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# Venus Spinning

Tara Acton

*Northern Michigan University*

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VENUS SPINNING

By

Tara Acton

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2009

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Tara Acton is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### VENUS SPINNING

By

Tara Acton

This collection of creative nonfiction essays may be split into three basic sections: childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. The first section explores my early forays into reaching beyond myself, from my romanticized attempt at piano lessons to my desire for a notable nickname. Adolescence introduces my desire to connect with both the ancients and the world at large, as well as my idiosyncratic struggle to stand apart from my teenage peers. The final section deals with my uneasy entrance to adulthood, from connecting to a stubborn America as a telemarketer to solidifying an identity through singing.

The overriding theme of the work is the yearning for that indefinable *just beyond*. I constantly seek for both a more-than-regular individual within myself and a connection to people, to places, to times past. The memoir focuses on finding humor and meaning in a middle-class American upbringing.

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Tara Acton

2009

## DEDICATION

This collection is dedicated to my parents, who let Hurricane Tara be herself, Erica, who introduced me to creative nonfiction, and Brennan, who reminded me why I love it.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my thesis director, Dr. Ron Johnson, for his support, advice, and encouraging feedback. His appreciation for the art of memoir kept me striving to hone my voice on the page.

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



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## Introduction: My Reading and Writing Influences

In my early years as an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, I took a literature course that was not required of me. As an English major, I was exempt from this class geared at non-majors, but I wanted to take a course that was filled with students who weren't used to analyzing texts on a daily basis, who probably didn't have a whole repertoire of past readings to quote from in the middle of class discussion, and who would, I thought, be a refreshing group to take part in. I was not disappointed.

Our teacher, Steve the TA as we called him, was the kind of inspiring instructor that our motley crew of young students needed—he was a twenty-something hipster who spent much of the hour telling amusing stories of his life as a musician and drifter, all the while pulling even the most dedicated slacker into a varied world of literature. He chose a variety of readings for our class to discuss, from Mary Shelley's classic *Frankenstein* and Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn" to Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine* and

Haruki Murakami's exercise in modernist absurdity, *A Wild Sheep Chase*. We drew pictures on the chalkboard and acted out scenes from Shakespeare on the campus lawn. Perhaps it was his age, so close to our own, and his abundant cool factor that allowed my classmates and me to connect with Steve the TA, respect him, and seek to read and write well in his class. Steve believed we should be proactive in the literary world, and offered extra credit to anyone who attended an author reading and wrote a short response. The University of Iowa and various local bookstores provided abundant opportunities for authors to visit and speak, and when I landed tickets to see David Sedaris give a reading, I was thrilled. Not only would I get to see my favorite author, the man whose writing had informed my own as-yet-meager attempts at creative nonfiction writing, I would receive extra credit for having done so.

When I approached Steve to confirm this, my excitement overflowing, a conflicted look crossed his features. "Hmm," he said, and paused.

I was confused, having expected him to rejoice in my interest in David Sedaris's writing.

"Well," Steve finally said. "I think his writing is what we might consider... *fun* writing? It's very... humorous. And I would prefer you write a response on one of the other writers who will be visiting this semester. But," he said with a smile, "if you'd like to attend another reading in addition, and maybe do a compare-and-contrast-style response, I would definitely give you credit for that." He pointed out that an author who had been a political prisoner in Asia was speaking next week. "That seems like something that would work."

I didn't know how to respond to this. Of course David Sedaris's writing was fun. I didn't bother reading anything on my own time that I didn't find personally satisfying.

But fun and humorous, it seemed, was not equated with what my instructor considered real, worthwhile, or thought-provoking enough to write an intelligent response paper. I abruptly declined his offer to attend another reading in addition to David Sedaris's. I would forgo the extra credit in protest. I wandered away, somewhat dazed at this unexpected turn of events. My shyness kept me from asking the teacher whom I had so admired why, just because a writer was popular with a general audience, his work was not appropriate for a college class.

Two years later, I was given the opportunity to take a writing workshop with a professor who taught at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, Dr. Patricia Foster. On our first day of class, as I sat nervously surrounded by people who I was certain must all be better writers and have far more experience than I, Dr. Foster asked us to tell who our literary parents were. Who influenced us, who made us want to read, who made us want to write? Whose style had inspired us to develop our own voices? My first response was instantaneous. David Sedaris's books and articles about his life and boisterous family, flowing with self-deprecation and twisted wit, had been the works to introduce me to the genre of nonfiction. They were not harrowing tales of war-torn countries or dark accounts of poverty and abuse, topics which the cynic in me believes Steve the TA would undoubtedly have found acceptable. These were stories I could identify with, stories that were funny and sharp and true, from a man who had grown up with a regular (well, mostly) family in a regular place, and who still had meaningful things to say.

I knew at that moment, as I introduced myself and my literary parents to Dr. Foster and my fellow writers in the class, that *that* is what I should have said to Steve the TA. I should have told him that I wanted to write the sort of work that I enjoyed

reading the most, the kind of writing that found meaning and humor (for humor is high on my list of necessities in life) in even the most ordinary of lives. I should have told him that I intended to never discount writing just because others may have found it low-brow or not deep or dramatic enough. I should have told him that I wanted my writing to be the kind of writing that people sought out because it not only gave them entertainment but they could find something of themselves within it, a validation that their own experiences matter.

Although the incident with Steve the TA happened several years ago now, I still imagine the scene playing out differently, with me whipping out a condemning-yet-inspiring speech about snobbery in the academic institution, highlighting all the reasons I felt he was discriminating against humor writers, and with Steve, shame-faced, acknowledging my openness and wisdom. Of course, that fantasy can never be realized, but I still take it upon myself to uphold that those beliefs. When my own students in the composition classes I teach whine that they have “nothing to write about... my life isn’t exciting enough,” I shake my head and remind them that we all have something to say, whether big or small—we just have to find our own voice.

\*

Of course, it took me awhile to come to that conclusion. And, truth be told, I’m not sure I’ll ever stop developing my writing voice. Perhaps a definitive voice is not something that I’m not meant to actually accomplish, but rather let it evolve throughout my lifetime. This collection of essays, then, is the childhood stage of my writing voice, which is only appropriate, since its primary focus is my own childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

Before I could begin writing anything resembling a memoir, I first had to convince myself that I had a life worth writing about. Like my students, my early instincts told me that my life wasn't exciting enough. And on those long nights when I sat without ideas in front of a computer screen, the cursor blinking its blank disdain, I turned to quotes for inspiration. I am a fan of quotes; I've collected so many words-to-live-by that I couldn't possibly live by them all, partly because there are so many, and partly because many of my favorite quotes are completely contradictory. Two in particular stand out. The first is a quote by Fran Lebowitz, who stated, "Your life story would not make a good book. Don't even try." It's hardly the sort of sentiment that should keep me going as I sift through my journal entries, but somehow I always find myself coming back to those words. A certain piece of me is determined to prove this advice wrong—to prove that any life could make a good book, at least to someone (I'm certain, at the very least, that my mother will be interested in how I perceive my childhood).

But it also reminds me not to take myself too seriously. My essay "Venus Spinning," after all, is about my decision not to go on a double-date with a friend. That decision was, to my teenaged self, an identity-forming, dramatic, significant event. It was important to me, when writing the essay, that I made this clear—it wasn't the sort of situation that was likely to be turned into an Academy Award-winning film anytime soon, but it was still an experience, if a small one, that informed my identity. That being said, I spent ages writing draft after draft of "Venus Spinning," until it seemed to me that that double-date must have been the end-all-be-all focal point of my teenage years. And that's when I turn to Fran Lebowitz's words and remind myself: it's just an

essay about a high school date. It's not the pinnacle of the literary world. And somehow I make it through to the next essay.

The quote that is contradictory to Fran Lebowitz's comes from Flannery O'Connor, who wrote that "anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days." These were the words that I whipped out in my own defense when I began applying to MFA programs when I was only twenty-one, despite the advice that several people gave me to wait until I had a little more "life experience" to actually write about. The "real world" was an oft-thrown-about phrase, particularly from my high school teachers, but also from any frustrated teenager: "When you get out in the *real world*, you'll see that the ten pages I'm assigning you now is *nothing*." "When you get out in the *real world*, you won't even remember Bobby Franklin belittled your beverage choice in the lunch line. And he'll be stuck in this little town with his little high school memories." And I too was guilty of using this phrase ("When I get out in the *real world* and go to college and get totally famous, they'll be sorry they didn't let me into their stupid spring play!"). I wished those childhood years away too fast, realizing too late that that I already was in the real world—because growing up is as real, and as valid, a time as any other point in life.

It was that realization that first prompted this project. During my first summer of graduate school, I took a fiction workshop where I was assigned the simplest (or most complex, depending on whom you ask) task: write one story. I didn't have much experience with writing stories that weren't *Star Wars* fan fiction or romance novels that I vowed never to show anyone, so I hemmed and hawed for days over my story, determined to make it great. I wanted to write the kind of story that would prompt my class full of graduate-level writers to lean back, stroke their chins, and nod thoughtfully.

I wanted to write about adults dealing with worldly situations, where universal truths would be presented and pondered. My first draft—or first paragraph, I should say, since the story remains unfinished—was about an opera singer who spent her time in airports, jetting from audition to audition, and who hadn't seen her husband in three months. I thought the idea had great potential.

After I'd sat for three days in front of that unfailing blinking cursor, unable to type past my introductory paragraph, I realized that what I really needed was to write about was the thirteen-year-old girl in the back of my mind who had her own story to tell. Fiction or nonfiction, that was the kind of writing I needed to do—the ongoing stories of becoming an adult. I wrote the first draft of the new story in two hours, hardly pausing for breath between paragraphs. There was plenty to say. There would always be plenty to say about adolescence, it seemed.

The tricky part, I think, is trusting that this kind of writing will be worthwhile not only to myself but to others. A few years after Patricia Foster asked me to introduce my literary parents to her class, I read her essay “The Intelligent Heart,” in which her colleague doubts the world's interest in reading personal stories anymore. She asks what it is we are really seeking in writing memoir, whether the “intelligent heart” is worth defining and worth unearthing:

But what is the intelligent heart and who gives a fig about that anymore?

Sometimes I think I sit alone in my room, in a solemn universe of me and like-minded friends to whom I can point and say frankly, “We care. We believe in the intelligent heart!” We believe that personal stories matter, that whether autobiographical or cultural, the story must act as a catalyst for thinking and feeling, that it is the congruence of both that elevates the essay to the status of



art. The intelligent heart is the heart that seeks revelation in dreams, then turns dreams into insight, and insight into wisdom. The intelligent heart is the balance beam, the quivering tightrope we walk when we dip perilously into our psyches and gather up the stray bits and pieces we patch together and call art.  
(Root 303)

I have underlined her phrase “the stray bits and pieces we patch together,” because I know that bits and pieces are all I can truly hope to capture, both in a short collection such as this one and in my entire writing life. I vow to put confidence in the intelligent heart, to trust that it will reach out and grasp whatever small moments I have experienced and make them worthwhile to a reader by turning them into relatable experiences, to insight, and, if I’m lucky, to wisdom.

\*

If David Sedaris is my literary father, I call my literary mother Jane Austen. My first Austen novel was *Sense and Sensibility*, and I tripped and stumbled all through the language, but soon found a rhythm to her writing, and became addicted to her. I moved on to *Pride and Prejudice*, and from there tackled the rest of her four completed novels, and finally her unfinished works and *Juvenilia*. Here was classic literature I could sign on for. She wrote on all the themes that the men whose works I had read in school wrote on—war, military life, romantic love (and not the sort of romantic love that ended with women throwing themselves under trains at the end, a la *Anna Karenina*), financial hardship, class relations, illness, death—but she wrote on them all from the perspective of women. More intriguing even than this was how *funny* she was. Hers was the definitive “sparkling wit,” incessantly poking fun at the absurdity of almost everyone, but particularly the upper classes. No relationship was safe from her candid and biting

observations, no social situation too unimportant to dissect and portray in all its ridiculousness. And most important to me—because I was easily frustrated and depressed by tragedies—she was able to create meaningful narratives with round characters without having to focus solely on death and dreariness. “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery,” she wrote in *Mansfield Park*. “I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can” (Austen 407).

I didn’t read any of Jane Austen’s writing until I was a senior in high school, but the reading I had done all my life prepared me for her. My mother, an English teacher and avid reader herself, assured that her children would be readers by restricting television watching to Saturday mornings, after which we took our weekly trip to the Marshalltown Public Library, a half hour from where we lived. For several years, the children’s librarian called me “April,” my mom’s name, since I used her card more often than not. I never bothered correcting her.

I was only interested in reading about characters that I could relate to, although that didn’t restrict much since even the titular character in Beverly Cleary’s *Ralph S. Mouse* was pretty relatable in his quest for mouse-style glory. Still, I was most often drawn to funny female narrators, the sort who acknowledged their shortcomings but still managed to navigate their way in the world with distinctive, if not always elegant, style. I learned about girl power from my first chapter book, an edition of Ann M. Martin’s *The Baby-sitter’s Club*. I reveled in the frankness of Judy Blume’s teenage girls in *Forever* and *Blubber*, and the medieval wit—not an oxymoron, I knew—of Karen Cushman’s *Catherine Called Birdy*. For awhile, I attempted to emulate the thoughtfulness of Anne Frank in my own decidedly less-dramatic diaries, and when I was older, the humor and authenticity of Meg Cabot’s teenage voices.

A series of books called *Dear America*, which consisted of the diaries of young women growing up during significant events in American history, was perhaps the most influential. These narrators were always caught in the middle of fascinating times of upheaval and struggle, but that was not what caught my attention. Rather, it was the diary format of each book, the focus on young women's day-to-day personal lives (even while the world around them changed), that pulled me in. Perhaps I wasn't a coal-miner's bride in nineteenth century Pennsylvania, or a freed slave in South Carolina, but there were universal themes to be found in the lives of each character. While I occasionally bemoaned the fact that my parents had chosen to raise me in small-town Iowa (a fact I of course did not appreciate until much later), and hadn't provided any fodder for the sort of explosive, controversial tell-all memoir I wanted to write someday, it was never the surroundings that were important, I learned. It was the message.

In college, when completing requirements for a Medieval Studies program, I tended to shy away from courses and readings that focused more on the royalty or higher clergy than on the peasant classes. The more fascinating parts of medieval studies always seemed to involve the general public, often with the darkest aspects of history (my essay "A Penchant for Plague" explores this) and bawdy, gritty tales. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* offered all this, while sacrificing nothing in terms of captivating language. A year spent studying Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) language provided an opportunity to translate everything from the original *Beowulf* manuscript to lowbrow Anglo-Saxon riddles. My short essay "Hwæt: A Bagatelle," included here, allowed me to address my interest in this sort of universal, through time and space,

connection (“A *scop*, or storyteller, called them out to the kings and peasants alike, uniting all”).

This collection of essays is intended as a continuation of the influences these works, both fiction and nonfiction, have had on me. I believe what Stephen King tells us in his ode to the craft, *On Writing*, that “to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There’s no way around these two things that I’m aware of, no shortcut” (King 139). Without the books I have read, from the time I learned to distinguish letters and words in Dr. Seuss to the thick volumes I’ve tackled in graduate school, I would not have any semblance of the writer I strive to be today. These were the works that inspired me to tell my own story, and find my own voice—knowing, of course, that my voice will always be made partly of the writers I so admire.

\*

Although I was always a reader and a writer if only for myself, I didn’t start writing creatively “seriously,” with instructors and peer workshops in mind, until college. In fact, this whole project could probably be blamed on my sister Erica, who took a nonfiction writing class at the University of Iowa before I was even sure what the genre of creative nonfiction was. One of her polished pieces for the class was an essay about me, a subject which I found highly interesting, since, at least in my journal, I too was quite fond of writing about me. As I had done, happily so, for much of my life, I followed in Erica’s footsteps and took a nonfiction workshop. If the rest is not quite “history,” it is at the very least thanks in part to my desire to write something as good as my sister’s—a feat which I am never quite convinced I have accomplished, but I think it’s rather important to have a goal that will last you for several decades.

In the workshops I took during my time at the University of Iowa, I was introduced to a whole slew of writers and sub-genres and methods I had never before experienced. I began reading a wider variety of nonfiction writers, and began trying to develop my own writing voice. When I moved to Michigan to begin working on my MFA in creative writing, I brought with me as many books as possible to help guide and comfort me through the process. Focusing so much of my work on my writing rather than literature and medieval studies, as I had been accustomed to, was a difficult transition. I again suffered from the fear that I had nothing to write about, or at least nothing *worth* writing about. A combination of getting used to graduate writing workshops and reading helped ease those anxieties out of me.

A favorite collection of essays that I often read when those anxieties took over is *In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal*. It is also a collection I often assign my students to read, because the selected pieces are like quick shots of nonfiction espresso—they pack a punch but, at only one to five or so pages each, they don't overwhelm the nervous writer. I like the challenge of writing a bit of truth within a short amount of space (pressure's on to make things happen without wasting time and paper); plus, there is nothing so inspiring to me as a writer as seeing the kind of exciting work others are doing. The students like to see the variety of the nonfiction pieces within the book, partially because they often believe that writing about "the truth" is limiting. The anthology's introduction attempts to combat that sort of thinking, remarking that "[i]magination becomes a way to probe reality. The real world we are lucky enough to live in is revealed as endlessly rich and deep" (Kitchen 20).

I found what is perhaps my all-time favorite piece of nonfiction writing within the pages of *In Brief*, a one-and-a-half page work by R.H. Herzog, simply titled "Twigs."

I always read this piece out loud with my students—it takes hardly a moment—to let them see how the writing of a tiny, personal moment functions in a larger context:

I focus on one hemlock twig, green needles half-penetrating the snow puff upon it. I breathe from my *hara*, exhaling my breath into the universe. I will know forever this twig. Of all the twigs in the forest, this has been seen. The next morning I follow the tracks of my snowshoes. I creak on snowshoes through trees creaking in the regenerating wind, to the spot where I yesterday meditated on the hemlock twig. I know the spot for the snow is more compacted here. I move my shoes into yesterday's tracks and stare intently at the hemlock starkly green against the snow. The twig is not there. (Kitchen 243)

I ask the students why they think Herzog chose to write about this moment—"I will know forever this twig"—and why it matters. I ask whether they've experienced moments like this, moments where we are acutely aware of the sounds of our feet on the snow and the distinct colors of our environment, of our breath, our mortality and the changing world. They're shy to admit it at first, but with a little prompting, they can usually think of a moment of their own to write about in their class journal. At first, students tend to write essays entitled "The Worst Thing That Ever Happened to Me," or, alternatively, "The Day I Got My Driver's License." I can't say I rejoice in those topics, though I understand students' desire to write them. But I encourage them to think of their own "twig moment," as I've come to think of them. I want these students to become the kind of writers that don't overlook a second of their lives.

The key to writing well about those moments seems to be avoiding the awkwardness of writing from one's own perspective. Isn't it a rather egotistical exercise, after all? Scott Russell Sanders even compared the nonfiction writer to a

soapbox orator in his essay “The Singular First Person,” remarking that no one had asked the fellow on the soapbox “for his two cents’ worth, but there he was declaring it with all the eloquence he could muster. The essay, although enacted in private, is no less arrogant a performance. Unlike novelists and playwrights... the essayist has nowhere to hide” (Root 383). Although I find the process of writing fiction and nonfiction to be remarkably similar, we don’t invent characters or situations from scratch. We must be willing to draw on what we have, and willing to give our reader the freedom to take from our writing what they will. Often, this seems like a gamble. During the writing process, I’ve asked myself one question hundreds of times: Am I contributing something to humanity, even on a very small scale, through this writing? Or is this merely a selfish essay, a therapeutic exercise meant to benefit myself? Or perhaps the same sort of demand for attention as when I dressed up in my mom’s shiny scarves and put on living room nightclub shows as Hurricane Tara?

Once during a writing workshop I put up an essay that was typical of my writing—the story of some childhood antics, the specifics of which I don’t even remember anymore. “I liked the essay,” a fellow student said, “but I just didn’t know what I was supposed to get out of it. Where’s the larger, universal message? It just seemed like a nice story, and that was it.” A few people nodded their agreement, that there should have been more sections that dealt with some sort of larger context for the events of the essay. A few disagreed, including the course instructor, who said that anytime there was growth or progression, perhaps through a change or realization in the narrator or characters— if an emotional impact was made—that in itself accomplished a universal message. I myself was torn about how to approach this, and experimented with using exposition in my narrative essays. Some pieces demanded it—

“To Be Small,” for example, was based on the *idea* of smallness, which didn’t lend itself well to an entirely scene-filled essay. In that sort of writing, I find that using exposition is the easiest way to address that “universal theme” my fellow student had wanted. Of course, those are the essays I worry about the most, where I wonder if I’m risking becoming the soapbox orator that Scott Russell Sanders wrote about. And usually, I find it more satisfying—perhaps because it is more challenging—to leave the exposition out and tap into those larger themes and messages solely through narrative scenes. Often, leaving out exposition is simply the natural way to write things, such as in “The Twilight Bark,” where the perspective is almost entirely from my childhood self. In those pieces, it seems better to let the narrative do the talking.

\*

When I was asked to turn in a thesis proposal as part of the Master of Fine Arts requirement, I provided a list of essays I planned to include in the thesis. Some of these had already been written and just required a few more revisions, some were essays that I hadn’t written but thought would work well under my growing up theme, and some were essays that I had written that I couldn’t actually imagine submitting as they were. I worried about those essays because they revealed information about myself and others that seemed more appropriate for a personal journal, the kind should be burned and purged from memory at the end of the year, rather than be put in an official document and bound together.

A student group of which I am a member recently succeeded in bringing author Margot Adler (author of *Drawing Down the Moon*, among other things) to lecture at our university. It was a small audience, mostly made of New Age enthusiasts who admired her for her pioneering work in the neo-pagan writing movement, and I sat in the second



row hanging on her every word. “I fear the written word,” Ms. Adler told us, speaking slowly and carefully, almost as if admitting a great personal secret. “It’s so eternal.” I felt an intense kinship with her at that moment, thinking, *if even Margot Adler understands the fear of letting your words out in an official capacity, surely it’s not so bad I’m afraid of it too*. I reminded myself that she was an author who had also managed to struggle through those fears, even when they persisted, and write and publish in spite of them—or perhaps because of them.

There is plenty of excellent advice out there on letting go of those fears, of writing about the things that frighten you or are the most difficult things to write about in the first place. Open the locked and forbidden door, Anne Lamott tells us in her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. She argues that the writer’s job is “to see what’s behind it, to see the bleak unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words—not just into any words but if we can, into rhythm and blues” (Lamott 198). The first forbidden door such as this that I approached held behind it my ordeal with anxiety and panic attacks, a topic I couldn’t understand, found almost impossible to articulate in words, and was in fact about the nature of fear itself. The essay became “Plastic Stars,” and although it was darker and less funny than my usual attempts, it was one of my more satisfying writing experiences. The difference there, however, was that I was only risking my own self and my own experiences, not the experiences of anyone else. How much should we as nonfiction writers be willing to reveal?

“Write as if your parents are dead,” Anne Lamott writes, advice I’ve honestly tried to follow, advice I’ve wondered how my parents would feel about (Lamott 199). I admire writers who are comfortable with the knowledge that just about anyone could be reading their work someday. Some writers I’ve met are adamant that facts should not

be changed, at least not without a warning note attached, details not fudged to protect identities or recognizable places—that the truth is the truth, and should be told as such. Personally, I don't see the harm in changing the name of my piano teacher in "Charm School Dropout" or my co-worker in "Jesse's List of Don'ts." My writing is not a place for revenge, or a place to "out" the experiences and secrets of others. I don't tend to change things beyond these basic details, but admittedly, when writing memoir, sometimes we are forced to make creative decisions that approach the "line" (more like a large expanse of gray area, really) between fiction and nonfiction.

The essays compiled here range from present-day events all the way back to when I was a small child. I believe the earliest memory that I have written about is the final section of "The Twilight Bark," where my sister and I take hands and run toward the setting sun. "The memory is made almost entirely of light," I have written, "silhouette and shadow, all stillness and motion." This is, for the most part, true. Memory tells me that the dialogue written in the scene is real, that my parents really did urge me to run after my sister, that Erica did say, "Then let's just run." But as I wrote the scene, I began to doubt what my memory was telling me, wondering how much of the "remembered" dialogue I invented myself. Patricia Hampl grapples with the concept of invention in memoir in her essay "Memory and Imagination," in which she realizes she has "told a number of lies" when writing about a childhood memory:

For the memoirist, the writing of the story is a matter of transcription. That, anyway, is the myth. But no memoirist writes for long without experiencing an unsettling disbelief about the reliability of memory, a hunch that memory is not, after all, *just* memory... I wasn't writing fiction. I was writing memoir—or was trying to. My desire was to be accurate. I wished to embody the myth of

memoir: to write as an act of dutiful transcription. Yet clearly the work of writing narrative caused me to do something very different from transcription. I am forced to admit that memoir is not a matter of transcription, that memory itself is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a static gallery of framed pictures. (Root 308-309)

Really, almost every essay here required some creative invention, as much as I try to be true to the events as I perceived them—I'm certain that the events of "Charm School Dropout" could not really have happened in the exact order that I present them, and some of those events were condensed to shorter periods of time than those in which they actually took place. People who were present in certain scenes of "Singing in Color" and "Venus Spinning" were edited out since they had little to do with the action.

I don't worry about those small matters, but certainly there are times when writing memoir is more difficult. "Sailor Girl," a profile piece on a friend from school, probably went through more revisions than any other in this work. It was originally two separate essays, the first of which was written as an undergraduate, the second as a first-year MFA candidate. Eventually I merged the two essays, scrapping the extraneous and duplicate information that appeared and segmenting it into three parts. When I first tackled this revision, I hadn't worked with the "Sailor Moon Wars" draft in over two years and was shocked to read what my original ending to the essay had been. Apparently I had blocked it from my mind. Not only had I ended the essay on a somewhat dull and somber note, not at all how I viewed the friendship I was writing about, I had invented an entire scene and conversation that had never happened merely to achieve the kind of ending I *wanted* from the piece. I know why I had originally invented an ending—real life hadn't seemed enough. There hadn't been the kind of

closure, as the events actually happened, that I wanted the essay to reflect. But there are ways of combating that, I have found. By merging the essay with the newer, more comprehensive look at my friendship with this girl, closure at the end of that original essay wasn't needed, at least not in the particular way I had been aiming for.

The message I learned from that particular revision process was simple: conclusions can't be forced. Sometimes they come naturally, sometimes they don't. The nature of writing about the process of growing up, as I've done here, allows me to think of this as merely *Tara's Life, Or Parts Thereof: Chapter One*. Whenever I have the urge to tack on a "we all lived happily ever after" ending, I have to remind myself that this is the beauty of writing memoir: the story doesn't have to end. Life goes on. We can find closure in the piece, but we don't have to "tie it up with a neat little bow," as people are fond of saying in writing workshops. I threw out the wrapping paper a long time ago. It's better that way.

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Once we have made our creative decisions—determining which moments are worth writing about, writing about them, finding closure in them, and then rewriting—we deal with it. "Because that's the difference," Patricia Foster told me, "a real writer is sick of their work, but they keep revising anyway," a sentiment I found only too true. By that, I mean we deal with having taken the fuzzy, static-filled memories that previously existed as mere wisps in our mind and turning them into solid, physical words on a page. How many memories have I converted this way? Will I ever look back on my time as a telemarketer without picturing the scenes exactly as I laid them out in "On the Line with America," rather than the way they existed in my mind?

I spoke previously of times when I took creative license with my memory. Another such example is “A Swiss Army Dream,” wherein I discuss the day my friend Parker and I cut up a fish on the beach with his knife. I have two memories of the way this really happened. The first memory is that we found a dead fish and decided to cut it up. The other memory—and who can say if this is how it really happened, or how I’m just *afraid* it happened—tells me that the fish wasn’t dead already, that we killed it. I almost couldn’t write the scene because that version of the memory bothered me so greatly.

I first chose to write the memory as I preferred it—that the fish was dead long before we stupidly cut it up. I figured I was still following Anne Lamott’s advice to open the forbidden door, since regardless of whether the fish was alive or dead, I was still filled with guilt. At least, that was how I justified this decision to myself. After writing the draft, that memory, the one that is far less uncomfortable to me, was the one that I highlighted. It seemed more and more likely that *that* is the “true” version of how it happened. And yet, the essay didn’t feel complete. After workshopping the essay in class and attempting various rewrites of those pages, I rewrote the essay with the other version of that memory: we killed the fish, and I was eaten up with guilt. The effect was stronger, I felt, and suddenly *that* memory seemed to be the one that was true.

While sometimes the change in how I think about certain memories is perhaps preferable, there is also an inherent regret. There are some memories I don’t want to touch, don’t want to convert into ink and paper, for fear of losing some kind of innocence that is attached to them. Mary Clearman Blew articulated these feelings so perfectly in her essay “The Art of Memoir” that I underlined and starred the section three times, all the while nodding my head emphatically. She writes, “I own my past

and my present. Only I can decide whether or how to write about it. Also, I know that once I wrote about the past, I will have changed the past, in a sense set it in concrete, and I will never remember it in quite the same way. The experience itself is lost...”

(Root 284). At times, I have to consider whether I want to just let memories be.

Of course, if all experiences were truly “lost” by writing them down, I wouldn’t do it nearly so much. More often, something is gained in writing about them. I had hoped, when I gathered up all the drafts of the essays included here, that despite the fact that some of them were still in their most rudimentary forms, it would somehow feel like a completed memoir. It doesn’t, of course. It feels more like I stuck my hand into a pail of memories, caught the stickier bits of experience, and let most of the other memories slip away. They’ll be there tomorrow, of course. The desire to write about everything, *everything*, and write about it *now*, before I forget, is strong. My personal journal suffices for now, and I write about my life as much as possible, just in case I want to test out that pail of memories again and write another collection like this one. I continue to read, whether it’s the young adult fiction I never quite grew out of, or the classics that professors recommend, and I try to write not just nonfiction, but more fiction. I continue to make lists of subjects that I want to research and fit into creative pieces as I did with *Venus and the plague*. More possibilities present themselves every day.

As much as branching out in my reading and writing help me grow, I can’t help it. I keep writing essays about my own life. As Henry David Thoreau said, “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew so well.” Writing memoir has taught me more about life than anything else, and I’ve hardly started. After all, *Venus* is still spinning.

## The Twilight Bark

When I was seven, I staged a half-hearted runaway attempt. I was scowling about the backyard, throwing sticks as far down the striped, mowed grass as I could, and brooding over the fact that my next door neighbor was stuck inside cleaning her room again. The summer sounds of lawn mowers and shouting down the block annoyed me, the way any sounds can annoy a kid determined to brood. The sun, lowering itself in the early evening, was too bright. The mosquitoes were too hungry. Summer afternoons were too tedious.

I pondered what the Boxcar Children, the stars of my favorite book series, would do on a day like this, when none of the neighbor kids or my siblings were around to play. Probably run away, get work picking blueberries, and then solve a jewelry heist mystery. There weren't any blueberry patches around Garfield Street. No jewelry

stores, either. Just my luck. The town of Gladbrook was dull as they came, and everyone was clearly bored with me, just all of them in a lump sum, simple as that. There was nothing for it but to run away.

The backyard stretched far back from our little house, sloped down a small hill (used for extremely moderate sledding in the winter), and into a small grove of trees leading to the other side of the block over. I stood next to the playhouse and sandbox my father had built and gazed down toward that shady grove in the yard of the backyard neighbors' house. I had run through it many times before, but what if I kept on going? I could swerve right and tackle the daunting hill that shot straight up from there, just run up it like a gladiator, head for the highway and out of Gladbrook.

Yes. I was going to do it. Like the Boxcar Children before me, I was going to run away.

“Tara!”

I swiveled back to see my older sister Erica skipping down our back deck stairs and coming toward me. “Tara!”

