2009

Phantom Pains

Cynthia Anne Brandon
Northern Michigan University

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PHANTOM PAINS

By

Cynthia Anne Brandon

THESIS

Submitted to
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Graduate Studies Office

2009
SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Cynthia Brandon 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.

______________________________
Committee Chair:  Dr. Ronald L. Johnson  Date

______________________________
First Reader:  Dr. Gabriel Brahm  Date

______________________________
Second Reader:  Prof. Rebecca Johns  Date

______________________________
Department Head:  Dr. Raymond J. Ventre  Date

______________________________
Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies:  Date
Dr. Cynthia Prosen
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NAME: Brandon, Cynthia

DATE OF BIRTH: OCTOBER 8, 1984
ABSTRACT

PHANTOM PAINS

By

Cynthia Anne Brandon

Whether it is a boyfriend, a relative, or a cyst, many of my essays—as different as they may be—focus either directly or indirectly on loss. Most always, my writing avoids the exact moment of loss, or even the time immediately after, but reveals the moments later on, when the process of healing has begun or should have ended. Like my essay, “Phantom Pains,” which begins with a literal account of my wisdom teeth extraction, where the pain only lasted a week but, years later, manages to reappear on occasion, the metaphors and events in my essays depict that same slow process of healing and the sporadic reoccurrence of old thoughts.

My essays are bound by my constant search for an accurate memory and the investigation of the inadequacies created by our ever-changing minds. Many of these essays will strive to use form and technique in fresh and useful ways, to build on metaphors for meaning, and to further investigate the human mind and the strange ways in which people interact.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Ron Johnson, my thesis director, for guiding me through this project. His encouragement, advice, and careful comments have strengthened my work while still allowing me to produce the essays I intended them to be. Also, when I first arrived at Northern Michigan, his considerate personality and willingness to offer assistance made me feel welcome and comfortable in a new place, something for which I am extremely grateful.

I am also appreciative of my two readers: Professor Rebecca Johns, whose keen eye and creative talents have allowed me to edit for cleaner and more controlled prose, and Dr. Gabriel Brahm, whose thoughtful insight and deeper interpretations have inspired me to strengthen the emotional impact and intended meanings of my work.

With the help of these three, and many others at Northern Michigan University, I have not just finished a thesis; I have significantly deepened my understanding of myself and of my writing.

This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.
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Introduction: My Reading and Writing Influences

In the senior year of my undergraduate education, I began the fall semester as an uninspired student of English who had no identity as a writer, as a lonely girlfriend in an unfulfilling relationship, and as a confused soul without any concrete opinions on life. By the end of the year, however, I managed to find comfort and clarity in one book. This was the year I was introduced to Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a remarkable amalgamation of poetry and prose to which I experience new reactions each time I wander and wonder through my densely annotated copy.

It was late August when I started reading Dillard’s book for my writing capstone, and I remember lying on the couch for hours while the summer wind drifted in and out, trying to turn the pages for me. That evening, my boyfriend and I had plans to go out, and he was late. Normally when this happened—and it happened a lot—I would be furiously waiting, watching the minute hand tick by on my mother’s cuckoo clock. But this time, three hours had passed before I realized what was happening. I called him, and his indifferent voice informed me he was playing video games with his friends. For the first time, I was actually able to stay calm and tell him to stay there; I had reading to do. And
even though it was a hot August evening, I found myself in a breathtaking blizzard of metaphor:

    I could no longer see the fat snow flying against the sky; I could see it only as it fell before objects. Any object at a distance—like the dead, ivy covered walnut I see from the bay window—looked like a black-and-white frontispiece seen through the sheet of white tissue. It was like dying, this watching the world recede into deeper and deeper blues while the snow piled; silence swelled and extended, distance dissolved, and soon only concentration at the largest shadows let me make out the movement of falling snow, and that too failed. (45)

Such meaningfully detailed writing made it easy to forget about the night I had planned.

    Dillard’s writing, full of vivid descriptions that pull meaning from even the smallest twig or stone, was like nothing I had ever read. She misses nothing, analyzes everything, and always reanimates the world around her. The language is amazingly dense, yet there are other times when Dillard drops into an enchantingly playful tone, making light of the world around her. Discussing some tree research, for example, she quotes John Copwer and then continues with, “He may not be right, but I like his adjectives” (113). Even though her
sometimes fun and other times enchanting words didn’t exactly inspire me to end my awful relationship right then, they did put it in perspective. That night I spent on the couch with Dillard made me realize how easily I could replace my unfulfilling relationship with this man with a forever-enriching life of writing and reading.

Perhaps the book struck me as meaningful because it was filled with the same questions and observations that were swimming around in my head at the time. Recently, I found a section of her book I had copied into an old journal:

A fog that won’t burn away drifts and flows across my field of vision. When you see a fog move against a backdrop of deep pines, you don’t see the fog itself, but streaks of clearness floating across the air in dark shreds. So I see only tatters of clearness through a pervading obscurity. (21)

This description came to me in a time in my life when I was unsure of myself and the world, and I saw it as a message that sometimes there is so much confusion or deception that all you see are those brief moments of clarity. It seemed as if the few moments when I was reading her book and could meditate on writing and my presence in the world were those “tatters of clearness.” This is when Dillard’s inspiration seeped over from my personal life to my writing life. I realized my love of nonfiction writing was based on trying to capture those
moments of true realization without the overly sentimental language that sometimes comes with life lessons.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard is constantly questioning and wanting to learn about the world she’s in. I often find myself drawn to writing in metaphor instead of direct exposition, and I was amazed and enlightened when I came across her dense, lyrical writing. When I began reading it, I was immediately filled with a feeling of “yes, you can actually do this in writing.”

Soon, I found myself paying closer attention to all of the details around me that I used to miss. My journals were filled with accounts of the weather, a praying mantis on our apartment window, or whatever descriptions would help spin new webs of meaning.

In an interview once, Dillard explained her obsession with figurative language by discussing one of her favorite authors, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. “He enters the realm,” she says, “as I try to enter the realm, where nothing can be said in art, but in metaphor, but in simile—because words fail and reason fails, as everyone knows. Only art can enter those realms, however pathetically” (Abood 2). That is the type of reading I enjoy most, in which images and instances combine to create an experience that no straightforward sentence can produce.

Dillard helped me realize this, and most importantly, she taught me the beauty of metaphor, language, and observation:
If I did not know about the rotifers and paramecia, and all the bloom of plankton clogging the dying pond, fine; but since I’ve seen it I must somehow deal with it, take it into account. ‘Never lose a holy curiosity,’ Einstein said; and so I lift my microscope down from the shelf, spread a drop of duck pond on a glass slide, and try to look spring in the eye. (123)

Passages like this, in which Dillard is constantly questioning, inspired me to consider what I am missing—in my writing, in my relationships, and in my life. It is thanks to her that I will always stop to consider just what mysterious matter might show up on that often-overlooked microscope slide of life.

Dillard’s writing provided inspiration and helped me understand the necessity of showing details and clear statements in an essay. As I began writing more creative nonfiction, many of the critiques I received expressed concern for clarity. I was trying so hard to avoid directly stating my feelings in my writing that I often omitted important information and thoughts that readers needed to know in order to understand the essay. Reading Dillard, I learned how she was creating essays with vivid emotion without overstating her feelings. In Teaching a Stone to Talk I found essays that are perfect examples of her craft. Specifically, in the four essays, “Living Like Weasels,” “Expedition to the Pole,” “Mirages,” and “God in the Doorway,” Dillard alternates research and personal narrative
throughout each essay and eventually joins the two to create an impressive metaphor for some discovery she has made. Though at first the reader doesn’t know exactly where she is going with these two seemingly different ideas, she still provides enough smaller connections to allow us to trust her and understand once she does complete the metaphor.

After reading more of Dillard and receiving comments from friends, professors, and editors, it did not take long for me to realize that making the connections is where I often fell short. I was leaving out important words here and there that were supposed to hint towards a higher purpose, that were supposed to develop the metaphor. Even though Dillard does not immediately show the reader her thoughts or reactions, she at least provides other reflection or maybe even a context for her reasons for combining the fact and narrative. In the writing before and during my thesis project, I realized this careful attention to clarity is definitely something I need to consider. I realize now that careless omissions of even a few meaningful words sometimes leave the reader completely confused.

Beyond the works of Annie Dillard, there have been many other writers whose use of creative nonfiction have inspired and helped me. Essays like Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Someone I Love,” and Bernard Cooper’s “The Fine Art of Sighing,” showed me writing that draws on one image or idea and uses specific
and beautiful prose to create a one-to-three page mini-masterpiece of thought. Even though these essays are only a few pages or less, they manage to provide such detailed and lyrical language, which stuns the reader into a thoughtful awe.

In her essay “Someone I love,” Nye takes just two pages to remember her son mowing down part of her garden. She begins, “Someone I love so much cut down my primrose patch” (161). Throughout the essay, she creates an image of her garden and its metaphoric importance with carefully selected words and phrases. And in the end she unleashes the meaning of this meditation:

It was the season of pulling weeds in other corners, hiding from headlines, wondering what I would do if the whole house had been erased or just the books and paintings or what about the whole reckless garden or (then it gets unthinkable but we make ourselves think it now and then to stay human) the child’s arms or legs, what would I do? If I did not love him, who would I become? (132)

Nye has recreated on the page the typical need for distraction by obsessing over something as small as a plant so she can ignore her real fear, a fear of losing loved ones, a fear of how that loss might change her.

It is not just Nye who relies on metaphor to explain an abstract idea. In “The Fine Art of Sighing,” Bernard Cooper replaces reflection with vivid descriptions of the process of a sigh, of his parents’ two drastically different
sighs, and of his own sigh. He also briefly considers the sighs of others, of widows, of judges, of schoolchildren. And, without directly saying it, he uses these descriptions to develop his idea that we are all linked through this one small action. To complete the metaphor, Cooper simply provides a fact that correlates with what he is implying:

Before I learned that Venetian prisoners were led across it to their execution, I imagined the Bridge of Sighs was a feat of invisible engineering, a structure vaulting above the earth, the girders and trusses, the stay ropes and cables, the counterweights and safety rails, connecting one human breath to the next. (262)

Like Nye, Cooper’s ending uses a metaphor that has been developing throughout the two pages. By building meaning from the use of images and description, the writer is creating a vivid and lyrical essay while generating a specific thought or conclusion in the reader’s mind. Then there writers like Diane Ackerman and Richard Seltzer who use technical terms and images to create a deeper meaning out of the scientific process. In “Why Leaves Turn Color in the Fall,” Ackerman chooses words and descriptions carefully when explaining the chemical process that takes place every fall. While giving these facts and descriptions, she also develops a theme that makes it clear the essay is more about life and death than leaves:
Dark, slimy mats of leaves cling to one’s heels after a rain. A damp, stuccolike mortar of semi-decayed leaves protects the tender shoots with a roof until spring, and makes a rich humus. An occasional bulge or ripple in the leafy mounds signals a shrew or a field mouse tunneling out of sight. Sometimes one finds in fossil stones the imprint of a leaf, long since disintegrated whose outlines remind us how detailed, vibrant, and alive are things of this earth that perish. (62)

An essay like this creates a fluid partnership between the scientific and the philosophic questions that many people face.

Richard Seltzer is another author who takes his knowledge of science and provides detail in a way that appeals to readers on an intellectual and emotional level. In “The Knife,” he allows readers inside his head throughout the process of a surgery and, by doing so, he creates an essay that depicts the tranquil life of routine actions:

A stillness settles in my heart and is carried to my hand. It is the quietude of resolve layered over fear. And it is this resolve that lowers us, my knife and me, deeper and deeper into the person beneath. It is an entry into the body that is nothing like caress; still, it is among the gentlest of acts. Then stroke and stroke again, and
we are joined by other instruments, hemostats and forceps, until the wound blooms and strange flowers whose looped handles fall to the sides in steely array. (708)

Here Seltzer creates a meditation on surgery, and even though most cannot perform this act, readers are able to understand the idea of process and ritual he depicts. In other words, he uses his world to convey thoughts he has about ours.

Beyond content, I have found inspiration in the form of many writers’ experimental essays. Ander Monson, for example, writes his essay, “Outline Toward a Theory of the Mine Versus the Mind and the Harvard Outline,” in the form of a Harvard Outline. In the essay about his childhood in Upper Michigan and his family’s history in mine work, Monson uses the form to create a metaphor that helps us better understand his experience:

III. The outline, so like a mine

a. defined by penetration

i. deeper in

ii. both laterally and vertically

1. for harder information (9)

Near the end of his essay, Monson explains exactly what effect this form is creating. It is using “the metaphor of mining one’s past or childhood for writing
material” (11). He has searched the dark spaces of his memory and provided what he has found in a form that allows and reinforces such fragmentation.

Margaret Atwood’s essay, “Nine Beginnings,” is also structured in an unconventional way that allows the content to better resonate within the reader. In an essay on the process and motivation of writing, Atwood writes nine different paragraphs, each with the heading “Why do you write?” As she tries to answer this question, she begins and starts over nine times, creating an essay that is essentially all beginnings. By the end of the essay, she has created an example of the process she is explaining. She states “You give yourself up to it like a sleepwalker. Something goes on that you can’t remember afterwards. You look at what you’ve done. It’s hopeless. You begin again. It never gets any easier” (204). Instead of trying to explain a complicated process of finding the right start, Atwood has allowed the form of her essay to do it for her.

Even a non-contemporary author, like Sei Shonagon, who wrote “Hateful Things,” experiments with form by writing an essay in the form of a list. In her essay devoted to things she despises, Shonagon is still able to use description and miniature scenes to develop an overall idea. Some of the components of her list are short: “Very hateful is a mouse that scurries all over the place” (25). Others are longer and even include dialogue:
A lover who is leaving at dawn announces that he has to find his fan and his paper. “I know I put them somewhere last night,” he says. Since it is pitch dark, he gropes about the room, bumping into the furniture and muttering, “Strange! Where on earth can they be?” Finally he discovers the objects. He thrusts the paper into the breast of his robe with a great rustling sound; then he snaps open his fan and busily fans away with it. Only now is he ready to take his leave. What charmless behavior! “Hateful” is an understatement. (27)

Shonagon uses these lists to develop a contrast, describing things she hates, and at the end, slipping in the opposite. Before concluding with one last hateful object, she gives an example of something she does not hate. She writes, “Even when he is dressed, he still lingers, vaguely pretending to be fastening his sash...The lady watches him go, and this moment of parting will remain among her most charming memories” (28). By constructing a list of negative qualities, she has drawn attention to an ostensibly unimportant character trait that she loves.

Like Atwood and Monson, Shonagon allowed the content of her essay to grow into whatever shape necessary. All of these essayists have created a new
form which embodies their ideas, and by accomplishing them, they have generated a controlled reading and interpretation of their essays.

***

In writing this thesis, I found it was not just creative writing that inspired and helped me find a form for my memories, but it was also a collection of helpful essays on writing that explained what I was missing in my own work. Before I began this thesis and my graduate studies at Northern Michigan University, I struggled with clarity and reflection, and I had trouble creating an experience of my memories rather than just a record. Reading essays by writers like Scott Russell Sanders, Jocelyn Bartkevicius, and Lisa Knopp helped me discover the techniques of creating a lively and poignant essay.

The first important idea I learned about nonfiction is the necessity of creating an essay that depicts the writer’s line of thinking throughout the piece. Scott Russell Sanders explains something like this idea in his essay, “The Singular First Person.” He states that “In this Era of prepackaged thought, the essay is the closest thing we have, on paper, to a record of the individual mind at work and play” (330). This line struck me and forced me to wonder how easily
readers could see my mind throughout my writing. After several workshops and a close examination of my writing, I realized that many of my essays didn’t give readers permission to see my thoughts throughout the writing process. Reading Sanders’ s essay, I realized that without mapping out my mind for my readers, they would be missing out on the entire experience.

