed, eyes blank, whites showing like one of those untamed horses you see in all the kids' movies. Up in my face. He screamed. I reeled back from him, tears starting in my own eyes, but hanging onto the socks, nevertheless. "When engaged in conflict with your child, once committed, you must win each battle, decisively." I heard Penelope, Dr. Spock, T. Berry. And the socks were shredded, more hole than fiber, they weren't intact, they weren't whole. They had come apart. Why am I still saying that, ten years later? Defending my taking of those socks, in the face of his horror?

How do you, do I, does anyone take in the sight of their child demented and anguished because of having to change his socks? This was not a temper tantrum he was engaged in, this was an alien disgorging, primal and terrified and furious that we were thwarting the implacable requirements set upon him by his OCD. I stood in the mud room of our house, red and green checkerboard linoleum, beneath the small wooden crucifix that my grandmother had given me for my Confirmation, when I was 12. I stood there, tugging at one end of the sock, telling him that he had to change them for a different pair because these were worn out. Over and over, trying to act calm, telling him, yes, he could go to stay over at Branson's house, just as soon as he changed his

socks. He had showered, washed his clothes, brushed his teeth. All the things we held out for him to do before he could go stay at someone's house.

“Natural consequences,” the child-rearing gang whispered in my ear. “Let the consequences develop logically from the infraction and your child will grow up with a sense of order and logic and safety.” “Nooooooo” he sobbed, broken, terrified, throwing himself up against the wooden closet doors. “Yes,” I held on, while inside I, too, screamed and shrieked: “What the fuck is going on? My god my god what's wrong with him? What is this, he looks insane, oh my god oh my god.” “Don't participate in the OCD rituals,” advised the experts. “Never enable them, no matter how much you'd like to do it.” I just wanted to be able to hold him, to hug him and reassure him that it was okay, it's okay honey, we're right here, nothing bad will happen. I just wanted to do my job, for him and for me. So we could both feel okay. But touching him during the bad year was like throwing holy water on those film vampires, he would have been out of his mind had I done that; I had experienced it and no longer reached out to touch him. That was the kindest response I could give him, no matter whether every inch of my skin directed me to draw him close.

I believe it was as if I, with the long standing fear of heights that I have, lived on a 77th floor roof, with no railings or barriers between me and the edge. And someone was trying to push me toward the edge. I would have reacted just like he was reacting: thrashing, shrieking. Unbelieving. Eyes rolled in extremity, out of my mind. And it follows that although my inhabitation of that 77th floor roof was only in my mind, it was as real to me as that (still) red and green checkerboard linoleum floor and that wooden cross. And I think of all the voices swirling around us, there, that night, in that room.

Insisting. Dictating and demanding their implacable demands. Advising, lamenting. The adamant voice of OCD fueling Luke, my voice and those who inform me: pediatricians, psychologists, my mother, the OCD experts, even the dog, barking. God, maybe. My ex-therapist, for sure.

Picture the close-ups of each cheesy demonic possession movie or preview you've ever seen. Picture a part of you, your child, who you know inch by every inch, every eyelash flutter, that funny way he cocks his head to one side when he's thinking hard—or, more likely, listening to the chorus in his head, and, mom-like, anticipate nearly every action almost before he's finished thinking it up—now picture that beloved kid out of his mind—not hearing, not able to articulate why this is unspeakable to exchange his beyond-worn-out socks with different, identical but intact socks. Picture inhuman rage and will and rejection. What had the OCD voices told him, for him to respond with such devastation? “If you change those socks, your whole family will die”? He told us every day, carefully and ritually, that he hated us all—so our death was probably not that fear. As far as we could tell, the OCD in his head was most concerned with “coolness” and appearance, with the absolute necessity of Lucas maintaining a specific persona. A “badness” that he had observed from infrequent glimpses of hip hop culture and the lawlessness he gathered from TV and movie watching. Far-fetched to an adult, but the very stuff of life to a preteen. And OCD always has a terrible penance attached to not obeying the dictates: illness, failure, death. Peer rejection? Lack of coolness? Illogical? Yes. That's mental illness. His anxiety and the OCD howled and lamented and the shrieking dryer trapped something else in its hidden crevices and coils, its hard metallic corners, and released it only years later, gasping.