Miffed that she had interrupted what was about to be the first real adventure of my short lifetime, I turned away and began to run fast as my pink jelly shoes would carry me. Once I set off, it felt glorious. So this was what it was to be free—to stumble down the sledding slope and under the weeping willow in the neighbors' yard, to leave



behind what was sure to be a miserable experience, without friends, without love, and head for the open road.

“TARA!” Erica shouted again. She was running after me. Chasing me! Glorious. Still, she was two years older and caught me by the back of my T-shirt. “Where are you going? It’s suppertime.”

I panted for breath, debating my response. If I told her the plan, she’d surely stop me. Or worse, she’d want to tag along, and as the older sister would automatically become the Boss of the Runaway. And suddenly I felt my throat catch. “I’m... I’m running away,” I said, suddenly aware of the tears threatening to spill over.

My sister looked at me, bewildered. “But why?”

I looked back at the merciless sidewalk hill jutting up into the next block. The sun’s rays shot through our backyard and down the hill and under the weeping willow, and Erica was caught in silhouette. I mumbled that no one liked me, unsure now if I was really crying or just pretending to cry, or whether I really wanted to run toward the East where life was more tragic and exciting than it was on Garfield Street.

“No one likes you? Like who?” she asked, all sincerity.

“Like... Mommy,” I said, and I knew my game my lost. Erica took my arm and assured me I was liked by everyone, and pulled me back up the hill for supper. As we walked up the stripe of mowed grass, I was never more aware of how my life could have changed if I’d kept running and running and running.

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I discovered my power during my elementary school years, when my family still lived on Garfield Street. Our neighborhood was typically Gladbrookian, with small white houses, a few yards overloaded with gaudy lawn ornaments (such as flat wooden cut-outs of old ladies leaning over to weed the garden, their bloomers poking out from under their polka-dot dresses. My parents sighed and shook their heads over these), front porches and smiling inhabitants who raised a hand as you passed on your evening bike ride. There was a plethora of typical small-town characters, but I perceived the neighborhood in terms of the resident dogs.

My own family, in those early years, had two Springer spaniels and a Dalmatian (the latter enjoyed the run of the neighborhood a bit too much and would meet an untimely end). Our neighbors to the north, the Williams, had a sad-eyed basset hound mix named Sandy, who was mostly too lazy to roam the area. Across the street lived the sort of dogs my mother forbade me to go near, the sort that were tied to trees with actual chains and threatened with snapping jaws to devour any passersby on Big Wheels or roller skates. When those frightful inhabitants left (or were evicted), a family with a handful of long-haired, rowdy boys and a scrappy black-haired dog took their place. To the east, beyond our backyard, lived an older fellow named Darryl, who called his beagle Ornerly. My mother swore that when Ornerly barked, his whining howl sounded exactly like "*Darr-yl! Darr-yl!*" The list of dogs and owners went on like this,

to the north and south and east and west, and I found to my delight one particular evening that they could all become one when I stood in our front yard and initiated the Twilight Bark.

By the time I was in fifth grade I had read the book *101 Dalmatians* a dozen times, and nothing fascinated me more than the Starlight Barking, more commonly known as the Twilight Bark. People who read the book believed it to be a mere communication system between dogs that needed to convey urgent messages about stolen puppies, but I discovered I could use it as a means to connect myself with the entire neighborhood. My free time was spent practicing my bark until it sounded authentic enough to be practically fluent in the dog language. As I stood on my front lawn, listening to the faint tinkling of wind chimes and a distant lawn mower, the sun setting over the fields just beyond our neighborhood, I wanted nothing more than to make our street come alive with a thousand canine voices.

Planting my feet firmly in the soil of our front yard, I took a mighty breath and barked. When a few moments had passed with no response, I geared up to try again, projecting the sound as far into the evening as possible. *BARK! BARK!*

For a few silent moments, I wondered if my free time might have been better spent playing GameBoy and making dandelion chains. Then I heard it—a returning bark from the scrappy black dog across the street. I answered him. And then from the backyard—*Darr-yl! Darr-yl!* A third dog chimed in, then a fourth, from where, I could

no longer tell. I couldn't have been prouder if I had actually been rescuing fifteen dog-napped Dalmatians. *BARK! BARK!* I answered.

The moment was broken when my father stepped out onto the stoop to tell me to knock off the racket; people were going to be going to bed soon, and to get off the grass he had spent all summer trying to grow. But I went inside that night feeling that even in my tiny Iowa town, standing on the patchy grass of our front lawn, I had been at the helm of creation.

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The Empty Lot, as we called it, lay to the south of our house on Garfield Street. The lot stretched from the edge of the street all the way past our backyard to the other side of the block—back then, it was endless. The yard was so long that our Dalmatian, Jessi, could gain enough speed while on a frenzied run down it that she'd flip herself over and do two or three somersaults in a row, to my great amusement. A house once stood there but had been torn down before I was born, and now the Lot served as a field for the neighborhood kids' outdoor games of kickball and whiffleball and freeze tag. In the summer we dragged the garden hose from our garage onto the Empty Lot and set up the sprinkler, and in the winter we built cities of snowmen and forts. My dad taught me to ride my bike on the sidewalk there, and I thus had a lot of face time with the dirt on which I crashed.

The bedroom I shared with Erica had windows overlooking the back, front, and side yards, and much of our childhood bedtime was spent staring across the Empty Lot and onto the street before it. The view was mundane for many years, and I usually felt nothing but desperation that there were lightning bugs flitting about the Lot waiting to be caught and released by me. As it was, they were free, and I was trapped in my room under penalty of bedtime, with the view of the expansive Empty Lot taunting me in my top bunk.

Things picked up when the new neighbors moved in to the house across the Lot, particularly because they apparently felt the Lot offered them enough protection from next-door spies to leave their shades undrawn. This afforded plenty of entertainment to the Acton girls, who watched, fascinated, as the newlywed couple carried out their lives. Handsome Man and Pretty Woman, as we called them, brought with them two small terriers named Teddy and Foxy, which we were allowed to pet if we happened to be in the Empty Lot at the right moment. Teddy and Foxy were too small to be seen through our windows at night, but there was plenty else to see. Handsome Man walked through the brightly lit kitchen in only his boxer shorts and drank milk straight from the carton with the refrigerator door open, and Pretty Woman stood idly by, too lovely and serene to chastise him. We hypothesized about their conversations, invented drama for them, mused on the possibilities of life with Teddy and Foxy on the other side of the Empty Lot.

One winter evening when I was eleven, I braved the snow and ice to ride my bike downtown, where I bought a package of Gummi Bears, and back again, where I shoved my bike into the garage and wandered off into the Empty Lot to cool off from my ride before going inside. I looked to the kitchen window next door, but Handsome Man and Pretty Woman were nowhere around. The whole neighborhood was silent, the kind of silent that can only be experienced in the dead of winter when the houses are encased in snow.

I found a pile of snow in the center of the Lot and lay down, burrowing into the snow. The stars blinked down, and I clutched my Gummi Bears in my mittened hands and blinked back up at the sky. Never had I been so aware of the stillness of the earth. I wiggled my body deeper into the ground, wanting to feel encased in the soft cold while the night sky covered me over, blinking and blinking in the silence. During guidance class once in school, we had done an exercise while we lay on the tiled floor in which we imagined roots growing from us down into the earth, and I had giggled through it then, but I was struck now with the power of such a feeling. I stared up and wondered for awhile what all the dogs of Gladbrook were occupied with now, whether they were waiting for me to speak to them. Here, in the Empty Lot, I was part of my home, Garfield Street, the winter, the chain of dogs.

Somewhere in the night, a dog barked. I was freezing. I rolled over in the snow and pushed myself to my feet. And I barked back.

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Our house faced west, which is how I learned where the sun sets. A giant maple tree in front of the house reached its branches in that direction, tangled up in power lines. It blocked out the sun and the front lawn dried up and shriveled as a result. The evenings of my first eleven summers, before we moved across town, were spent standing under the maple tree in the front yard, blinking into the western sky. Mention looking directly at the sun and any adult (or older sister) in the vicinity was bound to tell you never to do so for fear of going blind. But the prospect of losing all sight in the quest of seeing that perfect circle of light was too tempting a notion to listen. The front yard was all silhouette and harsh orange in summer hours before bed, and the mystery of the sinking sun was worth the shock of pain in my eyes.

Now, whenever I'm looking for the correct interstate ramp or determining the direction I'll need to run in order to flee to Canada, I look for the sun, picture myself standing under that tree on Garfield Street, and murmur to myself, "The sun sets in the west." My father could be standing blindfolded in a pitch-black room, spun around three times, and stood on his head, and he could still tell you which way is west. This is a skill I did not inherit. Instead, I received my mother's genes, which include the instinct to respond "just tell me left or right" when Dad starts giving me directions that include the words "head north" or "due south." When I need to know which way is which, it doesn't matter where I am—my mind always flickers back to my first home.

Back yard, *Darr-yl*, the possibilities of running away like the Boxcar Children to the East. Front yard, roller-skates, the sun bleeding through the greedy maple, the West.

Writing-prompt books love to ask the question of “your earliest memory.” I never know what to answer, since my memories don’t come stamped with a date and time like a home movie from childhood, so I usually go for the memory that evokes the most nostalgic, innocent feelings in me. While there’s no timestamp, everything else about the memory is played out like a movie, almost as if I can see myself running through the sunlight. The memory is made almost entirely of light, silhouette and shadow, all mixed stillness and motion.

It’s after supper and before bed. Mommy and Daddy are on the front porch steps. I am running in circles in the yard, shouting for attention, shouting for Erica to watch me too. The world is my golden stage. I turn to see Erica crossing the street and heading through the grass on the other side. I yell for her to come back, afraid for her to go too far. “She’s running to touch the sun,” Mommy calls. She and Daddy are laughing.

“Catch up to her,” Daddy says. “Go touch the sun.”

I throw a hand to my forehead to shade my eyes and run. I don’t check the street for cars, just run fast as I can. “No, Erica, no,” I cry. “It’s too hot. It’s too hot. It’ll burn us up.”



She sees me. Stops running; turns around. Behind her I see the edge of Gladbrook, with fields splayed out in golden brown rows.

“We can’t touch the sun,” I yell again, even as its rays blind me. “It’s too hot.”

Erica catches my arm. “Then let’s just run,” she says. As the sky turns to twilight, we run for the fields.

### A Swiss Army Dream

The idea most likely came from an adventure book of some kind—*Pippi Longstocking*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, maybe even a special summer camp edition of *The Baby-sitters Club*. Somehow it got into my head that to really rough it in the great wilds of Iowa, a girl needed a pocketknife.

All manner of things could be done with a pocketknife. If I had one, I knew I could hunt wild animals and prepare feasts for my bosom friends, much like Peter Pan and the Lost Boys. I *wouldn't* hunt, but I could. I could take it out during dramatic moments in backyard games of Oregon Trail and politically incorrect rounds of Cowboys and Indians. I *wouldn't* threaten anyone of course, but merely let everyone know I had it, in case there had been any doubt. But the real reason I wanted it—the

one that prompted me to spend the better part of a year begging for a pocketknife for my eleventh birthday—was so I could whittle sticks.

Whittling sticks was the sort of thing that cowboys did as they sat around the fire under Western starry skies. The sort of thing that Pippi Longstocking, princess of the seven seas and star of her own novels, would do. And it was the sort of thing that, if done in the manner I imagined, would garner me plenty of attention. I would be perceived by the world as both tough and artistic, worldly and withdrawn (romantically so), as I sat on the edge of our backyard sandbox and whittled sticks into works of art.

During the spring of my tenth year, I had several long talks with my parents about my desire for a pocketknife, and multiple assurances from them both that I would in no way be receiving one for my birthday.

“Hmmm, I think not, Tara,” was all my mother said.

“You’ll shoot your eye out, kid,” my dad said repeatedly.

However, when May 13 at last arrived, there was a small package from my dad waiting atop the other gifts. My mother made a bemused face at him when she saw it. The knife had been hard won—countless one-item birthday wish lists had been unsubtly taped to the refrigerator door, complete with detailed plans for how careful I would be, and marathon begging sessions had led to more than a few tears. Now, at last, I was to be rewarded for my persistence. With a glance at my father, who was half-smiling when I reached for the box, I tore off the wrapping paper.

The knife came in a sleek black cardboard box, weighty in my hands. I checked my eagerness as I softly lifted the cover. Although my imagination went wild at the thought of owning a pocketknife, I would not be cavalier about actually wielding one, lest I risk the knife's immediate removal by my parents. Not since the arrival of my bike-riding Stacy Two-Wheeler doll during Christmas of 1991 had I treated a gift with such reverence.

The knife was a Swiss Army Classic—no longer than my thumb, fire-engine red, with a Cross and Shield printed boldly on the casing. I had barely lifted it from its box when my father took me aside and gave me the *talk*. I sat on the edge of my kitchen chair, breath caught in my throat, the prospect of testing the knife just within reach. Dad spoke softly about how to hold the knife to keep from cutting myself and others. He took the pocketknife from me and demonstrated how to open and close the blade, as well as the other tools hidden in the base. Then he handed it back to me, looking me straight in the eye, and I held my breath as I repeated his motions, slowly opening and closing the blade, proving that I was worthy of wielding the knife.

Movies and television shows always featured heroes with knives flicking the blade open and shut with abandon, their chins lifted in defiance of the enemy or the law. If they weren't rebels, they were cowboys, who used their knives with such casual deliberateness that the knives seemed an extension of their own bodies. But these ruffians didn't need to toss their knives into tree trunks or tennis shoes to make a point.

To complete the coveted image of the knife as I saw it, they needed only to pull it from their belt or pocket, cut a fishing line, whittle a piece of wood at the evening fire, and slip it back from whence it came.

As I handled the Swiss Army Classic knife there at the kitchen table, Dad's eyes close on my hands, I tried to channel the spirit of the cowboy. Movements smooth as glass, deliberate as I could be without slipping. I slid my thumbnail into the groove on the blade and pulled it from the handle. There was a satisfying *pop* as the blade came free, and I positioned my hand so that the sharp edge faced away from me. Dad nodded with approval, and I carefully moved my fingers away while the other hand snapped the blade back into its resting place. "Can I put it in my pocket now?" I asked. We stood and I gripped the tiny knife in my palm, then slid my hand deep into the pocket of my pink shorts. I touched the outside of the pocket safely. "I'll put it here for now," I said with reverence, patting my pocket again like I pictured an adult might do.

"You be careful," Dad said, eyebrows slightly raised as he watched me go. As I backed out of the kitchen, he followed the statement up with more warnings, woeful reminders of the boy who shot his eye out, of the boy who ran with scissors.

My best friend Kimmy was waiting outside the house, where our backyards merged. I approached her slowly, trying to keep the prize in my pocket a secret.

"Well?" she asked. "Did you get it?"

Maintaining my cool, eager to prove I was the kind of mature girl a pocketknife demanded, I smiled and slipped my hand into my shorts pocket. This was my first practice at this movement, so I wanted to get it just right. Clasp the pocketknife in my palm, I squeezed it to feel the cool, blunt edges of the tools press into my skin, then pulled it along my hip, sliding it up my side. I held the tool out on my fingers so Kimmy could get a good look. Her eyes widened and I nodded, acknowledging the seriousness of the situation and the veneration required of us both.

We dropped to the ground in order to try the knife out on the grass. “Watch this,” I said, slipping into the role of expert. I pulled the knife from its sheath, grasped the top of a fragile blade of grass, and positioned the knife against it. Kimmy and I locked eyes, then looked back to the grass. I sliced outward, away from both of us, and the grass broke apart as I pulled it against the knife. The grass broke more because of the force of the pull than because of the sharpness of the blade, but Kimmy didn’t appear to notice.

“Whoa, Tara,” she said. We nodded at each other again. That said it all. “That went *right through* that grass.”

“Yeah,” I said. I waited a beat. “I better put it away now.”

Kimmy looked as if she wanted to hold it, but I wasn’t sure I could trust her yet. After all, I’d had months of mental preparation for a knife of this caliber—a *Swiss Army* knife, no less—to be in my hands, and in comparison Kimmy was all too inexperienced.

Seeing her hopeful expression, however, I paused. “Well, maybe a few more minutes.” I decided to show her the many features of the Swiss Army Classic.

First, of course, was the knife blade itself, which was just over two inches long, and curved around the top to a tempting point. In the time after I received the knife, I often pressed a finger ever so slightly to that point and the sharp edge to test its limits, daring it to cut me. Soon enough, it became clear that the knife was the only worthwhile tool on the whole contraption.

Next came the scissors, which were hardly good for anything that I could discover, although I made good show of using them during the summertime, when I daintily chopped the heads off dandelions. There wasn’t much purpose to this task, other than showing off, but I could never find another convenient time to use them. The scissors, it turned out, were rather difficult to use. They were so small that they seemed most appropriate for Barbie’s house, but my sister outlawed weapons from our dollhouse, even Swiss Army ones.

There was also a nail file with a screwdriver tip. The nail file was more practical than the scissors, but I had a hard time picturing Indiana Jones whipping out a nail file and checking his cuticles, and therefore didn’t spend much time using it. The screwdriver tip of the tool had potential but ultimately failed in practice. I attempted a few times to unscrew the screws holding my sister’s and my bunk beds together, but when I inserted the tip into the groove in the screw and tried to turn it, the knife always

slipped out of my hands. I finally gave up on that project and convinced myself that really, I just didn't want my bed to come flying off and hit my sister in the face, rather than accept that my pocketknife had any shortcomings.

On one side of the bottom of the knife was a tiny handle, which could be pulled out to reveal a small set of tweezers, by far the most useless tool in the Swiss Army Classic. "What do you even *use* tweezers for?" I asked Dad one evening while examining the knife. He suggested I use them to pluck in-grown hairs. I didn't know what an in-grown hair was, so he explained. "Gross!" I cried, insisting in-grown hairs were not something from which I suffered. "Isn't there anything else I can use these for?" Dad said I could use them to twist off the tick that had fallen from a tree onto my little brother's head, and after I had recovered from that statement, I decided it wasn't important that I use *every* tool in the Swiss Army Classic.

The final feature of the pocketknife was the plastic toothpick, which, like the tweezers, could be pulled by a handle directly out of the pocketknife casing. Once or twice I saw my grandpa using a wooden toothpick after Christmas dinner and was immediately inspired to pluck away whatever remains of our holiday feast were left in my teeth myself. However, this effort was rarely successful, as my mother prohibited me from bringing my Swiss Army knife to celebrations of the birth of Christ. I argued that we hardly even mentioned Jesus during our family gatherings, but she merely chuckled and reminded me that my holiday outfits didn't have pockets anyway.



I refused to keep the knife anywhere but my pockets. The Swiss Army Classic had a small key-ring, but for one thing, I didn't have any keys, and for another, attaching a pocketknife to a bunch of boring house and car keys instead of keeping it in my pocket took away all the romance. What was the point of having one if you couldn't grasp it deep within the depths of your pockets, a secret you could sweep out with perfect grace during dramatic backyard moments?

That, of course, was a definite problem of the pocketknife. I wasn't allowed to take it beyond our yard except on family vacations. Taking it to school was certainly out of the question, which I didn't *really* mind, since I shuddered when I considered how many oafish boys in my class would never understand how to coolly wield the power of a knife. But knowing I would never be able to carve stick-dolls for all my friends during recess did hurt a bit. I was becoming quite adept at removing the bark from the sticks I picked up at home. (I wasn't bad at removing bits of shingle from the roof of the life-size backyard playhouse Dad had made either, but that was a secret just for me.) I felt certain that if I were only allowed to bring my knife to recess and practice my whittling in the academic atmosphere, I could be carving statuettes of the goddess Venus out of branches by now. Instead, I had to content myself with sitting in my sandbox at home, picturing a roaring fire built by cowboys, mastering the sharp, pointy stick.

The uselessness of the extra tools on my knife was disheartening, and my inability to become a great whittling artist was disappointing, but I think most of my

enthusiasm for pocket knives dissipated after I went fishing at a nearby lake with my friend Parker and his dad. Parker and I wandered down the beach on our own, searching for treasures. Instead, we found a fish, still half-alive and flipping around in the sand. It would have to do. Parker closed his palm over the sandy body and swung it over to a log where we could sit and examine the fish. “Hold it down,” Parker urged me.

I complied out of sheer curiosity, pressing down on the sticky scales with a slight feeling of guilt, and watched in fascinated horror as Parker took out his own pocketknife and gutted the fish, stopping only when he had removed most of its insides, and some of its outsides as well. The flat fish eye stared up at the sky, perfectly still now, as if waiting for me to flick out my own pocketknife and help Parker cut away the sand and white scales that remained. I couldn't tell, by that eye, whether it was living or dead anymore, though I figured that knife must have killed it. My knife pressed against my leg through the fabric of my pocket. It was suddenly as heavy as it had seemed the day I had torn the wrapping paper aside and pressed my thumbnail into the blade's groove to open it.

“Do you want to cut off the tail?” Parker asked. He pointed at my pocket with his own knife, a nameless blade without any extra tools, just a thick, sharp glint of silver, with fish guts clinging to the worn handle. I touched the knife in my pocket, slipped my pinkie through the unused key-ring, squeezed the smooth casing in my palm,

with my thumb pressed against the Cross and Shield. I had owned it for over a year, and it felt unused. I didn't answer for a moment, just stared at the cold fish eye, so Parker continued. "Do it fast. Don't let my dad see. Here, use your knife."

"Naw," I said. "Naw, you do it." I left the knife in my pocket, used both hands to press the fish against the log, and let Parker finish the job. When he began to cut around the fish's eye, I looked away, my throat tight. I hadn't imagined my pocketknife and I would end up in this kind of situation, but then, we hadn't ended up in *any* sort of real adventure situation. Now that I thought about it, cowboys probably cut up fish before they cooked them over the campfire. Was it like this?

"Parker!" His dad was calling us from down the beach.

Parker seemed very satisfied with the results of our project, grinning as he tossed the carcass back toward the lake, and began running through the sand to his dad. I nudged the fish with my foot, pushing it back toward the water and wondering what I should have done. My hands were sticky with fish scales and sand and dirty water. I kneeled down to the shore and scrubbed the muck away, imagining a speech I could have delivered to Parker. *Pocketknives aren't really weapons*, I could have told him. *We should have used them like Indiana Jones would have, to save ladies who need help, or like cowboys, to cut up fish for eating, not just for fun.* My pocketknife never really was that fun, anyway.

I watched Parker and his dad down the shore. They both had their knives out and were cutting fishing line. I could hear them talking about today's catches as they flicked the blades out and pulled at the line. I had never used my knife like that, with a real purpose, with real results. Not once. Standing, I brushed the wet sand from my cutoffs and walked toward them. *Pocketknives aren't for fun*, I repeated to myself.

I couldn't help but still love it, so at home I put the knife safely in a kitchen drawer where my dad could borrow it or I could take it out to look at, to slide into my pocket and slide back out again. But my pocketknife fantasies were tinged with sorrow ever afterward; even years later, I was riddled with guilt for what Parker and I had done to the innocent fish. That was the first time I wondered whether pocketknives were better for dreaming than for actual use. The blade, I had learned, was the one useful piece of the tool, but the prospect of wielding it, even in harmless or honorable ways, lost a small bit of its luster.

From the knife itself, I received few physical injuries, just minor cuts, but never from a battle of daring. The disappointment in myself for killing the fish, the casualty of a Swiss Army dream, cut much deeper.

## Charm School Dropout

*Be charming*, I told myself, taking my place next to the piano and in front of the panel of judges. *Be sophisticated*. At seventeen, I had a clear picture of what that meant. Hands set lightly on hips, shoulders back, smile easy and gracious. Be witty, but not jokey. Be fluid, not frozen. Breathe, don't gulp. For heaven's sake, don't fidget.

I looked over to Jessica, my accompanist, as she took her place at the piano. She was charming as they came, smoothing her long dark hair and daintily placing her fingers over the keys. There wasn't time to resent her grace at the moment. Taking a shaky breath, I smiled out at the panel of five judges seated before me. The room was tiny, barely large enough to hold us all. Instinct told me to hunch my shoulders and step back, but I recalled my voice teacher's advice to own my space. I concentrated on everything she had told me, wishing she'd known a bit more about how to charm the professional, smiling faces before me into falling in love with me.

I had auditioned for things before, but this was the audition that would admit me to a university music study program, where I would be trained as a soprano, groomed for a world of class, sophistication, and music. It would be, I thought, a bit like the charm schools I had imagined attending as a young girl.

“And you’re Tara Acton?” One of the voice professors, an older woman in a suit, looked over a file in her hands, calm and gracious. She was the exact sort of woman I had imagined would run a finishing school, the sort that prepared girls to be debutantes, delightful and alluring. *Be like her. Like Jessica. Like a charm school graduate*, I ordered myself, opening my mouth to reply. *Answer her*. I was afraid I would stutter.

It occurred to me that had my mother ever consented to send me to charm school, I might have been just the sort of girl these judges desired.

\*

“Hey Mom, if I walked like this, would you send me to a charm school?”

I asked my mother this question countless times throughout my childhood, usually while trotting about on the sides of my feet, or swinging my arms up to my ears, or bending my knees in an over-exaggerated duck walk. Occasionally I took things to a more creative level. “Ma, if I talked like this, would you send me to a charm school?” was accompanied by a Cockney accent with excessive spitting or gulping sounds between each word. These displays often ended with me rolling around the living room floor, saying, “But what if every time I tried to dance, I ended up doing this? *Then* would you send me to a charm school?”

The habit began when, at age seven, I read a book in which a girl named Karen went to one of these classy charm schools, where she learned how to speak properly, walk with a book on her head, ballroom dance with dashing boys, and play very dainty

musical instruments like the harp. It all seemed very appealing and romantic. I imagined that if I were able to imitate any sort of accent or walk I saw on Saturday morning cartoons, I was sure to be a success (or at least an imitation of it) at charm school as well. Were I to go, I'd have many equally sophisticated friends to invite to my garden tea parties, and a cultured, enchanting French woman as a teacher who would wear large hats and scarves and tell us in a thick accent to call her Madame LaRoche.

My greatest pleasure was finding new characteristics that would embarrass my family if I were to exhibit them during trips to the mall or family reunions, the more ridiculous, the better. I figured if I walked like a beheaded goose enough times, my mother might be motivated to seek out a real charm school for me. At first, she offered legitimate analyses of my behavior, observing each respective walk and accent and making an informed decision on whether or not, indeed, I would require a charm school to correct myself.

“Well, the hopping between steps isn't so bad,” Mom would say, “but if you really couldn't stop snapping your fingers like that, then yes, I'd have to send you to a charm school.” After inventing several dozen new walks and bizarre methods of speaking, however, she began answering the question with exasperated laughter and a variation on “oh, hush up, Tara.” If I began flapping wildly around the room spouting, “But how 'bout now, Mom? What about this one?” she would respond that there weren't any charm schools in the central Iowa area and to stop messing around and finish doing the dishes already.

The long-awaited chance to refine myself came in a much less romantic venue. When I was in the second grade, my mother signed me up for piano lessons with a woman named Fay Bradley, a teacher who lived out on a farm with her husband and

teenage daughter. I was to ride the bus to her house with my sister Erica and Erica's best friend Nicole for the lessons after school.

My chances of meeting dashing boys who ballroom danced seemed slim, and the piano certainly wasn't as dainty as the harp, but it would have to do.

I began the piano lessons with the best of intentions. Fay, a monotone, forty-something woman with an obvious disinterest in makeup or hair care, sat me down in front of the piano in her living room. She pointed out the black keys and white keys and how to find the Middle C key. Finding Middle C, I learned in that first hour, was a snap. I would be a virtuoso in no time. I had plunked out Middle C a few dozen times and was feeling smug when Fay said, "Now let's take a look at your work book."

Surprised, I looked up at her. She stared back at me, her eyes gray and pinched, her lips curled slightly upward. She smiled as if *work books* were a completely natural idea. I couldn't understand it. *Work book?* I thought. I seriously doubted that any charm school worth its salt used *work books*. Piano books filled with music that might be used to accompany ballroom dancing, yes. Work books, no. And worse, Fay appeared cheery about the large book that she placed before me. She was enjoying this crushing revelation, I could tell. She began to speak about the purpose of the music theory book, but I tuned out her droning voice for the next few minutes, the full weight of it all tumbling down on me. Piano lessons weren't classy and sophisticated. They were just another opportunity for boredom, like social studies or the evening news.

"For next time," Fay said at the end of the lesson, "I want you to complete these pages in this theory book. See these notes on the musical scale? Below it, you write what letter the note is. See, here is Middle C. Then D, then E." Her voice was monotone, but something told me she was truly relishing this. Staring down at my



fingers on the cold white keys, I realized that my mother had sent me off on a bus to an evil woman. “Do you understand?” Fay asked.

What I understood was that piano lessons were apparently not about refining myself. They were about extra homework. I didn’t know what “theory” meant, but it certainly didn’t sound as fun as walking with a book on my head. I begrudgingly took the book, refusing to meet Fay’s eyes, and nodded.

My hopes for refinement dashed, I put only a half-hearted effort into piano lessons after that first encounter. There were minor pleasures involved with learning a musical instrument—playing my first chord was rather exciting, and when I learned to play “Little Indian,” the politically incorrect song on the last page of my first piano book, I made my sister and little brother dance along to the beat—but mostly, piano lessons were a source of alternating boredom and paranoia that Fay wanted to harm me.

After the first few trips out to the Bradley farm, the lessons became a simple, mind-numbingly static routine. Erica, Nicole, and I rode the school bus out of town, through cornfields and down the gravel road to the farm. We ran from the Bradleys’ barking, surely-rabid dog, a minion of Satan also known as “Buffy,” and threw our bags and coats down in the hall by the front door. Fay met us in the kitchen and put on all the appearance of a sweet lady who enjoyed baking Rice Krispie bars and playing the church organ, but we three knew better. Despite my suspicion that she was trying to poison me, I always took her offered snack, fearing what the alternatives might be. She watched me eat the snack bar a little too carefully, and once I could have sworn she cackled softly as she replaced the pan lid.

Then we took turns going into the living room with Fay for our lesson. My sister Erica usually went first. She was two years older, had usually practiced at least

once during the week, and embraced the “get it over with” philosophy. Nicole and I sat down at the tiny kitchen table with the remains of our questionable Rice Krispie bars and waited, the muffled sounds of Erica plunking out her weekly song assignment wafting in from down the hall.

I sat at the table with my usual I-didn't-practice stomachache, my eyes locked blindly on the small television on top of the refrigerator, always set to *Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?* Genius contestants as young as I was used their geography and history smarts to find the loot, the warrant, and the crook, and all I could manage was Middle C.

“That’s why I use a practice pad,” Nicole told me one day when I looked especially green with nerves. She flipped open her spiral notebook, on which she had drawn a crude keyboard. Her piano book lay open before her and her fingers drummed over her practice pad. I hurriedly copied her but knew ten minutes of silent practice on a paper piano wouldn’t get me through my lesson with Fay.

Erica eventually returned to the kitchen, clutching her books and looking slightly traumatized but relieved that it was once again the longest possible time before she’d have to return to that piano. Nicole disappeared into the dreaded room, Erica stuck her nose in an Agatha Christie, and I pondered why I didn’t practice more at home. I wanted sophistication, yes, but the excruciating practice sessions didn’t seem worth it. My bitterness over having lost out on charm school slowly turned to rebellion. And as my sister, Nicole, and I got older, we got daring.

It began when I climbed up onto the kitchen counter and reached for the jar of candy that was kept on the shelf near the ceiling while Erica kept watch by the door. We snuck into the bedroom next to the kitchen, which belonged to Fay’s daughter

Barbara, and ate the stale Easter candy she had stashed there. And once, most thrilling of all, we found the remote control to the television on top of the refrigerator and switched the channel away from PBS. I wondered what Madame LaRoche (who, despite her imaginary status, still judged me harshly with a cutting French eye) would think about my eating stolen marshmallow-filled chocolate eggs and watching *Days of Our Lives* instead of age-appropriate, educational programming on public television. But the panic and bitterness of piano lessons clouded my judgment.