And when it came time to write essays from a memory that had some very large holes, I did not realize at first that Sanders’ s comment applies there also. I missed the idea that writers should not only explore their thoughts about what they do know on the page, but that they should also ask questions about what is unclear. When writing essays like “Filling in the Blanks” and “Before the Clocks,” I struggled at first because these events took place so long ago. They raise more questions than they answer. I tried to explore what I did know in front of the reader, but this exploration left the reader with all the same holes in the memory that I had. This struggle is where readings like “Landscape or Creative Nonfiction,” by Jocelyn Bartkevicius and “Perhapsing,” by Lisa Knopp, assisted me. Before them, I was unsure how to go about writing essays about events that had an impact on me but whose specific details are unclear. I first began focusing too much on what I remembered even if these events weren’t driving the essay; it was all I knew. What Bartkevicius introduced to me was the concept of focusing on those forgotten moments to strengthen a piece of writing.
In her essay, she says “In order to tell the truth in creative nonfiction I must explore the gaps” (227). It was my original treatment of these “gaps” that led me to write too much about the unimportant details I did remember when I should have been directly exploring my unsure perception of the past, asking questions, and investigating the hazy parts in front of the reader.

Continuing her explanation, Bartkevicius says that, “Memory, the mind’s path, enacts wonders, and the creative nonfiction writer’s work is not to reason those wonders away with mathematical formulae, but to embrace them, to recreate layer after layer of incongruity” (227). This idea proved useful, because she made a connection between writing about memory and realizing that including the facts about what is missing and analyzing them adds more to the essay. In writing my own essay, “Filling in the Blanks,” I learned that the evening I was discussing did not occur during the winter, as I still remember it, but actually took place in the summer. Upon discovering this flaw, I at first thought that I would rewrite the section to reflect what really happened. But after reading Bartkevicius’s essay, it became clear that including what I remembered along with the truth would provide readers with much more. Not only would they know what really happened, but they would see that for some reason, I remember it differently, which added more depth.
After reading the Bartkevicius essay, I came across an article on Brevity’s website by Lisa Knopp. In “Perhapsing: The Use of Speculation in Creative Nonfiction,” Knopp discusses the importance of cueing the reader when writing about an unclear memory. This is important to me because I strive for complete accuracy of my memories when writing. Knopp says, “the word ‘perhaps’ cues the reader that the information is not factual but speculative” (1). This disclosure sets up a trust between the reader and writer, but it also allows us to show more than we would if we had simply avoided mentioning the missing information altogether. Knopp explains that by using words and phrases like perhaps, what if, and maybe, the writer “offers motives, actions, justifications, and specific details that add richness, texture, and complexity” that is not available “without crossing the line into fiction” (2).

Although Knopp and Bartkevicius are not saying exactly the same thing, they are both placing an emphasis on the importance of using memories—whether they are clear or not—as a way of exploring the past in an honest and detailed way. When writers make guesses at what might have happened, they include the informative details that led them to make that conclusion, information that helps enrich the reader’s understanding of the essay. Bartkevicius encourages writers to “take advantage of the unsettled terrain of nonfiction, wandering and exploring, allowing them to be vulnerable, following
the path of the mind even when they enter shadows, pressing on into the
territory of the unknown, the mysterious, the incongruous” (231). I have applied
this idea in many of these essays, asking questions about what might have
happened or how certain events took place, and providing guesses that show the
reader how I interpret the past. Without the advice from these writers, would I
have been stuck trying to create a vague picture of a memory that offers no
insight or questions as to why that memory is so important?

I appreciate the insightful advice one can find from other writers who
have already learned how to avoid and correct the mistakes we make in writing.
I am also thankful for textbooks and anthologies such as Tell It Slant from Brenda
Miller and Suzanne Paola, The Art of the Personal Essay from Phillip Lopate, and
The Fourth Genre from Robert Root and Michael Steinberg. These are the books in
which I will continue to find writing and authors I did not know I was looking
for, and to learn advice on writing that I did not know I needed.

It is all of the previously mentioned writers and more that make me want
to write, make me need to write. They have found ways to explore their
thoughts in a lucid and poetic manner, and because of that, they have motivated
me to investigate my own.
They board the hayride from the back. He’s lagging behind, so she slows her pace and reaches for his hand into an empty space of air that never seems to fill. The girl steps over the small children who have already claimed their places in the middle and heads to the tall stack of bales against the cab of the truck. Noticing he is no longer with her, she looks around and lingers a moment before sitting. Now she waits.

Soon the squares of hay next to her are taken by his younger brother and his brother’s high-school girlfriend, but there is still an open seat to the left. She moves to the center of the two bales and continues to wait. Over the romping group of costumed children, she sees him still standing near the back. Soon, his cousin comes and pushes her farther right, taking up any possible room for someone else.

Her gray tights begin to itch, and the black-buckled shoes on her feet are too small. She walks over to where the boy is watching people climb aboard.

“Are you coming over to sit down?” she asks.

“Yeah,” he says, passing her. He takes her seat next to his brother, who is sitting with his arm around his girlfriend. The girl returns and finds an empty seat directly in front of them, sitting a haystack lower.
“Come sit by me,” she whispers, lightly tapping his calf muscle, but he proclaims he is comfortable where he is. She cringes, and the old truck engine fires. With a jerk that almost knocks her off her haystack, they begin his family’s annual road trip through the dusk.

* * *

Earlier that evening, he had been late picking her up at home. She put on her orange-red scarf and black overcoat and walked out to get the mail. Strolling toward the roadside, she tapped the silver end of her umbrella against the pavement in calming, melodic beats. The rain had paused briefly and a slight fog had filtered in around the yard. Other than the quiet splashing of an occasional passing car, the water still slowly dripping from the roof was the only audible sound, and it matched her footsteps perfectly. She let out a breath and looked around. It was her birthday.

Just as she was reaching into the mailbox, he pulled into the driveway, the rattling of speakers shaking his windows. He lowered his with an automatic switch, allowing the commanding sound of his music to escape, and he huffed at hearing she would have to bring the mail inside the house before they left.
“Where’s your costume?” she asked while clearing the passenger seat of fast-food wrappers so there was somewhere to sit.

“I didn’t feel like wearing one.”

* * *

The truck’s movement generates a cold breeze, and her white blouse isn’t doing much to keep it out. The truck continues down its bumpy path, and the tiny bale beneath her is giving way. Staying on top requires a balancing act that grows tiresome. She tries to rest her sore back against the haystack behind her, but there is no room with his legs there. Behind the girl, they are laughing and joking and comfortable, saying things she cannot hear about things that probably don’t relate to her.

Throughout the ride, the small children pick up spare hay from the truck bottom, jump to the road, and stuff it into the mailboxes lining the curb. The really small ones find this a difficult task, and catching up with the moving vehicle proves difficult for some. Parents near the back talk and laugh. Occasionally they glance over, and she fashions a smile. For the most part, however, she silently continues to shift and remain on her bale while trying to get comfortable in a skirt that clearly does not fit.
“Please, just don’t abandon me tonight,” she said as he took the on ramp in his red Civic—shiny on the outside, a mess on the inside.

“Well, I’m not going to ignore my family just to make you feel comfortable.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She shifted her weight on the small seat and moved her feet around the plastic Taco Bell cups on the floor.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, “look in the back.”

“What?”

He didn’t respond. She strained to turn beneath her seatbelt and looked into the mess behind them.

“Where?”

“In the plastic bag.”

“The Meijer one?”

“Yes,” he said with a sigh.

She jerked the bag from underneath a pile of dirty gym shorts and his old Adidas running shoes.

“What is it?”
“Your birthday present.”

From the bag, the girl pulled a pair of gym shorts: extra large, black, orange, and men’s. Even if she had enjoyed wearing men’s shorts, she did not wear an extra large. She turned to the window, feigning a sudden interest in a car next to them. They passed a few more before she spoke again.

“This is my present?”

“Yeah,” he said, turning up the radio a little.

“Hm. Why did you give these to me?” Not that this question needed to be asked. He had made clear, many times, his strange preference in women’s fashion. Perhaps it was his frequent trips to the gym, but the boy thought girls looked best in baggy t-shirts and oversized shorts.

“You said you’d never spend your money on them, so now you don’t have to.”

“That’s— ” She paused. In moments like this she would usually let her hair fall to block her face, except the black brim of the top-hat she was wearing held her bun hairstyle perfectly in place. No bangs would fall to rescue her now. She continued staring out the rain-speckled window and into the blur of passing trees. Quietly, she took a breath and waited for a tear to fall and disappear before turning back to him.
“I never buy them because I don’t like them. I said this before; I don’t play basketball, so why would I wear these shorts all the time?”

“Some girls do,” he said. “I just figured if I bought them for you, you could wear them sometimes.”

Keeping her face down, she put the shorts back into their makeshift wrapping and tugged the wrinkles out of her black apron-like skirt. It didn’t fit correctly, which wasn’t a surprise since she had bought it at Goodwill for five dollars. She was Mary Poppins for the night—only her umbrella didn’t have a bird on its handle, nor would it allow her to float off into an enchanting evening sky.

As she placed the bag behind her, the boy said with a familiar annoyance in his voice that she could return them if she wanted to.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said after a few long moments. “Thank you for the gift.”

* * *

It’s completely dark now, and since the children are running out of hay at the back of the truck, they are moving in on her. They pull the nicely squared stacks apart, snapping their strings until they overflow into easily accessible mounds.
Once they move to the stacks of hay on either side of the girl, the bale beneath her begins to lose what little shape it has left. She tries to sit perfectly still, but the bumpy ride prohibits stillness. Her lopsided block won’t stay upright on its own, so she tries to gently balance herself against the boy’s legs. Loudly he groans and moves his legs to push her away.

She continues the challenge of keeping herself steady in this unstable environment while he, his brothers, and his cousin sit above her, leaning ungratefully against a surplus of the coveted seating material. One of the little girls jumps back onto the slow-moving truck after another trip to a mailbox.

“There’s no more hay,” she says.

“There’s some right here,” the boy says as he points in front of him to his girlfriend’s seat. Quickly, the children begin tugging at her bale.

“Hey,” she says, “I’m sitting here.” But no one hears her—not Snow White, the scarecrow, or even SpongeBob; they all continue their work. The tiny hands just keep pulling at the block beneath her while she shoots out her arms in all directions in a fruitless attempt to hold in the pieces. At least the twine is still intact to help the girl keep it together. And then it happens.

“Here, let me help,” he says to one of them as he cuts his girlfriend’s strings with a shiny pocket knife. She slides to the ground as her seat collapses. Hay is being pulled from beneath her, and all she has now is a loose pile of
rubbish on the bottom of a cold flatbed. The girl is crying now, but no one can see her in the dark.

* * *

Upon arriving at his aunt’s that evening, the girl was ready to see how yet another family visit would go. She had warned him two months ago after their summer party. And this was it—one last chance to show he cared. One last chance to unearth the caring side of him she had first experienced four years ago in high school. She told him the way-too-early Halloween party on her 21st birthday better be a good time for her, or it wouldn’t be good for him.

They pulled into the driveway off a dirt road. Before she could even reach around and grab her giant bag, knitted scarf, and black umbrella, he was out of the car and walking off with his cousin. She took her time getting out of the car, checking her bag for more props—cough syrup, a silver spoon, a small extendable lamp post with beaded shade.

The sun was warm for October eight, and she was sweating through her blouse. She couldn’t see the boy from the car, so she made her way to the decorated barn where all of his family stood around picnic tables. Yes, she made
her way, with those shoes pinching her feet and their heels catching in the soft, unstable ground beneath her.

* * *

As soon as the old truck pulls back into the yard, she hurries off, runs to his car, and grabs a paper shopping bag. In a dim, partially remodeled bathroom she’s dressing and picking out pieces of hay that have been lodged into her tights. The change of clothes she has brought still smell like bagels from her friend’s car—the car in which she had sat earlier that morning, ambushed by a concerned friend. This friend, whom she has never seen cry, or really even emotionally affected at all, had sat with her that morning, red-faced and teary, telling her to end it. The girl, on this morning before the party, had told her friend she couldn’t be sure of this decision, that this may sound crazy, but if he would just hit her or cheat or something, it would make things easier. There would be no room to misinterpret a black eye, or the existence of another girl, but this indifference, this emotional abuse, was always tricky enough to rationalize, underestimate, or place back on herself.

She finishes dressing.
In a few moments, she exits the bathroom in her regular clothing. She finds him, says that it is over, and is quickly assaulted with a collaboration of tears, excuses, and accusations that end in an unsure and sympathetic change of mind, a redressing into her costume, and, as a result, the continuation of its scratching, pinching, and squeezing of her, and, not to mention, the almost immediate, increasingly familiar, tremendous hatred of herself.
Walking across campus today, the pain returns, that haunting sensation in my gums. The sharp throb in back feels as if my teeth were coming in all over again. I head to my office and wonder if the dentist missed a piece, if one of the shards of tooth Dr. Wickstra’s flighty assistant missed began to grow a new tooth, a new nuisance. This pain doesn’t occur too often, not even once a week, but when it does show up, slowly burning its way through my senses with its jarring and unexpected ache, I find myself wishing I could just reach in and pull out whatever is causing this phenomenon.

The day of the extraction, Finding Nemo was playing on the TV hanging from the ceiling. As Nemo’s dad realized his son had gone missing, Dr. Wickstra began arranging his tools beside me. As I lay there, waiting and hoping for the gas to get stronger, I thought about my ex-boyfriend just a few miles down the road and the other painful interaction I had recently experienced. While there had been no blood, this other form of extraction was just as messy. A five-year relationship ended.

While the blood was absent, there were the similar feelings of sympathy, of hopeless obligation to something that was negatively affecting my life. At
least with the wisdom teeth, I had a certified specialist to inform me it was time to get rid of that trouble-maker, even if it meant ending a long-time relationship. At one point though, even if you don’t have an expert telling you, the insistence of everyone in your life should amount to something (you know something is wrong when your boyfriend’s mother tells you to get rid of him). In both situations, there was that moment when the constant pain seemed so much worse than the few moments it would take to end it.

The week that moment came, a number of behavioral issues had pushed me beyond my normal tolerance for his mistreatment. Picture a young couple dining out, the girl trying to carry on a conversation while her date stares at a basketball game on a television over the bar. After he answers several of her open-ended questions with a mumbled yes or a no, she says something else smiling, to which he replies, “Are you going to make a joke? Because I probably won’t laugh”. So, after years of ignoring the advice of friends and family, I finally realized this thing was infected, and it wasn’t my responsibility any longer to try to make things work.

The next night, to make sure I went through with it, I told my roommate I would break up with him. In the morning, if she were to awake and hear otherwise, it would be her responsibility to cause me serious amounts of physical harm.
I was up late trying to finish an assignment due at nine the next morning. There was no anesthesia, no gas, and worse, there would be no Vicodin after. Upon arrival, the culprit breezed past me straight to the TV. After watching him flip through the channels on my television, I told him to turn it off. This should only take about fifteen minutes, I thought to myself. He’ll be on his way by one, I’ll finish my paper, and be to bed by two, giving me a decent six and a half hours of sleep. Five hours later the sun was sneaking through the blinds in our large apartment windows. When my roommate exited her room it was clear the operation was complete.

When I take the slanted sidewalk past the university parking lot, the headache begins. I bring my hand up to my jaw to rub the sides of my face. I remember he was the one who convinced me to get rid of my car while I was at school, the one who said he could drop me off at home on his way past my house, the one who left me there on the side of the road because he didn’t want drive the extra two miles to drop me off where my mom was having lunch, the one who let me wait there, my laundry bag and other things from school on a tiny slab of cement off the road, the one who somehow made me explain to my mom how it made sense, the one who somehow made me convince myself it made sense.
The last time I visited Dr. Wickstra to have a cavity filled, I was given so much gas I blacked out for a moment. This time, the day on which I would need it most, my feet weren’t even numb. If ever there were a time to be generous with the pain killers, it seemed like it would have been the day my doctor had to regrettably saw one of my wisdom teeth in half before extracting it and the other. Most people do undergo this procedure while they are unconscious, but for half the price that I could already barely pay, my mom and I decided to stay at our family dentist’s.