* * *

The young guy helping me to pick out a new dryer had a red Lowe's vest on, spiked hair and clear blue eyes. His name tag said "Jake." He was patient with my hurried visit and followed as I went straight to the lowest priced models.

"So what's the difference between the \$389 model and the \$449 one?"

"Well, ma'am, let's take a look at the specs. This one is a Roper and it has a 6.5 cu capacity...and this one is a Whirlpool and has a 7.0 cu capacity..." he said, reading off the labels stuck to the front panels of the dryers. My eyes wandered through the fluorescent gray-white glow of the after-Christmas store, 8:30 on a Tuesday night, chilly and blank as the parking lot with the seven cars.

"And so what does that mean to me, as someone using it? Like, is that the difference between including one more pair of jeans in a load or what?"

"Ma'am that's a good question and I'd have to say I don't know. I'm not going to bullshit ya."

"Yeah, I appreciate that. So, okay, what else?" Another customer, a man, approached and we both ignored him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small blur of red as another Lowe's vest appeared.

Jake offered to print off all the spec sheets for me so I could compare, and also pulled out a little beeper thing to check to see which ones were in stock and if any had to be ordered. A deal breaker, for sure; at this point, I'd been a week without a dryer in the U.P. in January.

I chose the third cheapest one because it had three temperature settings and I could understand the graphics on the dial. Jake set me up with a cord and hose, both required for installation.

“Living way out where you do, ma’am, I’d sure recommend you take a couple of clamps, too. You don’t want to have to come back for anything or not get it all set up the way you want—with living so far out and all.”

“Oh, thanks a lot for thinking of that! Yeah, there’s nothing worse than being 40 miles away and realizing you don’t have what you need to finish the job.”

We moved over to the register and he started the paperwork for delivery. The adjacent carpet section beckoned, all earth tones and texture; I could smell the newness. My cell phone rang. I looked at the face of my old Samsung: Lucas.

“I’m sorry,” I told Jake, “but I need to take this really quick—it’s my son and I’ve been trying to get hold of him.”

“No problem, Linda, I’ve got to enter this information anyway, go right ahead,” Jake said.

“Hey, how ya doing, hon?” I answered the phone.

“Oh, pretty good,” he said, “How’s everything with you?”

“Good. I’m just at Lowe’s right now, buying a new dryer; do you remember I told you that ours quit?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, that’s right.”

“And they have delivery and installation included in the price, so, we were going to try to see if you could come in and pick it up with your pick-up and bring it out to the house, but now this way is nice and easy. And then Dad doesn’t have to worry about messing with setting it up and everything.”

“Oh, cool.”

“What’s up?” I asked, watching Jake ring up the transaction, signaling that he would wait, no hurry.

Luke asked me if I’d been able to pick up that \$40 from the Trenary Credit Union, the only financial institution he trusts, for him that morning, and I said that I had. We arranged to meet in the parking lot of Econo Foods when I left Lowe’s, so I could give him the cash.

He laughed a little on the other end of the phone. “Cuz I’m pretty low on gas right now,” he said. “And thank you very much, Mom, for doing this.” His deep voice sounded warm in my ear.

“No problem, hon,” I told him. “Bye—I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Jake handed me the ticket. “Here you go, Linda. Just take this up to the cashier and you’ll be all set.” Then he looked at me for a moment. “Is he a prodigal son?” he asked.

“A prodigal son? Huh. Yes. Actually he is.” I looked back at Jake, smiling a little.

“I thought so,” he said. “I’m a prodigal son, too.”