Our antics were pleasurable distractions from the creeping anxiety of having to go interact with Fay, but they couldn't last. When my turn at the piano came, I made the long, tense journey down the dark hallway out of the kitchen and around the corner to the living room. Fay sat waiting for me at the piano, a frozen smile plastered on her face. Her eyes appeared crinkly and bright behind her thick glasses, but it was evil shining out, not warmth. Although she asked how I was and whether I was ready to begin, I sensed a hesitation and prejudice in her attitude toward me. She perched coldly on a stool, high enough to give the impression of a hovering, strict schoolmaster.

The same thought always raced through my head as I approached the piano bench: her snacks laced with witch's brew hadn't finished me off, but the lesson surely would.

I hunkered down on the piano bench, practically curled into a ball but for my fingers stretched on the keyboard. Madame LaRoche would have been ashamed at my posture. "Well, let's hear your song for this week," Fay said, leaning back on her stool and gazing at me expectantly. My stomach protested against the entire scene, but I opened my book to the dog-eared page. Before I was able to play "real" music, as I thought of it, Fay assigned one or two-line songs which were usually given titles like

“Jump the Haystack” or “Grandma’s Chicken Soup.” My lack of musical accomplishment so far could be blamed on these exercises, because I was no more motivated to practice “Boogie Woogie Doo-Wop” than I was to make friends with Fay.

My mother employed various techniques to force me into practice sessions, such as sitting with me at the piano (but three strikes’ worth of my nonsense—rolling on and off the bench, doing impressions of Bert and Ernie, pressing the keys so quietly they made no sound at all and looking to Mom to see how impressed she was— and she was gone, a punishment I despised). Eventually she resorted to paying me to practice. At a dollar for thirty minutes of genuine rehearsal, Mom paid better than the tooth fairy, but even that was hardly incentive enough. Not even the possibility of Fay’s wrath could convince me to practice more than a few minutes the day before my lesson. Charm school was a far-off dream. I was officially an underachiever.

I plunked through that week’s song, hitting all the wrong notes and feeling Fay’s eyes blaze holes through the back of my shirt. My face was fiery, my palms were sweating and slipping over the keys, and the more I played, the worse the music became. When at last the song came to an end, I again lowered my eyes and stared into my lap.

Then came Fay’s silence. It was the most excruciating part of the lesson. The grandfather clock ticked in the corner, and Nicole and Erica giggled in the kitchen. In the distance, Buffy barked an ominous threat. Every sound beckoned to me. I thought fleetingly of making a break for it; I could grab my pink backpack and hop the fence to the cow pasture; I could face Buffy if I had to. Anything but facing the silence of Fay’s disappointment.

“So...” Fay hesitated, drumming her thick fingers on her lap.

I longed to be back in the kitchen, being dwarfed by the accomplishments of the *Carmen San Diego* kids and staring out the window, where Fay's husband Ron could often be seen working by the barn. Maybe Ron would aid me in my escape.

Fay had yet to unleash it, but each time she hesitated before speaking sternly to me, or took the edge of the piano in a steel grip, I knew her wrath was bubbling beneath the surface. "Did you practice this week?"

"Um," I responded. My vocabulary during piano lessons was restricted to "um," "you mean you wanted me to fill out the whole theory page?" and "I'm not sure, but Middle C is right here."

"Hmm," Fay said. I snuck a peek at her. She patted her graying hair and adjusted her glasses. I hated those ugly glasses. Only old, old women wore such big frames. What did she need glasses like that for, anyway? Witches weren't supposed to wear glasses; their evil power was above that. And Madame LaRoche would shudder if she could see Fay's sweater. "Let's try it... *again*," Fay said, her eyes sliding back and forth from the page to my unpracticed hands.

The lesson always continued this way, my heart sinking with each note Fay expected me to play. When she drifted into the lecture for next week's lesson ("Now look at this page on four-fingered chords...") I tuned out. As much as I wanted to be a sophisticated pianist, I simply could not force myself to listen to droning about cut-time and sixteenth-notes. Instead, I used that time to scope out the living room. I imagined her daughter Barbara sitting on the floor doing homework at the coffee table, while Ron read the newspaper in the recliner. In these scenarios Fay was always playing the piano; surely she had no other interests, except possibly baking Rice Krispie bars and

planning her weekly stern lectures. I decided that life at the Bradley house must be a very miserable existence indeed.

Any lingering hope for self-refinement via piano lessons vanished when I was in the fourth grade. I had been taking lessons from Fay for two years, and Erica, Nicole, and I had become quite adept at sneaking into Barbara's bedroom and down the hallway—never to cause any real trouble, but to see how far we could go without getting caught—and climbing around the kitchen counters, but all had been carried out in frantic whispers. Fay's house was a fortress of silence but for the broken sounds of musical struggle.

But then came the day when the cows broke loose. Literally.

Erica was quietly reading her Agatha Christie, and I was watching *Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?* when Ron came bursting through the front door. "Fay!" he bellowed. "FAY!" Erica and I sat, bewildered by the wild look about him, as Fay came running, followed closely by Nicole. "The cows!" Ron shouted, and ran back out the door, followed by Fay.

Erica, Nicole, and I scrambled over to peer through the front door and laughed ourselves sick as Fay and Ron flew down the road after the cows, who had broken through the fencing and were trotting merrily down the gravel lane. As town kids who knew nothing about farm living, it was all very exciting, the bumbling animals quietly trotting off toward gray horizons. I longed to run after them, kicking up dust and mooing away my piano lesson sorrows. As it was, we could hardly see a thing. We didn't dare step out the door because Buffy came running, jaws snapping, whenever we walked onto the front lawn, and all too soon, Ron and Fay had managed to somehow

corral the cows back into their fencing. Fay marched back up to the house, and we were all expected to return to the silent, normal piano lesson routine.

After the exhilaration of the cows' break for freedom (and who could blame them, I wondered? The Bradley farm was clearly oppressive for all creatures), Erica and I couldn't contain ourselves anymore. Feeling less lady-like and more rambunctious than I ever had in Fay's domain, I challenged Erica to a gymnastics contest.

By this time, we were pros when it came to climbing up on the sink, unlocking the mysteriously sealed jars on the shelves by the ceiling, and rearranging the kitchen furniture in near-silence. But the noise of head-stands, jumping jacks, and cartwheels in the tiny room was more difficult to contain. Just as I was flopping down from a particularly impressive head-stand and moving to seat myself like a proper lady again, Fay came bursting from around the corner. When I saw her face, I knew we'd finally done it. We had unleashed the wrath of Fay. Instead of the icy disappointment I was all-too-familiar with, she was blinking rapidly behind her thick frames and her lips were curved into a sneer. "You girls need to keep it down in here," she snapped, her voice miraculously shifting to higher and higher tones. She tugged down her burnt-orange sweater. "You're disturbing Nicole's lesson."

My immediate thought was that the cows were far guiltier of disturbing Nicole's lesson than we were, but Erica's skin had gone paste-white and she nodded stiffly. Nothing horrified me more than knowing that my older sister had been frightened by Fay. Erica withstood Fay's abuse better than any of us, and now she looked as if she were about to burst into tears. I could see Nicole peeking around the corner, her eyes bugging out of her skull in terror. My stomach knotted itself and my feet tingled, from

the head-stand or Fay's wrath, I didn't know. In my mind, even Madame LaRoche was sniffing at me, her star pupil.

Even the rebellion of cows, I realized, was not an excuse to lose one's composure.

My shame, however, only made me despise Fay and her stern, forbidding, prison of a house more. She gave us a final shake of her head, making her cropped style appear wild and unruly. When she whirled back down the dark hallway to the living room, Nicole at her heels, Erica and I stared at each other for a few moments before silently returning to the table to sit, ankles crossed, hands folded. My heart pounded, and there was a thin sheen of sweat on Erica's brow. I knew one thing for certain: I was by far the most uncharming, unsophisticated girl ever to exist, and piano lessons had ruined any possibility of becoming like Karen, the charm school graduate.

After Erica and I did the supper dishes that night, we confronted our mother in the living room. "Mom," Erica said, "I think it's time you let us quit."

Mom laughed and found her place in her book.

"No, really," I agreed. "Fay's evil. Really evil."

"How interesting," Mom murmured, eyes on her page.

Erica and I looked at each other for a long moment.

"Fay plays the piano with her butt!" I cried.

Mom looked up. "*Tara*. What?"

"She—she does!" I exclaimed, looking to Erica for support. Outrageous lying was clearly our only hope for escape. "I peeked around the corner and she was playing the piano with her butt, Mom! She was sitting on the keys! She's crazy!"

My mother just laughed. "Oh, Tara."

I looked to my sister.



Erica stepped up. “No, really, Mom. Fay’s... she... she picks her nose!”

Mom set her book down and gave Erica an exasperated look. “You’re telling me that *Fay Bradley*, a grown woman, picks her nose?”

“And she eats it!” Erica and I spouted together.

“We saw it!” Erica said.

“You have to let us quit. Fay is awful!” I continued.

“The worst—”

“And she yells at us—”

“And all we did was a couple of cartwheels—”

“Tara, shut up—”

“Girls!” Mom was still chuckling, to my fury. “Tara, get out your theory book right now.”

“But she plays the piano with her BUTT! Is that the kind of woman you want us to take lessons f— ”

Mom was laughing too hard now to let me finish. I slammed the piano cover open and began playing “Little Indian” so violently I was certain that Madame LaRoche was clutching her scarves in scandalized agony. “If anyone needs to go to a charm school,” I said, whirling back to look at my mother, who was still giggling behind her mystery, “it’s FAY BRADLEY!”

At our next lesson, frustrated with our lack of progress and continued imprisonment in the Bradley home every Thursday afternoon, we sank even lower in our retaliations. While Nicole and Fay were occupied at the piano, Erica and I wrote “FAY IS A BUTT-HEAD!!!!” on a tiny slip of paper, folded it daintily as many times as we could, and tossed the miniscule paper square beneath the microwave.

“Wait, wait,” I whispered after a moment. “What if she really finds it?” A twinge of guilt sparked in my stomach. Madame LaRoche would never approve.

Erica chewed her nail. “Ummmm,” she said, sounding slightly unsure. “But... she’ll never know it was us, right? She has other students.”

I recalled that Fay had assigned me four pages of theory homework. “Or maybe she’ll think it was Barbara!” I said.

“Would Barbara call her mom *Fay*?” Erica retorted, which sent us both into fits of giggles again. A moment later, Nicole appeared, quickly followed by Fay, and what was done was done. *Sorry, Madame LaRoche. Goodbye, refined Tara.*

My mother made me stick out the piano lessons for years, until I finally convinced her to let me drop piano lessons in order to get a job and join more school activities. There were other methods of refining myself, I supposed.

\*

I was staring open-mouthed at the voice professor who had asked whether I was in fact Tara Acton when the memory of Madame LaRoche and my rebellion against piano lessons flashed across my mind. “Yes—I’m Tara Acton,” I choked out. I’m Tara Acton, the girl who placed a note under her music teacher’s microwave that read “FAY IS A BUTT-HEAD!!!!” I’m Tara Acton, the girl who spent more time imagining being graceful than actually being so. I grinned and straightened my shoulders. After all, I had retained bits and pieces of my musical training that would make me a bit more refined. But the Tara Acton who knew how to have a good time was the one who wanted to become an opera singer. *Be charming*, I thought one last time. *But be yourself.*

The lesson ground into me since kindergarten, one that my imaginary charm school probably glossed over, was kicking in.

I sang my arias to the professors, who scribbled notes as I willed myself to stop worrying about appearing refined and to enjoy it. When I was finished, the woman with my file asked me the inevitable question about my piano abilities. “Oh... well,” I said carefully. “I’m all right. I can get by.”

Another professor peered down at my application and resume. “It says here you had eight years of lessons. That seems pretty experienced!” The panel members all chuckled.

I thought for a moment. “Well, yeah. Er... yes. Yes, I suppose I did.” I couldn’t help it. My shoulders dropped and I laughed.

When I learned several months later that I had been accepted in to the program, I spent a few minutes dancing wildly around my living room, hoping wherever she was, Madame LaRoche wasn’t watching. It didn’t really matter, anyway. She was always a bit of a snob.

## The Nickname Game

Grandpa Jim recently wrote me an email asking “How do writers and actors come up with their new names? How do they select their new identity? And what name will you take?” I had barely hit the reply button when two decades of name-inspired angst flooded my memory.

My name, Tara, came from *Gone with the Wind*, which my mother read in high school. It was Scarlett O’Hara’s plantation, the pride of her family, “the only thing that lasts.” My mother saved the name, go figure, as a second choice to the name Erica, which was given to my older sister. My father’s vote was to name me Alisa, and since my mother had won with Erica’s name, she felt she needed to give a little. However, she went into labor two days before the scheduled Caesarian section, and on the way to the hospital, Dad turned to her and said, “So it’s Tara for a girl?”

When I asked my mother to elaborate on the story of this switch, she said, “I think he just felt sorry for me because I wasn’t supposed to go into labor yet.” I wonder now, had I been born on the fourteenth instead of the thirteenth, whether my name might have changed things. Would Alisa have done the things Tara did, such as take more than an hour to do one meal’s worth of dishes, or throw her glow-in-the-dark rosary beads across the kitchen when she was angry (to her mother’s horror), or beg to be released from the torture of piano lessons? More importantly, would Alisa have chosen a career path destined for tiny paychecks and mailboxes of rejection letters? Alisa could be on her way to the presidency of the United States, for all I knew, had she been spared the identity crises that Tara invented for herself.

I first began to put real thought to my name during second grade, when our teacher began a science unit on dinosaurs. I heard the name “pterodactyl” and was hooked. “Everyone will choose a different dinosaur,” my teacher told us a few days into the dinosaur unit, “and we’ll use computers to write about them.” The class was abuzz with the excitement of using a computer for the first time in our lives, but I was more concerned I wouldn’t have the honor of writing about my namesake dinosaur, particularly when I heard another boy in the class bragging that the pterodactyl was all his. I challenged him immediately with my arguments: not only was Petrie the Pterodactyl my favorite character in *The Land Before Time*, the creature was practically named after me. When I showed the class that my name, when smushed together

("tara·d·acton") and pronounced aloud as one word, was only off by the last letter, no one could argue.

The only problem with my attachment to pterodactyls was that I couldn't get any of my friends to call me that. When I was a few years older, around the fourth or fifth grade, my small group of girlfriends entered the Nickname Phase. During this phase, everyone showed their love for their friends through cutesy names written on folded-up notes to each other. "Tara-dactyl," it seemed, was not cutesy enough.

"I don't even know how to spell that," Kim-now-Kimmy said.

"Are pterodactyls the ones that eat other dinosaurs' eggs or the ones that can fly?" Deidra-now-DeeDee asked.

I explained that pterodactyls didn't fly, that they glided, like flying squirrels, and that instead of spelling out Tara-dactyl, we could just draw a little picture of one.

"That's even better," I said. "It's like code."

Kimmy and DeeDee were not convinced. "Why don't you just go by Terri?" Kimmy said. "That's easy."

I sighed. "Terri" as a nickname for Tara was easy, yes, but it was also revolting to me. My mother had always refused to let anyone call me Terri, and I had inherited her attitude. "Can't we come up with something better, though?" I was reminded of the day, four years earlier in the first grade, when Eric Morrison had looked up at me from where he sat in the reading corner and said, "Tara, huh? Hey, you must really like

TEARING things, Tara-piece-a-paper!" He had laughed uproariously while I nodded and turned away, secretly disgusted. It wasn't just that Eric was a boy, a boy whose greasy hair was too long and who wore black T-shirts so faded they appeared gray, at that— but I felt even my seven-year-old self could come up with something better as a nickname than "Tara-piece-a-paper." Now, as a fifth-grader, I wasn't so sure. "How about Tara-piece-a-paper?" I suggested, only half-kidding.

Kimmy and DeeDee snorted with laughter. I faked a laugh too.

"Hey," Kimmy said. "What about this?" She took a pencil from her desk and wrote *Tarah* on a notebook.

"Ooh!" Dee Dee said. "It's got an H on it!"

"Uh, yeah," I said. "But it sounds exactly like Tara."

Kimmy and Dee Dee stared at me, as if they didn't grasp the problem.

"I guess Terri's fine," I told them, sighing. "For now." They promised to allow me to at least spell it *Tari*, a small consolation for agreeing to an inferior nickname.

After school, I shared my dilemma with my mother, who scoffed at "Tari."

"Why couldn't you have named me Kimberly or Deidra?" I demanded. "My name is so boring."

Mom scoffed some more. "Tara is the perfect name for you," she said with irritating confidence.

"MOTHER." I tossed myself on the kitchen floor in anguish.

“Honey, you have a nickname.”

“I do?”

“Tee Wee,” she said, referring to my parents’ pet name for me since I was a baby.

I rolled over and gave her a withering stare. “Oh, yes. Why don’t I go suggest that everyone at school call me TEE WEE.”

“Well, why don’t you go by your middle name for awhile?” Mom suggested.

“We could call you Tara Danielle.”

“I hate my middle name,” I said, staring at the kitchen tile.

“Tara, Tara, Quite Contrara,” she sang. A favorite phrase in the Acton household, it was almost a nickname, but more infuriating than satisfying.

“Danielle’s almost a boy’s name.”

“Okay,” Mom said as she left the room. “But you could go by Danny...”

I pondered this as I stared at the ceiling. Danny was still a boy’s name, but it was a *nickname*.

The next day at school, I told my friends I intended to go by Danny.

“Danny?” Kimmy repeated.

“But that’s a boy’s name,” DeeDee said.

“I’ll never remember Danny,” Kimmy argued.

“Let’s just call you Tari!” DeeDee said.



Their inability to compromise finally frustrated me enough that I gave up. Tari it was. And if I intended to use it, I would use it well. I wrote Tari on thousands of secret notes, drawings, and rounds of M.A.S.H. I signed my diary entries “Love, Tari,” and insisted that at all recess Red Rover games, the opposing team demanded for Tari to be sent right over. As fifth grade passed, I even began convincing myself that the nickname wasn’t so bad. It wasn’t as cute as “Danny,” or as clever as “Tara-dactyl,” but then, it was easier to spell and much girlier, which was key to our fifth-grade-girl clique.

Of course, if I were to go by Tari, there was the matter of hiding it from my mother. Over the summer our family took a vacation to the Rockies, and I sent a postcard to Kimmy signed “Love, Tari.” I shoved it to the bottom of the pile of postcards to be mailed, just in case, but when we returned home a week later, I discovered Mom had seen my signature anyway. I found the delivered postcard in Kimmy’s bedroom one afternoon, and was livid when I saw that a distinctly Mom-shaped “a” had been written over the “i” in Tari.

As for me, I fancied myself rather adept at nicknaming others. My parents had given my siblings, Erica and Brennan, names destined to be improved upon. “Brennan” was effortless, as nothing gave me more pleasure and him more frustration than when I inverted his name to Bernnan. Bernnan went from Berns to Bernsie to Bernie to Barney to Barns to Barnes & Noble to Bonz to The Bonzai back to Bernzai to Berstein to Berenstein Bear within a matter of months. Erica’s name was even easier and more

enjoyable to convert. She had a built in nickname in that Brennan and I already always pronounced her name with two syllables, “Air-ca.” The pronunciation became so common to us that recently when my brother called her “Air-ih-ca,” as most people do, he and she shot each other bizarre looks and the Bonz immediately apologized for misspeaking. This, I believe, is the mark of a good nickname: when the use of one’s true name demands an apology.

Air-ca gave way to Aircs, and it was open season from there. My sister has been known to answer to Rix, Rixers, Rixie, Rixiestarr, Rixiestarr-face, Rica, Rica Ricardo, the decidedly less PC Rica Retardo (those two thanks to my Nick at Nite phase), EMA (her initials), Little E, Nerica, Erica Michelley-Belle, Eeks, Eeksie, and Eeksie-Bilbo-Baggins. I couldn’t get my friends to call me “Danny,” and my sister had “Eeksie-Bilbo-Baggins” on her list.

Although many of Erica’s nicknames were of my own doing, they quickly began to work against me. I had hoped that their creation would result in a few nicknames of my own: I nickname you, you nickname me. In a way, the plan worked. However, it wasn’t quite in the way I had intended. My new monikers were less inspired than I had hoped, and no one seemed to notice but me. During one of many high school mope sessions, I brought up the issue with my parents again. I was sitting at the kitchen table, making out a list of possibilities. “When I go off to college, I want to have a good

nickname prepared. Something I can tell people to call me, and put on my dorm room door. So I can *start over*. Nickname-wise.”

“You have plenty of nicknames,” Mom said. “What about Trix? Or Trixie? Or Taircs!”

“Mother,” I said, “Have you ever noticed that all of my nicknames are just Erica’s nicknames with a T on front?”

“Hey,” Mom said, bemused. “That’s true.”

“You should have gone with Alisa,” I said. “Something with more syllables. For more nicknaming possibilities.”

Dad patted my shoulders and gave me a quick kiss on the head. “You’ve already got a nickname, Tee Wee.”

This time, I managed to refrain from tossing myself on the kitchen floor.

Of course there were a few nicknames here and there that weren’t leftovers from babyhood and weren’t someone else’s name with a T tacked on. My middle school years were marked by fleeting nicknames based on friendships with people a bit more creative than Kimmy and DeeDee. Girls I remember with a dose of nostalgia as “Camel” and “Angel” called me “Suave,” based unromantically on my chosen line of hair-care products. During our *Sailor Moon*-obsessed years, “Serena” took to calling me “Venus” or “V,” and still does to this day, but I could never quite convince my other high school friends to continue the tradition. College did bring a few nicknames, but they were

mostly a series of bad jokes, and none were worthy of the dorm-room door. “Taramisu” was used once or twice during the undergraduate days of coffeehouse pastry hours, and one friend occasionally spouted, “Tara, Tara, T-T-T” in her best cheerleader impression. Neither really stuck. “Tough-Actin’ Tara Acton,” a reference to the “tough-actin’ Tinactin” commercials, seemed to be the only nickname that occurred to people no matter where I went regardless of whether we were thirteen or twenty-four. As much as I enjoyed being compared to an anti-fungal foot spray, powerful and effective or not, this was not what I was looking for.

That was the question I began asking myself as I grew into adulthood: what was I looking for? I made a list: something powerful, something mysterious, something funny, something cute, and something romantic. A name that made me feel special. A name that made me feel like the very essence of myself. Honestly, how difficult was that?

“Well, what’s wrong with going by Tara, anyway?” a college friend once asked me. “It’s a great name.”

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing.” I was forced to think for awhile about that. She had a point. Perhaps I needed to embrace my given name more. Stop pining away for Alisa and all of her possibilities. After all, part of what I was searching for was a connection with some kind of history, and Tara certainly applied to that. Much of my family is Irish, and while I didn’t inherit the red hair of my father’s side, I did get the

temper, stubbornness, and Catholic upbringing. I made a decision: I would embrace my name as a mark of my ancestors. The first step was a little research.

The name Tara has several connotations. It is the name of an Indian goddess, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the members of a pagan-interest group I later belonged to (I was once allowed to take the first piece of Ostara cake because I “had the goddess name,” a fact I’ve been bringing up ever since when someone supplies baked goods during our holiday observances). In Sanskrit, Tara means “star.” I’ve heard many of these definitions—“stone of destiny,” “goddess of the sea,” “the Divine Mother,” and so on—and I find aspects of history and culture to take from them all, but of course it is the Irish connotation I identify with most. By definition, “Tara” is Gaelic for “rocky pinnacle.” I once found it translated as the decidedly less-attractive “craggy hillside,” and quickly slammed that baby name book shut. It is known more famously as the Hill of Tara, a resting place for the mythological High Kings of Ireland. Ireland’s famous “Tara Brooch” is an artifact from the seventh century that incorporates the high-quality goldsmithing of the early medieval period and beads displaying images of wolves and dragons. It is now a common symbol of Ireland and Celtic history, one that can be found on many decorative Irish pieces.

While browsing in a tourist shop called “Luck of the Irish” with my mother once in Illinois, we came across a gold necklace with a Tara Brooch charm. “Oh, look at this,” Mom said, bringing the necklace over to show me. “My Tara has to have this.”

She smiled as she placed it in her shopping basket. It was hard, with that sort of pride, to argue with my parents about their choice of name for me. I, who had always been searching for a link to the past, to a history of enchantment and royalty, had been given a distinct Irish heirloom.

I was studying Medieval Studies in college when I first began to seriously look into the background of my name, enjoying the ancient and medieval history behind it. And it was then, after the possibilities for dorm-hall nicknames and “brand new starts” had begun to fade a bit, that I began to settle into my name. It wasn’t long after my mother bought me the Tara Brooch necklace that an event occurred that seemed to solidify my destiny as a Tara. When I moved my double bed to school during my second year of college, my dad brought my childhood bed from the garage to my room.

“What’s that?” I asked him, pointing to a mark on the white frame, near my pillow.

“What?”

I leaned closer to the frame and saw a small green pterodactyl sticker I had placed on the frame, at least thirteen years ago, as if to say *Tara belongs here*. Beginning to laugh, I pointed at the sticker. “Did you see this?”

My dad took in the sticker and shook his head, a smile on his face.

“Tara-dactyl,” I reminded him, and ran a finger over the frayed edges. There was no way it could be removed without ripping the little guy in half. He was staying.

I have never outgrown this attachment to pterodactyls. I hold on to stickers, magnets, and toys shaped like the little winged Tara-saurs, like a mascot for myself. When I was twenty-four, my brother informed me that, scientifically speaking, pterodactyls are not dinosaurs. For awhile I blamed my second grade teacher for leading me into a lifetime of ignorance and eventual disillusionment. Later I decided to romanticize the notion: pterodactyls, much like myself, are oft-misunderstood creatures who have name/identity issues. It worked.

Incidentally, my mother recently revealed that Dad now says he didn't want the name Alisa, but *Alyssa*. "I never would have allowed that," Mom insists. "There were already lots of babies being named Alyssa back then." Regardless, they still disagree on which name it really was he wanted. With that kind of confusion, had Dad prevailed in that argument, heaven knows what identity crises Alisa/Alyssa would have encountered. In that light, I think I'm pretty happy being a pterodactyl collecting, nickname-giving (even if it's not for myself), Irish Tara.

"What name will you take?" Grandpa asks. "Or will you use Tara Acton, certainly a distinguished-sounding name that will fit well on the showbills and book covers?" The showbills and book covers remain to be seen, Grandpa, but yes. There's a lesson in here somewhere about growing up and growing into yourself, realizing the name you were born with is the name that was meant to be, and it seems too simple now to dig for even deeper interpretations. Now my papers and books are covered with my

handwritten name, my favorite doodle. When I write letters to my elementary school friends, sometimes I consider signing them as Tari, for old time's sake, but I always find myself writing simply Tara, and occasionally adding a small hand-drawn pterodactyl. And when I'm feeling particularly dramatic, I whisper it low, *Tara*, as if it is an ancient and powerful charm, my life-long heirloom, "the only thing that lasts."



## To Be Small

There are times I wish I remembered more of what it is to be small. To sit lazily in a swing with room to spare, to crawl beneath fences, to sit on my dad's lap. To cartwheel across the backyard without fear of spraining my wrists or endangering the lawn. Somewhere around puberty that feeling of physical smallness went away, taking with it a hint of freedom. Perhaps that's why being small is treated as something to be proud of in American culture—there's an inherent feeling that if you are small, you are capable of impressive feats, both in the backyard and in the social world.

I first realized I was not small when I was eleven and sat in silence listening to friends at a cafeteria table. "Oh, I'm going to freak out when I go over a hundred pounds for sure," one girl said. "Don't even talk about that day," said another. I had been over a hundred pounds for well over a year and had, until that point, not been aware it was cause for panic. Thus I joined the ranks of the majority of women who hide the exact numbers of their weight, albeit a few months earlier than necessary.

Early childhood was the opposite—having one’s height measured in preschool was a time of great dignity and honor; the taller, the better. And in first grade, reaching the monkey bars in order to impress the kindergarteners required height. At that age, no one knew what size clothing they wore, and we had more important things to discuss then anyway, like what the afternoon snack would be or what the new kid was like. But by the time I reached middle and high school, all that had changed. The value of being small increased with time. The monkey bars were condemned as dangerous because some careless first grader had spoiled everyone’s good time by slipping off and cracking his head. And knowing one’s pants size was a necessity if one wished to go shopping with friends at the local mall, a rite of passage in growing up, second only to being caught chewing gum in class, a sure sign of coolness.

In high school, small girls were tossed about like parade candy, bounced into the air by the boys for not much reason aside from the fact that they could be. Being a tosser or tossee was a sign of Joe Popularity. At football games cheerleaders were all but hurled into the crowds, to everyone’s delight; in the spring musical they were lifted into the spotlight and carried, with a dose of heroics, across the stage. In order to flirt most effectively with boys, one needed to consider if she was capable of being lifted above someone’s shoulders, while simultaneously laughing daintily and feigning shock and fear (mark another blow for feminism). In truth, if a girl was small enough, she was destined to be flung somewhere, and this was a desirable position.

A round woman is no longer a sign of wealth and prosperity as it was in history. Although, if one *is* round, one is licensed to a particular brand of girl power—that of being a plus-sized woman. Being large gives one license to roll her eyes at lingerie commercials and anorexic mannequins in the mall, and authorization to make such lofty proclamations as “I’d rather be a *real* woman.” The difficult part of this power, however, is that it is all too often feigned. The woman who scoffs at the *small* population, and declares herself to be happier when eating a bit of chocolate cake when she so desires, has undoubtedly found herself wishing to be of the flingable variety. Tapping into true plus-sized power is not easily done.

Still, in my experience, it only takes one moment to move from being a girl who wanted only to recall what it was to be small to a girl who realized that never being tossed into the air like a beanbag was hardly the worst thing in the world. In fact, being a bit different was—fancy that!—almost as pleasurable as my guidance counselor always declared it was supposed to be.

The moment came when I was fifteen. The swing choir had raised enough money for new costumes, which happened not only to come in the school colors, but sparkled sixty percent more than the previous outfits, and a prototype of scratchy blue had been sewed for the girls. We were all to try on the same skirt and top, just to “get an idea,” according to the seamstress. It wasn’t clear who came up with the one-size-

prototype plan, but that person apparently came from a land of identical china dolls—like heaven, or American Eagle Outfitters.

Locked in the choir director’s office, my limbs in a blue, glittering tangle, I heard the tell-tale ripping sound. It’s the sound that you hear in cartoons when the portly character leans over and his pants split right down the backside. Threads break apart, seams come undone, and boxers decorated with big red hearts suddenly appear. Guaranteed laughs. I’d heard it plenty of times, but even if I hadn’t, I would have known what happened.

I allowed myself a few moments of pure panic (*oh shit/everyone’s going to know/you’ll never be flung*). Then I careened into survival mode, well honed from years of cafeteria-table bodyweight conversations. I went for the first tool in the Girl Power Plus-Sized Woman’s toolbox: laugh it off. “Oh, Mrs. H.,” I babbled to the choir director. “I think I really messed up good.” I sounded like a hysterical cowboy. Apologizing profusely, laughing as daintily as possible, I flew from the choir room.

That was not the moment.

The moment happened a few days later when I went to a friend’s house to rehearse some music together. This happened to be the same friend who had declared she would “freak right out” the day she tipped the scales at a hundred pounds or more. (I never did ask what had occurred when she’d finally tipped the scales at one hundred, having stopped wanting to hear her opinions the day she looked at my tank top and

said, without apparent thought, “Nice arms, Tara.”) This girl’s mother, a prim-and-proper type who had probably done her fair share of easy cartwheeling in her day, greeted us at the door and asked whether we had received our new swing choir outfits yet. “Not yet,” my friend said. “We’re still waiting for them to sew new ones.”

“Well, who ripped that prototype in the first place?” her mother asked, pursing her lips.