Dr. Wickstra fired up his saw and took a step closer to me. Pushing my lower jaw farther into my spine, he held the tool against my budding wisdom tooth and began grinding away. As he shredded the mass at the back of my mouth, the assistant stood by with a thin hose.

“Suction please,” he said, as the first dust of ground tooth hit my tongue. She stepped forward and placed the hose into my mouth. As he continued to saw, minuscule flecks of tooth filled my mouth, sprinkling the back of my throat.

“Suction,” he repeated, this time a bit louder. This demand apparently didn’t startle the assistant, who was too deep in a trance to realize the hose was only making it to a small corner of my mouth. Dr. Wickstra continued to work. I flinched and gagged as I swallowed more bits of my warm, disintegrated tooth.
This is when I realized the benefits of paying the extra money for an oral surgeon. Finally, Dr. Wickstra spoke up for me.

“Look, either you’re suctioning or you’re not here,” he shouted.

“Sorry,” she said, waving her magic wand inside my mouth.

I tried to focus on the movie and not the fact that I was clearly being tended to by someone new on the job. I tried to be concerned about Nemo making it out of that fisherman’s net, but it was hard to think of anything else with a two-hundred pound man doing one-handed pushups on my jaw.

The breakup earlier that month had gone much the same. It required an unrelenting amount of force and a large amount of repetitive, pointed motions to finally knock him loose. As that night progressed, he finally began to accept that his usual strategy of crying and blaming me would break down my usually sympathetic self:

Yes, I mean it.

Yes, I understand you think I’m equally to blame, that I am never any fun, can’t lighten up, am not very smart, won’t find anyone better, shouldn’t need someone to compliment me, hug me, support me, or even occasionally make eye contact with me.

Yes, I understand you could have dated that hot girl from the gym.

No, we can’t have a trial period.
Yes, we can still be friends.

Yes, you can still visit our friends in my apartment.

No, this is not a break.

No, we won’t ever get back together.

No, we won’t see how it goes.

Yes, you really do have to go now so I can wipe my face off before my six consecutive hours of class.

Suction please.

For weeks after the breakup he was still coming to my apartment unannounced and staying even if our friends weren’t there. I just felt too bad to kick out someone who had no other friends. I only realized how odd the situation was becoming when he dropped by one day with an Easter basket his mom put together for me. Was she being nice? The same day, after he finished a phone call with her, he informed me she invited me out to dinner with them.

“I haven’t been able to tell them we broke up,” he said, after a few minutes of questioning. “I keep hoping we get back together.”

And then there was the blood, the bitter, tooth-speckled flow that crept down the back of my throat as the assistant spaced out again. Dr. Wickstra’s excavation
ended with the pressure and pull of the tooth freeing itself from my gums, a pineapple chunk smacking free from the Jell-O mold. An eternity later, he finished with the others, and after rinsing, and stitching, and gauzing my gums, the dentist congratulated me with a “well, that was a snap.”

When my mom entered, Dr. Wickstra informed her that I shouldn’t talk for at least an hour. He also suggested that we pick up my prescription for Vicodin on the way home. You know the rest: no straws, no smoking, no solids, rest, drugs, rest, drugs.

Mom and I walked through the aisles of Family Fare. She immediately suffered a strong attack of her usual affliction: pointless browsing. She was taken with whatever novelty items had been placed near the pharmacy aisle that week, and she stopped me on my desperate pursuit of medication.

“Cindy, look at these,” she said pointing to some strange wooden cutouts.

“Please, Mom, let’s just get the medication and go,” I mumbled through mounds of blood-soaked gauze.

“No talking! Now should we buy you some food you can eat? What do you want? Pudding? Applesauce? Juice? Soup? We can get you some soup,” she said, still perusing the random crafts for sales.

“Applesauce.”

“What about soup?”
“Just applesauce.”

“Are you sure?”

Nod.

“Ice cream?”

“No.”

“No talking!”

Arriving home, I was anxious to take one of the pain killers, but the pool of blood in my mouth made it difficult. The motion of swallowing hurt. After the pill went down, I tried to let it pool a while before swallowing. Before we left the office, I had been informed that some bleeding was normal and not to worry. As Mom used the bathroom, I turned to the window and saw Bob Blaharski, my neighbor and the father of a high-school friend, run by. I opened the door and waved at the sprinting figure. Too slow. Just then a large blood bubble formed in my mouth, popping thick into my throat.

I shut the door, and when I came inside Mom screamed from the bathroom door.

“Oh my God Cindy. You’re bleeding.” I turned to the mirror to see a stream had started from the corner of my mouth and was forming a big puddle on my chest—probably a sight Bob would be better off missing.
How much blood is normal? After calling the doctor we realized not that much. We didn’t have any gauze in the house, so the doctor prescribed warm tea bags until the bleeding stopped. Mom tried to soak and squeeze the bag, but the flavor never completely disappeared. For two hours, I lay on the couch trying to keep my blood-flavored tea-bags in place, hoping for a time to come when the blood would just stop. For the rest of the evening, I spread out on the couch while my mom watched *Capote* with her boyfriend, who despite my medical condition kept insisting I try the Milk Duds.

Once the bleeding had stopped and I could breathe without gurgling through a mixture of blood and orange pekoe, I felt better, peaceful. I was left alone in the living room, lying still on the couch, afraid any sudden movement would reopen the recently closed gash. It was over, and I was finally on my own.

I’m passing the NMU theater, tonguing my gums, and I wonder how to get on the inside, how to reach in and pull out those remaining bits, the scar tissue the dentist might have left behind or any stray infected strands of stitches. I wonder how to forget the almost monthly attempts to break up that always ended with me allowing him to convince me his faults only existed because of something I did wrong. I look around campus and think about finding that tooth, about
grabbing hold of it and telling it what it did to me, about how I never imagined I would think like this, but wherever it is now, I truly do wish that it is completely and irreparably miserable.

In the days after both extractions he was there, uninvited each time. He was what my mother described as a “socially awkward” fellow who didn’t need an invitation, a welcome, or even an answer at the door. He’d let himself in. After the breakup, he watched TV with my roommates while I worked. I would leave and he would ask where I was going, not something that would have happened pre-breakup. In my swollen-cheeks stage he came to watch TV with me, complaining about what I put on, but in a strange way that seemed more attentive than usual. In both situations the attention was so unfamiliar to me it was almost eerie.

At the end of his visit, he asked for a hug, and as much as I didn’t want to give it to him, I felt sorry for him there, torn, abandoned, his flaws finally realized. I tried to give him a quick pat on the back, but he pulled me in and stood for an awkward ten seconds or so while I waited for him to let go. After he left, I realized it shouldn’t be like that. These things weren’t meant to be drawn out. The doctor didn’t give me a period to say goodbye to my teeth, days to
spend with them before calling it officially over. I called later and explained we should stop talking for a while, and since then we haven’t.

After his visit, I focused my efforts on eating jars of applesauce. The Vicodin wasn’t much fun. It just made me tired, and after day two I think my body adjusted because the required dosage didn’t cover the pain anymore. Then, once my gums had healed around the stitches, the itching began. I could feel the stitches slowly decaying in my mouth, unraveling into my food, lingering in my throat, and the disturbing sensation of them jutting out against my tongue. Losing them was like the process of losing my baby teeth. It began with that moment where it felt loose enough to pull, but I didn’t want to rip up anything valuable, so I continued to wiggle it around with my tongue, a nauseating yet unavoidable habit. But eventually those too disintegrated, and I was clear of all evidence of their existence.

Then, slowly, I began to experience these occasional pains, a slight pressure, or throbbing where the extraction took place—as if it never happened at all. Doctors say these phantom pains are sometimes caused by anger, which my other phantom, a once-sympathetic kindness, had definitely morphed into by that time. No more sympathy, just a fierce, seemingly justified anger. But what caused these sudden pangs of fury, this recurring pain over a problem that no longer exists?
In some cases of phantom teeth, sufferers continue the extraction of other teeth, never realizing the problem is in the nerves in their jaw, in the wiring within them. After the original extraction, it’s become clear my tolerance has been tampered with; I can tell on those days when it comes back as a pulsing pressure. It is the memory of what he put me through. A fading of the sympathetic understanding I used to contain and a slow but strong realization of anger from which I can’t be sure I’ll ever completely recover.

I had another dream about him last night. I was browsing the cereal aisle of my hometown grocery store when he walked by. “Oh hi,” I said. We made small talk. I noticed he had put on weight. After he walked away, I was furious. I stared at the box of fruit loops and wished I had asked him if he had found a new girlfriend to manipulate these days. I knew he hadn’t. I wished I had yelled and had asked him what his problem was. But I didn’t.

Angry dreams like these frequent my nights. Like last night’s dream, I’m always in a different place, but the anger is always present. And today, as I cross the street to my office, I feel the back of my gums with a cold index finger to investigate—no leftover shards of tooth or spare dental instruments. I prod my slimy gums, and it feels like something could be underneath there. It isn’t a yielding surface like it once was; my finger rises and falls as it slides over the
area where the tainted piece was extracted. It feels slightly like a thin wall building up. And unsure of its consequence, I realize something significant has grown under that soft skin of mine.
I’m careful today, out on Lake Superior’s shore. I’m careful because I know what can happen if I don’t concentrate on my surroundings, if I don’t focus on the fact that there is more to this afternoon than how many shards of glass I carry home in my pockets. I have to remind myself that I’m out here for other reasons: the sunshine, the breeze, the slight exercise. Even the eerie rock island nearby covered in screaming seagulls is a reason for coming here. So, if I happen to see a piece of beach glass, shining with its wet and frosted glow, I’ll pick it up, bring it home, and place it joyfully in a bucket with the others. But I will try not to let it dominate my entire experience, not again.

Right now, I’m on the side of Presque Isle where rocky cliffs lead directly into the water. I’ve heard others call it Black Rocks because the reddish-gray cliffs that I sit on now quickly transform into a dark edge that drops into Lake Superior. On one very steep side, it plunges down into the lake where braver people than me leap off into the 48-degree water below. North of this area, I’m at the top of a small mound of reddish rocks, waiting for a family to leave the tiny ten-foot piece of shore below. I hope they aren’t looking for beach glass. Though it’s not the best place for it, I know I’ve found some nice pieces here in the past. Tourists—I put in my time all year and then they come, when the
weather’s warm(-ish), when Lake Superior isn’t frozen over for miles, when the air temperature isn’t negative twenty, when there aren’t fifteen-mile-per-hour winds burning into your cheeks, when you don’t have to walk the two miles through three feet of snow to get to this spot. They can drive up in July with their matching baseball caps and sweaters tied around their waists and take what I’ve been pursuing year-round. I don’t mean to say I don’t like tourists—just the ones who take my beach glass.

Rocks. Hopefully they will just focus on the rocks. But even if their eager eyes do fancy the glints of glass peeking through, I’m not supposed to be out here for that anyway. I am here to discover what motivates the lake’s inconsistent supply of glass. I want to understand how it decides when a person is worthy of finding something, how it can let you devote days to it and then give you nothing.

I’m careful today, because I know what it means to waste my life with a destructive pastime, to devote myself to something or someone and come out empty-handed. I used to spend entire summers searching for beach glass, digging around in the dirt and rocks. During these desperate pursuits, I missed my family, the beautiful scenery around me, and practically every other aspect of my life. It might be difficult to understand how a hobby can hurt that badly, how it can feed off your energy and corrupt what could be precious memories,
but it does. It gets inside you and uses your hopeful devotion until you’re an empty, mindless vessel hauling the weight of thousands of stones.

* * *

It started one day at the beach.

“What is this?” I asked my sister, pulling a blue shard of glass from the falling waves.

“You’ve never seen beach glass?” she asked. It was true. I was 21 and had never experienced the joy of a colorful surprise at my feet. After she explained to me that the foggy blue chip in my hand was just a weather-worn piece of glass that had been dumped into the lake, I spent the rest of the afternoon sifting through the Lake Michigan stones and sand, pulling shining bits of man-made wonder from the shore. I didn’t realize I was falling into a dangerously consuming pastime.

Soon any amount of time I spent at the beach was passed crawling through sand, digging through layers of rocks to find even the smallest green, blue, or white man-made, nature-renovated shard of waste. I even recruited my nieces and nephew to help with the search, the girls a tremendous help due to their willingness to sit in the water and sort through handfuls of stone. My
nephew, on the other hand, though full of energy and enthusiasm, never grasped the concept of beach glass, and every few seconds he held up a stone or two.

“I found one!”

“No,” I would say, sympathetically putting his prized rock back into the water. “See how this one is clear?” He raised his eyebrows and nodded, but then pulled out a tan stone. The afternoon quickly transformed into an ongoing lesson of the characteristics he should be looking for. It must be clear, Tyler; smooth and flat; that’s close, but not quite it. Poor sap, he found beauty in it all, taking my rejects and stuffing them into the pockets of his cargo shorts. He hadn’t yet discovered that not everything in this world is worth the trouble.

And then I saw that glowing flash of white imbedded in the sand. I waded over to Tyler, whose pockets were overflowing with pebbles, and he looked at it as if it were any other piece he’d found that day. Soon, he and the girls had enough and went to splash in the water or join my family in raiding the cooler. I stayed all afternoon and collected those diverse and refined shards of glass. I held them up to the sunlight before putting them in the pocket of my floral-print skirt, the need to fill it rapidly growing.

* * *
It started one day in high school, the awful relationship that now seems so clearly destructive. He ended up next to me on a school flight to Spain. He had spent the previous weeks mocking me in Spanish class, but when he offered to place my luggage in the overhead compartment, I assumed I had misunderstood his intentions. New to the concept of love and relationships, I latched on.

Soon after, we were dating, and I immediately ascertained that all relationships included acting indifferent to whatever painful interactions that might occur, like when he left my first tennis match without saying goodbye. I remember straightening my tennis strings as a teammate shook her head in my direction.

“You guys have such a casual relationship,” she said, leaning against the chain fence.

“Yeah, I mean, I’ll see him later, so what’s the big deal?”

I thought she had meant it as a compliment and didn’t realize I would be making the same justification for the next five years. I was positive that those insignificant details weren’t a true reflection of his feelings, like when he couldn’t clean out the passenger seat before prom; it was fine. Or that he didn’t buy me a corsage because he thought it was lame; I didn’t want one anyway. It was fine when I was driving alone to our campsite, lost in the dark in a rainstorm with faulty windshield wipers, and when I finally reached the cell of a friend who
was also camping she said he couldn’t be bothered to pick up to help me with directions. It was fine when I drove an hour in a blizzard to pick him up at the airport, waited for three more hours, used all my money on a payphone to see why he hadn’t gotten off the plane, and when I finally reached him, he told me he tried to call me—once—to tell me he was staying an extra day, but the answering machine didn’t work. It was fine when he told me to dye my hair blond, that I needed to lose weight, wear more blue, be less annoying, find different friends, or spend less time with my family. All these things were fine, except that now I understand he, and my careless assessment of the situation, cost me five years of my life. Even now, four years later, I try to understand why I kept searching, how I didn’t realize that I was wasting my time, but it’s a hard thing to crack, the amateur mind of the eighteen-year-old me. I can see the warning signs now, and know not to spend too much time where the glass is scarce, but back then for some reason I had this strange hope, a naïve determination that something would come along if only I just kept digging.

* * *

Waiting for the family of four to climb back up the ten-foot ledge, I look out over an endless expanse of beating blue waves. To my left is a shoreline that is so full
of hills and trees that the few houses that are there are almost unnoticeable.

There is a steamship on the horizon, and thanks to LaMotte, I know it’s one of the reasons why I am able to find beach glass on Lake Superior, home to hundreds of shipwrecks, thousands of broken bottles, dishes, car windshields.

The chances of finding something today grow more likely as the family of four seems to be preoccupied with obtaining the perfect skipping stone. The joy of sliding flat objects over the water keeps them from noticing any shining specks of blue beauty near their toes. They are probably better off anyway, spending their time like this in a joint effort.