* * *

I wish we had thrown that dryer lint out into the fields, regularly, in the same way that we collect watermelon rinds for our ducks, eggshells and apple cores for our compost bin, and sawdust for the chicken coop. I like the idea of soft blankets formed out of the slow dissolution of our layers cradling baby birds and cutting icy spring winds that accelerate off the hay field to the north.

Once in spring, under the apple trees when Luke was seven, Dick gave Lucas a shearing of five inches off his straight, shaggy hair, rendering him nearly bald. In almost every photo of Luke as a boy, except for his school pictures when I hustled him off to the barber, he needs a haircut. His brown hair, sleek and straight as an otter's, curved around his ears—my family's large and elfish ears—and he blinked his bangs out of his long eyelashes. A few weeks after Lucas's haircut, Dick came in the house with an empty bird's nest woven with locks of human hair interspersed with feathery twigs. Medium brown hair, straight, with red-gold glints catching the sun—Luke's hair. The nest had blown down in some May winds, from one of the low apple trees that ring our front yard. Luke felt proud of himself for giving the birds building material, "Hey look, like when we build forts from the apple branches that Dad cuts. That kinda makes me feel good, Mom." We have the nest up in his old bedroom, under a small glass display cube that once held a baseball.

Maybe deep in the Wood Island landfill, all that good dryer lint that we didn't share is available to the underground dwellers. I envision, in pockets of steamy warmth, tiny verminous offspring sleeping out the winter rolled like burritos in Bounce-scented

afghans knit of discarded dryer lint. The January winds keen far above as they breathe in
and breathe out.

Weekend

Wednesday:

Luke met Lisa at 5:00 to exchange possessions. He had an envelope of her eviction paperwork and she had some of his shirts. He had the paper dolls I had gotten for her daughter for Valentine's Day, which I hadn't given to her because of the scene at Lisa's house two days beforehand. She had a pair of his boots. While he was gone to her house, I changed the sheets in his room—gathered up the Tweetie Bird quilt that her daughter liked and Sadie's old stuffed puppy from the single log bed, rolled up the tie-dyed sheets and the tangled plush blankets from the double mattress on the floor. I stored away the Crayons, the pink box of tiny plastic animals, the basket of Barbies. My fingers touched the gilt edged pages of *Bedtime Fairy Stories*, remembering just a couple of weeks earlier reading "The Princess and the Pea" to a small, pajama-clad listener.

* * *

Thursday night:

Luke said "Mom, Dad... Mom and Dad, remember earlier when I said I might have something to do tomorrow? Well, I told Lisa that I'd go to the doctor's with her. She's taken two home pregnancy tests and they were both positive."

Dick sat on the couch, feet propped up, with a long neck Molson, chewing on a thick corner piece of Jet pizza. I slumped in Sadie's papasan chair and stared at the women's long program skating competition on the TV screen. Gracie Gold missed a jump and fell. The 15-year-old Russian fell while twizzling. The kettle drum sound track to the 22nd Winter Olympics resounded in my brain as they cut to a commercial.

Blizzard warnings and severe winter weather advisories scrolled across the bottom of the TV screen.

The gas fire in the black stove did not crackle as it warmed the room. The dog nestled deeper into his red blanket, the clock with the Roman numerals ticked with a battery driven tick. Wind hit the south facing window with a sonic noise that seemed to suck all the air from the small room. We stared straight ahead at the screen as the gilded figures spun and twisted, arms flung out in supplication.

Dick got up from the couch and as he walked past me to get more pizza, placed his hand squarely on top of my head like a caress or a benediction or a crown, and held it there for a moment, warmth spreading from his rough palm into my skull.

* * *

Friday morning:

“You should have been there when I told my parents. They didn’t say a word for like a half hour. Just silent.” I overheard Luke on his smart phone. He laughed a little. “Yeah, right? Yeah, I’m on my way.”

* * *

“Hey babe, how you doing?” I asked Sadie on the phone.

“Doing okay,” she said.