I had managed to keep my cartoonish ripping of the costume under wraps, but a flushing anger took over. This woman was acting as if I’d done it on purpose, gotten my jollies by ruining a swing choir prototype. “Oh, I did,” I chirped, raising my hand and letting out another Tara-trademarked embarrassed bark of laughter. “Yep, I just... put my elbow in and...” I trailed off as my friend’s mother stared at me. After a moment she smiled stiffly, but I saw it—within an instant her face had gone from indignation to disdain. Disdain that I had dared be too big for the costume, had dared rip the seam. Her eyes swept down and upward, from my feet back to my face.

This was the moment: I willed myself not to break her stare. Too long had I sat silently while girls declared they would kill themselves when they reached my weight, too many times had I quietly rolled my eyes as girls of five feet and a hundred pounds sighed and entered the land of high school clichés as they announced their intentions to lose five pounds by prom. Now I would stand up for fifteen-year-olds everywhere who were forced into the indignation of squeezing themselves into a sparkly size small.

“Well,” she said. I half-expected her to add a snobbish “Hmph!” Instead she looked away, a bemused, tight-lipped smile playing across her face.

Yes, some things, too many things, I cannot remember: being small enough to shop in the same boutiques as my friends, small enough to be carried on my dad’s shoulders, small enough to somersault and cartwheel my way across the empty lot next to our house. But I remember that smile, that air of superiority, that injustice that I had previously known only from peers. I remember *that* feeling of smallness.

It’s hardly a story to compare with victims of true injustice, and I’ve faced worse “sizism” than that, although the sparkly outfit debacle is a standby story whenever the “what’s your most embarrassing moment” question comes up in conversation. But it is highlighted in my memory, the moment I realized sometimes the bigger person (not to stretch the metaphor too far) is the lucky one. The one who learns the life lessons about understanding and embracing diversity and being more careful when trying on swing choir prototypes, and becomes a better person for it. As I see it, there are three types of small: small and flingable, small and petty, and small and unwilling to hold onto one’s Girl Power Plus-Sized Woman’s toolbox. In the end, I’m all right with being none of these.

## Sailor Girl

### I. The Girl

Kaitlyn first drew my attention during the required one-mile run in physical education class. We had just begun middle school together, and she was still a bit of a mystery to me, but by the time we were panting around the second lap, we had already bonded over our mutual hatred for gym shorts and love for Indiana Jones and fantasy. “I just think that we’re destined for greater things than running a mile in the school gym,” she confided, and struggling for breath, I agreed. “I don’t want to grow up to have some super boring job,” Kaitlyn continued. “I want to actually *do* things. I want to be unique.”

I liked the way she used that word. *Unique*. During my elementary school years, a string of guidance counselors informed my class that we were all very, very unique, to the point where the word began to lose all meaning, and I began to wonder if we

weren't all unique, just in very similar ways, and we could all do anything we wanted to do. It occurred to me that the guidance counselors probably meant that we could do anything we wanted in terms of future careers, but I secretly hoped that they meant we could literally do anything—be telepathic, travel to ancient Egypt, become adventurers without having to go to college. My friendship with Kaitlyn began because she felt the same way. Early on, she decided that keeping her imagination to a minimum was simply not for her, and that was that. And as far as her classmates at the Gladbrook-Reinbeck school system in rural Iowa were concerned, that excess of imagination was her first fault.

She wasn't exactly famous in the small town, rather a mix of notorious and legendary. At two years old, she was adopted by a local lawyer and his wife, and personality flowed through her even then: exuberant, happy, dramatic. Her brown curls were untamable, her front teeth came in with an impish gap. Compared to her new family's older daughter, Kimberly, Kaitlyn was a wild child, hard to control but easy to love. She was inimitable, ferociously herself. Her attitude was characterized by her seemingly complete unawareness of the world directly around her.

She was the girl who, at the Reinbeck Elementary End-of-the-Year Talent Show, had gyrated on the floor to "She Likes to Spank the Monkey," until the fifth grade teacher interrupted the show by turning off the boom box and uncomfortably stating, "Well, that's enough." Kaitlyn, naturally, was completely unaware that what she had done was controversial. This was the same girl who, in high school, didn't mind repeatedly stretching in the middle of class so that her arms reached far enough behind her back that her entire stomach was exposed to incredulous, on-looking classmates.



She wasn't a small girl. Unlike her adoptive sister, she was sturdy and strong, neither thin nor fat, with a broad torso and solid arms and legs. She was athletic and outdoorsy, preferring horseback riding and rock climbing to school sports. While I was self-consciously wishing to be small and skinny with straight blonde hair, Kaitlyn rarely complained, happy with her own natural curls and curvy frame. It was a brand of confidence in the public school system I only wished I had.

Of course, there were other exiled students who were happy to associate with such a high-spirited individual. Kaitlyn had the brains and means to keep most entertained. At six, she separated the Ross family basement into specific countries—Japan next to the wrapping paper cupboard, Australia by the television set, Mexico behind her mother's treadmill. At ten, she enlisted classmates to help write countless letters to Jonathan Brandis, star of sci-fi adventure show *SeaQuest*, asking if he might be so kind as to drive to Iowa, pick her up, and take her back to the *SeaQuest* vessel. When he didn't arrive, she took it upon herself to create her own underwater military base; it could be found on the Reinbeck Elementary playground. Her friends merely tried to keep up as she organized missions and investigated situations filled with seawater and myth.

She split her time between lands she created, whether in her bedroom or basement or playground, adventures to be had in all—provided someone would play the city kid to her outback guide. When I was first invited to stay at the Ross home for a sleepover in seventh grade, I was surprised to find that Kaitlyn still played these make-believe games; moreover, she was incredibly enthusiastic and unapologetic about it. As we fashioned whips out of Mr. Ross's belts for an *Indiana Jones*-style game, she told me

her philosophy of life—“To me,” she said, “it’s real. It’s all real. It’s not a game, or just in my mind. I really believe.” When I went home, she was running around her basement, catching Nazis and shouting at the cat to get out of the way of the jeep. It didn’t end for her. Life was one adventure after another. It was then that I glimpsed what set her apart from other imaginative kids our age. She wasn’t going to grow out of believing that games were real, or that she really might be involved in supernatural events or higher quests.

By thirteen, I myself seemed to be in a permanent transition between various social groups and was more interested in discovering what my past lives were than being invited to the hot parties. I fancied myself an independent girl, particularly in my older high school years, but I nevertheless still suffered what most of Kaitlyn’s friends did—should a girl completely embrace her quirkiness, play along, and risk ridicule from all corners of adolescent society? Looking back, it’s easy to say that the right decision is to stand by those whom you truly believe in, but when true happiness lies between “the right thing” and sixty-five self-righteous seventh-graders, *easy* isn’t always clear. This, of course, is a well-known story: Peer Pressure Threatens Friendship of 13-Year-Olds. Ultimately though, inspired by Kaitlyn’s optimism, I followed her into the far-more-interesting world of fantasy.

It didn’t take me long to see what drew her into such a colorful world, as she began involving me in her research. The discovery of other cultures—fact-based or fictional, folk or futuristic—shaped her play-dates for years to come, and eventually shaped her entire belief system. She pored over books on ancient Egypt in the school library and taped episodes of *Star Trek* to be studied and emulated in play each weekend.

Life in small-town Iowa couldn't compare to what she discovered was possible. Other *worlds* lay out there! There were castles and druids and space missions and magic and fantastical tongues and mysteries to experience. Clearly, Kaitlyn believed, she was born for more than a life as a lawyer's daughter in a small Iowa town. She felt a connection to it all; she sensed the need to be a part of it. She *was* a part of it. And as we grew closer, drawn to that kindred spirit we saw in each other, she made me a part of it too. I saw it all firsthand; I was privy, through notes passed in study hall and walks in the fields by her house after school, to the secrets she shared with me about whatever new world she believed herself to be in next.

Kaitlyn liked to avoid the ordinary. If we made dinner, we chose medieval Irish stews that required Guinness (the challenge was acquiring the alcohol), or attempted to make elaborate Thai cuisine with only ingredients that could be purchased at the local mom-and-pop store. If we took a walk, we were required to assume new identities, complete with accents (she switched nationalities at random; I was unfailingly English). Attendance at high school football games was normally followed by escaping the stadium to walk through nearby corn fields and discuss the stars we could see.

Though she had friends, there weren't many who were willing to enter her world as completely as I was, so we grew close quickly. Those who could ignore the whispers and snickering were rewarded: Kaitlyn made your beliefs valid. If I believed we were telepathic, then we were, simple as that. She organized times for us to think about certain topics and send information telepathically over the weekend, so we could compare notes on Monday morning and see if the other had gotten the message. When she included friends in her world, most lingered halfway between the "real" world—

knowing that the plan would never work—and *her* world, wanting so much to believe she was right that it *was* true. Some of these games were silent ones, written in notes and passed between classes, never to be spoken of aloud, in order to avoid the rolling eyes of the social upper class. Most games, though, were merely a part of life with Kaitlyn, and were freely discussed amid the bemused eavesdroppers.

## II. The War

Kaitlyn wasn't afraid of being exiled, but those around her were. The *Sailor Moon* War, as it came to be known, illustrated this fully. Bullies and beautifuls alike banded together to stop Kaitlyn's blatant display of enthusiasm for an animated Japanese teenage superhero from infiltrating the school. It began one day in eighth grade, when Kaitlyn hopped off her morning bus with a drawing in hand. I set aside my paperback and took a glance at what was to quickly become the biggest controversy of the eighth grade. A simple drawing of a girl with a strange hairdo, wearing a sailor-style school uniform, smiled innocently up at me. "It's called *Sailor Moon*," Kaitlyn explained. "It's animé. You know. From Japan." The next morning before I left for school, I switched my television set to the USA Network and watched the show with great anticipation. I examined with interest a handful of animated Japanese girls who, by day, attended prep school in Tokyo, and by night became superheroines fighting the crimes of enemies throughout the galaxy

I thought it was genius.

Kaitlyn and I began our *Sailor Moon* campaign the next day. As any obsessed geek would testify, the first step in campaigning for mass love of a television show was to draw many pictures, usually profiles of the main characters' vital information and

intergalactic crime-fighting techniques. Kaitlyn also taught me that a portrait of one's self masquerading as a character in the show never hurts either, and I found that she was correct. It was during these early days that she actually became known as "Serena." She had previously been known simply as Kaitlyn, but upon her discovery of Sailor Moon, whose by-day alter-ego went by the Americanized name of Serena, she wasted no time in changing it. A few kids in the class simply rolled their eyes and obligingly agreed to refer to her as Serena, but I had no problem with it. In fact, I delighted in the entire name-changing business and insisted on a change of my own. The change was short lived for our friends, but to this day, over a decade later, she still refers to me almost exclusively as "Venus" or "V," and I continue to address my letters to "Serena."

Upon the creation of our own *Sailor Moon* characters, the idea of an identity change suddenly became an extremely popular game among our friends. Our class was small—there were perhaps twenty girls in the whole class—and it wasn't long before many of them had heard about our quest to transform ourselves into girl-power superheroes. It was an attractive idea, and soon other girls were approaching us to create a *Sailor Moon* character for them as well. We were off, developing comic books, our own magazine (*Sailor Times*), fan fiction stories, and short plays to be acted out during phys ed when Coach Bailey wasn't watching. It was an all-too-perfect existence for two eighth-grade, animé-crazed girls. At least, until the boys caught on.

I had assumed that the boys didn't care what the girls did, which was precisely the reason why Kaitlyn and I were so shocked by the backlash our *Sailor Moon* campaign received. When a large, somewhat prematurely sadistic boy named Justin caught on to the Sailor-Identity game, he decided to become the ringleader of the Boys

Against *Sailor Moon* Club. Nearly a month had passed since *Sailor Moon* had become a part of my daily activity when I noticed several boys snickering over a poor drawing in the back row of desks during homeroom. Frowning at them, I craned my neck to see the crude portrait Justin had drawn—a girl severely lacking in proper clothing with a headline reading “Sailor Slut.” Justin and his minions were now laughing uncontrollably.

Being a relatively innocent thirteen-year-old, I felt a shock of humiliation at this profanity, which quickly turned to anger. Experiencing a rage I hadn’t felt since Coach Bailey had confiscated my latest issue of the *Sailor Times*, I retaliated in what I considered to be an appropriate action for a Sailor Scout—tattling. To my dismay, my homeroom teacher merely frowned and issued Justin a warning.

Seeing he could get away with his antics, Justin issued an all-out attack on the *Sailor Moon* girls. Over the next two weeks, the boys did everything in their power to tease the girls, humiliate Kaitlyn and me, and destroy the *Sailor Moon* legacy of triumph of good over evil. It was quite impressive, in truth—Justin, who had always been a complete slacker, was suddenly a beacon of strength and cruelty, presiding over his troops like a general gone bad. The eighth grade boys had never in their prepubescent lives organized into so much as a straight line, and suddenly—under the leadership of a smoking, cursing, thirteen-year-old bully who was failing junior high—they formulated into a complex army of *Sailor Moon* persecutors.

Justin divvied up tasks: the geeks were in charge of computerized documents mocking our Sailor literature—“We the undersigned pledge to stop *Sailor Moon* from entering our school,” one flier read. The theater kids were in charge of distracting the teachers as the girls endured their harrying. “Mrs. Jacobs,” Randy Jenkins announced

during math class, “I have a family emergency, can I have a pass?” As he distracted the teacher, Justin stole a Sailor Scout figurine from my backpack and threw it behind the radiator. The jocks weren’t capable of much more than verbal heckling. “What’re you supposed to be, Sailor Lesbian?” Bryce sneered when he saw Kaitlyn and me sitting together during study hall.

I was yelling after Bryce to shut up and leave us alone when I noticed how flushed Kaitlyn’s face had become. “Hey, what’s wrong?” I said, turning around in my desk and placing my hand on her arm. “What, those guys? They’re idiots; don’t let *them* get to you.” Kaitlyn shrugged as if she didn’t care, but I noticed that her eyes were filling with tears. She suddenly looked different to me—she was supposed to be my loyal leader, captain, friend—she wasn’t supposed to crack under some stupid boy’s taunting.

I spent the next few days trying to get to the bottom of the boys’ actions. “Why do you even *care*?” I pleaded with Justin and his minions during homeroom one day.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “It’s just funny.”

“What, aren’t we paying enough attention to you?” I rolled my eyes. “For once, you’re not the center of the universe?”

“That must be it!” he exclaimed, and his minions roared with laughter. As I turned back around in my desk chair, I realized that I hated boys even more than I hated phys ed.

But I had bigger problems than just Justin and the cronies. Although Kaitlyn had never had any problem being as eccentric as she wanted despite what others thought, the *Sailor Moon* backlash had hit her hard. After two weeks of unsuccessfully ignoring the Boys Against *Sailor Moon*, I took it upon myself to call an emergency

meeting of the dozen or so Sailor Scouts during lunchtime. Kaitlyn sat next to me, her head in her hands, looking confused. She was used to just ignoring the people who made fun of her, not speaking up and dealing with it, but I'd had enough.

I looked out on the faces around the table. "I—I suspected that this kind of foul play could be an issue," I spoke, my voice surprisingly clear. My fellow Sailor Scouts nodded. "But... but this is exactly what Sailor Moon—and Sailor Venus and Mars and Jupiter—and all of them—fight against. Good against evil. Dark against light. Boys against girls." I looked to Kaitlyn again, but she was watching me. "So—so don't let them get to you," I finished somewhat lamely. "We'll win this. This war."

I saw a spark of determination in Kaitlyn's eyes then. "This war," she repeated. It was precisely the sort of rhetoric she'd been batting around in her basement for years, the kind of situation she had always been preparing for. We braced ourselves for the only kind of action we were bound to face in middle school.

Seeing that the boys had actually managed some organization, I realized that a plan of action was in order. "A statement," I told Kaitlyn as we half-heartedly ran laps in phys ed that afternoon after the meeting. "We need a statement. Something that will show those boys that we're not backing down."

Kaitlyn, looking solemn, nodded. "Fliers," she pronounced. "We'll have all the girls post their character drawings on their lockers. First thing tomorrow morning."

I marched through the eighth-grade hall the next morning with an air of determination. Handing out fliers to all the girls, I told them, "Take a stand against the boys—don't let them tell you what you can and can't like. Let's win this *Sailor Moon* War!"

There were a handful of girls we knew we couldn't convince at all, girls who had



always disliked Kaitlyn and didn't even know who I was. Those who didn't fall under those categories were also finding the growing peer pressure to persecute the Sailor Scouts too much to handle. Kaitlyn wouldn't approach these girls, and when I smiled shyly and offered Jessie Hanks a flier with Sailor Pluto posed defiantly at the center, Jessie gave me a smirk. "I heard Kaitlyn's been brainwashed into thinking she's from the moon," she said, crossing her arms. "Seriously, what's up with that?"

I snatched the flier back and narrowed my eyebrows. "Just because a person has an imagination doesn't mean everyone should make fun of her," I snapped, walking away. It was by far the most defiant I had ever acted toward another girl. I met Kaitlyn at a locker down the hallway. She was standing hopefully, her arms outstretched and filled with fliers, before Rachel. Rachel, Kaitlyn's polar opposite, was prone to worrying about what others thought of her. Rachel looked at me hesitantly. "I'm not sure," she said. "I mean... don't you think this whole *Sailor Moon* thing is a little... out of control?"

Justin swaggered by, looked pointedly at Kaitlyn, and reached over to the nearest locker, ripping the *Sailor Moon* flier prominently attached to it down onto the floor. Rachel's eyes narrowed. "That's *it*," she murmured through clenched teeth. "Gimme that flier." Kaitlyn and I swelled with pride and excitement—this was drama the likes of which we had never expected.

By twelve o'clock that day, the hallway had the appearance of a war-torn battlefield. The floor and lockers were littered with half-taped, ripped fliers. Lunchtime was stalled by a showdown in the hall between the boys and girls. The boys took the profane route, shouting "Sailor Sluts! Sailor Whores!" while the girls attempted to use reason. Clamors of "Why should you care what we like?" and the ever-popular playground taunt, "It's a free country!" filled the air. The boys found the situation

hysterical, the girls found it devastatingly serious, and the result was a back-and-forth shouting match, with Justin and me at the helm, shouting into each other's faces, arms flying. The commotion was quickly cleared by a teacher, but Kaitlyn and I spent the next several weeks reenacting the excitement of the battle. "See, this is how we should be living all the time," Kaitlyn said. "Standing up for stuff."

"Even if it's just a TV show," I agreed. "We can do anything!"

Justin and his cronies quieted down for awhile, and it appeared that the war had been won, and Kaitlyn remained resolute in her philosophy that we should never "let the haters get to us," until the yearly talent show was announced. She was determined to realize her dreams of being both a stage star and honest-to-God intergalactic superhero. For weeks she prepared for the big event, writing a short *Sailor Moon* play and casting her friends as characters. She measured each girl in the school library, and at fourteen years old bought material and sewed ten Sailor Scout superhero costumes. While the cast murmured worries of sabotage to each other in the days approaching the premiere, Kaitlyn's enthusiasm was never higher, and she worked steadfastly in preparation.

The day of the show arrived, and, huddled backstage in boots and Sailor outfits, the cast noticed that Kaitlyn was missing. I was sent to speak with her when she was eventually found, as no one else knew what to do. I found her curled up on a bench in the girl's gym locker room, her arms wrapped around her knees, crying uncontrollably. The play featured only one male role, but it was key to the plot, and Kaitlyn had, after much deliberation, convinced her mopey boyfriend Michael to take the part. Michael had finally had enough of the jibes he suffered from his friends and the others, both for dating Kaitlyn and taking part in something they deemed as ridiculous as the play; he refused to go on.

I was slightly confused when I found Kaitlyn in such a state, but hardly surprised. This wasn't the first time her sense of drama had manifested itself as self-pity. Still, seldom did she let her guard down in this sort of manner. "I just thought the girl on the show was so neat... and she had such a cool life," she explained to me through her tears. "I just wanted to believe that something like this could really happen. I thought maybe my life could be a little like hers. What's wrong with that?"

What was wrong? It broke the rules. It wasn't calm and detached and good at sports.

I saw this clearly, even if she didn't, but I didn't tell her so. Instead, I hunted Michael down and threatened kick his Sailor ass to the Sailor Moon if he didn't get over himself and do this for Kaitlyn. He took my threats surprisingly seriously and relented with ease. The play went on as planned, but it was hard to shake the image of Kaitlyn as torn up as she was about the situation. It was enough for one to begin pondering why she was so firmly attached to her passions. Where had it all begun; when did she begin thinking so freely and believing so strongly? Was she purely a natural dreamer, or did she turn to modifying her life into something more exciting because she needed to escape?

### III. The Days Afterward

Although Kaitlyn and her father, a practical, logical man, were often at odds with each other, the family was close. She was given everything she could want and was the leader of her own pack. What, after all, kept her from just living a normal existence without the belief that she may have in fact once been a druid, or that she needed to learn Gaelic in order to properly write her life history? Perhaps it was the notion that

she didn't truly know where that history began. Kaitlyn lived with the knowledge that her birth mother had given her up. Her adoptive parents preferred that she keep her communication with the family to a minimum—at most, she received the occasional letter from her maternal grandmother, with whom she had lived for the first two years of her life. Kaitlyn never fought this; her adoptive parents were her true parents, but she never let go of wondering.

When it came to her biological father, she was defiant. As for her mother, Kaitlyn had once heard that she was in Minnesota, and the knowledge lived in the back of her mind for years, as she considered the possibilities of who her mother was. “She’s in Minnesota, and I’ll find her someday,” she told me occasionally, and we left it at that. She never knew who her father was, or why he had left before she was born. The constant question was unsettling. Who was Kaitlyn Ross, really? In high school, Kaitlyn showed me the letters her maternal grandmother sent her, always treating them casually, but later confiding that she pored over them repeatedly. A letter our junior year of high school led to the discovery of her second middle name, Marie. The knowledge jarred her—if she had never even known part of her birth name, what more could be missing? It was at once haunting and wonderful. Kaitlyn was plagued by the unanswered questions, but she was also given the gift of *possibility*. It *could* be true. She *could* be royalty, or enchanted, or the key player in some major, secretive world event.

In high school, when she began learning more about her birth mother, she began letting go of some of these dreamy ideas. The prospect of knowing the truth was almost more powerful than possibility of a more fanciful life. At seventeen, she arrived home from school one day to find a manila envelope waiting in the mailbox for her. It

contained a letter from her maternal grandmother, as well as a few photographs. She took the envelope into her room, shut the door, and slowly examined the contents. The letter informed her that her birth mother was in the Navy, and was raising two other children, both very young. A picture of the boy and girl playing with a dog was included. Kaitlyn stared at the photograph for hours, analyzing their little faces, finding her own characteristics in her half-siblings.

Most importantly, the grandmother had included an official Navy portrait. It was the first photograph Kaitlyn had ever seen of her mother. Here, at last, was solid proof, a real connection to herself. She was confused at first, as she pulled the portrait from the envelope—where had her grandmother acquired a picture of Kaitlyn herself? There was something strange, though, about the photograph, and she realized it then. This person was not her, though it had all the necessary features: the strong chin, wide, bright blue eyes, cream-colored complexion, and that uninhibited brown hair. Her mother was not the person that one immediately pictured upon hearing she had given her child up for adoption. This woman was strong, powerful, controlled, mature. She had a family now, and a career. Her self-assured smile hinted at her happiness.

When Kaitlyn showed me the photograph the next day, she say only, “Look,” and pulled it from the envelope. The picture needed no explanation; there was no one in the world who could be more evidently her birth mother. Kaitlyn couldn’t stop smiling. This, I believe, was the beginning of Kaitlyn’s own journey into adulthood. This woman, her birth mother, had found herself. A part of Kaitlyn that needed to be constantly searching for the meaning of her own existence was satisfied; she too could begin maturing.

After high school, Kaitlyn attended Cottey College, a two-year women's liberal arts program in Missouri. Still set on becoming an scientist, she majored in anthropology and sociology, but struggled with the work. After her two years at Cottey, she retook a few science classes at a local Iowa community college, but her friends began pushing her toward a major in art. Her talent for animation was extraordinary, and Japanese anime was where many of her interests lay, but Kaitlyn was determined to follow her lifelong ambition.

Even those closest to her, who knew she was intelligent but unmotivated by traditional schoolwork, often heaved a long sigh when people asked whether Kaitlyn was still planning on being an Egyptologist someday, as she had always stated in school. Since I was usually the go-to person for updates on Kaitlyn, the question most often posed to me was a simple "Is Kaitlyn...?" to which the unfailing answer was always a laugh, and "Still Kaitlyn? Oh, yes. Very much so... very much so." Calls to Kaitlyn over school breaks always yielded the same results: she offered little information on her whereabouts, and plenty of information on her current interests and personal projects. I usually spent the phone calls alternately wanting to smack her and hug her. She drove me crazy—why couldn't she just be the person I knew she *could* be, a talented artist and historian with an achievable goal, instead of the one who was still reaching beyond her grasp? I wanted her to stay herself, to keep dreaming and being the person who changed the way I thought about the world, but I needed her to be the mature person that I saw in her the day she received her mother's photograph.

For two years, Kaitlyn bounced back and forth between her home in Reinbeck and community colleges. She changed her address and phone number often, but the

occasional contact with her always assured me she hadn't changed. "I'm flunking zoology," Kaitlyn told me once, laughing into the receiver.

"Well... that's not too good, is it? Don't you need it for anthropology?" I replied. "Is there a study group you can join, or—"

"It'll be fine," she interrupted. "I think I can raise my grade to a D, and at least I'll pass. Did I tell you about the Celtic dance I learned for the diversity fair?"

I sighed and leaned back, listening to her tell me excitedly about the people she had met, and a possible trip to Europe in the spring. There was a new boy, too; there always was. Her romantic attachments never lasted long—they were passionate, then they were over. The creation of drama was always more exciting than the relationship itself.

Phone calls from Kaitlyn during our college years were sporadic, and always surprising. She was always following some new plan, new college program, new life path. In the summer of 2005, she moved to Wyoming and worked sixty hours a week at a mountain lodge, bartending and waitressing at a tavern, getting to know the locals, and horseback riding in the mountains. Her contact with those of us who knew her in Iowa was sparse, as she branched out on her own. I knew the work would be good for her; it was a dream for her to live in such a place, and she might be able to develop a solid plan for the next step in her life.

A year after she first moved to Wyoming, a mutual friend alerted me that Kaitlyn was back, and living close to where I was. As I was about to embark on a journey similar to her Wyoming trip, and in need of a familiar voice, I called her.

It only took two voice mails and one week to get Kaitlyn to call me back, which I found a large improvement upon her usual contact skills. When I heard her speak, I was shocked to hear a truly adult voice on the other line. “I just needed to talk to you,” I confided. “I’ve been missing our younger days, when we could pretend to go anywhere and do anything. Only now those things are really happening to us, and I’m a little freaked out.”

Kaitlyn hummed her agreement. “Mmm. I felt the same way. But you know, no matter where you go,” she told me, “you’ll find your place in it. And you’ll find the person who matches you there, and it’ll become your home. And eventually you’ll come back to Iowa, because let’s face it, it pulls you back here—“ we laughed together—“and once you’re back, you’ll know where you’re supposed to be,” she said. I’d never heard her with so much confidence. She sounded content, and wiser than the flighty girl I had known.

She was finishing her degree at the University of Iowa now, in anthropology. She was going to take Latin next semester, she told me excitedly, and there was a great archaeology seminar in the spring. To my surprise, I found my eyes tearing up slightly when she told me this. She promised she was going to work harder this time; it was really going to happen. Romance and logic were merging for her.

We spoke again not long after I had moved out of state, and she was well into her Latin class. I asked her if she still thought much about our school days together, and she chuckled and took a deep breath. “Oh, my. Our school days.” We became hysterical then, practically crying with laughter over different adventures we had, and projects we had begun but never finished, and stories and artwork we had created



together. A few weeks later, I told her I was writing about her for a class, and she sent me a letter. *I miss the good old days as well. So many things come up that remind me of our adventures and I owe my wit today to it. If you want, I will try to scan a picture that I have of some of the crazy things we did and send it to you. Probably won't get there in time for your paper, but I think you'd like it. It's us as Sailor Scouts.*

I called her and encouraged her to send it. “Oh, and I changed my email address,” Kaitlyn added before we hung up. She proceeded to dictate the longest email address in the free world to me, until I finally interrupted her, asking what the hell this moniker was supposed to mean.

“Oh,” she laughed. “It’s my Japanese name.”

## Jesse's List of Don'ts

### I.

I began my study of Jesse when we were in elementary school.

He was a year older than I was, so I didn't see him much at school, but I knew Jesse as a *bad kid* because we went to the same baby-sitter, where I heard him use the word "ain't" all the time. Once or twice I tattled. *Ain't* was a four-letter word in my household; my English-teacher mother made sure of that. Jesse was never scolded, but I was scandalized by his vocabulary nonetheless, particularly when he bragged, "I ain't going to school tomorrow."

"You mean you're *not* going to school tomorrow," I replied. "And yes, you are."

"No, I ain't. I'm faking sick," Jesse said. I worried that he would miss his badly needed English class.

There was further evidence that Jesse was a *bad kid*, of course, and I took note of it. He wore black T-shirts and liked heavy metal music. (I was more partial to my pink

stirrup pants and the soundtrack to Disney's *Aladdin*.) He played tricks on the kids at Sandi's day-care and took a bit too much pleasure in picking up spiders on the porch. He was loud, waking up the babies in the nap room too often for Sandi's patience; he was crude, teaching me the pull-my-finger joke to my utter disgust, and he didn't mind breaking one or six of Sandi's rules.

But I studied him, because he had all the marks of being bad, but he wasn't mean. He didn't bully, and he didn't mind, when I tagged along on his activities, that I was a girl. I discovered that he knew the fastest way to climb Sandi's apple tree (risk-taking was a must to him, and risk-taking, I learned, was a very good time), and how to softly climb through the neighbor's garden to spy without getting caught. And once I abandoned my futile attempts to tattle on Jesse's behavior, I found that he was the kind of bad kid I liked to be around. Besides, it upped my cool factor to play with the boys at the baby-sitter's.

We didn't see each other much when we outgrew day-care but became reacquainted in high school when he made it a habit of locking my sister Erica and me in the milk cooler at the local grocery store, the Gladbrook Family Market. He and Erica had both already worked at the store a year or two when I was hired as a basic cashier/stock-girl/everything-in-between worker. The GFM was my first job, and I knew nothing about how to do anything. I hovered around the check-out counter waiting for someone to give me a task, then attempted to make the tasks last long as possible to avoid the awkward standing-around again.

The cash register, which should have been simple, was merely cause for embarrassment during my first weeks of attempting to ring up groceries and make change. During those first months, Jesse was hired on mostly as a stock-boy; he

unloaded the trucks and stocked shelves, and usually helped out with the cleaning. He was the same as ever. He wore the same old T-shirts and scuffed shoes. He had the appearance of delinquency that turned out to be nothing but an unwillingness to join group activities (“I don’t *join things*,” he told me once) or vote for legitimate class presidents. He still said “ain’t.”

Opportunity for further study of Jesse’s person arose one day when I had just begun my job at the GFM. During a panicked moment when I tried to check out a customer’s groceries and jammed the cash register, I looked around helplessly for a co-worker and saw Jesse. He gave me a dismissive wave. “I don’t do any of that.” He sauntered away, laughing, though not unkindly, at my misfortune.

“Wait,” I cried. “I need help.” He continued up the aisle, away from me. I stood both fuming and panicked over my situation. I pulled out my mental clipboard, stowed away since our years at Sandi’s. *Jesse doesn’t help employees who struggle at their first real jobs. Seems to find pleasure in his inability and unwillingness to rectify a situation.*

I looked for pity from the impatient customer who stood across the counter for a moment, and I had just decided to abandon ship and head for the hills, when the store manager appeared, saying that Jesse had sent her up to help me. Begrudgingly, as I bagged the customer’s groceries, I altered my mental study. *Jesse occasionally helps employees. However, he does so in a slightly aggravating style that certainly does not make said employees feel welcome.*

But he did apparently intend to welcome me to the store, albeit in that same aggravating manner. Later that day, Jesse initiated me into the GFM family with what was, according to Erica, a rite of passage Jesse had implemented himself. I was working in the dairy cooler, a small space with only enough room for one or two people to slip in

at a time (the entire grocery store only encompassed four jam-packed aisles, with rows of coolers and freezers lining the outer walls). Restocking the dairy coolers mainly entailed checking expiration dates and filling the backs of the shelves with cartons and gallons from the stacks of crates stored there. During early trips to the cooler, I spent most of my time facing the shelves, looking out through the glass doors into the rest of the store as I stocked them. On this day, I was checking expiration dates on the chip dips, a task I usually shirked unless business was slow, when I heard the door slam behind me.