Some of the most desperate moments of my beach glass hunts were the afternoons I passed at the beach with my family. The only real time I shared with them was the car trip there and back. Once we hit the beach, I focused only on the search. The urge to fill my pockets lured me from my mother, two sisters, nieces, and nephew and left me on a solitary slice of shoreline. These days, if I didn’t live in Marquette, seven hours away from my family and original Michigan home, I wouldn’t waste my time sifting through handfuls of wet beach; I’d share a sandy egg-salad sandwich with my mom, listen to my older sisters talk about their days, watch my two teenage nieces argue about whose magazine is whose, or even let my soaking-wet nephew share my blanket while he throws food to attract the seagulls.
Even when I would give up the hunt for my family’s presence, I would waste that time worrying about the next or the previous beach visit (why was I always being let down? what did I do wrong? what could I do differently next time?), an act that forced my mind back to that beach again and again.

Now, the family climbs back up the ten-foot drop-off to their car, and I pack up my things to go take their place before anyone else. Sliding down the steep incline, I end up running to avoid falling. The water is so light green that it’s almost white, and the breeze and incoming waves are so loud that I am unable to hear the people at their car. I turn my head and find myself all alone.

I start on the farthest end and work my way, head down and searching, toward the other. Scanning the rust-colored rocks, some the size of marbles, others as big as a loaf of bread, I wait for a shot of color to reveal itself. I remember my sunglasses and slide them to the top of my head. I learned early on to take them off when beach-glass hunting. Their ability to dim the sun also dulls the shine of the glass, making it that even more difficult to find. I used to spend hours on the beach without their protection, squinting into the sun until I went home with a headache and probably a few wrinkles that wouldn’t otherwise be there.

The other side of the small shore meets me in about two minutes, and I have found nothing.
And just as I was about to give up, something would turn up, giving this flawed perspective of mine even more power. Take this moment: Leaving the enjoyable cool of the car, the couple steps outside into the heat. Exhausted, she goes to give him a goodbye hug. She kisses him on the cheek, and when she turns her head for a return kiss, he presses his stubbly cheek against hers.

“You missed,” she laughs. He smiles, kisses her cheek with a playful smack, and squeezes her in his arms. Her head takes its familiar place on his chest as he squeezes her in his arms. She sighs to herself taking in the perfect moment. His grasp becomes tighter and he whispers in a voice barely audible, "I love you"—the second time he had used that word in three years.

I would tell myself to remember a moment like that because it was one of few. Soon it would be replaced with short goodbyes, asking for kisses in a closing doorway, or even other times where he just left without telling me. But somehow I kept thinking that these fragments of beauty have to be worked at, have to be searched for among all the pointed bits of reality.

Returning home, I would set that surprise on a shelf for everyone to find, so they would see I wasn’t crazy, wasn’t wasting my time on abusive lakeshore quests. And after my show and tell, I continued inspecting it, the shining object I
found on a dim shore. I handled it continuously, felt its smooth edges in my palm. If I fixed my eyes on its shine for long enough, I couldn’t remember the afternoon I had spent trudging through mounds of rocks.

* * *

I climb down to the bottom of Black Rocks, which is about a two-minute walk. This bit of shoreline is about the same size but is almost like a little harbor, a place where the rock walls break and let in some of that turquoise water. On both sides of me are jagged rock walls topped with grass and thin trees. Directly in front is an expanse of shallow water that darkens and deepens before reaching the cliff where those daring people scream in fear or excitement as they break the surface of the chilled water. Last summer I saw a SCUBA diver in these waters and resisted the urge to ask him if he saw any beach glass, maybe even an entire frosted bottle, but I’m sure he was looking for fish, or some other living, noteworthy creature.

Even though it is only a few feet away from my other looking spot, this part of Presque Isle is significantly quieter. No waves here, just the slap and slurp of a slight tide. The water’s edge is covered with small and mostly gray rocks.

I’ve had luck here before, but so far, no glass. I stand on a large, flat rock that rises a few inches out of the water, something I wasn’t able to do at the
previous site. While there are a few reachable rock islands over on that more violent side of the lake, large waves like to sneak up on them. Surrounded by water, I peer into the clear liquid but see nothing but distorted, almost liquid-looking rocks. No luck here either, but I stay a while to enjoy the calm and think.

In my search here last December, I experienced a common occurrence, when the pain of the search lasted far beyond the joy of any momentary discovery. Ice covered the stones, and as I broke through to secure a piece of glass, an icy pain overtook me. I continued anyway, desperate for a reward. By then I thought it was worth it, that people had to work for moments like that. I kept working, but a wave snuck up, freezing parts of me I thought had gone numb some time ago.

* * *

And some days there would be no reward. I would look for hours, hungrily pacing the shore, neck craned, eyes drying up, skin burning, and couldn’t find anything. Soon, I was so tired and hot I merely sat in the water, sorting through hills of tiny rocks as they dug into me, impressing their pointed armor into my ridiculously hopeful hands. This is how it is, I told myself as waves crashed against me, pushing me away. They’ll turn up.
Eventually I couldn’t remember the last time I went home with something new and wonderful in my pocket. All that I had was the knowledge of the large amount of dirt and rocks I had dug through and how callused my skin was becoming. I began every day with a hope that was almost instantly washed away with fresh waves of pain.

* * *

Sunset Point, stop number three, is the last bit of beach before the island curves back to Lakeshore Drive. I park in the lot in front of a log building that faces the lake. A grassy cliff covered in picnic tables and camping grills leads to what looks more like a Lake Michigan beach, soft white sands, tall and slender blades of grass, houses higher up on the shore. Walking to the sandy area, I’m careful to avoid the gifts the geese have left over most of the ground.

Farther away in the grass are two peeling tennis courts. Last summer, my current boyfriend and I tried playing there, but after we shooed away the party of geese, I realized I wasn’t comfortable picking up tennis balls that would be rolling and dropping in bird feces.

I end the search for beach glass at a slab of clay-colored rock leading up to the sand—nothing here either. I give up and snap a few photos of the nearby
geese. It is an interesting sight with four of them bending down in circle. As they twist their necks behind them, it looks as if they are trying to clean themselves or pull something out of their feathers. One goose simply stands there unmoving, his neck elongated, as if refusing to repair himself.

I think about all the time I spent trying to please him, taking the hints that he dropped, dying my brown hair blond, straightening my natural curls daily, wearing that bright blue he said he liked, just to get a simple and infrequent, “you look nice.” But there was always something else I could change for him, and I always did. The condition escalated until one day I opened my closet to see most of it was composed of that bright blue, a color I didn’t even like.

Snapping one last shot of the statuesque goose, I become disgusted with myself, how I so readily changed myself for someone, and how needy and attention-starved I became. I grow frustrated thinking about the time I lost and the pathetic person I became, and any memories I have of that period are tainted with the feeling of struggle and self-loathing.

I head back to my car and think about the other options for glass-hunting. Though I wasn’t sure what would happen out here this afternoon, I read somewhere recently that the sound of the waves has a calming effect, something about the repetition. Maybe I thought it might help me come to some kind of conclusion. I wanted to finally be able to forgive the beach for not giving me
what I needed, but now I realize I’m here to forgive myself for constantly returning to a place that didn’t satisfy me.

I realize the lake isn’t to blame. It was just doing what it had had always done, churning out whatever someone else dumped into it for its entire life. I was to blame for thinking sympathy meant staying with it, that it was my duty to force good out of it. But I can be proud of the fact that I stopped looking and realized those stones had nothing to do with me or my actions, that I owed nothing to the lake. I can be proud of myself for looking up. I can be proud of myself for finding a new shore.

I turn the key in the ignition and instead of thinking of another beach, I think of home. I’ve found something more useful today than those pretty pieces of glass, and besides, thanks to my boyfriend of three years, those beautiful shards are easier to come by these days. In fact, he brings me handfuls daily and unabashedly hands them over. I’m not surprised by them either; their presence is a blessing that I have finally realized I deserve.
I’ve been in the aft pilot house for three hours now. I’ve been kneeling and rubbing and wiping and cleaning while a small, black space heater throws warm air at my face. I’m not getting paid for this. I don’t even know how to properly do what it is I’m doing. In fact, when I was given the Nevr-Dull, gloves, a green bottle of metal polisher, a package of steel wool, and a bag of old socks, the object to which I was directed was something unrecognizable to my eyes. And, after hours of working at this three foot metal shaft, its function, origin, or even destination still remain unclear.

March 3—In my Bag

- Billy Joel CDs (generously compiled by my good friend Blanthony, legendary music pirater)
- MP3 player I found in the snow
- Small black flashlight
- A brochure for the *S.S. City of Milwaukee*:

  This national landmark represents the remarkable 100-year history of Great Lakes railroad car ferries. The sturdy, 360-foot long ship carried an entire freight train and 300 passengers across Lake Michigan year round through ice and storm in period splendor. Come aboard, step back in time, and experience the legacy of “rails across the water.”

- Old, faded, too-big men’s Levi flannel shirt with the cool snap buttons
- Blue hooded sweatshirt from old airport job
Three pairs of wool socks
Same amount of underwear—not wool, however
Least favorite bra
Two old thermal underwear shirts
Journal, which so far reads:

Most would say two and a half days are nothing substantial. But then again, most who find themselves in this situation usually spend more than three hours with their father every three months. Not me. Not my sisters. In fact, the last time I spent more than the usual three hours—birthday, thanksgiving, or Christmas—with my dad was in 1996. I was eleven and my older sister, Lisa, was thirteen. We went camping. We ate quietly around fires, packing up and moving each day to a new campground.

In case you didn’t do the math—because I rarely do—that was ten years ago. A decade has passed since I’ve spent any period of time with my father that was longer than a movie and dinner. Who can say the reason for this? After my parents’ divorce, my sister and I moved in with our mother, and maintaining a connection with him was harder than expected. That doesn’t mean I never tried, or cared. Only, after a certain amount of time passed, both the gap in the relationship and the indifference with that gap continued on a steady increase. Plus, this situation involves a bashful girl and a father that probably wants to spend time with his three daughters, but feels they want the opposite. Or, maybe, the situation is as it appears, and he really just doesn’t care.

Either way, I do not know this man. All I really know is that he spends every weekend of his life driving three hours to Manistee to work, unpaid, on a historical car ferry, the S.S. City of Milwaukee. I know he spends holidays there. I know he sleeps, eats, and lives on that out-of-service boat, and that he has dedicated more time to its restoration than he has to me. What I do not know is the reason for this dedication, this fascination, this lasting love he feels for this beached and broken vessel.

Hat (the ugly one)
Scarf—weather forecasts predict an average temperature of 12 degrees this weekend
Gloves (mismatched)
Emergency Milky Way
• Black GE voice recorder, made in Malaysia, model number 3-5379A, and four tapes
• Contacts case
• Small bottle of Renu
• Toothbrush—I’ll leave the toothpaste up to Dad
• Three pens: two medium-point black Pentel R.S.V.P’s, and one Pilot Varsity Fountain Pen—blue, the black being stolen by my other friend, Carwash, currently on the lam after several instances of pen theft

March 3—Preparation

My older sister Lisa visited before my weekend departure, and when my weekend plans were revealed, she offered a combined expression of pity and confusion.

“Why?” she asked, petting our bulldog, Bear.

“To see the boat.”

“The boat?”

“Yeah, the S.S. City of Milwaukee, that boat he’s been volunteering on.”

“Why?”

“Because I was talking to him online the other day and he said I should come out and see it sometime.”

“Well, have fun. You know he’s going to be talking about the boat the whole time, don’t you?”

“Do you need any money?” Mom asked.
“No, thanks.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s fine, I don’t need to bring any money.”

“Are you lying? Do you want some money?”

“Mom,” Lisa interrupted, “she doesn’t need money, and if she does, let Dad pay for it.”

After further explaining—or justifying—the weekend for Lisa (driving there, working, sleeping, eating, and coming home), I was treated to even more of her cynical examinations. “So you’re going to eat on the way up there?”

“Yeah, he said something about stopping at Mancino’s in Manistee.”

“Oh God, what’s he going to get his whole large, one-topping for 5.99 deal?”

“What are you talking about? I don’t know. Maybe we’ll get a grinder or something.”

Moments later, I found myself climbing into his red Explorer. I dropped my purse on the floor and prepared for an awkward hello. Dad’s previously gray hair and beard, which he later explained had been dyed gray to impress his online girlfriend, was now back to its usual shade of white.
“Are you ready?” he asked, putting the car into reverse. Pulling out of the driveway, Dad turned the radio on and lit a cigarette.

“Well, I think before anything happens, I’m going to stop at the Mobil and get a jug of water to suck on,” he said in his naturally startling voice. Perhaps it’s because he can’t hear that well, or maybe it’s his factory job that requires him to speak over constant noise, but it’s definitely true that no one ever misses anything Dad says. In an attempt at humor, he yelled with a bottomless laugh in his voice, “You want water, you want pop, what, what, what?”

“Tea’s good,” I said to stop the thunderous interrogation. Just then the denim-clad man behind the wheel turned up the radio. I shook my head and strenuously abstained from laughing as the car filled with the lyrics “There’s nowhere to run to, baby, nowhere to hide.”

* * *

“When we had the occasional passengers, it was nice to get that extra twenty-five cents a car driving them onto the boat, but we liked our privacy. We lived like pirates, walked around the boat half dressed, and drinking beer on the deck.”

* * *
At first glance, the difficulty of this project was evident. Spoiled after years of neglect, this once-beautiful, gleaming brass object was now a tainted, black, and unidentifiable artifact of a nearly forgotten past. But now, after just three hours of committed labor, a significant percentage of brass is beginning to peek through the damage.

March 3—Nocturnal Navigation

“Traveling Man” comes on the radio just as we are reaching Manistee, which a wooden sign informs me is the Victorian Port City. I’m not sure what road we are on anymore. I lost track after Grand Haven’s congested US-31 streets, where the buildings stalk the roadside. We are somewhere beyond the draw bridge, somewhere past Muskegon, where Dad had kicked off the cruise control and cursed at the green caravan stopping in front of him. We are past the first sight of snow-covered fields, where yellow brush jabs through the powdery precipitation, and past the point where I watched as the fields shrunk into a dark hallway of trees lining the roadside, and then transformed into a set of high hills. We’re somewhere at the end of the road. We’re somewhere after the extinction and then rebirth of US-31.

After shooting down Billy Joel, Dad is playing Stan Rogers, who sounds like a drunken pirate in a bar, or maybe even some crazy Scottish man singing
Robert Burns’ “Green Grow the Rashes.” Over these obnoxious tavern tunes, Dad makes efforts at entertainment. When he isn’t recounting stories of his working days on the car ferries, he is shouting things at other drivers like “now just because that guy is getting a ticket doesn’t mean you can’t drive the speed limit,” and “who’s this driving their sports car like it’s a Model A?” We’ve discussed things like which flavor Altoids are his favorite. He’s had the mint, cherry, apple, tangerine, and it turns out he’s seriously considering trying the grape. He also comments that the saved tins work well for holding his guitar picks. And although I’m still bitter about Billy Joel, and I’m thinking this is the perfect music to which one could lose their mind, I add that wintergreen is my favorite.

Finally, we roll into a darkened Manistee, and the subject of dinner is mentioned. “Well,” he says driving up to the large boat in Lake Manistee, “I usually get a large, one-topping for 5.99.”

* * *

“One winter night, the top of the water was frozen. There was a really bright moon, you could see the waves going out, and the water sparkling....I was stoned off my ass.”
The polishing project was initially rather uncomfortable. It forced the use of muscles not normally required by my body. I was unsure of how to behave properly. Should I be pressing? Exerting the most strenuous pressure? Or should I instead gently massage the problem areas, in a slow and comfortable manner, until nature itself works out the scars of abandonment?

Now that I have been working at this for some time, the manner in which I conduct this transformation has become a natural act, a reflex. This polishing is now an effortless undertaking. No discomfort. No aches. Only the gentle reassurance of discernible progress.