“There’s something going on I wanted to let you know about.”

Her voice changed. “What?”

“Well, guess what?”

“Luke’s in jail.”

“No! No, honey, something different...something else. Luke went to the doctor’s with Lisa today, to her appointment with her.”

“Doctor’s appointment. Doctor’s appointment...no. Oh my god, no.”

“Yes.”

“Are you kidding me? Oh shit...”

“Honey? Sadie? Are you laughing or crying?”

* * *

Friday afternoon:

Luke entered my home office and dropped down on the loveseat. He was half smiling and rubbing his forehead.

“Hi hon, well?”

“Yeah. She’s pregnant for sure—they can’t tell how far along yet. We went to this place, some kind of pregnancy place...”

“Like Pregnancy Services or something?”

“Yeah. And they let anyone who is really pregnant pick out this free baby blanket and so Kenzy picked out one with ducks on it. She’s really excited.”

“Okay...well, she’ll be a nice big sister.”

“Yeah. And Lisa wants us to start working out together, like for health for her and the baby, ya know? And she’s cutting way down on smoking now.”

“Okay, that’s good. So, what? Are you guys, like, friends now or like partners? You’re not back together, or are you?”

“No, well, not right now anyway. She said maybe we should sometime, because, you know, it’s better for a baby to have two parents. But I don’t know, it’s kind of messed up if we get back together and then when the kid’s like six or seven, we split up. That’d be hard on a kid, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, it would.”

“But it’d also be messed up for a little baby to go back and forth between parents, too. So I don’t know.”

“Well, you know there never are any guarantees about any relationships. You never know if they’ll last or not, so I guess try not to project into the future too much.”

“Yeah. So we were talking about names. And if it’s a girl, we talked about Havana or Mina.”

“Oh, those sound pretty.”

“Yeah. And if it’s a boy, guess what name we picked? We both really like it but it’s kind of weird. Not really a name that you hear around.”

“Oh. Okay. What is it?” One of Luke’s friends named his son Jackson Daniels.

“Lincoln. You know, like Abraham Lincoln and then we’d all have the initials L.S. What do you think?”

“Oh, Lincoln. I like it! We could call him ‘Linc.’”

The next day, I realized that Luke’s car is an old Lincoln LS which he loves out of all proportion to a 13 year old, 145,000 mile vehicle. It has heated leather seats. And a kick-ass sound system which makes the empty Mountain Dew cans on the floor vibrate, and the torn Pop Tart wrappers waft around the back seat.

* * *

Friday afternoon:

I’m talking on the phone to my sister, Luke’s godmother. When Luke was one and a half, he named her ‘Icky’ for reasons unknown.

“So now you’ll be great-aunt Icky. The saga continues.”

“No, I want to be renamed. Either ‘Kicky’ or ‘Chicky.’”

“Not happening. Anyway, Luke will have to make that call. He named you the first time, so only he can re-name you. I like ‘Chicky,’ myself.”

“So, is Lisa going to keep on dancing, now that she’s pregnant?”

“Luke said she plans to work just this weekend and next weekend and then be done. Unless she can find a club that features pregnant dancers.”

“Oh, a club for really perverse guys. Or else, really warm and fuzzy guys...would-be fathers.”

“Yeah, a Gentleman’s Club for the Really Messed Up.”

* * *

Friday night/Saturday morning:

Dick has gone to bed. It's 1:00 a.m. Luke and I are watching the end of a movie called *The Family* about a Mafia family who are in hiding and want to start their lives over as regular citizens. They are in the south of France and keep accidentally falling back into their old habits, like Michelle Pfeiffer, as the mother, blows up the stock room of the local grocery store because they were rude to her. And the son is a small time hood at the local school with various deals and shake-downs, all profitable to him. Robert De Niro, the Mafia father, spends his days in an old greenhouse, writing his memoirs. Luke's phone rang.