I whirled around, tried to open the big aluminum door using the push-handle, shouted for help, hit the push-handle a few times more, and gave up. Then I began the whole process again.

The milk cooler wasn't so cold when I was only there for a few minutes, but fifteen minutes later, after sitting on a chilled milk crate with my hands wrapped up in my shirt, I was ready to murder Jesse. My suspicions of his guilt were confirmed when he popped up in front of the chocolate milk and gave me a wave and a shrug. "Jesse!" I screamed. "Get back here! I'm going to tell on you like we're eight years old again! Jesse!" He sauntered away to help a customer despite my threats, a smiling playing on his lips. To my dismay, I realized I was smiling too. I kicked a milk carton, furious with myself for suddenly wanting to laugh. "I swear I'll tell," I growled under my breath.

Tattling, much as it had been in day-care, was no good at the GFM. Locking people in the milk cooler—and deep freezer, as I later found out—was Jesse's signature move. Anytime a new person was hired, he or she was inundated for weeks with the

question—“Did Jesse get you yet? Better always take a jacket into the cooler.” I would have enjoyed my irritation much more if I could have stopped laughing.

That was the most annoying thing of all about Jesse. He was silly, immature, and crass. He used incorrect grammar more often than not. He jumped up behind me when I was stocking cans, causing me to jump up and shower the aisle with Cambell’s Chunky Style soups, and causing Jesse to shrug and say, “What, I scared you again? I don’t do it on purpose.” He was still what my seven-year-old self would have called a *bad kid*. So why did everything he did and said make me laugh? I laughed so hard sometimes that I couldn’t stop, and embarrassed, had to walk to the back stock room so he wouldn’t see the tears of laughter in my eyes. Sometimes I had to will myself not to crack a smile for fear of encouraging his behavior. He hid my coat in the dead of winter, sprayed me with Windex when he washed the front doors, dropped sugared gummy worms in my bottle of Diet Coke. Even when I didn’t laugh, just glared at him for his insolence, he found it funny enough for both of us and repeated the process during our next shift.

Surprisingly, despite evidence to the contrary, Jesse seemed to have a conscience. At times his morals were downright irritating to Erica and me, as we felt that the size of the GFM as compared to a giant superstore meant that basic rules were more casual. We felt little guilt about occasionally sneaking a candy bar or bottle of pop without paying for it and extended our breaks by several minutes whenever we could get away with it. Jesse, however, seemed to take all the discipline I had never seen him utilize at school and apply it to himself with a modest morality that irritated me. He timed his breaks to last exactly fifteen minutes, every four hours. He shook his head with disapproval if anyone helped herself to a slice of Swiss cheese behind the deli counter.

Once, after I stuck a foot out and tripped him for locking me into the deep freeze, he shouted after me, “At least I don’t just open up bags of chips right off the shelf like you and your sister!” I added another note to the Jesse file: *Jesse doesn’t approve of taking advantage of management and store profits. Appears to believe minor murder attempts in deep freeze equal appropriate retribution for those not up to his moral standards.*

Jesse didn’t do a lot of things, it turned out. He didn’t mind leaving anyone from me or my sister to the resident GFM veteran, Wilma (who was at least sixty-five), locked in the milk cooler. He didn’t stock tampons or maxi-pads despite my claims that a real man would stock them without a complaint (“I don’t do the *female* stuff,” he said). And eventually I came to know him well enough that I learned Jesse’s list of don’ts extended outside of the Gladbrook Family Market.

“Christy likes you,” I told him the spring of my junior year. “She wants to ask you to the Memorial Day dance.”

“I don’t dance,” Jesse said, tossing a few licorice whips into a co-worker’s purse for no apparent reason.

“So don’t go to the dance. Go to a movie. Go to the dollar theatre in Grundy. That’s cheap.”

“I don’t date.” He gave me his usual stubborn smirk.

“God, you’re immature,” I grumbled. I added these traits to my Jesse study, as simply as he stated them. *Jesse doesn’t dance. Jesse doesn’t date. Jesse doesn’t seem to do much of anything.* It occurred to me that I too disliked the processes of dancing and dating, but these characteristics seemed far more interesting on Jesse.

Not long after I was hired, Jesse’s responsibilities at the store expanded to include all the basic tasks the store required. And as a series of other GFM employees

entered and exited through a revolving minimum-wage door, he and I came to work together more and more often, until we were both old enough to drive and eventually close the store without a night manager present.

Jesse had an old Chevy Malibu he'd purchased himself, and he kept it running most of the time. Occasionally it broke down and I gave him a ride home after work. The first time I drove him home, he directed me toward a small white house in a neighborhood I was unfamiliar with, small as our town was. While he gathered his things to exit the car, I examined his house closely. I knew his mother well from her weekly trips to the GFM but little else about his life outside of work and school.

There was some junk in the yard, old bicycles and sports equipment his brother had obviously left lying around, and his broken-down car in the driveway. There weren't any lights on. I wondered if his mother was working the night shift at her job and whether his step-father was home. "Kay, thanks," Jesse mumbled, sliding out of the passenger seat.

"You bet," I said. I paused, then blurted, "Looks dark. Anybody home?"

"My mom's probably at work."

"What about your brother? Is your step-dad here with him?"

"I hope not," Jesse said. The sentiment was bitter, but he laughed, made it a joke.

"Heh," I offered. "Good luck, I guess." I watched him slam the door and shuffle across the street to the garage door. I waited for a minute until I saw a hallway light go on.

At home, I asked my sister what she knew about Jesse's situation. As far as we both knew, his father was out of the picture. "I remember years ago, something Sandi



told me when he was still going to the baby-sitter. Jesse's mom asked him if he wanted her to marry that guy," Erica said, referring to Jesse's current step-father.

"What did Jesse say?"

"He said no." Erica paused as we contemplated that. "But I guess she married him anyway. And then they had his little brother, so..." We both shrugged.

Sometimes afterward, when Jesse and I worked together, I tried to approach the topic of his step-dad, curiosity getting the better of me. "So what does your step-dad do?" I asked while we restocked the cigarette counter together. "Do you get along with him and your mom?" I knew full well he and his mom got along as well as one could expect of a teenage boy and his mother, but I didn't want to pull a full-on Dr. Phil about his relationship with his step-father quite yet.

"Sure," he said.

"Really?"

"Well, whatever. My mom anyway."

"What, not your step-dad?"

"Eh," he said, and shrugged.

"Why not?" I pushed, smiling to lighten the question.

"Because he's an ass," Jesse replied. "Hey, I'm going to the bathroom. Can you cover the cash register for an hour or so?"

I rolled my eyes. "Guys are disgusting." I didn't ask him any more after that. Part of me had wanted to make him an extended study, to find some kind of deep, emotional layer to him. I could picture myself writing out a report: *Jesse is deeply scarred by the abandonment of his father and perceived betrayal of his mother, and takes out the hostilities within him—based on his feeling of inadequacy compared to his younger half-brother—with*

*refusal to stock feminine hygiene products, and a penchant for locking others in dairy coolers for fifteen to twenty minutes. Harmless but in need of—*

That part of the report would end there, because not only did I know Jesse would never think of himself in the dramatic way I always did about my own life, but I was never sure exactly what it was I thought he needed.

## II.

Christine was hired on as a manager the summer that I was sixteen. A single mom of three boys under the age of twelve, she had just moved to Gladbrook from somewhere down South in order to live with her mother. I felt certain she had other reasons for leaving her previous job and life, but I never asked about them. She was trained quickly as a manager, and by the time we worked a shift together, she was as confident and cheerful as anyone in handling the daily annoyances of working a minimum-wage service job.

I liked working with Christine immediately. She was efficient and smart, and had the kind of attitude toward the bosses and store manager I wished for. She rolled her eyes when they left written warnings about slacking off for us to read over, and she treated me like I had management status even when I was still under eighteen. She liked to stand up at checkout counter and talk about her kids and her mother, and occasionally exchange some gossip about the new bosses and their drama-filled lives.

“Dave forgot to give me the weekend off,” she told me one evening when we were working with Jesse. He was straightening the candy and snack aisle behind us, listening to our conversation. “But he’s just going to have to deal with it. I’m driving down to Kansas City,” Christine said, leaning back against the cigarette counter and grinning.

I leaned next to her. “What for?”

“We’re going to a revival.”

“A revival?” I wasn’t sure I heard her right.

She ran a hand through her short brown hair and squinted out into the glare of the sun on the street. “We’ve gotta get there early because thousands of people show up. Parking’s gonna be hell.”

I suddenly realized what she meant—a Christian revival. “Oh, so, like... there’ll be speakers and stuff?”

Christine nodded. “Yeah, I told Cody if he does all right in school this year, we’ll go. My mom’s staying home with the younger boys.” I tried to imagine what my own younger brother would have thought of going to a Christian revival as a reward. I had seen footage of those events on the Trinity Channel, and it seemed like a load of—well, something—to me. “Well, that’ll be...” Were revivals supposed to be fun? “Nice,” I finished lamely. I could see Jesse laughing out of the corner of my eye, at me or Christine, I couldn’t tell.

“It’s just, he doesn’t get to spend much time with his dad anymore,” Christine continued. “I wanted him to have something to look forward to. So I’m going to have to have a talk with Dave tomorrow morning. I’m taking this weekend off, end of story.” I immediately flushed and felt guilty for my judgmental thoughts. I turned to send Jesse a death stare but he was crouched down behind the Twinkies and Little Debbie’s.

A customer came to the counter and Christine checked out his items. I watched her silently. Part of me knew I was trying too hard to see it, to make a connection like a student taking Psychology 101, but she reminded me so much of Jesse’s mom. Not much money, blue collar job, mother of boys, no-nonsense when it came to dealing with

the crap that life doled out. A little bit frazzled, worn-looking around the edges. Treated me like an equal, a confidante even, despite my age and the fact that we didn't know each other all that well.

A few days later Christine came in with her youngest boy, not more than four years old, to buy some groceries. "Jesse, you still coming by later to get your CDs?" Christine asked as she gathered up their plastic bags. "See ya then!"

I turned to look at Jesse as Christine and her son exited the store. "What was that about?"

"What?"

"You're going over there?"

"Oh," Jesse said, shrugging. "Yeah, I leant her kid some stuff. Cody."

"Like what?" I pressed.

"Some CDs."

I waited for him to go on, but he just began straightening the bills in the cash drawer. "Well," I finally said, watching Christine help her son into the car outside. "Her little boy is cute."

"Pssh," Jesse said, slamming the drawer shut.

*If Jesse is doing good deeds for single moms and their kids, he doesn't elaborate on it.*

By the end of that summer, the management had begun staggering the shifts of people over the age of eighteen. I didn't work with Jesse much anymore, but Christine and I were accustomed to working the evening shift together. I had just finished sweeping and mopping the store one night when Christine called me over to the deli, where she was cleaning up after some customers had ordered sandwiches. "I've got all

this extra bread that's about to expire," she said, waving me back. "You want a sandwich?"

"For free?" I asked, slightly bitter from the new management's crackdown on what constituted legitimate free stuff for employees, but wary because we were working with Amber, the boss's power-hungry nineteen-year-old step-daughter.

Christine rolled her eyes. "That girl," she said, cocking her head toward the back storage room, where Amber was working, "can report me if she wants. Wouldn't be the first time we've clashed. But this bread is either going to us, or to that trash can." I grinned, and with Amber out of earshot we complained happily for awhile about our jobs as she sliced turkey and tomatoes for our sandwiches. "I had some extra bread the other night," Christine told me after awhile, "but you know, Jess wouldn't take it."

"Yeah, he's kind of a stickler about that," I said. "But you know..." I told her how Jesse had taken and hidden another student's bag in our seventh-period art class that afternoon. "He didn't seem to mind so much *then*," I said.

Christine laughed. "He's a good kid, though."

I shrugged as I sat on a crate next to the bread trays. "I guess. Yeah. Kind of drives me *insane* sometimes, but yeah."

We watched the clock for a few minutes.

"He's taken Cody out fishing a couple of times at the lake this summer."

"Jesse has?" I was impressed, and surprised, although I remembered how Jesse had been lending Cody music.

Christine nodded. "Cody really likes him. And he likes fishing. You know, Cody just has a hard time making friends. He's so quiet, and he hates swearing—he gets mad at me because I do it all the time," she chuckled. "It just makes him

uncomfortable to be around kids his age who act like that. He's just different. Like before every meal he sits and says grace first, all on his own. He has a hard time," she repeated.

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded.

A few nights later, Cody came in to the store and Christine asked me to give him a ride home when my shift ended. I was slightly nervous since I wasn't sure what a quiet, devout twelve-year-old boy and I would have to say to each other, but he didn't seem to mind sitting silently. I had seen Cody a few times at the store. He was the kind of kid who was quiet and polite and called everyone *sir* or *ma'am* in his slight Southern twang.

"So I just go straight here and turn left?" I asked him, although I knew perfectly well where he lived.

"Yes, ma'am," Cody said.

"You guys haven't lived there here for too long, right?"

"No, ma'am," he said. He didn't elaborate.

Out of the corner of my eye, I took in his appearance, all the while wondering what he and Jesse talked about when they went fishing at the lake. It was one thing to sit on the lake and wait quietly for the fish to bite, I thought, but what about the ten minutes it would take to drive there? If Jesse was some kind of male role model to Cody, surely he wasn't his usual immature self, cracking jokes and teasing him.

Cody did actually remind me of Jesse, although I couldn't quite place my finger on why, though their looks were similar. They had the same haphazard appearance, the old T-shirt and scuffed shoes, hair that hadn't been cut in awhile, light-blue sleepy eyes. Cody was clutching a half-empty Mountain Dew bottle, which was certainly like Jesse.

I dropped him off at their trailer and waved a friendly goodbye to him. He was too shy to meet my eye but mumbled a polite thank-you and ran inside, kicking up dirt in the yard. Somehow I couldn't picture Cody Super Gluing his younger brothers' fingers together, as Jesse had proudly reported to me that he had done to his own brother.

But then, I thought, the Super Glue incident had been a few years ago. Maybe Jesse had grown up since then.

A few weeks later, the GFM store manager called me on my day off. "I know it's last minute, but can you work a shift this afternoon?"

I paused. I hated working extra shifts.

"It's just, Christine quit last night," Dave continued. "And she's definitely not coming back. We need someone to fill her shift."

"Wait, what?" I exclaimed. "Christine *quit*?"

"Yeah," David said. "So can you work this afternoon?" His casual tone irritated me. I knew he didn't like Christine; she was too rebellious by his standards. But she had become my ally in the new management system, the one person I relied on as a confidante since my sister had quit two years ago and I rarely worked with Jesse anymore. "Tara?"

My mind reeling, I said I'd be in. I had to find out the story behind Christine's sudden departure. I had worked with her two days before, and she hadn't mentioned anything about leaving. She was the only source of income for their family; surely she needed this job to make ends meet.

At the store, Jesse filled me in on what little he knew. "I guess she just left a note," he said with his usual shrug. "I think Amber finally drove her out. They were working together at the time." His expression didn't reveal whether he had an opinion

on this. He was too good a worker to ever declare loyalty to either management or the lower workers on the totem pole in the great GFM management war. *Jesse doesn't take sides.* Everyone relied on him.

“But what about...” I wanted to ask him about her kids, what they were going to do, whether she had another job lined up. Part of me wanted to ask whether he was still going to see Cody. But he probably didn't know I even knew about that. In my frustration, I trailed off.

“I'm not too happy about it either,” Jesse said. “But I hope they hire someone better than Amber.”

Soon after that, Jesse announced that he was joining the Army after graduation. His mom told me once in the check-out line that she hoped that boot camp would “kick the remaining shit out of him,” and she smiled proudly. I couldn't help but be a little proud too. He wasn't exactly a college-bound individual, but he had a different kind of drive. The managers must have seen that too, because he was the only GFM employee to begin working in the various other branches of their grocery empire, and the only one ever asked to come in to help with special tasks. The other girls and I joked that the managers were just sexist when they chose him over us, but no one really believed it.

For awhile after Christine left, I had nothing dramatic to add to the Jesse report.

I didn't see Christine again for several months, and never learned what really happened to make her quit. At first, I was angry with her since I hadn't believed her possible of letting someone as petty as Amber get to her. Her decision seemed rash, and the people I actually liked working with at the store were rapidly disappearing. The new high-



schoolers who were hired seemed immature in an un-funny, un-Jesse-like way, and Jesse was leaving soon.

I heard that Christine's mother died a few months after she quit, and knowing how devastated she must have been, I found myself thinking of her often. I missed her. When I looked up from the cash register one day to see her face grinning at me, I pounced on her. As we began bagging her groceries together, I peppered her with questions. "How are things? Where are you living now?" I had driven by her trailer, and it was deserted.

"We moved out to the lake!" Christine exclaimed. "The boys love it. We've got a house there." She told me she'd found another job on an assembly line. "Better hours, especially now that Mom's gone. Hey, where's Jess?"

He was off for the evening. I asked if she'd heard that he was going into the Army.

"Yeah, but we haven't seen him in awhile. Tell him to come out and visit us at the lake, though." She picked up her groceries and headed for the door before I was ready to let her go again. "Tell him we'll go ice skating!"

I waved as she left, laughing a little at the thought of Jesse, with his unbuttoned coat and adamant refusal to wear winter gloves (*"I don't do that whole catalogue thing"*), doing salchows and axels with Cody and the boys. It didn't seem likely to happen, but I wanted it to, though I could hear his voice in my head—*I don't ice skate*. I watched Christine load her groceries into her car and drive off. That was the last time I saw her, since life spun us in different directions, so I chose to believe she and her boys lived happily ever after, skating on the lake and fishing in the summer.

During Jesse's final shift at the GFM, I relayed Christine's message, sans the ice-skating invite. "You going to go out there and visit? You should. They're your biggest fans," I teased.

"Sure, maybe," he said. "I haven't seen Cody in awhile."

I folded my arms and grinned, trying to hide my pleased reaction.

"Oh, shut up," he said, and ducked behind the cigarette counter.

After Jesse left the GFM and went through boot camp, his mother came through the checkout line, and I was again reminded of how alike she and Christine seemed.

"Yep, we went down to visit Jess," she told me. "His brother and step-dad and me. I've never seen him so grown-up, Tara. He bought his step-dad and me dinner. He wanted to buy his brother a present, anything he wanted. I think the Army's been real good for him."

Jesse did a tour in Iraq right away. He was gone a long time, long enough that the high school passed around cards for everyone to sign for the troops from our area. I didn't know what to write, so I wrote, "God bless, -Tara." Afterward I felt a little embarrassed that I had written something about God, but I remembered Cody sitting down and saying grace before meals and decided I didn't care.

Jesse came into the store during my last week of work there, before I graduated high school. I wanted to ask him about Iraq and how he was and see if he was still goofy. "Hey, Jess! What's up?" I was excited.

"Hey," he said simply.

I opened my mouth to ask my questions, but suddenly felt too shy. Instead, we made awkward small talk. We hadn't spoken for over a year, and he seemed a little self-conscious too. He smiled a little without meeting my eye, bought a bottle of Mountain

Dew. He wore an old T-shirt and his Army buzz was already growing too long. As I made change for him, I geared up to ask him how life in the Army was, but at the last second just waved and said goodbye. I wondered when or if I'd see him again, whether things would ever be the same as they had once been when we stood at the cigarette counter together, me trying my best not to let him see me laughing at the things he said and did. And I watched him exit the store, climb into his old Chevy, and drive away.

The Jesse report was filed away after that. There weren't many conclusions drawn in the end, but it was a study I continued thinking about in the years afterward. On the few occasions when I was home from college or graduate school and drove by his old house or the GFM, I wondered what he would be like now, if graduation and deployment and life would have taken away any remnants of the *bad kid* I'd once perceived in him. All I really gathered from our last exchange—the pleasantries, the Mountain Dew, one last “workin’ hard or hardly workin’? Better quit slacking, Tara” and friendly smirk—was that Jesse didn't seem quite the same. But then, he didn't seem entirely different. I hoped, though I doubted it, he still kept in touch with Christine. I hoped he was still a little bit impossible. I hoped he still said “ain't.”

## Singing in Color

I've been singing colors with a grandfather clock in my throat for about five years now. It's a concept that I usually just keep to myself, but every so often I want to tell someone about the colors I feel in music, or I want to ask a fellow singer whether the clock helps them feel the connection between head and chest voice. Sometimes, when I get too lost in the mixed-up lingo of voice study, I banish the clocks and the colors and allow myself to simply feel the unexplainable. But I like all the lingo I've picked up from various voice teachers over the years. I like knowing the voice in me has a history. It's left a trail of where I've been.

\*

I began taking voice lessons in high school; it was required of me, as well as every other member of our sixty-five-person choir. In actuality, they weren't so much lessons as they were opportunities for our director, Mrs. Haddix, to verify that we weren't

mispronouncing Latin words in the spiritual choral pieces she inevitably chose for us. At least, that was how most people treated those thirty-minute blocks of time that got us out of study hall. Mrs. Haddix plunked out notes on the piano, and the students did their best to stay on key and not think about the fact that all these *gloria in excelsis Deos* might violate the whole separation-of-church-and-state thing.

I, however, was certain that these voice lessons were the key to my future. My long-term goals were of the impractical sort: I wanted to write, and I wanted to sing. English classes met every day; preparation for my future writing career seemed well-covered. Singing, however, did not come naturally to me, nor did the school offer any intensive voice-study classes. I decided that if I were going to make it as a Broadway or opera star, whichever came first, I needed to truly apply myself. I set my journals aside for awhile and began to concentrate on music.

After suffering through two years of sharing the same time block with some of the school's worst singers, I cashed in my *always-polite, always-prepared student* chips and finagled a private weekly lesson. After school in the choir room, I assumed a diva-like stance, chugged some water as gracefully as possible, and turned to Mrs. Haddix, expectations high. And at first, Mrs. Haddix delivered. We worked on pronunciation, use of breath, and the development of my singing range. I was determined to be a soprano, as all divas inevitably are at some point in their careers, and I began to formulate my identity as a singer in those first voice lessons.

Then, my opinion of Mrs. Haddix started to slip.

I was already somewhat suspicious of her capacity to give me the vocal ability of Renée Fleming or Maria Callas because she herself was unable to sing properly. Surgery on her vocal cords had left her voice mousey and hoarse, and she therefore

could not demonstrate certain aspects of technique to me. Later I learned that many excellent singing teachers don't have the vocal instrument to sing themselves, but in my youthful arrogance, I found this unacceptable. Still, I dealt with it because the lessons were free and I couldn't afford anything more.

However, any approval I still had of Mrs. Haddix was lost the day when a loud, partying track star named Sharon joined me to make up a missed lesson. Sharon was unable to stop giggling during choir rehearsals, so when she met me in the choir room after school, I treated her with icy disdain which went unnoticed, as my icy disdain needed work; it was not yet at proper soprano-diva level. We retrieved our music folders and went to join Mrs. Haddix at the piano. Then, to my horror, Sharon pulled up a chair, situated a music stand in front of it, and *sat down*.

"You know, Sharon," Mrs. Haddix said, "you're the only one of my students who sits down during a voice lesson."

Sharon looked smug and waved her arm. "I like to be comfortable."

I stood frozen next to my music stand, furious with Mrs. Haddix for allowing such disregard for proper vocal technique to go unchecked. Any amateur knew that good, *standing* posture was the only way to sing.

"Do you want to sit down, too, Tara?" Mrs. Haddix asked.

"No, thank you," I said, shooting more icy looks. *Bloody altos*, I thought, *treating a vocal lesson this way*. I reminded myself that someday I would move beyond the high school level, to a place where proper singing technique demanded the highest respect.

\*

When I entered the University of Iowa, I was unsure about what I wanted to do.

Reality had set in, and with it, a feeling of panic: I wasn't sure anymore that I was cut

out for opera. I declared myself both an English major and a voice major, but I felt vastly more prepared for English classes than I did for music theory. I floundered for a semester, choosing not to deal with the requirements of the voice major, and instead taking general-education classes. Of course, by the time my first winter break arrived, I missed singing too much to stay away.

I found a voice class at the UI School of Music, auditioned, and was assigned to work with a graduate student in the spring. The class was essentially a workshop—I would have a private voice lesson each week, and a weekly seminar in which students sang for the class and workshopped performances with the group. At my first lesson, I met Antonio, a jovial baritone with a theatrical flair. He was a large man with dramatic features, thick black hair, an impeccably-kept goatee, and sharp black eyes. When he first boomed out his introduction and shook my hand with confidence, I could immediately picture him flourishing a cape on the operatic stage.

During that lesson, I was so excited to be studying voice again that I couldn't control my heart rate. "Are you all right?" Antonio asked, eyebrows raised with amusement. "Are you nervous?" All I could do was laugh and shake my head and try to compose myself. That became a struggle for me—I became so enamored with singing itself that I spent years trying to rein in my voice and control it.

Antonio was the first one to teach me to truly breathe, to use breath to my advantage, and let it help me rather than hinder me. "There's more to breath," he explained, "than being able to hold a note." I had always known that good breath support was an important part of singing, but understanding the concept and being able to implement it was difficult, and Antonio could always tell when I hadn't practiced.

At first I resented the breathing exercises I was assigned as homework. “I should be working on a *song*, not on, you know, consuming *air*,” I complained to him at the end of one lesson, as I held one hand over my stomach and tried to guide my body to good breath control.

“Tara, Tara, Tara,” Antonio said without meaning. He sat on the piano bench in his studio, tapping out a rhythm I was supposed to breathe along to.

I grimaced, trying to let air swoosh out, controlled by the diaphragm, in *short—controlled—breaths*. “Seriously,” I said between gulps of air. “I still need help with the *actual* process of singing. I’m tired of breathing.”

Antonio looked at me with a bored expression. “Is... difficult...” he said, writing the words under my name in his gradebook. “Now picture a birthday cake and imagine you’re blowing out the candles one by one.”

Antonio always had some distinctive way of illustrating technical aspects of singing to me. Breathing exercises usually involved imagining candles being blown out. Sometimes he substituted candles with spitting sunflower seeds or a similar activity. And there was always some new way of getting a better grasp on my breath, which he wrote down on notecards for me to carry around. Outside of lessons, I practiced breathing in my classes, on the bus, and in my dorm room, where I lay on the floor and blew out the candles of thousands of birthday cakes, one by one by one, endless rows of them, each one an attempt to gain control.

After a month of lessons, I was scheduled for my first seminar performance. Antonio and I had selected a song called “The Red Dress,” and I stood in front of the class in a stadium-style room and wished for an oxygen mask. All thoughts of breath went out the window. I botched the entire thing and only managed to squeak out the



last dying notes because my accompanist, Chia-yi (who was in a perpetual bad mood except when I paid her), sped the tempo up to four times what it should have been.

Antonio came down to the stage area, put his arm around me, looked around at the class, and said dramatically, “Students, let this be a lesson to you. If you forget to breathe, you will die on stage.”

He joked around for awhile, teasing the nervousness out of me, until everyone was comfortable. Then he began to coach me. “First, Tara, I want you to picture a grandfather clock in your torso—moving from your throat right down through your lungs and to your stomach. All right?”

I paused. “A grandfather clock,” I repeated. The class tittered.

“Yes, a grandfather clock!” He waved an arm in front of his torso. “There’s power here, and it has to travel up here—” he patted his throat—“and work together with your voice. You can’t let the voice do it all by itself, can you?”

By the end of the hour, I was able to sing the song with sufficient breath control, as close to adequate as I was bound to get that day. As I gathered my things to leave after class, I turned to Antonio and sighed. “I feel like I’m not making any progress. All that practice breathing and I didn’t think of it *once* when I first sang the song.”

“That’s what voice study is all about,” he said.

“Forgetting everything I’ve learned?”

“No, practicing it so much that it becomes second-nature to you. Because when you get up onstage, everything you’ve been trying to remember is going to fly out the window. And that’s when instinct is going to kick in.” He grinned and put a CD in the stereo by the piano, where Chia-yi was organizing her music folder. “You’re only in your first semester. Stop taking yourself so seriously. Just relax. Here, listen to this

song.” He cranked the volume on the player, and Outkast’s “Hey Ya” began blaring so loudly that Chia-yi threw her hands over her ears and shot him a disgusted look.

“You’re an idiot,” I shouted at him with pleasure.

But I took his advice and kept drilling things that he taught me, hoping that his crazy vocal techniques would embed themselves into my mind. When I was finally getting a small hold over my breath, we moved on to more helpful vocal exercises, for which I was grateful. I was tired of sounding like I was hyperventilating on the bus.

Antonio occasionally allowed me to pace back and forth in the studio as I sang, because it helped me concentrate. As I paced, he sat at the piano playing scales and musical phrases, shouting instructions at me.

“Let’s try it again. And go for *resonance*.”

I sang the phrase again, trying to demonstrate that I had a vodka shot lodged firmly below the soft palate of my mouth, as Antonio had suggested.

“Pretty good,” Antonio conceded, “but needs more resonance.”

“You mean like vibrato?” I asked, tugging my hair.

He thought for a moment. “Okay. Imagine you’re a swing. If you're a swing and you're swinging, and I come up and push you, that's resonance. It could be assault too, depending on how you look at it. Yeah?”

I thought about that. Lessons with Antonio were quickly becoming lessons on imagination as well as singing. “Helpful,” I said.

And I became a swing, carrying around a grandfather clock, balancing a shot glass, until they were a part of me and I didn’t have to just imagine anymore.

\*

Two years later, when Antonio quit teaching in order to finish his Doctorate of Musical Arts, I wrote long, sorrowful entries in my journal and contemplated retiring from music altogether just to spite the University of Iowa music department. I took the summer off from singing and began to concentrate on the other half of my academic life, creative writing. I had been enjoying all the freedoms and opportunities that my first two years of college provided, but with graduation looming, I began thinking more seriously about my options. Up until that point, I'd allowed my English major to be a safe, comfortable, *easy* part of life, but when I registered for creative writing classes I found that it was often as satisfying as voice study.

Once again, I wondered whether I had to choose between writing and singing. I decided that if I were to make such a choice, I needed to give both areas the proper attention. Antonio's absence had soured me on the idea of continuing, but when reason returned, I took up voice lessons with Melinda, a pint-sized, serious mezzo-soprano who would be able to teach me the finer points of singing in the middle-high range.

I felt a little lost at first. I missed Antonio's bad jokes and terrible piano playing. But Melinda was friendly and sweet, and our lessons were straightforward and productive rather than unpredictable and noisy, as they had been with Antonio, and after a few weeks of lessons with her, I began to embrace this new stage in my singing life. Antonio had taught me the basics of how to breathe, how to stand, how to properly use my voice in general, and Melinda was ready to bring me to the next level. In our first session in the studio together, she seemed surprised but pleased with my vocal ability and range, and put me on the fast track to opera study.

Melinda was a performer at heart, and her class relied heavily on this fact. She was entirely focused on preparing her students for performances—we drilled our

introductions over and over, watched recordings of operas and concerts, and wrote reports on our interpretations of songs. For each song I performed—usually four a semester—I developed a history of my character and threw myself into the story of the music. Occasionally I sang popular pieces from musical theatre, and studied up on the roles such as Mei-Li from *Flower Drum Song* or Nancy in *Oliver!* I usually sang art pieces and was given the chance to invent a character for the song, ranging from children to mothers to young lovers.