March 4—Lunch

After my first three hours of brass polishing, Dad came in his second all-denim outfit to fetch me. With the exception of his brown boots, he wore blue-jeans, a blue-jean shirt, and a blue-jean jacket. It was the same outfit as yesterday’s, only today’s denim was a shade darker. I wondered if tomorrow he would have to break out the stone washed denim or switch things up with some black jeans.
We left immediately in the ear-annihilating Stan-Rogers-mobile for what Dad referred to as “a quick snack.”

While I picked at a disgustingly meaty bowl of Big Boy chili, Dad continued his car-ferry-related conversations:

“We had these things so if the switch was broken you could still tie the ship up. We had a bunch of great six-foot-long handles in the locker, and you’d put the handles in the hole with about three guys to each handle. Fortunately we never had to do one. There was one off of the 21 that I polished. I went out one day and that thing was painted black, and the black paint had peeled off most of it. So I took the rest of the black paint off and got the brass polish and polished it up so it looked just like that thing you were working on today. I was just doing this for the fun of it, because I thought it would look nice. I recall the mate being up in the pilot house watching me and probably wondering what the hell I was doing working out there when no one told me to. But I thought there were few things pretty on the boat, and I thought with that brass all polished up it would be.”

After lunch, Dad gave a tour of what he refers to as his high-maintenance girlfriend.
“It’s pretty unsettling at first. They throw that rope ladder over the side and tell you to climb down to get off. You’ve got to jump over from the ladder onto the pier. It’s especially troubling when the railing is icy.

The first time I did that, the guy threw that ladder down the side and said okay climb down, and I said yeah right. He says no, uh, that’s what we’ve got to do. And the other three guys went down the ladder and I says oh I guess it’s no joke.”

* * *

At first I feared the amount of time this project would require, and was even more afraid that perhaps I’d spend my time working only to discover the piece couldn’t be restored to its original condition. Still, I continued, dabbing this miracle solvent onto the steel wool. At first working in small circles yielded no result. Then, after further efforts, the brass became blacker, bringing up years of tarnish. Once this occurred, a simple swipe of a clean sock would reveal a shining gleam of youth. Even the darkest of stains would disappear, leaving only a flawless shine from my faded, once-fancied friend.
Entering the back of the City of Milwaukee was like entering a warehouse. The walls were tall sheets of steel, chipping off pale white paint. Rows of rusted train car rails lined the floor with a couple of cars still in position.

Up a pair of steep yellow grated stairs was the second level of the boat—the level at which passengers would board. On the outside deck, I walked through snow trying to picture the boat in use, bustling with passengers and deck crew before one of its cross-lake trips. Through a door about midship, I found unlit hallways with wooden paneling so narrow I could touch an extended elbow to each wall. Through screen doors, I saw small rooms with bunked beds and an occasional desk or sink.

Farther down, about six rooms, a heavy door on my right led to a large fridge. Past this was the kitchen and the staff eating room with a steel table surrounded by round stools. Across the hall, a room housing a wooden table and chairs was reserved for the mates and other higher-up workers. In the kitchen, a large steel stove and a connecting washroom all bore bolts, clasps, and levers to prevent dishes from falling.

Through a wider hallway were the passenger rooms, separate men and women’s smoking rooms, and the observation deck. The view of a semi-frozen
Lake Manistee provided the only light that escaped through the observation deck windows and down the halls.

Back down the yellow stairs and down another set was even more boat—specifically, a room with two metal picnic tables in the middle of two sides lined with six doors each.

“This is where the crew stayed,” Dad said, reaching the bottom of the stairs. “The unfortunate ordinary seamen—car handlers, deck handlers.” Along the other two walls were four sinks and mirrors, and opposite them a four-foot red door.

“Is this where you would stay?” I asked.

“Well, originally, yes. But in the *Pere Marquette*, before I even got there in 1953, they made the deck longer and added rooms up there for the deck department. About twenty guys lived in this area.”

Through the four-foot door and into the dark was the boiler room and engine room. My flashlight revealed grated walkways over a collection of mechanical equipment all under a ceiling of large pipes. Dad informed me three guys manned the engine room, and two or three worked the boiler room.

“When the boat was going,” Dad said, pointing to a long, thin shaft running down the middle of the floor, “you had to be careful not to step on that, because it turns ninety revolutions a minute.”
To the right was a large board of fuses, now blocked off with a clean wooden fence.

“You see, when the boat really went, there wasn’t a fence here. If the guy fell towards all the switches, he had to grab this to keep from getting electrocuted,” Dad said, slapping a small yellow handle.

Directly in front, I discovered more gears and shafts, grease-covered and dripping a sticky black substance down their sides. On one of these giant contraptions hung a picture of three men in action. Though the room was presently quiet and dust-filled, I imagined the noisy excitement that must have occupied this room when the picture was taken. The image all but pulsated with sounds of rods, cylinders, valves, throttles, steam turbine generators, the boom of shifting eccentrics, and the informative ding of the telegraph, back when pistons still revolved ninety times a minute—back when life was still lived here.

* * *

“There’s the post I hit with my motorcycle back in ’71. See, it’s crooked. Someone dared me to peel out, so I did and lost control and bounced off the post.”
“Once we were out on the lake, and first mate Ballinger was working and I said
‘Mr. Ballinger, is it alright if I try some wheeling?’ The second wheelman, says
‘You want to go down and get some coffee, Ballinger?’ ‘Alright, Brandon,’ he
says, ‘just keep it in the lake.’”

March 4—Dinner

After unpacking my things in the second mate’s room, I walked down the dim
hallway to Dad’s usual quarters. His frequent presence on the boat was evident
as he had taken time to decorate his small room. On the shelf above his bed was
a line of framed photographs, all boasting old car ferrys—the 21, the 22, the
Viking, the Pere Marquette, the Milwaukee that sank and the one that replaced it.
Next to these pictures was a bottle of water and an old copy of Finnegan’s Wake.

We were leaving his room for dinner when the hallways suddenly went
dark.

“What the hell was that?” Dad asked me as if I caused the blackout. “Oh,
shit,” he mumbled while I waited for an explanation.
“Shit.” He stood staring into his room.

“Shit.” No movement, no explanation.

“Shit.” Am I supposed to say something here?

“Shit, well, we blew a fuse.”

Soon Dad was climbing back down to the engine room, which involved the company of his 21-year-old daughter, who was too afraid to stay on the darkened upper deck of the crew’s quarters. The silence between the two may have been uncomfortable, but the dark halls of that quiet vessel would have been absolutely unnerving. After the fuse was replaced, we set off for dinner.

* * *

“Everybody had their names. There was the trick-or-treater. His greeting when he came up to you would be “trick-or-treat.” Then there was Lurch, Super Sailor, Dynamite Dan, Poncho, Sap, Tee-hee...that was his name...he was always laughing, tee-heeheeheehehe.

“For the longest time I was the almost winner. There was this show called the Bozo Show; there were never any losers. There were winners and almost winners. So when Mr. Ballinger used to give me a hard time he’d say I was an
almost winner. And then, after I bounced my motorcycle off the yellow post there, then I was called Mr. Ricochet, because there was a cartoon back then called Ricochet Rabbit. Then when I first started, I was merely the kid because I was the youngest guy on the ship. ‘Yeah, let’s take the kid up town and get him drunk.

“Well you know, for a long time the first mate, Ballinger, thought my first name was goddamn you. ‘Goddamn you, Brandon!’ Of course when he really wanted to be sarcastic he’d call me Commander Brandon. ‘Commander Brandon, do you believe you could do this?

“There was an Indian on the boat. We called him Wounded Knee, after the Wounded Knee Massacre. We were never really politically correct on the boat. We had our token black guy. In fact, I think there was only one black guy in the entire fleet. He didn’t get a nickname. He just had to put up with our harassment. I remember there was on the news that there were riots going on somewhere, so Milwaukee Eddie was telling him ‘Hey Howards,’ he says, ‘when you’re off on your eight days you know, if you have any riots see if you can get me one of them colored TVs, I don’t have one, I really need one.
“He bought himself a Harley Davidson. Anyway he left it somewhere, and had
chained it to a telephone pole with a big chain, when he came back, someone had
chain sawed the telephone pole. The pole was hanging on the wires, and the
Harley Davidson was gone.”

March 5—Superannuated

After a night of four blown fuses, no available toilets, and the unsettling clamors
of an empty steamship, Dad and I set off for home. Before the trip was complete,
Dad was determined to show me “a seaman’s guide to all that is important in
Ludington”—this being whatever vessels sat in the nearby waters of Lake
Michigan. He pointed out the Spartan, and the only presently running
steamship, the Badger. However, he would not be satisfied with his tour until he
located the ship on which he spent most of his twenties and had, at one point,
planned to spend his life, the Pere Marquette.

We drove through an opened fence that demanded authorized personnel
only and between piles of snow-covered dirt until Dad found it. Only it wasn’t
what I had expected. The large boat was now a long, empty, roofless
monstrosity packed with mechanical equipment.
“I remember when I came down here once a long while back,” Dad said, “and this guy says, ‘Hey, Pat did you take a look at the Pere Marquette?’ And I walked over and this is what they had done to her. Cut her up. Well, I almost cried. ‘Oh what did they do? What did they do?’ I said. She was the prettiest boat of them all and they chopped her up and made her into a barge. I was nearly in tears.”

Dad got out of the car to take a few pictures. After this, we headed home to the sound of Stan Rogers.

So here’s to useless superannuation
And us old relics of the days of steam.
In the morning, Lord, I would prefer
When men with torches come for her,
Let angels come for me.

* * *

“It’s about a man who was sent to spend the night with his ship in the graveyard,” Dad explained over his favorite Stan Rogers song. In the morning when they come to destroy the boat, they find him dead. He drank himself to death.”
Before Dad’s loud voice went quiet to listen to song, he said that for those working on the steamships, this also meant living on them. The song depicted a strong connection that came after years of devotion, a connection that Dad said wasn’t unusual in real life, and that retirement was really a separation of one’s life and home.

I listened to the melancholy tune and wondered why Dad, the young man who had held ambitions to work the wheel himself someday, hadn’t waited for “useless superannuation” to remove him from the ship, or why he hadn’t spent his life doing what he loved. At least, I did until I remembered the girl in the front seat next to him, surprisingly happy to find another Stan Rogers CD in the counsel.

* * * *

Nearing the end of the project, I finally realized what it was I had been polishing. This awareness came while completing the long cylindrical device. The flat top surface
included a moveable arrow. As I polished, words began to appear on this now-radiant surface, and then I knew. This was a wheel stand, the very object which directed the Milwaukee for its entire lake-crossing life.

Sore and exhausted from over six hours of polishing this piece, I stood up and stretched. Just as this happened Dad entered the pilot-house to ensure I took a break. Looking over to check for progress on the artifact, he stepped back in silence.

“Wow,” he whispered. Apprehensive of my work, I examined his wistful expression.

“Well,” I said, “I figure it could use a final go around, but it’s pretty good, right?”

“Wow,” he repeated, “would you look at that.” Dad stood shaking his head.

“It’s beautiful. It’s just like new.” Moments passed as he gazed at the repaired project. With recognition of the past swimming in his sea-green eyes, Dad broke the silence to say it looked perfect.

Now it spends its life looking out over Lake Manistee from the pilot house. Sometimes weeks pass without any recognition, and at other times we return to find it tarnished from time or mistreatment. But, I take comfort in knowing it is always only a few hours
of work away from shining with its original and imperishable light, and that when Dad
takes a look around, he’ll hopefully consider it one of few things pretty on that old boat.
When the Mesabi Miner first appeared on Lake Superior’s horizon, I thought the show would go quickly, but I soon realized the movement of the thousand-foot freighter was slight, almost imperceptible. My boyfriend and I stood on the flat, soggy part of the beach waiting, and Dad just stared quietly at the boat. On his first trip to Marquette, he had driven the seven hours to visit, and the first item on our itinerary was watching one of those old freighters in action. After at least thirty minutes, she slipped slowly into her place at the ore dock, and as she neared, Dad’s unbreakable gaze grew more vacant. Even though the Mesabi was an unfamiliar boat to him, it was clear he was replaying the docking process in his mind, remembering the excitement of standing on deck as the boat pulled in, shooting down the side over a rope ladder, and landing to bring her taut to shore. Regret and nostalgia seemed to be pulling him apart one memory at a time.

It is a year later from Dad’s last visit to Marquette, and we’ve been on the road for at least twenty minutes. Even though the plan was to leave at 10:00 a.m., maybe 10:30, Dad called at 9:40 to say he was waiting in the parking lot. I wrapped my toast in a paper towel, poured my chocolate Malt-o-Meal in a small plastic container, and shoved a spoon in my pocket. I didn’t even have time for my usual seconds-before-leaving pee.
When I met him in the parking lot, I was glad to have my hands full, because I wasn’t ready to try another hug. The last time I had seen him, I had gone in for a goodbye hug, but instead of hugging back he kept his arms at his side. Because my arms were already in the air, I tried to act as if wrapping them around his shoulders was completely natural. This morning that wasn’t an issue, because I verbally greeted him as I unloaded my bags into the back of the truck.

Now in the front seat of the Black F-150 that’s pulling his 20-foot Coachmen, I pull out a pen and notebook and ask myself what I’ve been wondering all week: What am I doing? Why am I taking a week-long road trip with a man I haven’t spent more than three days with in the last fifteen years? Three days ago, when we talked on the phone, our conversation ended in long, awkward silences until we gave up and said goodbye.

But there are steamships, pig boats, and tugs to tour, and if the largest steam engine is in Ironwood like Dad thinks, there is that to see as well. Also, there is the hope of an end to the awkwardness, an end to laughing politely at everything he says, an end to analyzing everything before I say it.

A few weeks before departure, Dad called to finalize some plans for this trip. He would be in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula on August eighth or ninth, and we would make various maritime-related stops in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.
After we finished planning, Dad admitted that he wasn’t the easiest person to interact with. “Sailors shouldn’t be allowed to mix with the rest of society,” he said, laughing that air-sucking laugh of his, almost like he’s choking. From 1970 to 1973, Dad sailed as a deckhand on the car ferry, the S.S. City of Milwaukee, scrubbing, scraping, and painting the deck, tying up the boat, parking the passengers’ cars, and securing the train cars. But that came to an end when he married my mother and had three daughters.

He was telling me how he had “abandoned ship,” left the Milwaukee, the steamship he’s been volunteering on for the last eight years. Until he quit, he had spent every weekend on this retired car ferry in Manistee, Michigan, driving the hour and a half after his work week at a tool and die manufacturer to meet her. Once there, he would spend the rest of his weekend painting handrails and smokestacks, repairing windows and engines, and spending his money on whatever renovation projects were necessary. Just this summer he donated twenty-five hundred dollars so the City of Milwaukee Historical Society could purchase a naval tugboat called the USS Acacia.

Since he offered my older sister only five hundred dollars for her May wedding, this donation immediately created some turbulence among my mother and two sisters. A couple of days after he told me about the purchase, my mother called, waiting to reveal her purpose until the end of the conversation. Like it
always does, Mom’s prying-for-information mode kicked in with a question followed by words that tried to make her sound indifferent: “So I hear your dad bought a boat or something? How much did he pay for that boat?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Mom, twenty-five hundred or something.” Part of me really couldn’t remember the exact amount, but another part of me was trying to forget so I wouldn’t have to tell her.

“Are you sure you don’t mean twenty-five thousand?”

“Mom, I really can’t remember.”

“Well, boats cost a lot of money, especially something that size, so it had to be at least that.”

As the conversation continued, she asked at least two more times how much it cost and I continued to plead ignorance. I’m still not sure if I was trying to protect Dad, calm Mom down, or if I really couldn’t remember, but it was not the first game of twenty questions I’d played with her, so I knew the less information she got about him the better off everyone would be.

It wasn’t just Mom. Lisa called too, and it wasn’t only the seemingly stingy contribution to the wedding that had her dialing my number. She also called to tell me about the special coat Dad planned on wearing to her big day.