"What? What do you mean? Are you shittin' me?" he jumped up from the couch and walked into the kitchen. "Are you alright? I'll be right there." He headed toward the stairs.

"What's up, Luke? Is something wrong?"

"Yeah, that was Lisa. Three guys grabbed her at the club and now she feels weird like contractions or something."

"Okay. What are you going to do? She should go to the hospital and get checked out."

"Yeah," his voice floated up as he went downstairs to grab his jeans.

"Just remember, stay calm. You're on probation still and you can't afford any trouble," I called after him.

“I know,” he emerged from the basement in his jeans, pulling a sweatshirt over his head. In his hand was an aluminum baseball bat.

“Luke.”

“Mom, I know. But not only is this Lisa but that’s my kid in there, too.”

“Oh my God, please be careful. You won’t do Lisa, yourself, or the baby, any good if you’re in jail.”

“Mom I got it. I’ll be careful. This is just to defend myself.”

“Oh God.”

“Mom, I hate to ask this, but could I use your car? Mine’s kind of low on gas and everything’s closed.”

“Yes. I don’t need it, but just be careful, don’t rush, think. Okay? You just need to get her out of there. Just get her out and take her to the hospital to get checked out. Don’t waste time with the guys who grabbed her because that’s about you, not about her.”

“Yeah.”

“Just get her out, okay? And call me when you leave there so I won’t worry, because you know I will.”

“Okay, Mom, thanks. See you.”

“Bye honey, please be careful. Just get her out, and you too.”

* * *

Sunday:

Closing ceremonies. Where will we all be in four years? For two weeks now, I've watched luge and bobsledding and snowboards. Luke and Lisa and little Kenzy with her heart shaped face. This new little sesame seed growing within my son's lover's body. Skiers hunched and laying down, side to side, directing their paths by the tilt and thrust of their bodies—some flying across the line, some scattered, limbs crossed and splayed across the mountain's soft snow. Skating twists and spins, bodies hurtling through cold space, sparse sunlight in the odd warmth of Russia. I envision myself, weak with love, holding a small bundle, rosy new skin scented with tobacco.

No

no **1** not in any degree; not at all **2** it cannot be so: used to express surprise, dismay, disbelief, etc.

Did that certainty that I would breed badly come from my having been sexually molested in first grade, against the backdrop of a suburban cocktail party, siblings and cousins playing down in the basement and outside in the humid Kansas night, playing Hide and Seek or Smear the Queer, and the adults: my parents, my aunts and uncles and their friends, except for one, out back in the summer house, martinis in hand, bursts of laughter sounding as soon as the back door opened and the cool gust of air conditioning whooshed out the door and the waves of laughter flowed in, before anyone knew enough to warn us of “Stranger Danger” and “Good touch, Bad touch” or, especially, before anyone thought, much less told us, that children—even sassy children—had the right to tell any grown-up, anywhere, ever, “No,” and, in that well-meaning vacuum of “Let’s don’t talk about those unpleasant things” I, eldest responsible child that I was, came, later, to the certain realization, at night alone in my twin bed at 3204 Sarah Street, scabby knees mounded beneath the chenille bedspread, near my little sister asleep close by, after my dad said prayers with us at the end of the hall, four scrubbed Catholic kids in pajamas—mine and my sister’s flowered, probably matching—hers’ pink and mine blue or hers’ yellow and mine pink—my brothers’ with cowboys or stripes, I convinced myself, within that caring, yet wrong—so wrong—utter lack of input from adults, that I was responsible, had allowed that stranger—a stranger! Really! Linda Anne!—to touch me, to fondle me, and so I was, therefore, bad? And on Aunt Pat’s pale, linen covered slipper chair, in the creamy comfort of the formal living room, within sight of the antique

vahses, yet. What is more, that cellular badness, that kind of shameful rancid bad-to-the-bone decay that flowered deep within the shadowy nocturnal rooms of my small consciousness, eyes clenched closed so no one would see me, could see into the heart of my shame and my difference, that kind of bad must spread out endlessly in the darkened sky, from the black pinpoint of that night, that event, so bleak and ropy were its tendons, so impervious to light and reason and air. Night after night, I worked to cage the wildness of it, the shame of it, into small locked closets in my head—but it was hard. The images were resistant, the disgrace complete. “No,” I would whisper to myself, pushing hard, and “no.” “You’re baa-ad,” would come the sing-song response. “This is your fault.” Certainly I would have a bad child; a wrong child, wrong as I.