“Perhaps you are a character in a musical or an operetta,” Melinda suggested to our class. “Perhaps you are yourself. But which version of yourself are you?” I had pondered that question before, but always in writing classes—which version of myself would I put on paper? On paper, I usually found myself writing about the over-the-top Tara, the satirical Tara, the sarcastic Tara. In song, I never considered myself those things. In song, I was the Queen of the Night from *The Magic Flute*, I was Amalia in *She Loves Me*, I was my favorite version of myself, passionate and tortured and joyful and in love. Most of all, I felt unafraid. I was none of those things in the rest of my life. Tara the writer and Tara the singer seemed destined to stay two separate people.

I felt the urgency to choose who I was, and I couldn’t do it. Aggravated, I took out my frustrations on an aspect of singing that I always struggled with—the break between chest voice (how most people sing or talk in casual situations, where pitch resonates in the chest) and head voice (which many people associate with “falsetto,” but in opera is not the same thing). Midway through my vocal range, my singing voice cracked as it transitioned up the musical scale from chest to head voice. I wanted to be one or the other, head or chest, and with each waver in my sound, I grew more frustrated with what I saw as the two sides of singing. One day, doing vocal warm-ups

with Melinda, my voice cracked as I sang a scale, and I swore loudly. “How can I get over this?” I begged Melinda. “How can I get my head voice and chest voice to work together?”

Melinda waved the statement away. “I would encourage you to think of your voice as just one instrument. None of this head voice, chest voice stuff.”

I questioned her further on the matter, only to learn that there was a middle register called the “passagio” area, where the chest and head voices worked together. It was considered the most difficult register to sing in because it required such extreme muscle coordination. I was nowhere near being able to achieve the passagio register. I had been breaking my life into pieces—the English major, the singer, the sensible one, the dreamer—for years, and my voice went hand in hand with that. Chest voice, practical and comfortable. Head voice, passionate and ambitious. I didn’t know where passagio fit in my life as a singer, and I felt hopeless that I would ever just be one voice, one me. Could I really just start thinking of my voice as one instrument, just because Melinda told me to? Split pieces of my identity wouldn’t mend themselves with a single voice lesson.

I told her so in no uncertain terms.

“You’re thinking too much,” she said. “You’re on your way to being an accomplished vocalist. Blending all the parts of your voice will come in time. Now, let’s try that scale again.”

The following winter, Melinda urged me to audition for the upcoming university opera. Despite doubts about my progress, I made the cut and began nightly rehearsals, surrounded by amazing talent, including Antonio, who had landed a lead role. I spent the first few weeks of rehearsal filled with anxiety over whether I would measure up to

the music majors and professionals around me, particularly if they were all as talented as Antonio. But as the opera came together, and no one made me choose between school and writing and types of singing, my fuzzy identity crisis began to clear. Like breathing, I needed to let the pieces of my life as a singer help, not hinder, me. I told myself to stop splitting up my voices and let them be one, and—as Melinda had told me—things naturally began to blend.

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I began my senior year of college with another new voice teacher. Like Antonio, Melinda had gone on to finish her degree, and I was more than ready to work with Elisabeth, a dazzlingly beautiful mezzo-soprano. She was a rising opera star in the department who was friendly, loud, and outgoing, but she took her job as a teacher very seriously, evaluating each of her students and coaching accordingly. When we had been working together for a few weeks, I asked her which aspect of my singing needed the most work, and her answer surprised me. “At this point, you’ve been taught all the basics you need to know,” she explained. “Now we’re getting nit-picky. We’re working on perfection. We’re becoming artists.”

*Artists.* I treasured the word. It was the sort of word a true diva used. I pictured myself in a messy, flower-filled dressing room, a cigarette holder dangling between my manicured fingers, closing my eyes and saying, “*Dah-ling, I! Am an aaaaartist!*” in an English accent. I shook myself from my daze. “All right,” I said. “Let’s become artists.”

Singing with Elisabeth was a new, vibrant kind of art. She introduced the idea of colors to me, putting words to feelings I hadn’t been able to name. During one lesson, I paced around the studio, singing short, melodic phrases, and between key changes Elisabeth called out words for me to emote using only my voice. “Passionate,” she

called, and I sang passionately. “Playful,” she called, and I sang playfully. Then she would challenge me: “Mountains... the sea... the sun...”

We ended the exercise with colors. “Sing it red,” Elisabeth said. The exercise was about projecting feeling and atmosphere, combining all the physical aspects of singing with the emotional ones. There were a million choices to make in that moment—vocal huskiness or brightness? Shallow or full breath? Soft or loud, round or flat, husky or bright? A singer could be a painter, choosing the right combination for the perfect shade of vocal color. I closed my eyes and made my choices, singing it red.

“No, that’s... *balloon* red. Sing it... *velooooour* red.” We both laughed and then I made a bolder vocal choice, and sang a velour red phrase. I wondered if anyone would have been able to tell the difference, but somehow we both knew one phrase was balloon, and the next was velour, and then came purple, and green, and yellow, and finally we worked on my current piece, a French art song by Fauré called “*Les Berceaux*.” Elisabeth talked about pushing and pulling phrases, and we practiced it with lines in the songs.

Channeling Antonio, I pictured a taffy puller, gently pushing and pulling my voice around. When I sang through the entire piece, I sang out ribbons of color, splashing them through the air, weaving them into song.

\*

Workshop, however, was another story. Antonio had been right; in performances, everything I knew flew out of my head, and being an artist wasn’t quite second nature yet. But Elisabeth knew how to get the best out of her students. She watched our performances in workshop closely, then swooped onto the stage and challenged us with a few simple words—“Where are your shoulders?”—that would turn the performance

completely around. And she couldn't get enough emotion. "I have no idea what you're thinking," she said many times. "I don't know who you are."

She repeated those words to me in my last day of workshop, just days before I graduated from college. I felt frustrated; "Les Berceaux" was a poem by René-François Sully-Prudhomme about men who sailed away and were haunted by the cries of the children they left behind—there was no main *character*—and Elisabeth kept urging me to do more, *more*. "I can't do anything more," I finally said. Inspiration wasn't there. "Can't you all see what I'm feeling yet?"

The girls in the class smiled noncommittally and the guys merely shrugged. *Bloody tenors*, I thought, mentally ending my friendship with Tommy in the back row.

"Tara, I think you're too attached to the *way things are*," Elisabeth said, hands on her hips. "It's still missing something. You need to *explore*."

I took a few deep breaths, thinking about English and French translations.

"Try a few lines. Let go of the things you're always worrying about. Let go of who you were before," Elisabeth said. I had a sudden flash of memory—myself, standing in the high school choir room, filled with expectations of where singing would take me. But now, singing didn't need to take me anywhere; for now, I just wanted to sing.

I nodded to my accompanist and began the song again. Concentrating on a spot in the back of the room, I began to sing, softly at first, "*Le long du Quai les grands vaisseaux*,"—*all along the quay, the grand ships*—letting the sound merely tickle my throat. Then I checked my posture, remembered my grandfather clock, and centered my breath. *Now let go*, I willed myself, and turned my thoughts only to men sailing away on ships.



*Sing a sunset over the water*, I thought, and I pushed and pulled the phrase and sang in blues and golds, and the song went on.

As the men's thoughts turned to wails of the cradles, so did mine, and at last instinct kicked in, controlling my breath and making my mental French-to-English translations smooth, while I concentrated on interpretation. Elisabeth was right—I had been looking at the song from the wrong perspective all the while, and then I was existing nowhere but in that moment, "*Par l'âme des lointains berceaux*,"— *by the spirits of the distant cradles*— balancing the clocks and shot glasses and *just one instrument* and velour red phrases. It was that rare moment of truly living in song, touching every surface and space in the room with color, channeling myself through more than just a simple sound.

I stayed focused, in character, a lump in my throat, until the last chords of the piano died and silence filled the room—and the class applauded me. It was then I realized that I had only been supposed to sing a few lines, but Elisabeth was shaking her head in disbelief, saying, "You see? You see? You let your guard down that time. And what a difference."

\*

In a writing class during my senior year of college, I found myself working on a piece about singing at an audition. The essay went through several drafts, and I relished making writing choices in the same way I did with singing choices. Writing in color, it seemed, was not so very different from singing in color. It was easy to blend Tara the writer and Tara the singer, and I spent hours working on it, unable to let it go until each word was crafted perfectly. After reading it, my teacher encouraged me to apply to graduate writing programs, and for once, I didn't feel like I was leaving music behind by

deciding to pursue writing. Music can't be forgotten, after all. My voice goes wherever I go, whether on paper or in a music studio.

Although I was satisfied with my decision to enter a graduate writing program, I was melancholy about the end of my singing workshop with Elisabeth. "There's still so much for me to learn," I said to her in our last meeting. "I've probably only made a dent in everything I need to know about becoming a singer."

"You've accomplished more than you realize," she assured me. I shrugged, unsure whether to believe her. Then, a few days after my graduation, while rummaging in my car, I found an old, battered cassette tape. It was unlabeled, so I popped it into the cassette player while I was driving. Plunky piano music rang out, and a tiny, thin voice began to sing in Italian. My heart began to pound when I recognized the song as a solo that I had prepared for a music contest back in high school. I had recorded the song with Mrs. Haddix in the choir room and had sung along with it in the car hundreds of times in the weeks before the contest.

*Bella rosa porporina oggi Silvia sceglierà...*

I knew what came next, and I sang along: "*Con la scusa della spina... doman poi la sprezzera, doman poi la sprezzera...*" I stopped for a moment and listened to my seventeen-year-old self sing the aria. Almost five years had passed, five years in which I had many times doubted that I'd learned anything at all or wondered if my voice teachers were merely humoring me, but now I finally heard a difference—it was like listening to a child singing.

"Where's your shot glass, Tara?" I demanded of my younger self. "Where's your grandfather clock?" My younger self kept singing, straining over the mid-range break. "Oh, for God's sake," I mumbled, "where's your resonance? Where's your

emotion? Who *are* you?" I was thoroughly disappointed with my younger self. And pleased to be so. The familiar chill of diva-like, icy disdain took over, and I smiled, pounding the steering wheel a few times for good measure.

## On the Line with America

“Hello, my name is Tara Acton and I’m calling on behalf of America Online; how’re you doin’ today?”

The brightness with which I spoke these words, over and over and over again, is burned into my memory. Even thinking about it, the corners of my mouth curl up in the mock-cheerfulness that I endeavored to create on each phone call. It’s an art form, really, blending the right amount of bounce and friendliness and professionalism to keep the person on the other line from slamming the phone down.

It sounds simple, looking back. Why should anyone be afraid to be so pushy on the phone? Customers couldn’t see me. They wouldn’t remember my name after we

hung up. We lived in different states, different worlds. *It's merely a phone call*, I told myself repeatedly when I felt my nerves rising.

The important thing, of course, was that I landed the job at all. I was a college student, on break for the summer of 2002, and had applied to every supermarket, video store, and motel in the area, with no results. When I heard that Access Direct, a tele-sales company based in Marshalltown, Iowa, was in need of new blood, I shrugged my shoulders and arranged an interview. I was hired on the spot, and wondered fleetingly if I should take the manager's desperation for sales representatives as a warning.

On my first day of training, I settled uneasily into a swively chair, surrounded by a motley crew of fellow Iowans—high school dropouts, single moms, college students on summer break, drug dealers looking for extra cash, retirees bored with playing golf. We were the new America Online team, brought together by a cheery trainer who did her best to assure us that “telemarketer isn't a bad word!” I pored over the pages of the information packets that were handed out, wondering if I had compromised my soul in becoming a “goddamn telemarketer,” which I believe is the official term.

The goal was clear: to peddle internet and television services to people in California, throughout the South, and across the Eastern seaboard. Peeking through the windows of the training room door, I could see the polished telemarketers of Access Direct energetically flitting about the official call floor, pulled back to their cubbies by the curly cord of their headsets, tapping information into their computer as they

laughed and joked around between calls. This was to be my fate, I realized with a sinking feeling. I was only expected to make calls on behalf of America Online and to convince agitated customers to listen to my sales pitch, but there was more to it than that. These sales reps were experienced performers, and I was star-struck by them and by their carefree ability to woo the customer. Swiveling nervously back and forth in my chair, I was torn between jumping out the second-floor window to abandon the notion of becoming one of the most hated people in America and wanting desperately to be one of those sleek sales reps.

My attention was regained when our trainer suggested we do some role playing with a training computer. I was paired with a high school dropout named Amy, who smelled of cigarettes and hair spray, and who couldn't pronounce even the simplest of names.

"Hi, can I please speak with Tara Action?" Amy said brightly, popping her gum.

"Um, it's pronounced Acton," I mumbled, scanning the script I was supposed to follow.

"Oh, right. Miss Acton, my name is Amy Johnson and I'm calling on behalf of America Online; how are you doing today?"

*I'm terrified*, I wanted to say. I managed to answer Amy and rebuff a few of her sales advances before we switched roles and I became the goddamn telemarketer. "Miss

Johnson, I understand that you recently used a free trial of AOL, and today I'd just like to confirm some information! Um... all right?"

"No thanks," Amy said, leaning back in her chair and letting her eyes wander around the training room.

I paused, looking to my script again, trying to remember the appropriate response. Our trainer spoke from behind me. "You gave her the opportunity to say no, Tara," she said, her hands on her hips. "Don't ask if she'll do it. Just act like she's already said yes."

"Um, all right," I said. "Miss Johnson, would you please verify your home address?"

"Better." The trainer beamed and wandered away, satisfied with my meager level of pushiness.

Amy and I continued role playing and rehearsing our scripts. We dedicated most of our time to handling rejection and very little time to the process of confirming sales. "If you're lucky," the trainer told us, "you'll make your goal of three sales a night working on the AOL team. If you get switched to DirecTV, you might make two sales. Credit card companies aim for just one sale per shift."

My jaw dropped at the knowledge that I would be spending my summer sitting in front of a computer, strapped to a headset for hours at a time, just to make three measly sales—"if I was lucky." Convinced I was unprepared for such a role, I tried to

persuade Amy to rehearse during our short breaks between training sessions. “Oh, relax,” she told me, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and heading for the emergency exit. “You’ll be fine. Just get over it. They’re never even going to see your face.”

I was annoyed that Amy wouldn’t cooperate but more upset by the fact that she, a seventeen year old, had no problem transforming into an internet-pushing standout among our team. I was used to putting effort into school and reaping the rewards, but role playing during training week wasn’t doing the trick.

When our week of training was half over, our trainer sent us out on a scavenger hunt among the call floor so that we could get used to the atmosphere. We were supposed to find someone over six feet tall, someone with a beard, someone who had made at least three sales, and various other arbitrary characteristics among the seasoned sales reps. I wasn’t thrilled with the assignment and stepped outside the quiet training room and into the call floor area with trepidation.

There were two giant call floors at Access Direct, each half the size of a gymnasium, filled with rows and rows of small, short cubicles. It was an impressive sight, to say the least, when the hundreds of sales reps were in their element, spinning in their chairs or pacing in front of their computer, all talking and shouting away in energetic speeches. Once I’d made a few laps around the area, timidly asking for signatures from reps with beards and nose rings for the scavenger hunt, the different teams that comprised the full company became apparent. The back left corner was



selling Citibank cards, middle west was *Wall Street Journal*, front right was AOL, and so on. Each team had a leader who ran up and down the rows, pacifying outraged customers who demanded to speak with a supervisor, shouting encouragement at the team, and scribbling motivational quotes and the day's stats on the chalkboards that lined the walls.

It was chaos.

I noticed that most of my training team was finishing up the scavenger hunt, and many of them were heading back toward the training room with their lists of required signatures. Glancing at my own sheet, I noted that I still had one signature left to find: “someone wearing boots.” It was summer, and almost all of the reps, varied as they were, were wearing sneakers or sandals, and I walked up and down the call floor with increasing anxiety.

Then, like a shining light from an anti-conformity heaven, I saw him: his dyed black hair hung past his shoulders, and he was wearing ripped jeans, a T-shirt with an pro-anarchy slogan across the chest, and—blessedly—large, buckled black boots. As he smiled into his headset, his hands shoved in his pockets, he noticed me eyeing his boots. He motioned me over with a grin, and, shrugging, I trotted over and handed him my scavenger sheet. He signed his name—*Dustin Markel*—and flashed me another smile, still speaking into his headset (“Mr. Henderson, would you like to use your credit card or your checking account for that?”).

As I made my way back to the training room, I tried to reconcile my perception of a goddamn telemarketer—pushy, loud, aggressive, dynamic—with Dustin’s interpretation—soft-spoken, kind, charismatic. A glimmer of hope rose in my chest. I could be like that, I thought. I could be like Dustin.

Despite the birth of my timid optimism, when our trainer announced that our training period was nearing its end and we were to begin our own lives as real telemarketers, I couldn’t help but worry. The job was a performance, and I needed more rehearsal. The following evening, I spent the shift listening to the reps on the call floor, soaking it all in. Though I was filled with a kind of panic, the environment was intoxicating; I was excited and terrified of the chaos around me. I shared a headset with a middle-aged woman named Catherine who seemed to be the poster child for telemarketing—she was loud, she was insistent, she was offensive, and she made sales. “You just gotta learn to not care about rejection,” she advised me, adjusting her headset. “Here, why don’t you try the next one?”

My stomach clenched at the thought, but knowing I couldn’t avoid it forever, I nodded. I tried to block out the noise of the call floor around me and braced myself. The computer automatically dialed a number, and a moment later, the name of the next lead popped up on the computer screen. “Uh—may I please speak with Mark Rudabaker?” I mumbled.

There was a long pause. I could sense the suspicion in the silence on the other line. “Hang on,” a woman said. A moment later, a man picked up.

“Hello, Mr. Rudabaker,” I barked, jerking slightly. “This is Tara Acton, and I’m calling on behalf of America Online!” I waited for him to hang up on me. He didn’t.

“Yes?” he said gruffly.

“I understand you recently used a free trial of AOL, and today I’d just like to confirm some information! Now, can you please verify your home address?” I read off the script on the computer, remembering what my trainer had said about never giving the lead a chance to say no.

“No,” said Mr. Rudabaker. “I hated AOL.” All right, so my no-chance-to-say-no attempt had failed. I looked to Catherine, and she nodded at me. *Go on.*

I mentally spun through my training packet, trying to remember the proper response formula—ah, yes: Name + Empathy + Repitch. “Mr. Rudabaker,” I squeaked, “I understand your hesitation, but, uh, we would like to give you another chance to enjoy AOL’s new features so you can see for yourself how important customer satisfaction is to us... now will you please verify your address for me?”

Our conversation went in circles. Mr. Rudabaker protested; I empathized and repitched. Access Direct required me to pitch the product three times before thanking the customer for his time and hanging up. In a miraculous twist of fate, Mr. Rudabaker softened by my third promise that he “would be in no way charged” should he choose to

cancel before his trial membership was up, and he verified his address and bank information with me. By the time the call was over, Catherine, who was listening in, was grinning wildly. She high-fived me and I sat there in shock. “That was amazing,” she cried. “A sale on your first call!”

I smiled weakly and attempted to stop the nerves jangling in my stomach. The team leader stopped by our cubicle to congratulate me on the sale—he had been listening in on his own headset—and to remind me to stop using “filler” words. Fillers, I learned, were words like “*well*, Mr. Rudabaker,” and “*okay*, Mr. Rudabaker,” and according to the trainers, they let customers see our vulnerability and were therefore taboo.

I promised the team leader that I’d try to shy away from the fillers, but by the following week, when I had my own cubicle, computer, and headset, and was making three to five hundred calls a night, I realized just what a comfort the filler words were. I longed to use them; they were a crutch, a comfort, a sign that I was an empathetic human being and not an internet-peddling-robot.

Of course, an internet-peddling-robot was exactly what I was expected to become. During my first official night on the roaring call floor, my heart pounded and my ears buzzed; I was pumped up with adrenaline and raring to make America Online the best-selling internet provider on the market. My early success had been thrilling (when I’d had time to recover), and the managers and team leaders made it the business

of Access to motivate us. I was young and impressionable, so the energetic atmosphere worked on me like a charm. As the morning crew finished up their calls, I stood behind the rep occupying my cubicle, waiting for the moment when, like a tag team on a track, the rep would take off his headset and pass it to me so I could log in as quickly as possible. We had to make calls and we had to do it *now*.

My first team leader, Rosie, was loud and full of bounce, shouting cheers at my fellow sales reps and me, pointing out who was pulling in the best sales or achieving the fastest call times. “Keep it up, Adams, and you’ll be number one tonight!” Giant whiteboards lined the walls, where inspirational quotes and lists of the night’s top sellers were constantly updated. Occasionally the team leaders gave prizes, but telemarketing was more like a sport—the glory was enough. It was difficult not to be sucked into the constant stream of motivating factors. We cheered for each other and jumped around between calls, keeping the energy high, spurred on by Rosie.

A part of me had secretly hoped that making a sale on my first telemarketing call meant that I was destined to make dozens of sales per shift, but I was quickly slapped to reality. My beginner’s luck ran dry quickly, and as I settled into the job, I faced any number of death threats and profanities and chastisement from my customers—“I told ya three goddamn times, I don’t want it, ya goddamn telemarketer!”—during each shift. The threats from the customers were only a small factor in the intensity of the work. The unyielding automatic dialing, extreme noise of

the call floor, few breaks and high pressure to make sales felt like culture shock to me; I was used to the quiet calm of the university library where I worked during the school year. I began my first official day with trepidation, knots in my stomach when I considered what lay ahead, and ended it with a dull headache.

The script became second nature by the second week on the job, and I took to drawing and journaling while I worked. Access Direct didn't mind if we did crosswords or doodled while we pitched products, although we weren't allowed to read. I used my journal to vent my frustrations during my first month. I wrote bad poetry about the work:

*I often sit and wonder why*

*With all our earthly love*

*With all the faith and trust we keep*

*In Heaven up above*

*With all the comfort we provide*

*To those who are alone*

*We cannot seem to be courteous*

*To a caller on the phone.*

I wrote notes and stories and composed lists of names for people on whom to get revenge. Those lists were primarily made up of the especially cranky customers I

encountered as a telemarketer. My first list was topped by a Mr. Scott Borgerding, who spent ten minutes yelling at me (“you people”) for ten minutes about being harassed by a collection agency. Unsure how to react, I blurted, “I’m so sorry, sir, I’m just trying to do my job.”

“Oh, and you do it *so* well,” he shot back, and slammed the phone down.

Later during the same shift, a Mrs. W.D. Fields told me three different ways to “find a real job,” one where I would actually have to *work*, and one that didn’t cause me to “ruin dinnertime!”

“I’ll do my best, ma’am,” I replied, losing my cool, and carved her name into my revenge list.

“No,” Mrs. W.D. Fields snapped. “You’ll do better than that, or I’ll get my lawyers involved!”

I had to bite my lip to keep from asking her just how many of them she had, and whether she even remembered my name so she could sic these lawyers on me. The knowledge that team leaders and managers could be listening in on my calls at any time (for quality assurance purposes, of course) persuaded me to keep the bulk of my wrath and frustration in my journal. Since I faced rejection three to five hundred times a night, my journal was filled quickly. *What a phenomenon has swept the country!* I wrote darkly on one page. Was there some memo that the Golden Rule—treat others as you would have them treat you—was still in place except when it came to telemarketers?

Soccer moms, secretaries, young children, grandfathers—it didn't matter who the person on the other line *sounded* like, they were just as likely to violently reject me as anyone else.

The bitterest rejection was the kind based on the fact that I mispronounced “a simple name!” As a teenager, I myself had slammed the phone down on anyone who pronounced my name “Action,” and karma was completing its cycle. During my week of training, I had learned how to pronounce a few common, difficult monikers (“Nguyen” was “When,” for example), but it was impossible to cover everything. By the time the customer's name appeared on my computer screen, that customer had already picked up the phone and said hello, leaving me less than a second to take a blind stab at the pronunciation. I flubbed even the simplest of names under the pressure to perform, and I lost the possible sales of Shoghig Bardakjan, Jotsnya Iwaskiewicz, and Isobe Gborkorkollie, Sr. before I even had a chance. Names like “Ng Ng” were beyond hope for me; I stumbled my way through them and attempted to remain bright and cheerful, knowing I had already offended my lead before I could even tell him—or her?—that I wanted to sell something.

Names were the pastime of Access Direct employees. My journal was filled with catchy names, unusual names, difficult-to-pronounce names, names of celebrities, names of especially rude people, and names of the few but wonderful people I wanted to remember. “Oh, listen to this one!” the crackhead who worked in the cubicle across



from me cried once—“Long Dong, hahaha!” The male reps always found the anatomically-inclined names particularly amusing. “I got a Sally Sprayberry,” I replied, and my fellow reps would try to find a name that could beat mine: “Try Purdy Flowers,” someone shouted back.

AOL brought a whole new set of name issues to the call floor. I had been working the AOL campaign for three weeks when the name “Secret Squirrel” unexpectedly popped up on my screen. Before I had time to mentally process the situation, I asked to speak to him, and was met with a long silence, followed by hysterical laughter. That, of course, was the day I learned that many AOL customers chose to enter their internet screen names rather than their legal names. The Secret Squirrel incident was nothing, however, compared with Black Wednesday, when I was forced to ask for “BigBoy6969.”

As the weeks slowly passed, I tried to settle into the job, but I had yet to find the success I sought in other areas of my life. My sales goals were usually met, but it was due more to luck than skill. I had fun with my co-workers but was frustrated with myself and eager to become one of the polished, decorated sales reps that had awe-inspired me during the scavenger hunt.

I had been working with the America Online team for nearly a month when I was pulled to work DirecTV, re-signing customers who had cancelled their service. I was sent back to the training room to learn about a product that was far more terrifying

than verifying bank information for AOL. DirecTV was a satellite TV service with what seemed like a thousand different channel plans and price deals. Worst of all, my trainer informed me that I would have to spend another week listening in on a fellow employee's DirecTV calls instead of being the master of my own cubicle-domain. Full of resentment for my new assignment, I set to memorizing channel lineups and price ranges, ignoring my co-workers.

My attitude changed when, after another round of training, my new DirecTV team leader scanned the cubicles and pointed toward a sales rep near the back. "Go with Dustin," he said. "He'll show you how it all works."

I turned slowly, hopefully, to see that I had, in fact, been assigned to sit with Dustin Markel, the sales rep who had dazzled me with his kind smile and oversized black boots on the night of the scavenger hunt. Dustin smiled and waved me over, holding out an extra headset. In the soundtrack of my mind, the music swelled, and I rushed into the arms—well, walls—of his cubicle.

I spent my next few shifts sitting next to Dustin, listening to him pitch DirecTV and letting out nervous squeaks whenever he asked me a question. It wasn't long before I understood why Access wanted him as an employee, despite his easy-going, lazy nature. "Just relax," he told me, echoing the sentiments that Amy had expressed during our initial training, but had then seemed trite. "This isn't that much different from what you've already been doing."

Customers loved Dustin. It was his charm, the charm of an early-twenties everyman, that drew people to him. Leads stayed on the line long after he had secured the sale just to talk with him. He charmed the kids who answered the phone, the father who took the receiver away, the crotchety old ladies, the drunken frat boys, and the young, flirty women. He charmed all our co-workers with his soft, dry humor, and the supervisors and team leaders with his Southern “ma’ams” and “sirs.” He charmed me with everything he said and did, and it wasn’t long before we were trading rock CDs and sharing our bad poetry in the break room.

I was thrilled when I was reassigned to the small cubicle next to Dustin’s, partly because I was violently in love with him and partly because I wanted so badly to observe him, and embody a charisma like his. He was the ultimate performer when it came to winning over leads, a talent I had yet to master, yet he wasn’t intimidated by the harsh standards and rules of the company. When I asked him which script responses he used most with DirecTV, he shrugged and replied, “Oh, I don’t really use the script.”

I balked at the notion, and he laughed at my surprise.

“I just go with it,” Dustin said. “You’ll get to know the product and it’ll be easy. I promise.”

I took to beginning my shifts with stretches, loosening my shoulders and clearing my mind from the business of the call floor. Studying Dustin, a calm, steady

force in the middle of the chaos, I could feel myself alter. I took the harsh customer responses more in stride, laughingly imitating the particularly amusing leads for Dustin, and began calming my anxieties about the job more easily. My opening smiles were more natural, and my reliance on the script eased, just as he had told me it would.

As I launched into my third month as a telemarketer, working alongside Dustin and the DirecTV team, I began noticing the bright spots in my job. I was secretly thrilled when, on the first call of a Saturday morning shift, I learned that the person I was calling for was now “in prison! That bastard took my money and broke my couch and now he expects me to pay for his damn satellite TV!” I feigned sympathy and then acted out the scene for my fellow reps during our mid-morning break to generous applause.

Later that same day, I spoke with a heartbroken man whose partner had cancelled the DirecTV subscription before leaving him for another man. I longed to continue our conversation about life and love and satellite TV, but my team leader eyed me and motioned for me to hang up. I liked feeling connected to people far away, connected to a larger world. Many of my calls were to Spanish-speaking households, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from replying to the usual greeting of “¡Bueno!” with my own “bueno.” On weekends, for some reason, my team often called customers in the South, and by the end of the shift Dustin had always reverted to his full-blown Texan accent, and even those of us who were native Midwesterners had developed a

twang. When our calls were automatically switched from East Coast to West Coast after seven at night, so we wouldn't disturb sleepy New Yorkers, I marveled at the change in attitude between customers, often feeling jarred at the switch from uptight to laid-back. It was a familiar switch, of course, one mirrored in myself.

When August and my return to the University of Iowa was looming, one of the supervisors called me into his office. I was nervous, worried that I had been too cheeky to a rude customer, or that I had been caught not following through with a third repitch, but Travis, the supervisor, didn't seem concerned with my job performance. "Have you ever considered," he said slowly, playing with his tie, "applying for a management position?"

"I... what?" I asked, confused.

"We have an opening for a team leader," Travis explained. "And we'd like you to apply for it."

"Me?" I squeaked.

"You have excellent customer service skills," Travis said with a shrug. "We think you could go far in this company."

I scratched my head and tugged on my necklace, trying to reconcile Travis's perception of me with my own self-image, which only recently had a makeover. For a fleeting moment, I imagined myself wearing a high-power suit, shouting at the new sales reps to keep their call times short, waving statistics sheets in the air.

Then I recalled my academic ambitions. “Oh... I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m actually leaving. To go back to college.”

“College?” Travis’s face fell, as if I were wasting my life. “What are you going to do *there?*”

“Um,” I swallowed, “well, I’m majoring in English and medieval studies.”

Travis looked scandalized.

I returned to my cubicle in a daze and put on my headphones. As I switched on my phone, I felt a twinge of regret. Despite the constant noise, constant pressure, constant change, constant headache, and constant rejection—I had grown into this role, reshaping myself to fit it, developing the art of the sales pitch. Where could I go, I wondered, if I took Travis up on his offer?

I spent my last two weeks as a telemarketer soaking up the voices of America, trying to remember every detail of every voice. My cubicle was near the window, and I stood looking out at the darkened Iowa night, talking to the elderly Elizabeth Howell, who gushed about the fact that my name reminded her of *Gone with the Wind* and Clark Gable. I held on to the musical accent of Palmy Rojas, whose limited English kept me on the phone for thirty minutes before we closed the sale, but who was so grateful to me that my supervisor pulled me aside to congratulate me on a job well done. During my last weeks, there was a Brian Pratt, who thanked me sincerely at least seven times for calling because he had been meaning to resume his DirecTV subscription for so long (a

first for me), and a William Book from Maine, who told me I needed to visit the East, because it was the most beautiful place in America, even if the rain sometimes took out his satellite signal.

A few days before my final shift, Dustin left to study art education, and the call floor seemed quieter and more subdued. As I moved from call to call, scribbling mindlessly in my journal, I felt ready to leave as well. When I hung up my headphones for the last time, twinges of melancholy pulled at me. Dustin and I saw each other sporadically, but we were headed in different directions, and Travis's offer hung in the back of my mind—an offer I pondered when school became frustrating and I began doubting myself. Now, it seems that it was the summer of “what if,” before I headed back on my original path. The voices remain, though, soaked into my mind, a chorus of American echoes.