“Well, what exactly did he say?” I asked, laughing at the amplified hysteria in her voice.
“I said, ‘The guys are wearing black tuxedos’, and he said, ‘Oh I’ve got everything under control.’” She continued the story, dropping her voice dramatically with her imitation of Dad. “He said, ‘Don’t worry about me, I’ll look sharp.’ He’s not walking me down the aisle in some Desperado coat.”

Immediately, I thought of the long black jacket Dad wore in a picture he gave me the previous fall. In the computer print-out, which he slipped into a protective plastic pocket, he wore a shin-length black coat with pockets down both sides of the front and an extra layer of fabric over the shoulders. Underneath, he was sporting all denim on his double-x body, and had topped off his white hair with a faded blue cowboy hat. My favorite part was that as he held one pistol pointed at the camera and the barrel of a custom-made Shiloh Sharps that was resting on the ground, he’d gone to the trouble of walking into the woods so he could have a backdrop of pines.

It’s difficult to get angry with a man who has so clearly been born in the wrong era, so I asked Lisa if she couldn’t ask him to wear a suit jacket. She dragged out a long no and threw out a phrase I was used to hearing from my mom.

“He always has to be the center of attention,” she said before saying she had to get to work. I told her I hoped it worked out, because it would be nice if it did, even if it was just for a day.
After finishing our plans for the trip, Dad told me he couldn’t put up with the lack of intelligence the members of the historical society had to offer and that he finally told them unless they started giving his ideas more respect, he would take his time and money elsewhere. When they refused, he packed up his tools—except for those that were missing because they had been lost or stolen by other volunteers—and drove home.

“Apparently, you’re not supposed to get angry when your tools go missing,” he said, laughing, making it impossible to tell if he was upset or not. But then he paused for a moment. “This is a big change, and I don’t like change.” He said instead of devoting his time and money to a boat, he’s going to build a retirement home in the area he grew up. Because it would have cost forty thousand to insure it, the *Acacia* never made it to Manistee to join the *City of Milwaukee*, and Dad wouldn’t be getting the twenty-five hundred back.

I told him I was sorry. He said thanks for answering the phone, and I knew he was referencing Lisa, whom he hadn’t heard from since her wedding three months ago even though he blended in with an unnoticeable black jacket. Trying to induce some harmony, I explained that I hardly get her on the phone either. He hung up with a quiet “Goodbye, Cindy.”
So today we head to Duluth, driving west on 41. Currently we are passing by a town called Diorite, which sounds like a weight-loss pill. We are surrounded by a large group of trees that tower over both sides of the road when Dad sees a flash of construction orange over the next hill. Dancing in my rearview mirror, the Coachman camper bounces on potholes behind the truck. As Dad slows to forty, he yells at the warning sign on the right in his usual startlingly loud, mock-angry voice. “No shoulder. There’s no fucking anything.”

Because I still haven’t seen one during my two years in the Upper Peninsula, I take the opportunity to scan the rocky roadside and approaching hills for moose. Next to a small bridge that stretches over a creek, I look in a sand pit of a construction site filled with frozen bulldozers, hoping to see an outline, antlers, a shadow, but all I get are fallen tree trunks.

Even though we’ve only been on the road for an hour or so, I’m trying not to think about the need to pee. I learned from early family vacations, before my parents separated almost twenty years ago, that Dad takes little pity on a weak bladder. In those days, when the three of us girls endured road trips from the back of a covered truck bed, we begged our parents to stop at a rest area through a glass window, tapping, miming, and yelling to communicate our urgent needs to the world up front. Just as I fall deeper into the memory of that red Ford with a bench seat placed in the back, Dad starts to slow the truck.
“All right, where’s the damn rest area?” he asks. “My coffee’s getting restless.” Thank goodness for old age.

As Dad parks the truck on the side of the road, he remembers our road-trip challenges too and reminds me of the signs we would hold up to the truck window for my mom to read.

“Lisa has to pee real bad,” he says. “Well, what ever happened to Lisa has to pee, and Lisa has to pee bad? How did we skip right to real bad?”

I assume he’s going to relieve himself in the trees next to us until I realize we are pulling a bathroom behind us. Though he might have opted for shelter today, I remember plenty of trips when a wooded side of a road was enough for him.

An hour later, we stop for lunch at a scenic turnout, which isn’t all that scenic thanks to the trees blocking the view. Dad’s menu consists of Koegel’s summer sausage, Colby cheese slices, and Ritz crackers. For dessert we split half a cinnamon roll, and then get back on the road.

It is 2:10 p.m. and we’re driving through Ashland, Wisconsin when Dad pulls a short brass pipe out of a Whitman’s sampler box and holds his lighter up to the end. Between drags he sings, “One ringy dingy; two ringy dingy.” This is the first time I’ve seen him do this, but I immediately think back to the mysterious smell that used to drift out of his office.
“I can’t smoke much anymore,” he explains, putting the pipe back into its tin, which is slightly larger than an Altoid’s container. “Your Aunt Jeanie gave this to me, enough for a couple of joints, probably thinking it would last a few days, but I’ve had this for a few weeks.”

I give my typical I-don’t-really-know-what-to-say response: “Hah.”

“I went over to see Todd the other day.”

“You mean Todd as in Todd and Sherry, our old neighbors?”

“Yeah. He pulled out some wicked stuff. I was going to Chicago the next day. It wasn’t a very big one, but it was all I could do to get the windshield wiper fluid into the truck when I got home.”

We finally arrive at our campsite in Cloquet, Minnesota, and Dad is standing with the truck door open looking for his registration. The warning for the ajar door is dinging loudly, and I see his eye twitch.

“Goddamn bells,” he shouts in their direction. He pulls the keys out of the ignition and shakes them for half a second in his hand before launching them onto the dashboard.

“God. Damn. Bells!” It is hard to tell because he yells a lot when he’s trying to be funny, but it appears as if he is truly angry at the noise. “Can’t a person have a moment’s silence?”
An hour later, the site is set up, and I’m touring the inside of the camper. Dad has hung a curtain for me in front of the camper’s one secluded sleeping space. He will sleep on the table that converts into a bed. Throughout the camper, he’s hung round brass clocks, replicas of the ones on his ship. Hanging above the small refrigerator, is a picture of Dad when he used to work on the boats. It looks just like a picture he took on the *Milwaukee*, leaning over a black railing with the pilot house behind him. Although he’s in the same position in this picture, his hair is brown, he’s thinner, and most of the railings are white. “That white is solid ice,” Dad told me when I asked why only part of the railing was black. They had taken the picture that day to show how cold it could become.

After learning my way around the camper, I begin unpacking inside. Going through my bag of clothes, I realize that I have forgotten my flip-flops. I picture showering with my bare feet on the floor of the public restroom and panic. I look at the clean sheets I just stretched over Dad’s mattress cover and know I can’t soil their cleanliness with bathroom-floor germs on the first day of the trip. And I can’t skip a shower because when I flushed the camper toilet earlier, the surge of power from the electricity caused it to spray water all over my jeans, which have now been quarantined in their private dirty-clothes bag.
I’m also avoiding using my hands because of an earlier bathroom incident. I had gone to use the camper toilet after Dad had repeatedly explained that, in order to avoid drainage problems, all toilet paper should be placed in the plastic bag next to the toilet. The entire time I was in there I chanted to myself “don’t put paper in the toilet, don’t put paper in the toilet.” As I stood up, I somehow became distracted from my motto and watched as the ball of paper left my hand and began dissolving in the yellow water. *Do something!*

I couldn’t go out and retrieve something to remove the paper with because Dad would know I had disregarded his repeated reminders. In a state of panic, I grabbed more toilet paper and wrapped a portion as large as a baseball glove around my hand. As I reached into the toilet, hoping somehow the mass of paper would reject the water, I realized how quickly it dissolves. After twenty minutes of washing my hands, two generous applications of Purell, one use of an antibacterial WetOne, and then another trip to the sink for continued washing, I still feel contaminated.

As we sit outside the camper in lawn chairs, I tell Dad I forgot my flip-flops. I’m not expecting much sympathy, but I’m also not expecting the response he gives me. He looks down at the black canvas flip-flops on his feet and thinks for a moment.
“I’ve been wearing my Baywatch flip-flops, but they’ve never gotten me any closer to Pamela Anderson.”

“Well, there’s always hope,” I say, eager to end the conversation there.

Dad stares blankly for a few seconds as he often does after saying something, and I know more is coming. “But I did see her on the DVD Playboy sent me: Naked Celebrities.”

“Ah,” I say, nodding my head. I try to go back to my book, Lake Effect, but just as I begin reading about another man’s tales of working on the Great Lakes, Dad’s silent thought comes to another end.

“Yeah, Playboy,” Dad says before taking a drag of his cigarette. “They tried nagging me for a while to get a subscription. Well, finally they sent me something for twelve dollars for a year.”

More head nodding.

“That’s a dollar an issue—they are six to eight dollars each. So I read Playboy for a year. And these girls...they look like classy, worldly women, but then you see them on TV and they aren’t nothing but a bunch of bubbleheads. At least you don’t have to hear their voices in the magazine.”

Listening to him talk about Playboy is only slightly more awkward than yesterday’s conversation about his prostate when he informed me that he had to pee every hour, but until it got worse he wouldn’t take any medication. He
ended the conversation by explaining, “When the doctor did the whole rubber glove thing, he seemed impressed.” I’m not sure what he meant by that.

I couldn’t stand the idea of leaving whatever was in the toilet water on my legs, so I wore my new canvas shoes in the shower last night. When Dad wakes me up at 6:30 the next morning, I step outside to see if my shoes have dried. They have not.

Dad makes bacon, eggs, and coffee, which all immediately anger my sensitive stomach. Once we dress, we make the twenty-minute drive into Duluth. Walking along the water, and under the lowering lift bridge, which remains whole and raises and drops to allow for boat traffic, we pass the Maritime Museum and a retired tugboat sitting in the lawn.

“That’s the perfect size to live on,” Dad says as he circles the tug a few times. We continue down the boat-cluttered dock to find the *S.S. William A. Irvin*, a 610-foot freighter previously owned by U.S. Steel that’s been converted into a museum. Most of it, except for some of the cargo space, which has been remodeled into a gift shop, still appears as it did when it was a functioning ship.

Walking up to the *Irvin*, I feel dwarfed by its rusty-red, thirty-two-foot hull. The tour begins on the deck of the same color, which has eighteen rectangular holes. These openings are spaced equally across the deck and are
covered with hatches that, when opened, lead into the ship’s three cargo holds. Before the ship was retired in 1970, because it was outsized by the new thousand-foot freighters like the Mesabi, it carried Taconite, an iron ore, from places like Duluth and Two Harbors to cities at the southern end of the Great Lakes.

As we pass over the deck on the way to the engine room below, Dad comments on the thickness of the steel plates along the deck in comparison to those of the Milwaukee. They are about an inch thicker, creating a steep edge where they overlap. I have already tripped on two, so I can’t imagine what it was like trying to avoid stumbling over these in times of inclement weather.

Nearing the ladder that takes us down to the engine room, I ask if he ever worked on a boat like this.

“No,” he says. “Just car ferries. I was thinking about going to work on one like this but it would have cost five hundred dollars to get a license.”

Down below, the engine room looks immaculate. Even the green grated flooring that circles the steam turbine engine shines as if someone has just wiped it down by hand. Polished brass railings line the walkway, and even the brass sign indicating the meaning of the bells and whistles is without any fingerprints or tarnish.
“This isn’t much cleaner than mine.” Dad scans the area and nods. “Of course I can’t say that now,” he says, reminded of the historical society members he considers lazy and stupid, “because soon it will all be full of garbage.”

We follow the guide up a steep set of grated stairs and come to a narrow hallway made of mint steel walls that lead to officer’s quarters of the same color. We aren’t allowed to see the deckhands’ quarters below because they haven’t been restored yet, but I imagine they are much like the ones my father spent his three years in, rows of bunk beds crammed into as little space as possible.

As the tour continues, the _Irvin_ looks more and more like Dad’s carferry with an officers’ dining room, a smaller crew dining room, and a pantry and galley that sit between them. We see steel shelved walls with slotted coverings, a stove with burners surrounded by strips of metal, and pots and pans with tall handles designed to catch on the grid, all details that prevent the loss and spill of food in foul weather.

Before beginning this trip, I looked into riding on one of the ore freighters that frequently slips into Marquette, but it turns out that unless you work on one it’s almost impossible to ride aboard anymore. But I’m thinking I’m getting the overall deckhand experience anyway, sharing a small camper that smells of smoke, urine, and other man-made odors.
After ending the tour in the cargo holds, giant dark rooms that feel like warehouses, I follow Dad as he wanders down the streets. We pass a bar and Dad looks into the windows. Without saying anything to me, he turns and walks inside. I’ve been hungry for the last hour, so this is a relief. As we enter the restaurant, the bartender comes over and asks if we would like to have lunch.

“No,” Dad says, looking around. He waits silently just long enough to make it uncomfortable. “Just a drink.”

When we sit down at the bar, I wait for Dad to order so I know what we’re drinking. He asks what non-alcoholic beers they have, and I glance quickly over the thirty beers on tap. I order an India Pale Ale because the tap is just a silver bar that says Surly on it. After debating whether or not I’ll get food even if Dad’s not interested, I order some cheese garlic bread and share it with him.

After lunch, we walk around the maritime museum and then take a drive up the lakeshore to Two Harbors. There we tour a tugboat named Edna G. that sits next to a rusting ore dock. From the outside, Edna is an adorable 110-foot tugboat with a red hull and goldenrod cabins. The tour is quick since there is a lot less ground to cover, but the captain’s quarters is a large wooden room with brown leather bench couching lining both walls. After the tour, we get back to the campsite for our dinner of London Broil steaks, potato salad, and baked beans.
As we are about to leave the Duluth/Cloquet campsite, Dad is outside wrestling with the sewage hose, a big reason I will probably never own a camper. We are about to leave for Sturgeon Bay, and I’m afraid of what this new campsite will look like. I don’t think we’ll get this lucky again—a brand-new building with showers and bathrooms that look cleaner than a hospital. But there is always Lake Michigan if showering isn’t an option.

I’m wondering if I’ll ever grow out of this anxiety of germs and learn to be more like Dad, eating whatever looks good with whatever I can find. This morning, as we began making our pancake breakfast, I watched him pour the batter into the same mold-covered bowl he casually wiped out with a cold towel yesterday. I tried to pretend I didn’t see it or the strange red fuzz all over our silverware, but all I could do was picture that black-and-green fur swimming inside the batter.

Even as a child, I never really enjoyed sleeping at friends’ houses because I hated not knowing what was clean, what had been where. I remember one whose house was always a urine-scented clutter of clothes and toys. Under the impression that I had no choice, I continued going until one day I asked my mom if she could make up an excuse, and when she said I didn’t have to go, I knew I was never going back.
My oldest sister Angie recently told me a story about the same place. She had been called over to babysit and sat down to eat a bowl of cereal.

“I started eating,” she said, making the motion with an imaginary spoon in her hand. “And then I felt a little hair in my mouth.” With her hands up to her mouth as if she’s pulling something off her tongue, Angie continued. “I kept eating and kept finding hair, so I go to the cereal box and the whole thing is full of cat hair. One of the kids must have spilled it on the floor and scooped it back into the box.”

That’s why potlucks and buffets are also especially trying for me. Too many people, all hovering over, sneezing on, coughing around, digging through food that could have come from anywhere or been through anything. After this morning’s moldy pancakes, I have vowed to never watch Dad make breakfast again. In this case, I choose not knowing over trying to forget as I eat.

As we drive out of Duluth to Wisconsin, Dad talks about the Meteor, a whaleback freighter we are about to visit, and thoughts of The City of Milwaukee creep into the conversation. He lights another cigarette, and I slowly move my head closer to the window. A couple of months ago, when Dad went in for his yearly physical, he told me if it turned out he was healthy, he would quit smoking, but if something was wrong, there was no sense in quitting. The tests
must have gone well, because earlier today he said he was going to have to “give the patch another try” when he got home.