Recipe for Shipwreck

Shipwreck is an old Southern concoction relied upon as “funeral food.” This dish calls to mind a restaurant located on a back road in rural Alabama: the It Don’t Matter Family Restaurant, which we drive past on the way to Grandma’s house. My sister and I chuckled at the name, while in the back seat Lucas pulled his eyelashes out, clump by clump. A proper Shipwreck is constructed layer upon layer like a good compost pile, feeds masses of people, and makes use of whatever happens to be in the pantry when someone passes. Shipwreck is also appropriate for quieting hungry families on those days when it only feels like someone has died, the days when you’d like to kill someone, or those times when you wish yourself dead. The preparation is just that easy.

Tools:

A *9 x 13 pan* of the sort that every household has, as well as a *skillet* for frying up some meat. *Aluminum foil* to cover your casserole for baking will complete this simple list.

Ingredients:

You will thank me when you hear how flexible and versatile are the ingredients for a big pan of Shipwreck. Like the restaurant, it doesn’t matter what you use.

You will need, in the order of layering:

Onions- sliced or diced, Vidalia, yellow, red...

Potatoes- peeled or unpeeled, sliced, diced, fresh, frozen, canned, red, Yukon, hash browns, etc.

Vegetables- celery, peppers, corn, carrots, beans, squash...fresh, frozen, canned, whatever.

Two cups cooked rice- brown, white, wild, or what have you.

Cooked meat- hamburger, sausage, pork, ground turkey—whatever fits your mood or budget. My Alabama grandpa used squirrel or quail...my Missouri father used rabbit.

One can tomato soup- mixed with a can of water

Couple teaspoons Italian seasoning- added to diluted soup

Cheese- it don't matter.

Salt and pepper

Method:

Be sure your meat is cooked. Build your casserole layer by layer in the 9 x 13 pan, salt and peppering between layers. Pour the diluted soup mixture over all, cover it up with foil. Bake at 350 degrees until the potatoes are done or until you remember to check it. Pull the pan out of the oven and throw some cheese on top, then forget about it again until the cheese is melted.

Serving:

If you feel up to it, you can open a can of peaches to accompany the Shipwreck. Or whatever.

Alternate Ending #6: Choke

choke 1 to prevent from breathing by blocking the windpipe or squeezing the throat of; strangle; suffocate; smother; stifle

The middle aged woman laughs. She sits at the long wooden breakfast bar in her kitchen with her grown son and his girlfriend, eating supper together. She has cooked a recipe from her husband's family, a dish that her tiny French Canadian mother-in-law always called "Fricase" (free cahs') but with a lilting French accent which made everything that came out of her mouth sound alluring, even when she cursed casual visitors and salesclerks and the adult friends of her children, with a sly and pretty smile and a Gallic toss of her graying curls, glass ear drops set dancing. All kinds of words had a lyric cant, phrases like "thru de chu" (hole of the ass) and "maje le mud" (eat some shit) which the woman and her husband have no idea how to spell and so are left to spell phonetically with the pronunciations he remembers from his long ago childhood, now emphatically over since both his parents are dead.