### A Penchant for Plague

*“They sickened by the thousands daily... many died in the open street, others dying in their houses, made it known by the stench of their rotting bodies. Consecrated churchyards did not suffice for the burial of the vast multitude of bodies, which were heaped by the hundreds in vast trenches, like goods in a ship’s hold and covered with a little earth.”*

*- Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron*

It came by U.S. Postal mail in a plain brown box, tucked in with a letter and a few other items from my friend Johanna. I shook the contents of the box onto my couch and stared for a moment at the plush toy that lay innocently on the couch cushion before picking it up and examining it closely. The black creature was slug-like, shaped like a rod, and stared up at me from my palm with unassuming plastic blue eyes. I frowned and turned it over, wondering what possible miscommunication had led Johanna to believe I wanted a stuffed worm.



Then I noticed the cardboard tag. “BLACK DEATH,” it proclaimed in a cheery orange font. My stomach leapt, and I unfolded the tag: “The plague microbe *Yersinia pestis*... 1,000,000x actual size!” There was a short history of the Black Death, and an address to a website that featured a whole line of stuffed “Giant Microbes.” I sat there for a moment, holding the cutest little plague microbe in the world, feeling happier than I’d felt since graduating from college a few months earlier.

Aside from being one of the more unique gifts I’d received in my life, the stuffed microbe was perhaps the most perfectly suited to my personality. During our undergraduate years, Johanna was often the witness of my fascination (some called it an obsession) with the Black Death. Many times I brought up the matter of the plague in civilized conversation, or cackled with delight when it was mentioned in a book or movie we were discussing.

No amount of discussion about the disease, however, could rival the exhilaration of being sent the plague by U.S. mail. Its arrival was, I decided, every bit as unexpected as the actual bacteria probably were to unsuspecting Europeans during the Middle Ages, when the Black Death reached its horrific height. If the little guy in my hand had the capabilities of its non-stuffed, much smaller (*1,000,000x smaller!*) counterparts, I could have been infected almost immediately. Sitting back on the couch, propping my feet up on my coffeetable, I considered this strangely intoxicating idea.

I checked my neck and my underarms for swelling in the lymph nodes. Nothing. I placed the back of my hand to my forehead, hoping for a slight fever. Still, nothing. For a moment, I imagined that I could feel an aching in my limbs. The moment passed. My life remained, ever-so-dully, quite vital. I wasn't sure whether I had evaded the plague, or it had evaded me.

\*

My fixation on the Black Death began much earlier, when I was thirteen, and my mother brought a book called *The Measly Middle Ages* home for me. The jacket summary said it all: "This book tells you what life was really like in days of old—when knights were bold, women wore tall pointy hats, and the peasants were revolting."

It was a clever pun, I realized years later, to describe the rebellious nature of peasants, but at thirteen, I was only interested in the disgusting aspect of the word. It was, in fact, that "revolting" part that persuaded me to read the book at all. Knights in armor were fine, and I supposed the ladies in tall pointy hats were all right—but the peasants were wonderfully revolting indeed. The book devoted a whole chapter to the plague, describing the sickening effects of the disease in satisfying, stomach-turning detail. I couldn't see a spider without running and screaming for my dad, but when it came to the plague, I couldn't turn the pages fast enough.

When I had obtained as much use from *The Measly Middle Ages* as I could, I hungered for more information—particularly of the nauseating variety. To my chagrin,

my world history teacher breezed right on by the Middle Ages so that he could get to the Renaissance. Believing Michelangelo and Queen Elizabeth to be a bit stuffy, I took to reading up on the Black Death on my own, seeking out and then criticizing medieval-themed books and movies that paid too little attention to the plague.

When I was accepted into the Medieval Studies program during college, my courses finally allowed the plague to become a central point in my life. Since the graduation requirements dictated that I take courses beyond the history department, I enrolled in my first religion course, Medieval and Reformation Religious Thought. The subject matter was enjoyable, but my interest increased tenfold the day I looked up to see Professor Keen scrawling “PLAGUE” on the board in his chicken scratch. Immediately, I sat up straighter and leaned forward, pen poised, prepared to finally soak up true, collegiate knowledge about my favorite of all pandemics.

Professor Keen turned around, gave our small class a wild glare, and thundered a question in our direction: “What caused the plague in Europe?”

A girl in the front row raised her hand. “Improper nutrition,” she said, and I cringed.

“No,” snapped Professor Keen.

Knowing relatively little about theology and religious history, and being a lazy student in general, I had yet to brave the wrath of Professor Keen. But I finally had my

chance to impress. I threw my arm in the air. “Fleas on the rats that came from Eastern merchant ships,” I said, unable to contain a grin.

“No,” barked the professor.

My mouth dropped open. My mind raced through my historic and scientific knowledge. *Yes, it was!* I shouted silently. *Rats! Merchants! Fleas!* Perhaps he wanted to me to name *Yersinia pestis*? That would be bordering on pretention, I decided.

A few boys near the back of the classroom hazarded guesses.

“No, no, no,” growled Professor Keen. “This is a religion course, people! Not science class! It was GOD! GOD caused the plague!” He spent the next hour pacing wildly in front of the board, throwing his arms about as he was wont to do, sputtering on and on about the repercussions of the plague in the religious community.

As much as it pained me to admit, this was an aspect of the plague that I had not considered much before. I had been wrapped up in twentieth-century explanations for the coming of the Black Death, answers found in test tubes and studies. I decided to turn my attention to other explanations. The medieval world had been rocked by the plague’s arrival, and theories for its coming abounded. Some medieval scientists argued that changes in the planet, such as earthquakes and temperature changes, had brought about noxious fumes. Other people killed cats and dogs, certain they were the cause, although there is no evidence that the true culprits, rats, were ever suspected. World

leaders called for help from the University of Paris, where renowned medical experts of the age declared the cause to be the positions of Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn on a particular day in 1345.

There was certainly nothing to be done about that, and many Europeans decided instead that the cause of the plague was God's wrath. As I realized that day in Professor Keen's class, I had spent little time really reflecting on this idea, partly for the shame of knowing my own ancestors may have taken part in the resulting persecutions. The Church took to blaming the existence of Jews, Muslims, and heretics. When they weren't busy persecuting these groups in retaliation, Christians blamed themselves for allowing sin to reign in the world. Ashamed, they organized grand processions in which they smeared ashes on themselves, went unwashed, and wandered the streets, wailing and tearing at their own bodies, lashing themselves with whips. It was all very over-dramatic, I thought, and that was coming from a girl who rather enjoyed historic drama. I never bothered to imagine a procession of my own.

But why, I wondered, did I so love the gore and grimness of the scientific explanation of the Black Death? The idea of a higher power punishing the human race for its wrongdoings did not inspire as much excitement as the mere scientific and psychological ramifications of the plague's descent on Europe. Religion is uncertain, slippery, and the thought of experiencing the same divine punishments as medieval people doesn't captivate me like the idea of sharing a hideous, disgusting death. I don't

want to lie in my bed at night and wonder about the fact that a supreme being would punish us all with the plague—no, I want to muse over the way our physical bodies can turn in on themselves, cause civilization to uproot itself, and eventually rot away in our graves after the world has finished with them.

\*

Although a plague is defined simply as an epidemic with high mortality rates, most of the world knows precisely which disease “The Plague” refers to—the pandemic that swept Europe in the fourteenth century, killing between thirty and sixty percent of the European population and sending the world into a panic. This plague was a phenomenon—a ruthless attacker, an unstoppable force, and a curse upon mankind. I was utterly captivated.

I realize how strange, or possibly offensive, that may sound. Few things in this world fascinate me simply because they are disgusting or horrid—bugs, for example, terrify me, and I can’t bear to watch people eat strange concoctions on *Fear Factor*. I ache for the innocent who lose their lives, and fear disease and famine. Yet, when it comes to the medieval plague, I am immune to rational thought. Perhaps this is because the pandemic happened seven hundred years ago, too long ago to understand and imagine it as it truly was. The best I can do is read about it, and even then, the medieval world is a dreamy one, hazy with the passage of time, and too far removed from me, an American student in the twenty-first century, to really grasp.

But I tried. I dreamed about the era that fascinated me most constantly, fueling my imagination with whatever literature on the plague I could find. I imagined the actual arrival of the plague most often throughout the years, how Europe had already been weakened by famine and violence at the start of the fourteenth century, and then, in 1347, the plague arrived from the East, where it had already begun a path of destruction. I saw a dusty map of the Eastern and Western worlds converging, ships from the East docking in Sicily and Sardinia, the merchants appearing from their cabins and rat-infested decks to trade goods. My imaginings took on a cinematic quality; my mind was a camera capable of zooming from a bird's-eye view of European ports from the Black Sea to the Ionian, straight into animal hosts of disease.

Black rats, the likely carriers of the bubonic plague, are formidable creatures. They can gnaw through bone or metal, scale walls, and jump great distances without harm. A black rat will consume anything from grain to manure to human flesh; it can even withstand the presence of *Yersinia pestis* for a short time. Black rats were not uncommon in the Middle Ages, and they earned their nickname of “ship rats,” traveling the trade routes and spreading disease from the fleas that clung to their hides. The fleas had their own cargo stored in their intestines: thousands of bacillus, the rod-shaped bacteria known as *Yersinia pestis*, now produced in adorable plush form by [giantmicrobes.com](http://giantmicrobes.com). The fleas feasted on warm rat blood, and *Yersinia pestis* quickly found a new home in the bellies of black rats. I invented colorful scenes of ships

docking in Messina, Sicily, of merchants embarking onto dry land, unloading their goods, and freeing the rats from the cargo holds.

Black rats could travel far and survive almost anywhere, but once their bodies could withstand the infection no longer, they convulsed in pain and died. Fleas, capable of jumping up to half a foot, leapt onto new human hosts, eager for their next meal. They were willing stars of the cinema in my mind, soaring from rats to merchants to families with something like a mischievous glint in the expressions I painted on them. Black rats were but rogues of the sea that met tragic ends; fleas were the true culprits of destruction.

Once fleas transferred themselves to human hosts, the movie was over. I became a participant in the action and pictured it all happening to my own body as if I were an English merchant trading with Sicilians who had first been exposed. Bubonic plague arrived first, and I relished the hold it had on me, wondered at the power it was capable of wielding. When I lay in bed at night I pretended I lay on the floor of a cottage several centuries ago, surrounded by scratching straw and all my family members. Rarely was I royalty even in my own daydream. Then, from somewhere in the darkness, an adventurous creature took a flying leap at me and *ouch*... a tiny pinch, like a mosquito bite, transferred the *Yersinia pestis* into my own body. As I lay there, feeling dramatic and tragic, I waited for the symptoms to come.

The bite would most likely occur on my leg. Within a day or two, my head



would begin to ache, and I would become chilled and defeated by weakness and aching. My tongue would become heavy and coated; my heart would flutter. My mind would turn easily confused and hazy and my family would notice the pustule that had formed where the flea bit me. After a few days of this, my lymph nodes would begin to swell painfully. As my heart attempted to combat this, feebly pumping blood through my deteriorating body, blotches of purple and black would appear on my skin.

As I grew older (and, thanks to a college biology class, more capable of comprehending infectious diseases), my fantasies advanced. After the bubonic plague came pneumonic, which combined bubonic plague with respiratory infection. Death rate at this point was 95 percent. Now as I lay dying of the plague in the loft of my dorm room, I was also cursed with the coughing and sneezing that would send *Yersinia pestis* airborne, easily reaching my roommate and infecting her as well. Finally, there was septicemic plague, which would attack my bloodstream and allow any fleas that might miraculously appear in Daum Hall to transmit the disease even more easily to other dormmates. No one escaped the septicemic.

The Black Death killed me many times during my college years. More stirring than that, it got most of my friends as well.

\*

Death is, after all, a constant, although the plague is no longer responsible for a majority of the deaths. Still, my stuffed *Yersinia pestis* microbe is not the only existing

evidence of the plague. The disease still endures in present day; one need only watch popular television to know that. Every so often on episodes of *ER* or *House, M.D.*, a lucky hospital patient catches the plague. Intense music plays and actors in white jackets run around in shock trying to control the disease before another medieval-style pandemic can occur.

Although those cases are fictional and usually over-acted, it is not uncommon for them to occur. In certain parts of Asia, and in western parts of the United States, a few human cases of plague are reported each year, usually resulting from exposure to fleas and rodents. Although rare, there are even a few recorded human cases of plague traced back to dogs and cats. I have lived all my life in the Midwest, and my pets have mainly been indoor dogs, but there are occasions when I watch my dog carefully, wondering if perhaps I will become one of those rare human victims of plague. I often find myself checking behind her black pug ears for any sign of fleas. So far, I have found none, at least not the sort carrying *Yersinia pestis* in their bellies. Fortunate for the dog, I suppose. Rather dull for my imagination.

If I had, in fact, ever found fleas there behind the dog's ears, and they had been carrying a plague bacillus, and I had fallen victim to the modern Black Death, there are plenty of treatments available. Plague vaccines were developed in the nineteenth century, and other medications have proved effective as well. As a typical teenager with problem skin, I was prescribed Tetracycline, an antibiotic, for acne. A few months later

I was patrolling the Internet for news of the latest plague outbreak when I discovered that Tetracycline is used as a modern treatment for it.

I read the words on the screen a few times just to be sure, then whirled around in my chair. My imagination, only too used to inventing its own connections with the Black Death, went wild. Perhaps Dr. Weiss had actually recognized that I had fallen ill with plague but didn't wish to scare me with the news. Perhaps acne itself was a little-documented symptom of the plague. Running to the bathroom, I checked my bottle of Tetracycline, and then my complexion in the mirror. I appeared to have the problem of any ordinary seventeen-year-old, but *Yersinia pestis* was tricky. I vowed to check my lymph nodes daily but continued to find myself decidedly, and perhaps even disappointingly, normal.

I suppose that if strains of the bacillus that were resistant to antibiotics were to appear in the modern world, the plague could all happen again, as it did in 1347. The notion is at once terrifying and thrilling. But then, there are plenty of terrifying diseases and pandemics prevalent in the world today—AIDS, SARS, and so on—and I don't enjoy imagining falling victim to any of them in the least. I perfectly comprehend that to do so would be unacceptable. These modern plagues frighten me as much as the medieval plague *should*. When I see news stories about these diseases, I wonder why I consider it acceptable to revel so in the idea of the medieval plague—it was as real, and as deadly (perhaps even more so) as modern pandemics. But perhaps the fear itself is

what draws my interest.

At the end of all three types of plague, bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic, the disease took its pleasure in fear. The nervous system went, and anxiety and terror took hold, which would likely be increased by the panic of those around me. When I lay in huddled under the covers, imagining how I would succumb to the pestilence, my heart fluttering both in fantasy and reality, I tried to predict the consequences of a modern plague. Would anyone care for me, try to save me? Would they flee for their own safety? Was it too late for them by that point anyway? Could even our modern government and education systems and methods of instant communication be struck down by such a plague? How could they not? Fear exists as abundantly today as it did then.

There, that was key: I was no stranger to anxiety, with or without reason, and here was a disease that threw the world into such a spin. *All* the world. No one was exempt from this terror—the royals, the peasants, the cats and dogs who died alongside their masters. The plague followed no hierarchy, took no discriminations. A rare few survived to tell the tale of escaping the clutches of Black Death, bearing scars from pustules and struggle. For most there was only defeat, resignation, and then the rotting of skin before death settled in mere days after the bite. The minority who were never infected still dealt with the hysteria of world reaction—persecutions, mass murders of anyone suspected of bringing about such a punishment, self-flagellation, selfishness,

utter guilt and the breakdown of civilizations. I fell for the black glory of this death in the same way panic attacks had taken over my own body: there is a hint of something quick and black, a terror, a realization of what's happening, and the release of all sense. Powerlessness sits at the heart of the matter. There is a question inherent, and a release of strange pleasure in both options: fight, even with little chance of winning, or give way to the fall?

Satisfaction doesn't seem the right explanation for my fascination, nor can I realistically claim to identify with true victims of plague. But there is a mix of pleasure and pain in the subject, and an addiction to standing on the precipice of history, death, anxiety, fear, survival. Looking into the blue eyes of a stuffed *Yersinia pestis*, I can savor a strange and pleasant twist of my stomach, the way that people relish violent movies or horror novels. I want a taste of its death; I want to cross the lines of science, religion, time, and medicine, and to feel the romance of the disease crawling through my bloodstream, revolting as it may be—to feel what it was to live and die in a medieval world.

## Hwæt: A Bagatelle

*Ic þe axige soðlice eart þu an hælþ?*

Ic þe axige soðlice eart þu an hælþ?—I ask you, are you truly a warrior? I did not expect my foray into Old English, spoken by Anglo-Saxons from the fifth to twelfth centuries, to be such a battle. The language was slippery, and then rough, then a blend of harsh and smooth sounds, and when I first began speaking it, the barbs of its pronunciation caught in my throat, tripped through my mouth, and spilled forth in a mess of battered English and German sounds.

*Hwæt!*

I spent a year grappling with Old English poems and riddles, but the true battle began with Beowulf, the famous Anglo-Saxon poem about an eighth-century warrior. It called

me to listen— Hwæt!—in January; I laid it to rest in May, and in the meantime lived in a world of myth and language. For five months I fancied myself a monk, huddled at my desk, poring over verse and calligraphy for hours at a time as I translated the poem to modern English. Beowulf threw out his sword, I held forth my pen, and we battled around foreign words, strange symbols, and copies of crumbling parchment. It was an ancient enigma to be conquered, this language.

*Sop is þæt þu writst!*

Sop is þæt þu writst! -- What you write is true! Those manuscripts held the truest form of the language. I translated the verse into a modern work, accessible to all, but found myself always returning to the original form. Scribes slaved over each word, creating intricate calligraphy and a constant alliteration scheme in each line, all of which is lost in the transformation from old to new. Old English riddles and poems and other manuscripts are now mass-produced by textbook companies. I find they lose their appeal when I can't see the ink spots on the parchment, or the smudges where ink dried and stuck the pages together—bits of history that cannot be duplicated.

*Ic sing þone sang ealdordæga.*

Ic sing þone sang ealdordæga. – I sing the song of ancient lifetimes; they are presented to me through strings of words in fading ink. The words were not truly meant to be read, I suppose, but audibly executed; they were meant for the grand halls of the medieval world. A scop, or storyteller, called them out to the kings and peasants alike,

uniting all. At times I take out my parchment copies and ring out the maððum, the treasury of words, to myself. The words tickle the tongue, slither through my mouth, a musical exchange of antique echoes. From mind to pen to page through time, the words link ancestors and ring out a familiar cry. They thunder their songs in my stomach; I exhale their sound, a breath of history.



## Plastic Stars

My first panic attack was by the book.

That first time, I was nineteen and home from college for the summer, taking an afternoon break between a couple of part-time jobs, letting the air conditioning waft down on me. As I lay in the bed I'd slept in since I was six and stared up at the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to my ceiling, the nervous feeling came. It was a smoking length of twine, unfurling in the cellar of my stomach, prickling and churning. This graduated into full-fledged stomach cramps, the kind I always thought must be a little like labor pains (and therefore I vowed never to have children), and were quickly followed by shallow breathing and a sense of foreboding. My heart took its cue from the flashes of worry shooting from my mind to my stomach and began to speed up. I began to sweat, the sort of cold trickle that happens not when you're at the gym, but when a sixth sense raises the hair on your arms and tells you *watch your back, kid*.

*Something's coming.*

Gulping for air and clutching my stomach, I knew instinctively I had to move. I stumbled into the bathroom and lay on the floor among my brother's dirty clothes and a pile of wet towels. Even there, I felt better, at least for a moment. My heart raced, pounding in my ears. I stared at the ceiling but couldn't focus. I needed to run again.

I ran to the living room and whirled around, looking for some kind of answer. "I'm having a heart attack," I screamed at the couch.

The lazy overhead fan kept spinning.

The house was empty.

I ran again.

Pounding on my mother's bedroom door, knowing she wasn't there, I screamed for someone to call 911. The walls were turning black. I ran.

Something was wrong with my face. I rushed to the bathroom mirror, where a dreamy girl looked back. My face was tingling.

The dream girl touched her cheek. I was crying.

I realized my hands were tingling, too, and the sensations were moving up my arms. Ever the hypochondriac, I grasped at my left arm. Superman's dad had died this way. I realized I was going to die and that my last thoughts would be about a comic-book hero. Then I couldn't remember why I was thinking about it.

Who was Superman? Who was the girl in the mirror?

I ran.

My mother was walking in the door, into a room with a blue couch and lazy fan, a place I knew as home and yet didn't recognize. We were in a movie, I realized; we were just characters on screen and the camera was moving in and out of focus. I hadn't

met the woman before me, and yet I had, she was Mom, but—no, that wasn't what she was supposed to look like.

I cried out again, scarcely able to summon the breath. "I'm going crazy! I have to go!" My face was on fire. Everything was black. Numb. I was falling up, out my body. Somewhere below, a girl faded into the blackness.

A moment later I was lying on my back, head awkward against the carpet, my mother rubbing my arms soothingly. "Take deep breaths," she was saying. "You're hyperventilating."

I was sobbing, my breaths ragged. But I was shoved awkwardly back into my body, real again.

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When I was twelve, my family moved to a bigger house, and I no longer shared a bedroom with my sister. I decked my walls with Beatles posters and hung beads from the door. The plastic stars were my favorite part. I bought them with babysitting money from a cheap accessory store at the mall—fifty neon-colored star cutouts, guaranteed to glow for hours.

Attaching the stars to the ceiling proved a more difficult task than I had imagined. They didn't come with any adhesive, and my dad forbade us to use tape on the walls for fear of chipping the paint, so I used gummy poster putty. The stars varied in size from one to three inches across, to create a more realistic effect, I supposed, and came in neon yellow, pink, and blue. In the dark, however, they all glowed the same yellowish green, a fact I found disappointing. After jumping up and down on my bed for twenty minutes, arms straining to reach the ceiling, I'd had enough. The plan had been

to spell out “JPRG,” the first initials of each of the Beatles and my current favorite math class doodle, but I quickly saw that I’d need to babysit far more hours than I deemed acceptable in order to afford such an undertaking. I completed one perfect “R,” and then scattered the rest of the stars wherever they would stick.

For years afterward, friends would point at my bedroom ceiling and ask what was up with the weird arrangement of my makeshift galaxy. “But *R*’s not a real constellation,” one of them once commented. Real enough for me, I thought. I wanted bedroom walls that said, *here, this is me, this is who I am, what I aspire to, what I dream of*. A smattering of plastic stars that looked down on the bits of magazine cut-outs and montages and posters of far-off lands and music stars was enough, then. I didn’t need real constellations, just something small and tangible enough to grab onto just before drifting into sleep. An “R” for Ringo Starr.

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The first attack had snuck up on me, the unsuspecting kid in an alleyway, knocked me down and taken away some sense of security, but I thought it was all due to some temporary worries I knew would fade in time. I waved it off like a bone-rattling dream. And then I devoted a few years to the traditional university experience, writing notes on dorm room doors, helping out with an improv comedy group, shouting along with crowds at political protests, trying to formulate some sense of self that went beyond posters on a bedroom wall. I was too busy reaching out to the world to collapse in on myself again.

But as graduation loomed, anxiety crept in again, until the thought of leaving my adopted city made my stomach drop and my heart skip. I found it was harder to do work, harder to commit to anything. Senioritis, people called it. Before, I’d been

confused by upperclassmen who didn't want to do anything. "Don't look at me like that," someone said to me once. "You'll get burned out too." But it wasn't burnout I felt so much as a stifling feeling. I clung to Iowa City while still trying to numb myself from its pleasures, knowing I'd soon leave the life I'd carved out there.

As graduating roommates moved out, I spent more time in isolated rehearsal rooms in the music hall and walking around the city with headphones shoved in my ears and eyes trailing along the polluted Iowa River. All the while I thought about questions without answers. Was I doing enough to become the person I should be? What person should that be anyway? Why bother, why make eye contact with the man on the bridge? Why smile at the coffee drinkers through the window when we'd never meet, and even if we did I still had only dreams and ideas and nothing real to show them?

Most people my age seemed to be asking themselves the same questions, but I wondered whether they also felt that familiar length of prickly twine twisting in their stomachs when everything should have been fine. Did fellow seniors ever find themselves lying awake at five in the morning in a cold sweat, heart racing, certain that some invisible force was on its way to wreck everything? Week-long stretches of fear were punctuated with episodes of panic, when the textbook symptoms once again took over and I ended up either passed out from sheer terror or hyperventilation, or frozen where I sat for a few minutes before I could go on with my life. That began happening more and more often, until one of those mornings when I awoke in a frenzy, sharp tingles and hot flashes creeping over my body as I untangled myself from the sheets.

I realized that persistent panic wasn't normal anymore. It wasn't just nerves about graduating or concern that I couldn't say for certain anymore who I was or what I wanted, it was a medical problem.

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The day after Thanksgiving that year, when I was twenty-one, I opened my eyes to the stars on my ceiling and knew immediately something was wrong with me. I'd spent the previous day relaxing with family and eating the traditional dinner, but I felt today as if the world had crashed down around me and all that remained was this small bed and those plastic stars.

I tried to breathe and breathed too much, too fast, and recognized too quickly that I was hyperventilating again. I shut my eyes and felt worse, as if I were swirling around in the sheets. My body was suddenly on fire. I knew this time was different. This time I'd be done in.

And a few minutes later, I felt fine.

I didn't tell my family; I'd had waves of panic before and survived, and chances were, I'd feel normal for the rest of the day. I moseyed into the kitchen and sat on the floor with the dog in my usual manner when the panic returned. I willed myself to stare at the dog's face, to ignore it this time. She stared back, silent and black and suddenly unfamiliar, and I failed. The panic overtook me and I was in a dream, some odd mixture where unnatural, off-putting cartoons danced around and I watched myself sit nose-to-nose with an unfamiliar dog, on unfamiliar tile, in an unfamiliar dimension.

When I recovered, I decided believing I had been ripped from myself again was a little too *Twilight Zone*. My mother took me to the emergency room, where they gave me Xanax and an unofficial diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder. I saw a doctor a few days later and went on regular medication. I wanted an instant fix: little white pills that would set my brain right, make it stop rebelling against itself, let me just be.

I gained sixty pounds on the first medication they prescribed, but the panic attacks occurred less often.

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I only recently learned that there is a medical term for what I experience during an anxiety attack. Two of them, actually: *depersonalization*, according to the American Psychiatric Association, is “an alteration in the perception or experience of the self so that one feels detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of, one's mental processes or body... a sufferer feels that he or she has changed and the world has become less real — it is vague, dreamlike, or lacking in significance... many feel that indeed, they are living in a dream.” *Derealization* is similar to *jamais vu*, when familiar surroundings look alien, bizarre, and surreal. Saying I experienced depersonalization and derealization was certainly preferable to stumbling through awkward descriptions of feeling like I was just plain nuts, although it didn't make the symptoms any easier.

Summers were the hardest, too much time on my hands and all of that. Let your guard down, and that's where anxiety strikes the hardest—the weak points of your armor. When I wasn't immersed in school or working, I returned home and spent my nights staring up at plastic stars thinking and thinking about those pesky unanswerable questions about my identity: Whether I even knew who I wanted to be in the first place. Whether I stood up enough for what I believed in. Whether I was making the right decisions and taking enough chances and scraping together some form of a life that wasn't just *kid from Iowa, school to college to work, one town, one state, one little life*, nothing to write a book about.

Sometimes I imagined that none of my life was real and reveled in the idea of a fake world I could control with a wave of my hand, the sort little girls play in their

Barbie dream houses. No real risks. No real problems. Then the game was over, and reality returned, and those moments where life wasn't real and I wasn't me weren't so fun anymore. Depersonalization wasn't the vacation from self-doubt I desired. It was ripping my identity, not gently pulling it away on starry, silken fingers of night. The stars I stared up at weren't mysterious pinpricks of light billions of miles away, someplace silent and profound and filled with the meaning I was looking for. They were just neon cut-outs of plastic, three-ninety-nine at my nearest accessory boutique.

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I found a better medication one year later, one that helped immensely and had side effects preferable to weight gain, but of course nothing could completely stop anxiety or the occasional attack. I didn't fear the physical symptoms as much as the mental ones, the symptoms that made me believe I was dying, or worse, made me forget even for a moment who or where I was. It's not the sort of thing you can casually describe to a friend or family member without sounding like you're cracking up—“Oh, and then I sort of became two people, the person inside of me who looked around and thought she was in another indescribable dimension, and the person who floated away—but just for a moment, of course, and then I finished washing my hair...”

When I went on medication, the attacks occurred less frequently—I could go for months without incident—and were always less severe than my first experience, lasting only a minute or two. This was a relief, of course, but didn't make those few moments less difficult to deal with. “It's like quicksand,” I told my doctor during one appointment. “I know it's happening, so I freak out. And when I freak out, I lose all sense of control, and it just gets worse.” Panic was laughing at me. It took the greatest fears I had, being ripped from my own mind and body and forced into believing that



death is imminent and nothing was ever real or will be real again, and made them a reality.

“I know it’s difficult to actually do,” my doctor replied, “but try focusing on an object in the room. If your brain tells you it’s not real, you have to just ignore it and let it pass.”

I didn’t think her advice would work. I’ve never been sure of the reason, but most of the times panic hits me, I’m in the shower. I’ve never been claustrophobic, as some people have suggested, but I would guess I must have once felt panicky in the shower, and my brain associates the place with a past experience, and boom—next thing you know, I’m watching water stream down a blank white wall as my vision closes up into a black tunnel. Nothing there seemed real enough—it was just water and white and steam, nothing strong enough to really focus on and pull me back to reality. For awhile, I thought I’d never gain any control.

The first time I felt successful at conquering the panic through the doctor’s suggestion, I happened to be at home from school for a weekend. I woke in the early morning as I often did with a stomachache and the knowledge that I had escaped the attacks one too many times, and *no really, this time we’re finally going to get you*. Before I could physically begin to panic, I looked around in the dark for something to latch onto and naturally saw my plastic stars straight above me. The package had said that if they “charged” in the light for an hour, they would glow for at least four, but they’ve always lasted longer than that. The “R” for Ringo was as prominent as ever, a greenish reminder of the pre-adolescent I’d never really left behind. Breathing deeply and kicking off the covers, I unclenched my teeth and locked a hard stare on that “R.” *I’ll remain Tara this time*, I repeated over and over, *I won’t let myself be carried away*.

The worry passed. I was me, whoever *me* was, and it was enough. Real or not, my stars did the trick.

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The bottle of Xanax I carry in my bag directs me to “take one tablet every six to eight hours as needed for panic attacks,” a fact I find amusing since once it’s happened, it’s usually over, and it won’t return until I’m back in that dark alleyway, not expecting an attack from behind. And I’ve never had a big problem with anxiety in public—I have little trouble standing up to perform in front of people or to teach a classroom full of students—but I carry the bottle around anyway, just in case. If you can read the early signs of anxiety, it’s good to take the tiny white pill, strike first for once. And I’m getting better at reading the signs.

My panic rarely manifests itself in full-fledged attacks. Those only happen every six months, or a year, if I’m lucky. Mostly I have mini episodes that hit after I just wake up and hop in the shower, when I leave some sleepy dream world and enter a bizarre world. I’ve trained myself to lock eyes on a piece of reality and cling to it, even when everything seems too alien to be real. I can ride out the symptoms and take heart in the fact that I’m not the first person to deal with some form of anxiety, nor do I have the worst case. I’ve survived it all so far.

Four years after my first panic attack, I moved into an apartment without roommates or family, a place all my own. It reminded me of the freedom I felt when I first had my own bedroom, but this time I left behind the Beatles posters and beads and plastic stars. There are new things in those places now, new chips of identity to indicate growth and evolution of self, new pieces of reality to ground me. I still like sleeping in my childhood bed, of course. I once feared that staring at the plastic stars on my ceiling

would always bring up those anxious feelings again, so I began to focus on the memories I have of buying and putting them up, a silly, happy twelve-year-old with newfound freedom. I forced symbolism onto them, convinced myself that they were a calming mechanism, a reminder of an unbroken, happy me. That was my first combative move toward anxiety. And in over a decade, not a single star has fallen.