“Why they have a picture of a pig boat on the Milwaukee, I’ll never know,” he says. “I wanted to find a picture of a car ferry. Well, we did have a kid who was getting pretty interested in it. Said he wanted to put up some pictures.”

Dad reaches some orange traffic cones near a narrow bridge and doesn’t slow. A man in an orange vest tilts his head to the side and moves his arms up and down.

“Oh Jesus, mister,” Dad says, “I’m going 25. Give me a fucking break.” After speeding up a bit, he returns to his story. “So I said, son, if you think you can find some pictures, go for it.”

When we get to the Meteor, I can see why some people mistake it for a submarine, or as Dad says a pig boat. The hull of these boats are rounded black, and when they are full of cargo, they sink deeper in to the water. One picture on the Meteor shows a blizzardening September night when a whaleback had been so weighed down with ice and snow that its deck was at the same level as the docks.

The boats were only around for a period of ten years—another casualty of developing technology. After the tour guide finishes with their history, Dad says that when someone asked the workers on the Mackinaw, an icebreaker we’ll see
in Michigan, why they had chosen it, the mates said it was the only icebreaker you could still drive. Now retired, it too has been replaced with a computerized version.

As we leave the Meteor, we head out of Superior. I’m deep in thought, watching the passing fields of grass and considering how dull it must be to watch a computer as it does your job, when a pair of black horn-rimmed sunglasses fly by my face and out the window.

“There,” Dad says, “maybe some hobo will like them.” Apparently they were scratched.

Dad laughs and goes for another Winston Light. When he finds the box is empty, he throws it onto another empty box on the floor and pulls a full pack from the inside of his door. The design of the truck is such that no matter how many windows I roll down, there is no airflow across the cabin. The smoke lingers.

Last night, I tried to go for a run in Cloquet, maybe a few miles down the beautiful road we were staying on. My lungs were burning by the time I hit the exit for the campsite, which is only about a fourth of a mile. I felt like I was the one who had smoked the two packs of cigarettes that day. Returning to the campsite, I realized this trip was attacking my body on all fronts: exhaustion from the lack of sleep, anxiety from the surplus of germs, stomach aches from the
never-ending meals of grease, and burning lungs, headaches, and congestion from second-hand smoking.

Just as the self-pity starts to sink in, a truck passes with a pontoon boat behind it and Dad smiles.

“Before I quit drinking, a pontoon boat seemed like a hell of a way to party. Take the beer away and it just turns into a raft.”

We see another sign for elk and Dad says I’m right, that those are pretty big animals on the signs.

“I still like the one I saw in Montana when I was down there. ‘Cattle at large.’” He lets out a single laugh. “And there was too. Well, when they weren’t shooting at the range, it was a pasture. Dried manure everywhere.”

Before he spent his time volunteering on boats, Dad worked at a gun club. I remember going through the shooting range with him at the end of the day and searching for clay pigeons. I loved the flashes of orange, yellow, and white, the excitement of finding one still completely intact, the weight of those round discs in my palm, the idea that it somehow survived the incoming gunfire.

For lunch we have potato chips, potato salad, leftover brats, and more baked beans out of the same open can Dad keeps putting back into the refrigerator.
We left our site at ten, stopped for an hour-long lunch, and have arrived at Point Beach State Forest in Two Rivers, Wisconsin at 7:30. According to Dad’s math, that’s a seven-hour trip.

After finding our site has no electricity (I forgot about this before we left and assumed I’d be able to charge my dying cell phone and dead laptop when we arrived), I realize Dad had mentioned that one of our stops wouldn’t offer electricity. The only thing worse than not being able to type up my notes, now that I finally feel motivated, is the inability to talk to my boyfriend—and the knowledge that it may be two full days until I am able to do so. I call him to warn him about the situation, and we are cut off when my phone dies a few minutes later.

Dad and I make the trip into town so he can search the Dollar General for supplies: Coke, a grill brush, and generic aspirin. I wander the aisles in such a state of loathing that I find myself thinking things that only seem suitable coming out of the mouth of a ship’s boson. Earlier, for example, I thought in a series of profanities when Dad left the door open after I had terminated all the flies and mosquitoes that had found their way into the camper. Or in the car for the eleventh hour: *Yes, please, have another cigarette.*

At the Pick & Save, our second stop, when I put in a small bottle of dish soap, Dad steps back and stares. I finally worked up enough courage to put
something into the cart and he looks at it as if it is the most impractical thing I could have pulled off the shelf.

“Unless you already have some,” I say.

“No. I don’t use it.”

“Ever?”

“Not when I’m camping. Don’t need any for silverware.”

“Well, I do.” At this point, it is impossible to tell where this man’s line of cleanliness is drawn. Although he spent the first ten minutes of setting up camp making it clear that I was to take off my shoes before walking onto the outdoor rug next to the camper, the inside floor is full of dirt, leaves, and whatever else we might happen to track in. And even though it bothered him that I left my tea bottle in the truck’s cup holder for a day, he has no problem throwing his pillow directly on top of the open bag that holds our used toilet paper.

Dad finally gives up on vetoing the eighty-eight cent bottle of Ajax and continues trying to find something for dinner—salad would be nice. Dad drops a pound of burger in the cart and finishes planning.

“Well, we’ve still got potato chips and baked beans”—my mind flashes to the open can still sitting in the door of the fridge and the fly that I’m positive I saw dive in.
“We’ll finish those beans yet,” he jokes. Actually, he will, because I’ve stopped eating them on our second try. He could at least warm them up. Next, he finds the deli counter and says he has had about enough potato salad, and asks what else sounds good.

“There’s pasta salad here,” I say. After a moment of silence, Dad turns to the lady who has come to help us.

“We’ll take a pound of the potato salad there in the back.”

For the rest of the evening I wonder why he even asked what I wanted if he wasn’t going to order it. But maybe he thought I said potato salad and he was being nice enough to order it even when he was sick of it. Now I’ll never know, because if I ask what he thought I said and he did hear me, he will have to admit that he didn’t care what I wanted.

But surely he must care. Earlier when he was backing up the trailer he told me to get out and watch the tree. After a short pause, he added the word “please,” clearly not his first instinct, which is indicated by the pause. See.

Or just like the day years ago when my parents were together again after a year or two of separation, and he found out the night before that my mom was cheating on him. He, Lisa, and I were sitting on the couch after school when Mom pulled in the driveway. I remember the sound of the tires against the gravel and pretending to be intent on the show we were watching.
“It seems to me,” Dad said, turning to us, “that when your mom comes home, you usually run out to greet her.”

Maybe I misinterpreted it, but to me, that seems like trying.

Since Dad is without his TV tonight and I’m without my laptop, we are both reading by the light of the lantern on the rug that is so pristine that I’m considering sleeping on it.

“There’s no hot water,” Dad says.

And for once I just say what comes to my mind first. “Well, it’s a good thing we bought some dish soap then, isn’t it?”

Dad rewards my brave comment with a genuine smile and a nod before returning to his book, *Wild Geese Calling*. I’m just getting back into *A Sailor’s Logbook* when Dad laughs heartily. When we were still living together, Dad would often be reading silently while we watched TV and would laugh so loudly that we couldn’t hear the TV. “What?” I would ask, every time, which I admit had to be pretty annoying. He would just respond cheerfully, “Oh, just something I read.”

Tonight, after I ask the same question, he turns to me and tells me what was funny. A group of cowboys are stranded in the snow for months. One morning, a man says the coffee is awful and the man who made it pulls out a pistol and shoots a hole in the pot. I wonder what other outrageous actions Dad
has been laughing at all these years and which ones he has stolen from these
books for his own, like throwing a scratched pair of sunglasses out the window.

Driving to Manitowoc, Dad passes through Kewaunee where his car ferries used
to dock.

“There are eighteen bars here,” Dad says, stopping at a light among the
old buildings. “And one night, we went to them all, twice. And I didn’t get
carded ‘til we went to the eighteen-year-old bar. But the lady asked what was I,
about eighteen, and I said no, twenty-three. And she said, “You don’t need to lie
to me. I see them guys come off the boats and they get their drinks.””

“Well, later in the night, our second trip to the eighteen-year-old bar, I sit
down and finally a pair of chicks sits down on both sides of me and starts
talking. Unfortunately at that point, I was incapable of speech. The night ended
with me lying on the sidewalk for a good thirty minutes, people around looking
down at me. I had fallen and didn’t want to get up. I looked around. Where’s my
group? Well the snow was about a foot deep and I tried crawling back, but my
hand kept going through the snow no matter how hard I tried. Finally, by the
time I got back there, the second mate looks down at me with snow and ice all in
my beard, and says, ‘Hey. Brandon. Been up the street?’”
Dad’s stories continue like this until we reach Manitowoc. As we walk into the Wisconsin Maritime Museum, Dad asks the girl at the desk if his friend Bob is working. They met when Bob volunteered a couple years ago on the City of Milwaukee. He’s not working today, so we go straight to touring the USS COBIA, a World War II submarine that sits right outside in Lake Michigan.

Of all the boats we’ve been on, the COBIA is the most intimidating. Its pointed, dull-gray hull makes it look like a shark, and the black deck doesn’t add much color. What’s worse is the inside. When I crawl through the first hatch doorway, I have to simultaneously step up a few inches and duck a few more to move through the oval-shaped doorway. The first room we enter is crew’s quarters. Shoved here into the pointed bow are several thin cots positioned inches above, below, and between sixteen Mark 14 torpedoes. Not only was the crew forced to sleep inches away from their 20-foot explosives, but as the tour continues, I see the tight living quarters in which they endured 95-degree heat and were only able to shower once every week and a half to two weeks. This, my father says, is how they came to be known by some as pig boats. The politically correct tour guide tries to say he doesn’t know about that, but another tourist agrees. This man, who had worked on a submarine, laughs and confirms this observation, saying that whenever he returned from duty, he burned his clothes.
After we tour the submarine, we find Bob walking the halls of the museum. He’s wearing a white T-shirt with a green ring around the neck and sleeves and green and orange letters that spell “fiesta”. His faded black jeans, held up by a pair of black suspenders, are ragged and short at the ends, providing breathing room for his gray Velcro sneakers.

“How’s everything at Manistee?” he asks, crossing the hall and removing his floppy City of Milwaukee hat. His hair flops over in a gray wave. Streaks of rusty brown mix in as if his hair has been stained.

“Ah, not bad. I got aggravated, told them I was taking my tools and going home and I did. But I don’t know. I don’t know exactly what’s going on right now, but they’re giving tours. And they were working with that deal trying to get the Acacia.”

“Well, let me ask you this,” Bob says, pointing a crooked finger at him and looking into his eyes. “Can they take care of it?”

“No,” Dad says in the quietest tone I’ve ever heard from him. They continue their conversation, but neither of them seems to be listening to the other because their responses don’t match up.

“It took them two months to come up with the other twenty-five hundred,” Dad says, “and now they’re saying, ‘Well, we need forty-one thousand.’ Well, where are they going to get that?”
“What do you plan on doing with it?”

“Rent it out overnight. Give tours. And if they get it up there, it will be great.”

“Did you see the rest of the museum?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Well, come on! What are we waiting for?” Why are we standing here?”

Bob shows us the rest of the museum, reading all of the plaques aloud to us while Dad slips in information about his boat where he can.

Germaphobically speaking, I’m doing better this evening. After driving up to Sturgeon Bay, we’re back at the campsite. I have been walking around barefoot, and I am even considering skipping the shower tonight. That means I am accepting the fact that whatever came into contact with my skin throughout the day will be transferred to the sheets I have to sleep on for the rest of the trip. My need for communication devices has not subsided however. After sitting in the women’s restroom, cell phone charging on the wall for twenty minutes, I left with just enough power to call my boyfriend. I walked out to where I had talked to him briefly before my phone died and pressed speed dial number two. For that quick second I felt in control again, not isolated and uncomfortable. No service.
After dumping our gray water, Dad leaves me in the truck while he showers quickly. I start on *Woman in the Wheelhouse*, the experiences of Nancy Taylor Robson on an ocean-going tugboat. I begin this now because we are on our way out of Wisconsin today, but we are making another pass through Kewaunee and will tour the tug *Ludington*.

It’s a nice morning at the state park, cool enough for long sleeves, and the sun is shimmering on the beach grass as a breeze stirs it back and forth. The water is a bright blue, and I remember Dad saying yesterday that where it turns from deep blue to turquoise is so exact as you pass over it that it looks like a line has been drawn in the water. I’m still staring out at the divide as a young girl appears and jumps on the swing in front of me.

Soon Dad makes his way back to the truck, brown towel in hand.

“Well, it looks like someone got some free soap,” he says, referring to the bottle he left in the shower yesterday. He is still talking about it and standing with the truck door open when he pulls out his pipe, which looks like it came off a sink or something else that might require plumbing. He lights it a few times as the swinging girl walks by, waving a stick in the air.
Twenty minutes later he’s telling me a story about backhanding someone and bragging about how many days he’s spent in jail (one, seven, fifteen, and thirty).

“I decided in the end I didn’t like it,” he says. “It was half the reason I quit drinking.” Now, unprompted by the silent radio, he is enthusiastically singing “Cheeseburger in Paradise.” When he finishes the verse, he says he would really like to find another plum-colored T-shirt like the one he has on. Also, he’s mentioned more than once how excited he is that we’ll be driving by a statue of a cow he once photographed. Somewhere in Wisconsin, there is a statue of a cow standing up and flashing people. Moments later, when we pass by a group of real cows, he rolls down the window and yells, “Show us your tits!”

When we board the tug Ludington in Kewaunee, we wait as another tour finishes. The tug has an all-black hull, cream-colored walls, and red decks. The black smokestack has a thick red stripe with gray on both sides, and I see in the middle of the red stripe, a silver metal castle, the symbol of the Army Corps of Engineers.

“This is a nice deal here,” Dad says, “because the boat is purchased by the city. We have to pay the city to keep our boat there. They won’t even give us a tax break.”
Though it’s in rough shape, paint chipping and cobwebs everywhere, the *Ludington* is bigger than the *Edna*. The crew wasn’t shoved into the small, musty corners of the bow, but the white walls aren’t as nice as the oak and birch in the *Edna*’s captain’s quarters. The *Edna* has something to it that seems more romantic—the size, shape, and color. It is quaint.

As we leave, Dad takes down the manager’s number because he has decided to drive up next summer for a vacation of painting and cleaning the deck. So much for building the retirement home.

We drive to the other side of the harbor and Dad shows me where he used to tie up the car ferries. We walk alongside the seawall until we reach the opening to the lake. Just on the other side of the small opening is the tug, and then a small inlet, not much longer than the actual boat, to where boats could turn before tying up.

“*It was quite a turn,*” Dad says. Then he looks back over to the tug and motions to the other side of the narrow channel. “*And the bars were always so near, yet so far.*” In order to get to that side, the crew would have to go all the way around the inlet, a few miles out of the way. On other lucky nights, they’d find help from a local bar owner. “*If you called Iola, she’d send the car down. She’d have a beer or two for the guy with the car. Yeah, she’d have business even if she had to haul it in.*”
We continue walking along the sidewalk next to the water as Dad stares out wistfully. After a few minutes, he points to another spot along the water.

“There’s right along the seawall there where I fell in. Larry had to pull me over the side of the seawall, which is quite a ways to pull as you can see. Thank God I had longer hair then, because he grabbed me by the hair and pulled me over the seawall.”

As soon as he ends that story, Dad begins telling me about the time they made enemies with a seagull.

“They were hanging around screeching and raising hell, like we weren’t supposed to park there because they had their nests in the pilings. We were all just skipping rocks across the water and I said, ‘See if you can hit one of them seagulls.’ Hit the seagull in flight. Well, we’re getting ready to go into town. Minutes later he comes back with about thirty friends and they keep diving at our heads, screaming, screaming, all the way into town.”