The middle-aged woman's recipe file is filled with strangely spelled delicacies from her mother-in-law like "Patish en Moi" (patish un wah') which is a kind of shepherd's pie, and "Tetons de Negress" (tayton deh nigrez') which are chocolate covered cream-filled treats because, although French was her husband's first language, when he landed in first grade in El Paso, Texas, and the other children threw rocks at him and laughed at him because he couldn't speak English, his parents abruptly stopped speaking French to their five children and started speaking English, except in the heat of

anger when they lapsed, especially his mother, and resumed their musical and explicit French cursing. Or when they wanted to deprecate some non-French speaking person in their presence, and share the joke with their helplessly watching children. Her father-in-law swore in conjunction with his boyhood Catholicism, supplication and condemnation in one phrase, in rich, suave tones that reminded the woman of a stocky, coverall-clad Ricardo Montalban, who played Mr. Rourke on *Fantasy Island* in the 1980s; even though Ricardo was Mexican instead of French, the woman loved the continental appeal of her father-in-law's curses: "Chalice de Crist" he swore, swinging a mallet at a tire rim, and "Eh, tabernac!" at the sputtering chainsaw.

* * *

Her mother-in-law cooked and the middle-aged woman watched and wrote down what her mother-in-law told her, although the middle-aged woman wasn't middle-aged then, she was young and too tall for her mother-in-law's liking and it irritated her mother-in-law when her son came up behind the daughter-in-law and pushed her shiny hair aside and murmured into her ear, encircling her waist with his hands, even while she, his mere', was cooking his favorite dishes like "The Phillipino Dish" or "Soup a Malade" (soup ah mahlahd', or "soup for the sick") and that gypsy, that "grande dame," who did she think she was?

Recipe for Fricase

Package of turkey dogs, hot dogs, or sausage

Butter or margarine

A large onion, cut in slices

About ten potatoes, sliced, don't mind if the eyes are on, just brush them off—cut out the bad parts

Brown the meat and onions together in butter in a Dutch oven or soup pot. Add sliced potatoes and cover with water. Salt and pepper well. Cook slowly until potatoes are tender and broth thickens a bit. If the broth doesn't thicken, you can add cornstarch but unless you know how to keep the cornstarch from forming little white balls that float in the broth, even when you stir it in with a metal whisk, it might be best to allow broth to thicken naturally.

Serve with “poyes” which are like buckwheat crepes, if your Papere' came from Aroostook County, Maine, or with cornbread, if your Grandpa rode in from Plantersville, Alabama.

Chew thoroughly.

* * *

Forks clink on the metal salad bowls, as the middle-aged woman, her son, and her son's girlfriend spoon dinner into their mouths. Cartoons murmur in the background as the five-year-old child of the girlfriend watches Dora the Explorer, having finished her chicken nuggets and grapes and cornbread spread with creamy—“That kind, cuz I don't like that crunchy kind any more now”—peanut butter. Her son loves fricase, as does her husband who will be home later that night and will be so glad, she imagines, for a hot, carb-laden meal after a day of fighting broken pump hoses on the tanker truck he drives through the bi-weekly blizzards of a northern winter.

“We’re going to take my truck and leave my car here so we can go up to Big Bay tomorrow and check on her grandpa,” the woman’s son says. “He just had surgery and she wants to see how he’s doing—and it’s pretty rough getting into his place.”

“That’s nice of you guys to do that,” the woman says.

“He’s so good to me, my Papa,” says the girlfriend, “I worry about him up there.”

The woman takes a bite of her fricasse: a bit of potato with a slice of sausage and chews. She opens her mouth to say, “You’re such kind people,” to her son and his girlfriend. She inhales and opens her mouth and as she does so, she breathes in a piece of the sausage and it blocks her airway. She tries to take a shallow breath and cough, but can’t get any air. She jumps up from her chair, claustrophobic and private and turns away, trying to cough it up but is blocked. Plugged. No air in and no air out. She begins to hear her son and his girlfriend in the background: “Mom, are you okay?” “Linda? Are you okay?” “Mom...? Mom...?” And she feels foolish and thinks, in a blur of shame, of other overweight women like Liz Taylor and Mama Cass Elliot and how embarrassing it is to be an obvious food lover and choke on a piece of food. And then she doesn’t think of anything else except that she can’t breathe, that usually she is able to dislodge whatever she mis-swallows: a slurp of Diet Coke, a fragment of food, water in the shower as she opens her mouth and turns her face up to the spray. Air. And she thinks how she is a choky person:

choky adj. **chok’ier, chok’iest** **1** inclined to choke **2** suffocating; stifling Also sp. **chok’ey**

who has been in this situation many, many times, but never quite like this, she realizes, as she begins to get a little dizzy and can hear her son saying, “Mom! Do you need help?”