## In the Water

The summer that I was nine, the Midwest flooded.

That summer all the adults that talked about was how many people had lost their homes, and how many more inches the water was expected to rise. I worried about the dogs and cats, whether they were saved too, and watched as the people on the news moved around their underwater cities in little fishing boats. The following year, families marched in our local summer parades wearing neon-pink T-shirts that read “I survived the Flood of ’93.” I watched them pass with a mixed sense of jealousy and awe.

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It’s sixteen years later, and I’ve escaped the flood again. This time, I’m in graduate school in Marquette, Michigan, while most of the people I know and love are six hundred miles away in Iowa, in the midst of what FEMA has now declared a disaster. Every few hours, the top headlines on my usual news websites make new declarations: “Officials order evacuation of downtown Des Moines”—“Flood widens across Iowa—

and the crest is yet to come”—“4,000 homes evacuated amid flooding in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.” After awhile my stomach is so tied in knots, I force myself to look away.

My parents, sister, and brother have been busy vacuuming water that floods into our basement when it rains, but they are safely away from the real disaster zones. Others haven't been so lucky. A friend in Des Moines evacuated her new water-logged apartment in search of higher ground. Friends in Iowa City can't make it to work because of the flooded roads, while at the University of Iowa, my alma mater, campus buildings begin filling with water from the Iowa River. Thousands of residents in Cedar Rapids have abandoned their houses and businesses and are told to conserve water. Loss of power is experienced everywhere. The American Red Cross begins relief efforts.

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After watching the flood coverage on CNN for awhile this morning, I take a drive along Lake Superior, where I now live. I attempt to describe to myself how the lake looks but come up only with cheesy metaphors, and even calling its beauty indescribable is cliché. The lake's beauty simply *is*, and I drive back and forth on my usual scenic route for awhile. The sight of the water has been intoxicating to me since moving here two years ago. As much as I look, I can never get enough.

Feeling stressed from teaching a technical writing class and lonely from missing Iowa, I drive a few miles out of Marquette to a roadside park. I kick off my shoes and walk around the deserted shoreline for awhile, soaking in the natural environment. Seagulls scream as they chase the rocks I throw into the water, like dogs playing fetch, and even the wind drowns out my iPod. I rescue an ant trying to crawl his way out of a

dip in the sand, wondering if he knows how close he is to being swept away by the waves. Mostly, I stare at the water.

Shores stretch in a semi-circle around me, but if I stare straight ahead, I see nothing but deep blue water and horizon. The view is a drug to me, glorious, fulfilling, even spiritual. But it is never enough. I am always left with a yearning. Something in me commands, quite selfishly, *bring me the sea*.

It's the largest of the Great Lakes, but Lake Superior still, apparently, does not qualify as an ocean. I find this a shame. I once heard a classmate in a writing workshop call it "the sea," and he was quickly reprimanded by a group of students who had no sense of romanticism. He replied to them, "Who's to say what is or isn't a sea?"—a phrase that has stuck in my memory each time I stand, feet firmly planted on grass or in sand or on a road somewhere high above the beach, and look out at the water.

Who is to say what is or isn't a sea?

I'm prompted by this question to look up the definition of the word. As it turns out, seas can be large, landlocked bodies of water. Now when I turn on CNN, I am inundated with images of my former college campus in Iowa City being flooded and destroyed by nearly thirty-two feet of river. Is this a sea? How much water constitutes a large body? Enough to swamp the hospitals and libraries, enough to force evacuations in three cities and dozens of small towns?

I try the word out: *The Iowa River has become the Iowa Sea*. It is a murky, brown sea that has swallowed up cities and scoffed at the sandbag walls, sent cars floating down streets and knocked out electrical power. Does it qualify?

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Both my brother and sister are certified water safety instructors who teach swimming lessons every summer. I prefer to merely stand on the shore—or on a boat—and take water in with my eyes. (My sister, Erica, has an aversion to these practices. “Ugh! *Nature!*” she says, only half-joking.) I haven’t worn a bathing suit since 1999, except for a brief hour last year at the Marquette YMCA. I decided to give swimming pools and bathing suits another chance when I signed up for a Y membership. But swimming, is *not* like riding a bike.

That afternoon—the day I was turning over a new slimmer, more-health conscious leaf—I tugged an old black swimming suit out of a drawer, managed to tangle myself into it, and slipped into the YMCA pool. Trying to ignore the lifeguard staring at me from his bench as well as the two prepubescent boys splashing on the other side of the pool, I attempted a front crawl. I immediately sank. I attempted a breast stroke. I sank. I attempted a face-float, which I fondly recalled from my youth. I sank and received a hearty helping of chlorine up my nose.

The water was only a few feet deep and I couldn’t stop my legs from sinking under the surface and dragging me down. I was out of practice, to say the least. What would Erica and Brennan say about my technique now? Of all the Acton siblings, I was most likely to drown. The thought amused me until I realized that I was also the Acton sibling most likely to walk along a breakwall on Lake Superior, and therefore the most likely to be stolen away by a wave. I calmed myself by flipping onto my back. There—the back float. This I could handle, either due to skills left over from a childhood filled with competent swimming, or the natural buoyancy of the human body. I chose to believe in both. Should I ever be swept away by water, I would rely on those memories and physical science.

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My grandparents moved to a cabin on Holiday Lake, near Brooklyn, Iowa, when I was ten. They bought a pontoon for lake cruises and a paddleboat for the grandkids, and we spent summers in swimming suits, running up and down their dock. The water just off the dock wasn't very deep, perhaps six feet, but the lake floor was mud and slime. My cousins and I jumped off the dock and played our games, trying at first to avoid the endless black marshmallow just under our feet.

Holiday Lake itself became a game, and everything was a feat. Avoid the muck below, five points. Squish your feet purposefully into the mud and laugh, ten points. Swim under and open your eyes to the filthy brown water, fifteen ickily earned points. Scoop a pile of mud into your hand and throw it at your sister—you've gone too far. Despite occasional sibling beatings, this was carefree water.

My cousin Emily was smart enough to wear swimming shoes to avoid the lake floor, but I preferred to swim old-school style, with just my swimming suit and bare feet. Once I swam under and caught my foot on a root. For three terrifying seconds before I pulled free and surfaced, I was doomed to suffocate under brown water and passing pontoon boats, my bare toe forever entrapped by the mysterious roots of Holiday Lake. Determined never to take oxygen for granted again, I headed back to the cabin for a bowl of Cheetos and parental sympathy. As I scarfed and dripped lake water on Grandma's couch, my mother told me about a time she had taken her dog Cass to a pond by the wood dump and let him swim. "He got all tangled up in the roots and plants in the water," she said, giving my knee a pat, as if to say *you aren't alone*.

"What happened?" I cried, forgetting for a moment that Cass had gone on to happily frighten neighborhood children for many years. "Did you save him?"



“Well, he saved himself, honey!” Mom assured me. “But I wouldn’t let him swim in that water again. You just don’t know what’s under there.”

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The nation, through hoards of media outlets, crosses its fingers as levees in Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois threaten to break, despite earlier promises from FEMA and officials that they would hold. So far, one levee has failed, flooding an Illinois town with ten feet of water. A few days have passed and the floods in Cedar Rapids and Iowa City have started to recede, though the damage is done. Now the real work now begins. Monetary losses are estimated to be in the billions, and flooded areas lie covered in brown muck. 35,000 people have been forced from their homes. At least thirty-five people have died, most of them in Iowa. Some drowned when water, deceptively tame, pulled their cars from the road. Although a sick sort of curiosity in me craves to know, I can’t bring myself to find out more about the drownings that occurred so close to everything I love.

It’s this same sense of curiosity and awe that now and then prompts me to research deadly diseases and natural disasters—“for fun.” I’m not deranged enough to revel in tragedy or death, but I’m fascinated by the power of these things. The mystery drags me in. And there is little more mysterious than large, dark bodies of water. Lake Superior undoubtedly played an important role in my choosing a graduate program. In Marquette, I could live mere blocks from the shore of not just any Great Lake—but the largest, the deepest, the deadliest. Containing 3,000 cubic miles of water, it has the largest surface area of any freshwater lake in the world.

Stories of people drowning in Lake Superior don’t stop the hoards of people I see at the beach this week from swimming. The tales do stop *me*, though. And I’ve heard

plenty—from beachgoers' firsthand accounts, to descriptive papers students write for my freshman composition class, to memorials erected at the sites of tragic drownings. Drownings are part of the local lore. So I take my fill of the lake with my eyes and ears, and leave the swimming to others.

I don't have much faith in my swimming abilities. Besides that, though, I recognize a sinister quality in the waters here, even as I find myself driving along the lakeshore daily just to gaze at the expanse of water. When I return to my usual roadside park outside of Marquette, I wade in up to my ankles, far enough that a bone-chilling wave soaks my jeans from the waist down while I let out a half-joyful, half-frightened shout. But I've never walked far enough into the lake to lift my feet and let the water hold me. As the waves wash back and forth over me, I scrunch my toes into the sand and cling to the earth.

Strangely, though, I *want* to. I want to swim as far off shore as I can go, and I want to sail off toward the blue horizon in a ship. The fear of being lost at sea has, thus far, held me to mostly-dry land.

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Floods begin as a problem of depth. The overflow of water is measured in steadily climbing feet, until the number ("*thirty-two feet yesterday morning...*") can provoke audible gasps. Commercials for flood insurance show families stranded on the roofs of their houses, being rescued by Red Cross relief workers as the rain continues to pound down, while the tips of trees peek above the water's surface.

As a child, too, I was amazed by the incredible depths of water. Mrs. Koester's fourth grade science class taught me that the Mariana Trench, in the Pacific Ocean, was over seven miles deep. My ears felt the pressure of the nine-foot section of the local

swimming pool, and I was shocked by pools with sixteen-foot depths; I imagined my brain collapsing in on myself somewhere just below the very top of the Mariana Trench.

After awhile, though, the depth is less impressive. Other aspects of water take precedence, whether it's Lake Superior or the overflowing Iowa River. Giant waves can easily knock a man down from his perch on the edge, frigid temperatures cause deadly hypothermia, and polluted water poses risks to the surrounding community and environment. The unknowns are the truly frightening. The flooding has tapered in Iowa, so the real worries begin. *What is in the water?*

One article reports everything from dead birds and fish, animal waste from flooded farms, diesel fuel, and propane tanks, to pesticides, herbicides, fertilizer. The Department of Public Health urges the public to stay away from the water. People who have come into contact with it seek out tetanus shots. All to be on the safe side. No one knows what the water will do.

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The University of Iowa calls off summer classes and encourages students and employees to contribute to the efforts by filling bags and creating sandbag walls for flood prevention. It's belittling to true flood victims to call myself stranded, but I do feel waylaid when friends in Iowa City tell me about their efforts on the "sandbag brigade," as everyone is calling it.

I read and watch the news, and e-mail with friends and family who send me personal pictures of destroyed houses and underwater roads. I keep tabs on the University of Iowa Main Library, which sits mere feet from the Iowa River, and where I worked for four years in college. An assembly line of library workers and volunteers is formed to rescue the stacks of old books in the basement. I spent much of my old

library job in that basement, shelving and shifting those books. A selfish part of me feels left out now.

Life in Michigan goes on as usual. I work during the day, pay a visit to the shore and toss rocks for the seagulls to chase in the evening, bum around my apartment at night. I want to ditch my responsibilities here, blow a kiss to Superior, and drive the 550 miles home. I don't know what I could do once I got there, and my drive would be blocked by flooding anyway. But the sight of my land-locked home turned into a sea of its own makes me restless.

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Not long after Holiday Lake took hold of my toe, my brother Brennan, our dog Jessi, and I were sent to stay with Grandma and Grandpa. Brennan was too young to be any fun, and our cousins weren't around to help me paddle the paddleboat. Having Jessi, my dalmatian, at the lake was a consolation.

Grandma and Grandpa decided to take us out for a drive around the lake on the pontoon, and I was allowed to bring Jessi along. Jessi was especially excitable, even for a dalmatian, so I wrapped her leash around my hand three times as Grandpa drove the boat out of the cove and into the bigger parts of the lake. Jessi strained at the leash as we cruised along, her eyes locked on the water just out of her reach. I tugged back on her collar, afraid she was going to jump out of the boat. After a few minutes of this, Grandma said, "You can let up on that leash a little, Tara. She'll be all right."

"She's going to jump," I insisted, but I let the dog go.

Jessi moved to the edge of the boat for awhile, fascinated by the water just below, and I imagined what would happen if she leapt into the water. The grandkids weren't allowed to swim out here; the water was dozens of feet deep and too many boats

sped by in this area. We were also warned never to go near the pontoon motor, which could slice us into sushi right there in the water. These thoughts took away any enjoyment I had of our leisurely afternoon cruise, and suddenly I was contemplating not Jessi's jump into Holiday Lake, by my own.

I was empathetic to Jessi's desires. I too wanted to take a flying leap into the water; who wouldn't? There is freedom in water, the ability to suspend yourself in "mid-air," the sensation of being surrounded by cool, smooth liquid, the music of a muted world beneath the surface. But were I to fall into the lake, surely a passing speedboat would careen directly at me. If I survived, I would be knocked below the water to find myself trapped under Grandma and Grandpa's pontoon and quickly become disoriented. Which way was up, which way down? I would fight to keep my lungs from collapsing as I pounded my fists against the bottom of the boat, all actions slowed by the water. Eventually I'd become trapped in the motor, and the sushi remains of my body would drift down, down, down in the hazy water, only to bury themselves in the roots and rocks of a mud floor.

Although impressive, it would be a bad way to go.

I was just getting to the mud floor aspect of my imaginary water death when Jessi leaped. I screamed, certain that Jessi was destined for sushi-ville. Grandma and Grandpa took action, bringing the boat to a stop and reaching down for the dalmatian who was happily dog-paddling below. Somehow they dragged her back into the boat, and I wrapped myself around her. She smelled wet and fishy but seemed quite pleased with herself as she panted and shook off water droplets.

She never understood that there were some things you had to resist.

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Photographs in the flood news tug at me—rescue workers climbing through upstairs windows to find pets that were left behind, families being reunited with their dogs and cats, and a man in Cedar Rapids wading through waist-deep water with two yowling, yellow cats in his arms. That last photo is part of a series. One of the cats finally breaks free and jumps into the flood water. A third photo shows the drenched cat, now defeated, back in his master’s arms. In every picture, the man is laughing.

A business door in Des Moines informs those entering to use the “west dock.” An online video captures a man sitting waist-deep in water on a park bench in the midst of the Des Moines River flooding. A 25 MPH speed-limit sign on an underwater street in Cedar Rapids now reads “No Wake.” I don’t realize how much the humor is needed until I find myself laughing over a baseball park in Davenport, which boasts the “World’s only underwater batting practice!” and “Midwest jet-ski championships between innings!” Everything up until now has been almost incomprehensible, flickering images on a screen where I sit warm and dry, miles away. The touch of humanity and Midwestern style somehow make me feel closer when e-mails and photographs aren’t quite enough. Somehow, Iowa is going to be all right.

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My dad e-mails me to report that for the first time in weeks, there is no water in the basement. He plans on ripping up the carpet there and installing drains in the floor, so that when the rain comes again, we can sweep it down quickly instead of relying on shop-vacs for the carpet. The plan has been a long time coming. He asks me to cross my fingers that the storms give everyone a break for awhile. The flooding isn’t over, just moving farther south along the Missouri River, but clean-up in Iowa is underway.

I also cross my fingers in the hopes that when I come home for my summer break, we won't be spending our time drying out another flooded basement. Part of me doesn't like missing out on the sandbag brigade and rescuing the University of Iowa Main Library, but it's hard to see the nobility in operating a shop-vac in our laundry room.

My summer break in Iowa will begin in just a few weeks. I know I'll miss Lake Superior while I'm away, so today I drive to my favorite roadside park again, dig my feet into the sand, and watch the waves. I find myself thinking about the Cedar Rapids man wading through the flood, laughing with his two cats struggling in his arms. I wax philosophical for awhile about the nature of Nature, a bringer of peace—these seagulls floating on Lake Superior, the gentle rhythm of the swells—and agent of chaos—the pull of its current, the way the sand floor drops sharply into sinister darkness just beyond where my feet cling to the ground.

It's difficult when I see kids splashing their sisters at the YMCA pool, feel a toe caught deep in the roots and mud just out of reach of a safe dock, or see farmhouses and barns pulled from their foundations and swept away, not to think of water as good or evil. I have a desire to pin labels on Nature—destroyer, peacemaker, friend, temptress, mystery. Visions of a car submerged and floating down the street twists my romantic notions of lakes and rivers, so that I'm left contemplating the unpredictability of water and my fantasies of freedom of the sea. I'm left with no more answers than I had before. Sometimes a house is lost to the flood, sometimes a heart is lost to the sea, and regardless of what is rebuilt, the rivers keep on flowing. The water at my feet keeps on waving.

## Venus Spinning

“Let’s be rowdy teenagers and disturb the peace,” Becky says. She leans up from the backseat to jab my shoulder. “We could T.P. somebody’s house, maybe.”

My friend Ellen veers her Honda onto Highway 175, taking us out of town. We’ve just come from a student meeting at Gladbrook-Reinbeck High School and are embarking on our nightly cruise. “Sounds harsh,” she says with a straight face.

“We don’t have time for that,” I say. I turn around to face Becky. “I want to see Venus come up tonight. If we stay in the country, we’ll have the best view. Anyway, can we please *not* do something as stupid as T.P.ing tonight? Our lives are clichéd enough as it is.”

Ellen hits the gas, and as we pick up speed, I press my forehead to the window, looking for Venus above the corn fields outside of town. The moon captures my



attention instead, a nearly perfect pearl against the backdrop of a wide Iowa sky. “Ellen, check it out,” I say, pointing.

“Fine,” Becky says, sighing. “Let’s drive to Grundy and go by David’s house then.”

“You know, Becky,” I say, my eyes still locked on the moon, “I hear there are more important things to life than chasing your next boyfriend.”

“Like what?”

“Like seeing another *planet*, for one,” I say. I tap the window loudly. “Or the moon. Look at it! God, isn’t it beautiful? Hey Ellen, can I open the window? It’s not that cold out; really, it’s not. Come on. Don’t you want to feel the wind on your face?” I grin.

“For the last time, no,” Ellen says. “When it’s April, you can roll down the window.” I’ve frozen her a few too many times during the starry winter nights. She’s used to my need to be one with the celestial skies.

“The moon?” Becky repeats with a bark of laughter. “The moon? What the hell are you talking about? How is the moon going to help me? Besides,” she leans back, dejected, “you’re the one who’s always saying we never do anything exciting or rebellious.”

“Driving back and forth in front of David’s house *is* the ultimate in excitement,” Ellen says. She drums the steering wheel. “We really are rebels.”

I trace shapes among the stars with my finger against the window. “Well, Becky, I guess I had something more extraordinary in mind.”

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Lately, I’ve been reading about Venus.

Most people know the basics—Venus is the second planet from the sun, covered mostly in rocky, volcanic terrain—but I’m more curious about her quirky details. I suppose my interest was piqued when I read in a list of trivia that Venus is the only planet to have a retrograde rotation. In other words, the planet spins in the opposite direction of Earth’s rotation. Not only that, the process is excruciatingly slow. Venus’s orbit around the Sun takes only 224 Earth days, while a single rotation on the axis takes 243—meaning that a Venusian day is longer than a Venusian year.

I like to imagine this as a sudden act of teenage rebellion, only on a galaxy scale—as if the entire solar system was harmoniously rotating together when suddenly Venus took it upon herself to spin another way, taking her own sweet time to do so. Maybe it was an act of defiance toward the Sun, who wouldn’t, she knew, be too happy about rising in the west and setting in the east. Perhaps it was meant as an act of intimidation toward Earth, her sister planet—sibling rivalry, Milky Way-style. I figured this couldn’t be too far-fetched of an idea; after all, multiple family vacations had proved that my sister and I couldn’t face each other for too long before we started ripping out chunks of each other’s hair and chucking our My Little Ponies.

Or maybe she wanted to capture someone’s attention. Everyone loves a rebel, and an act like Venus’s was something to aspire to. In high school, I was waiting for that sort of chance, to make a choice and spin one way or the other. I thought that the moment would be huge, something catastrophic and dramatic to show the world my colors. That moment never really came. Instead, there were little choices along the way—the ones I shrugged about years later—that probably made all the difference.

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The next time Ellen and I go cruising at night, we ditch the usual high school cruising loop and head for the highway right away. Before we can get out of Reinbeck, Becky flags us down. I glance at Ellen, knowing that taking Becky along will mean listening to her lament about David's alternate flirting and lack of affection.

"Maybe she'll chip in for gas," Ellen says, shrugging. She pulls over, and I raise my eyebrows. I suspect that Ellen enjoys listening to Becky talk about her love life. It gives her license to be judgmental and sarcastic, and secretly, I think she's a bit of a romantic herself, or at least she likes the drama. She and her boyfriend have been together for two years and they're both so low-key, the most drama they have is deciding where to sit in the cafeteria.

We drive through the country and into the small, neighboring town of Grundy. Becky shouts directions at Ellen so we can go around David's block a few dozen times. I complain that I'll never get to see Venus tonight if we're going to stay in town the whole time, but Becky assures me that David lives near the country. "Are you sure?" I demand, shaking a bottle of Diet Cherry Coke at her. "We're not wasting another night just so David's dad can yell at us for disturbing the peace again."

"Relax, Tara," Ellen says. "I promise, you'll see your damn stars tonight."

We drive along the edge of town for a half hour, circling David's block and singing along to Celine Dion. "Can we please change the station?" Ellen asks.

"Only if I can roll my window down." It's warmer tonight, so Ellen obliges. I roll the glass all the way down and throw my arm over the window ledge, breathing in the night air. "Isn't this amazing?" I cry. "Look over there! That's Venus! See, the brightest point in the sky?"

"It's nice," Becky says.

“Yes, very nice,” Ellen agrees, fiddling with the radio dial again.

“Are you even looking?”

“Yeah, yeah, I looked!” Ellen says. “Seriously, is it a federal requirement for radio stations to play nothing but Celine Dion this year?”

I settle back into the seat. “Have you guys ever really looked at Venus? Or even thought about what it all *means*? It’s such a *connection*.” I point at the sky for effect.

“You know, the past, and the present, the unknown—I mean, have you ever looked at the stars and thought to yourself, these are the same stars the ancient Egyptians looked at?”

Ellen nods, looking bemused. “I have thought that very question many times.”

Becky laughs along.

I roll my eyes. “I’m serious. The stars, the moon, everything... people have been looking at Venus for thousands, maybe millions of years. You know, the Mayans and the Egyptians and the Babylonians. It’s like a sentinel of our lives.”

“A what?” Becky says through her laughter.

“A sentinel! Oh, shut up. You guys have no imagination.”

“Hey,” Ellen says with a smile. “We have our kind of imagination, you have yours.”

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At times I find myself flipping past pages of scientific recordings about Venus’s terrain to get to the passages about world history. This is what I still crave: connection with cultures past, to know that I have gazed on the same celestial sights as people did one thousand, two thousand, three thousand years ago. In fact, Venus has played a significant role in cultural development since prehistoric times. The Mayans developed

a religious calendar based on her, consulting her movements before going to war, and we recognize her name, Venus, as the Roman goddess of love; likewise, she was *Aphrodite* to the Greeks. She has also been called *Ayeleth-ha-Shakhar*, "deer of the dawn" by the Hebrews, and *Tai-pe*, "beautiful white one," by early Chinese astrologers. The Lakota associate Venus with the final stages of life and wisdom.

All this reminds me of fourth-grade science class, when everyone chose a planet to write a report on. Some of my classmates chose Jupiter, because it was the biggest, or Pluto (back when Pluto's status as a planet wasn't constantly in question) because it was the farthest, or Saturn, because it had those nifty rings. I chose Venus because my dad liked to show her to us through his telescope.

I found out many things—her size, distance from Earth, and usual temperature, for example—but I didn't learn anything about the cultural significance. Back then, I thought that "Venus" had been an original name, invented specifically for the planet. Nearly every fact I listed in my report had come from scientific studies done in the last twenty years. None of those facts affect me nearly as much as the feeling of driving in a car at night, looking out at a planet millions of miles away, knowing that I am just one small person in a line of others who have looked up at the night sky. We have thought the same ideas, and wondered the same things. It's a comfort, somehow.

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Becky wants to go on a double date with David, his friend Ryan, and me. The previous winter I had finally agreed to a similar set-up, but a snowstorm had overtaken those plans. My relief had been palpable, and I had avoided any kind of rescheduling, until now. Becky wants Ryan to be my date to the Grundy High School formal. "If Ryan doesn't go, David doesn't want to go," Becky pleads.

We're sitting on Becky's front porch, the sounds of her dad and brother cheering on a basketball game drifting out into the chilly night. I drove twenty miles to meet them here, my chest tightening with anxiety as I peered out at black sky. I hate these situations. It feels odd to be so awkward around Ellen and Becky. Normally, if they didn't have to work on a school project tonight, we'd be cruising around town, joking about people at school and keeping an eye out for the stars.

I wrap my arms around myself and push the porch swing where I'm sitting back and forth. "I just... I just don't want to go to some other school's formal dance thing," I say, looking at my feet. Becky stares at me. I can tell she's upset. "It's not because of... Ryan... he's nice..." I trail off, cringing at how clichéd I sound. "I just don't want to do the whole thing. I hate the whole... idea. I'm sorry."

"Oh come *on*," Becky says. "You didn't go to our prom, and this is a chance to make up for it! You want to miss it?"

"I don't get it, though," Ellen says to me. "What is the *big deal*?"

Part of me feels annoyed. Ellen has been one of my best friends for two years, and I've known Becky three times that long. They've heard me say how awkward I am when it comes to dancing. Besides, I hate the fancy strapless dresses and sparkly shoes, and I hate all the girls (except Becky and Ellen, of course) who can't shut up about those things. But I know those aren't the real reasons I'm telling Becky no. Our friends keep telling me I should "just take a chance already!" and go on a date, but I want to be the one who rebels, who doesn't do something just because everyone else does, the one who spins alone in her own way. I don't want to change my relationships or my interests—I just want to keep cruising around, talking about the stars and the radio, smirking at people who can't think of anything better to do than talk about their next boyfriend.

It's a selfish choice, since it would make Becky happy, a choice to make myself feel quixotic and remarkable, and I know it.

But I'm not changing my mind. Ellen and Becky are fixing me with baffled looks in the dark and I'm thinking that if I don't come up with something to say—something that doesn't sound as formulaic as “I just want to concentrate on myself right now, okay?”—I'll die. I fight the urge to look through the screen windows at the stars for comfort or reassurance that it's okay for me to go on alone.

Ellen laughs then, like the situation is ridiculous. I know she's right. “Why don't you just go? All Becky wants is to get a chance at making out with David under a disco ball.”

“Shut up, Ellen,” Becky says. She makes puppy-dog eyes at me. “But yeah.”

“Can't you find someone else to be Ryan's date?” I exclaim. “God, I'm not the only female around here.”

“You're the only one without a boyfriend,” Ellen points out. She takes a swig of her Pepsi and shrugs.

I glare at her. That certainly isn't true, and it seems like she's only playing along with this because she thinks it's funny. “Well, maybe I like it that way.”

Becky tries another tactic. She reaches for my arm and smiles brightly. “Come on, Tara! Remember when David and I set you and Ryan up and then there was that huge snowstorm and it never happened? It's like the universe was trying to keep you apart! And now this is the universe's way of bringing you back together. You like stuff like that!”

I pull away and cross my arms. “Come on. This isn't like that. This is *high school*, for god's sake. It's just a *dance*.”

Becky stares at me. “Tara,” she says, “I don’t get you.” She shakes her head at Ellen and walks back into her house, the door slamming behind her. Ellen raises her eyebrows at me.

I know I deserve their disdain. I put a hand over my face and say, “Neither do I.”

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Venus is the only planet named for a female. I don’t think this is any mere coincidence. She has all the qualities of the sort of woman I once imagined I would grow up to be—playful, rebellious, mysterious, and of course, available but unattainable. She is our Evening Star, our Morning Star, the brightest body in the sky, if you can catch a glimpse of her—certainly the most flirtatious of all the planets. Venus dances along right next to us, but her silvery cloud covering—the very one that reflects so much light and is credited for her great beauty—has, until the past few decades, kept us from learning anything about her.

Science fiction writers like Robert Heinlein and Ray Bradbury took advantage of her mystery, and the twentieth century produced dozens of Venus-based novels, each one hypothesizing on the true nature of Venus. Humans wanted to believe—could still believe—she was a habitable planet. Once scientists managed to launch equipment capable of sending back information about what lay beneath her silver clouds, that dream was gone. Venus’s temperatures—usually around 400 Celsius (750 Fahrenheit)—and dense, sulfuric atmosphere make Earth-like life on her impossible. Some scientists have stated that Venus may be the least hospitable place in the solar system.

Sometimes I believe it’s better not to dig too deep. Maybe we should stop sending satellites and space probes, close our eyes tightly, and keep believing in the



possibility that Venus can sustain life under her silvery armor. I don't know if it's her survival tactic or merely a frustrating trait, but part of me understands what it is to allow others glimpses of yourself, only to shut them out a moment later.

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I am sitting on the picket fence in my backyard on the edge of town, knee up, chin in hand, watching Venus set. It is nearly an hour after sunset; she'll be gone soon, sunk below the dark field before me. This fence has offered the best view of the sky since I moved here when I was eleven, and it has never failed me. The need for something constant, something familiar, has overtaken me. I'm having a very teenage discussion with myself, trying to understand why I am the person I am, why I've made this choice or that choice, why I felt it was better to be alone tonight than on some formal double-date with Becky's friends.

The spring formal, I know, is trivial. I'm a little embarrassed, sitting here, that the backdrop of my biggest problem is the *formal*, of all things. At seventeen, I've been hoping to avoid all that typical drama. I fancy myself rather adept at avoiding drama, in fact, and I don't usually worry about my relationships with friends. David has found another date for Ryan and agreed to take Becky, and I'm genuinely glad for her. But it nags at me that I can't say anything without acknowledging that I've hurt her more than she wants me to believe.

Thinking about this, I'm singing softly to the sky, letting my voice get lost in the April wind. It's a lonely sound, but I like the way the vibration against my hand reminds me I'm still here. Venus twinkles at me, a friend in the sky, too far away to comprehend the distance. I wonder if she's content out there, hanging on her own fence in orbit, spinning slowly against the grain.

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Venus has no moon.

A new theory suggests that billions of years ago, she may have had one, created by a huge impact from a meteor or asteroid. It probably orbited for ten million years, until Venus was hit again with another impact event—an event that, the study proposes, caused her to begin her reversed rotation. When she began spinning this new way, her moon began to spiral inward, eventually colliding with her surface, merging, and becoming part of her. So perhaps it was no mere teenage rebellion that caused her to spin slowly away, but something much greater. Maybe it was her way of embracing change, turning her lonely life around.

Whenever I read about Venus's moon, I am reminded of my teenage choices, and regret creeps over me. I wish I had told Becky yes. I wish I'd rescheduled that snowed-out double date. I wish I hadn't been so stubborn. Spinning alone wasn't a solution, but an option I chose for too long before letting others in. I thought Venus was all alone out there, inaccessible to all, but she isn't. Her moon united with her, making her what she is today, retrograde rotation and all. These days, I'm still striving to be like her, but in a new way—ready for the crash, the chance to connect with someone, to keep spinning no matter the direction.

So, I am fond of thinking, Venus had her trivial problems and her teenage years. She's hiding under her clouds, but she isn't alone, and no one's given up on her yet. Venus will be back tomorrow, and the day after that. I still watch her from my backyard fence, when I can, and she continues to dance in a near perfect circle around the Sun, undaunted. There's always another chance, for her, and for me, to show ourselves to the world.

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