Do you need me to do the Heimlich maneuver?” and his girlfriend, “Babe, do something!” and the woman starts out to the mud room, onto the red and green checkerboard linoleum, maybe heading for the door, flapping her arms and turns, once, eyes streaming, face panicked, to gesture to her son, a wordless “Yes! Yes, come here,” she waves to him, speechless for once, gesturing to him to come to her, waving her hands and her arms, pantomiming “Yes, help me help me,” and his long arms are around her, his head towering over hers and he says, “Hang on, Mom, I’m here, I’ll help you,” and he puts his arms around her ribs just under her breasts and begins to squeeze, and she thinks, oh, shit, that’s too high and he might break my ribs and he squeezes again, but his fist isn’t in her diaphragm like she remembers it is supposed to be from the baby CPR course she and her husband took when her son was a huge, sodden weight in her seven months pregnant abdomen and she remembers how her husband couldn’t practice on her because of her mound of a belly. And she pushes her son’s clasped hands down lower to her diaphragm and he begins to really push and yank her up and her son’s girlfriend yells, “Lift her up! Lift her up! Harder, Babe! Harder!” and then the woman begins to get lightheaded and to understand that, seriously, and finally, and ludicrously, this is going to be how it all ends and she is so shocked, stunned, really, that one moment a person can be laughing and talking and eating fricase and the next moment, literally, moments later, a person can be leaving life. Then she understands, suddenly, that it doesn’t matter if he breaks her ribs, that all that matters is her getting air, getting air now and that he can bang on her chest with a sledge hammer if that will dislodge that mound of whatever the fuck is keeping her from breathing and that someone can probably fix broken ribs or a broken clavicle but no one can fix dead, choked, suffocated. And she hears “Swiper, no

swiping,” from the TV and is thankful that the child seems to not hear any of this choking scene, and hears her son breathing and hears his girlfriend making little panicked sounds, like “Babe,” and “Oh, babe,” and the woman fights and fights to expel that bit of—what, sausage? And she has a vision of her mother-in-law clapping her small hands together and laughing; she hears “cochon...” (pig) faintly in the dimming edges of consciousness, yes, it must be the sausage—and her son gives a particularly sharp thrust and she feels a loosening, an easing in her airway and she pats his arm, frantically, encouragingly, and he does it again and again and she can feel a tiny stream of air and a piece of sausage skin in her mouth all at the same time and dares to think that maybe she isn’t going to die, leave life, here in the mud room under the crucifix that hangs on the wall, on her wild-eyed way out the door into the -13 degree February night to flap around in the driveway and fling herself against the hood of her son’s ancient white Lincoln, over and over, in a futile attempt to self-Heimlich and falling, finally, onto the snowy crust of the driveway, eyes turned up to the crystalline indifference of the February stars, head turned up like Jesus on the cross, eyes blank, stunned into immobility.

And the middle aged woman reels around, head lowered, face contorted, hand on her son’s broad shoulder to steady herself. She coughs and coughs.

live **1** to be alive; have life **2** *a*) to remain alive *b*) to last; endure **3** *a*) to maintain life; support oneself *b*) to be dependent for a living

Final Moment

“Mom, this thing you’re writing isn’t for people who have OCD. It’s for the parents. People like me, people who have OCD or something like that, we don’t read books about what we have. Books are for the people that love people with OCD or whatever.”

“Wow, Luke. You’re right.”

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