When Dad is done staring out into Lake Michigan and watching his memories play out on the dock, we climb back into the truck and head for St. Ignace. I tell Dad about a story I read in Lake Effect, where the writer would put beer in a sock and hang it on a rope out his porthole to cool it. One night he tried it with a wine bottle and pulled up a sock full of broken glass.
“Oh man,” Dad laughs. “We didn’t have to work at it that hard. Somebody would just go in the galley and steal a gallon can of ice. We’d have the sink full of ice and the beers cooling in it.” This reminds Dad of their drunken wheelsman and how one night he drove the ferry into the seawall in Ludington.

“I was kneeling under the side of a box car, trying to reach the cable, and he hit the wall and the wheels came up this far off the side of the track and down again next to me,” he says, showing a foot or two between his hands. “Holy shit, I was cowering against the side of the boat. Well, I guess they straightened up, stopped allowing drunkenness on the boat. What the hell fun was that.” A few moments pass, and then he says quietly, “It was always fun playing with train cars.”

We are driving down US 2, nearing St. Ignace, and Dad says randomly, “I have no idea how fast this truck can go—the red truck could haul ass.” I don’t ask where that comment came from because I’m too busy remembering the Sunday afternoons we would drive home from St. Peter’s. One long road that passed all of the town’s farmland is covered with small spread-out hills. We would ask Dad to speed up, and he’d hit the gas, speeding faster by the barns and cows until it felt like one small rock could throw us uncontrollably into the ditch. But that didn’t bother me because I was in it for the feeling when we hit those hills—the
drop in my stomach as the truck began to rise, the pull in my throat at the top of the hill, and then the smooth, gravity-free float through the air as my pants lifted from the seat, when I couldn’t feel anything, when it felt like we might never run aground.

On the way to Whitefish Point, I return a missed call from my sister, who doesn’t pick up. I am leaving a voicemail and Dad says to tell her to call him back. I realize that even today, on his birthday, neither of my sisters has called. I wonder if it has anything to do with the email he sent us after my sister’s wedding. In what was an attempt to say something nice, he wrote that there have been times when he wished he’d never quit sailing and gotten married, but then he realized he never would have had us three. I don’t know if they are stuck on the first part of that sentence, or if they remember the past differently than I do, but there is something different between our perceptions of this man. Theirs seem to be based on the idea that he doesn’t care, but for some reason mine seems to be in a constant state of uncertainty and flux.

On our last maritime attraction, we wander the exhibit at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum. Not only does the exhibit list all of the ships that have sunk and their causes, but there are several more specific presentations on certain ships. Some caught fire, some sunk in bad weather, and others collided with an
oncoming ship. Reading each story, what I find most interesting are the objects pulled or discovered from the wreckage. Here in this room, dim and lighted with an underwater-themed light filter, I peer through glass boxes filled with derelict cargo—broken tea cups, decaying letters, rusting timepieces—and I wonder to whom each piece belonged. I wonder which objects are flotsam—items that were lost from a ship involuntarily, usually during a wreck—and which pieces are jetsam—items that were purposely thrown from ship to avoid a wreck. Then I wonder, which am I?

When Dad drops me off at my apartment, I am glad to be home. It’s a relief to know where everything has been, and what can be eaten off of and what can’t, but I’m also proud that I just went the last eight hours without applying a single drop of Purell. I ask Dad if he wants some water before he leaves, but he says he better get going. Before stepping out, though, he comes over and gives me a hug, squeezing and rocking me a little in place, not like any other hug he’s ever given. As soon as it’s over, he heads out, back to his truck, and then campsite, and then the job and life he often wishes he never had.
Last night, after dinner in Mackinac City, we drove back over the Mackinac Bridge to St. Ignace. The dim sky was hazy, but I could still see far into Lake Michigan. As a freighter came into sight, Dad practically drove us off the bridge. He stared out his window, swaying from this lane to the next, and tried to identify the freighter nearing the bridge. Another was coming to us from the mist in the other direction and Dad declared that it had a bone in its teeth, which for some reason meant it had waves coming up on either side.

For the five miles of bridge, Dad continued looking left and right at the boats and then out into the magnificent horizon, where beyond was nothing but blue water. He rolled down his window for a better view and realized it was the Mesabi Miner, making another pass through the Straits of Mackinac, but I knew what he was really seeing. By then he couldn’t bring himself to focus on the road at all, and I was glad no one was beside us because the truck was straddling the center line. Looking at him, I realized he couldn’t see anything but those ships fading slowly but definitely into the horizon, and I wanted to let him go. I wished he could just go.
Invisible Scars

Stepping up to the counter at Panera Bread, I finally reached the front of the line that stretched across the restaurant. Before I could order my usual “you pick two” with half a Frontega Chicken Panini and a cup of French Onion soup, the girl behind the register widened her eyes and stared at me across the register.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Excuse me?” I asked, trying to remember what did happen to me, what she was looking at so intently.

She pointed to my chest, about an inch below my collar-bone, and I remembered the scar. It took years, but now when I look in the mirror, I don’t even see that red, golf-ball-sized circle indented into my skin, but back when it was super-sensitive, when the doctor suggested I apply consistent amounts of sun block to the red discoloration, it was always the first thing I saw.

“What is it?” she shouted over the noise of customers and espresso machines. I wondered how much detail she wanted. Did she just want a statement about the after-effects of infection and then surgery? Or did she want it all? First the tiny hole, then a swollen, bloody pocket dripping with pus and pain? The numerous doctors’ tables? The chill of the metal on my bare legs as a group of lab coats stared at my naked six-year-old chest? Or did she just want a
lie—a burn, a scar from a gang fight, a simple birthmark? But none of those are close; it wasn’t a moment of violence or stupidity but seventeen years of miscalculation and pain. It was needles and antibiotics and accidental baseballs.

Or maybe she wanted the scientific explanation. What exactly is a cyst—a fatty piece of extra tissue beneath the skin’s surface? But people were waiting, and I was hungry, so I tried to satisfy her as quickly as possible.

“Oh, it’s just a scar,” I yelled, waving my hand. “Could I please get a ‘you pick two’, with the Frontega—”

“A scar from what?”

Of course people occasionally asked about it, but it never seemed so urgent, at least not something that would hold up a line. I wondered what would happen if I continued with the story. What the people in line behind would say. Maybe they would be interested too.

I probably would have started with the surgery to see if that would satisfy her.

Well, I would say, it ended with a pair of cold tweezers, with a doctor tugging it from beneath my skin.

“Would you like to see it?” he had said, smiling as if he were about to hand me my newborn.
It didn’t look like much, a small, fatty mound of skin, something very close to the potato gnocchi I put in my home-made soup the week before.

When that wasn’t enough, when the girl at Panera leaned farther across the counter and ask how long it had been a problem, I’d step closer to the counter and begin.

I was two, and it was barely visible—a pin-sized hole directly beneath my left collar bone. My mom noticed it one night at bedtime. Up in the large drafty room of our farmhouse, she was slipping me out of my hand-sewn dress, my pajamas on the bed next to me, and her attention was drawn to a bump on my chest. She ran her fingers across it, starting first at the level area, her finger rising as she passed over the hole in my pale skin. A thick bump had formed, and inside the pinprick was a small amount of paste-like substance, white, thick, and unmoving. And so later in the week, Mom made my first of many doctor appointments.

First was Dr. Dorsa, our family doctor who lived five minutes down the road. After much examination through his big glasses and past his highly visible nose hairs, Dr. Dorsa determined it was a pore that hadn’t closed up. “Nothing to worry about,” he assured her.

For three years it seemed as if Dr. Dorsa was right, until one afternoon at Cedar Point. What was once a flat area of skin had grown into a quarter-size
bump protruding from my reddened skin, and what was previously a pin-prick had become a tear duct, only its secretion was thick and opaque.

When we had visited all of the children’s rides, I convinced my dad to bring me on a larger roller coaster. Unfortunately, my fix-year-old body was so short that my infected bump lined up perfectly with the top of the lap bar. Throughout the ride, each massive drop and sharp turn slammed the reddened area against the bar, first just irritating the surface, but soon breaking it open, causing a large splotch of blood to form on my T-shirt. Since then, I haven’t enjoyed roller-coasters much. I will always be stuck with the feeling of knowing in a few seconds a large amount of pain is coming and there is nothing I can do to stop it.

After the trip to Cedar Point, Mom made another appointment. Dr. Dorsa was out of town, so we drove the twenty minutes into Holland. The office shared the same parking lot with the movie theatre, so from then on pulling in to see the new releases would always fill me with images of paper-covered tables and the feeling of extreme humiliation.

I may have only been five or six, but when the doctor asked me to remove my shirt, I was filled with a feeling of embarrassment and self-consciousness that I had never before experienced. Something was different about me, wrong with me, and the man in the room had forced me to reveal it. The feeling was only
amplified when the doctor needed a second opinion, and then a third, and
fourth, until I was sitting topless among a group of puzzled men. My mom says
she felt awful that day. A cool shiver of empathy ran through her every time she
heard another man say “let’s go get so and so in here to take a look at this.” They
stood in an unbreakable half circle, gawking and poking at the tender area and
commenting on what they saw. She would have felt a little relief if, at least, they
had determined the problem.

As the infection continued, we returned to the family doctor. After an uncertain
assessment of the unclosed pore, Dr. Dorsa realized a few good needles would be
necessary to cure this ailment. His medical opinion was that in order for the
infected area to improve, certain pressures had to be relieved. My mother was
again filled with an ache of helpless sympathy as she watched me scream each
time he ran a needle through the large bulge. She shuddered as a mixture of
blood and yellow pus streamed from the broken sac. This had to be the end.
And for a while, it was.

And then it was fall and I was about seven. In the early morning before school
me and my two older sisters waited in front of our farm house for the bus. We
were passing time by tossing around an old softball. They seemed to be more
interested in tossing it back and forth with each other, so I waited for my turn until I saw the flash of yellow at the end of our dirt road. As I turned my head and watched the bus tires throw dust into the cornfields at the side of the road, someone finally decided to throw the ball to me. My chest made the catch. After changing my clothes, covering my hole with a thick mound of gauze, and cleaning up the pool of blood on the front porch, mom drove me to school.

After the hardened blood and split the in my skin healed, the area wasn’t a problem. There was a ten-year period where the tiny hole sat dormant, empty even of the white cream it had been producing. Even though the pain and infection had subsided, I was still very aware of the area. I refused to wear clothing that revealed this scar, no v-necks or scoop-necks. Most shirts had to be buttoned up to the second-to last button, and even my swim suits went up high enough to hide it.

These fashion restrictions were still an issue in tenth grade, when my oldest sister Angie was planning her wedding. I was relieved to hear we would be picking our own dress patterns and they would all be made from the same fabric. My other sister, Lisa, had picked hers, a full-length dress with a neckline that scooped down in beautiful sheer layers—not something I could wear. Angie’s friends had already chosen theirs, but I was still sitting in Joann Fabrics, piles of patterns books on the table in front of me. They were all too revealing,
and the ones that would cover my scar, were hideous. I found myself staring wistfully at an off-the-shoulder dress, eventually shaking my head and putting it down while saying to myself, “No, this won’t cover it.”

“What’s the problem?” Angie asked after approving my sister’s dress.

“I just can’t find one to cover it,” I said, flipping quickly through another book.

“Cover what?” she asked, infuriating me, as if she didn’t know about it, couldn’t see it sitting there like a bad piece of meat.

“It. The thing.” I yanked the neckline of my shirt down to show it. I had to call the spot ambiguous names like it and thing because it was a mystery, a strange defect that had no origin, no solution.

“Cindy, it’s not that bad,” she said, pointlessly—a thirteen-year embarrassment wasn’t going to be solved now. “Just get whatever dress you like the most. You can always wear a big necklace.”

“That will just draw more attention to it. I’ll find one. I just need more time.” The girls were all getting restless, so I just picked the plainest shape I could find that still covered up the mark.

A year later the area had become more than an eyesore, it was active again, oozing a strange clear substance, the circle around the hole darkening to a bright
raspberry, and the skin over it wrinkling and turning to a crisp. I wouldn’t make
an appointment because I was leaving that week for Spain with my high-school
Spanish class. Over the two weeks I spent in Madrid, Seville, and then Merida,
the area continued to grow angrier. The skin over the hole was a crusty, peeling
mess with a wet, clear substance soaking through my shirts. I couldn’t sleep
because there was no comfortable way to lie down. Lying on my back would
stretch and tear the dry skin, and turning to my side pushed it together. Most
nights, I ended up on my stomach, one pillow on my head and the other on my
stomach, creating a space of empty air for my chest.

On bus rides I would sit still, trying not to turn my head to talk to avoid moving
the skin, trying not to move my arms to avoid pulling my shirt across the delicate
area.

When I returned home, I decided it was time to revisit the doctor. By that
time Dr. Dorsa’s license had been suspended by the state after he had
intravenously injected essaic, a blend of herbs made into a tea, into a patient and
told her to go home even after she was experiencing breathing difficulties, which
led to her death. This time we went to a specialist. As we entered the new
doctor’s office, the first thing I saw was a large fish tank that covered an entire
wall. As Mom checked me in, I sat staring at the colorful fish behind the glass. I
thought about them and not about what was wrong with me. I watched them
float around peacefully, seemingly not concerned with anything. We were in there for less than five minutes before the doctor had identified the problem.

“Let’s see what we have here,” he said, pulling back the cloth draped over me. “It’s a cyst,” he said without much thought.

“A cyst,” my mom said, as if she was realizing it right then as well. We made an appointment to have it removed, but before that could happen, the doctor prescribed a set of antibiotics to eliminate the infection.

Weeks later, I was back in the waiting room, calming myself with the sight of the beautiful fish. I had never had surgery before, so I was trying to ignore that fact that someone would be cutting me open in the next few minutes. Mom waited outside, and the doctor directed me to lie on the flat metal table under a group of lights.

After he sanitized and numbed the area, the doctor pulled a tray of tools closer to him and told me I wouldn’t feel the cut. The noise was bad enough, the silver scissors slicing through my skin, squeaking every time he cut through. I was focusing on the Christian song coming out of the circular speaker in the ceiling when I felt one pass of the scissors slicing my skin. The scream probably made a few people in the waiting room nervous, but the doctor didn’t seem too startled.
“Oh,” he said, turning back to his tray, “that part must not have been numbed.” I sat tense, waiting for the remaining cuts of other parts that he neglected to anesthetize. Soon he lifted what looked like a tiny set of tongs and told me I would feel a slight tug. As he pulled at the cyst inside me, I could feel the agitation of what surrounded it, the nauseating movement of body parts.

“Do you want to see it?” he asked, smiling. I wasn’t sure, so I agreed and glanced at the white mound of goo being held between the arms of the metal tool. It was hard to relate the tiny thing in front of me to all the years of damage and pain. When I was done, he dropped it into a metal can and stitched me up.

It was gone, but I suffered the self-consciousness of the scar. I stuck to the same covering clothing, but when our tennis-team uniforms were open to the chest, it was hard to conceal it. I usually kept my blouse completely buttoned, but one September evening, it was too hot to play my match with my shirt buttoned all the way. Forgetting it was out after the match, I sat on the bleachers watching a teammate play. I heard two girls next to me whispering, giggling quietly, and then I heard the word “hickey”. I knew they were the ridiculous ones, as if someone would have a hickey this size, in the middle of her chest, where for some reason the area of skin was indented. Yes, it was ridiculous, but I still sat there, trying to find a way to turn away and casually button my shirt.
By senior year, something unexpected had happened. Shopping for a prom dress, I took a black spaghetti-strap dress off the rack without hesitation. After slipping it on in the dressing room, I turned to the mirror and yelled to my sister that I had found my dress.

“Let me see.” When I stepped out, I asked sister what she thought. “It’s nice,” she said, looking at me as if she were waiting for something.

“But...?”

“But you can see it.”

“Well I’ll wear a strapless bra, of course,” I said tucking the straps into the dress.

“No, I thought you wanted to cover up your scar.”

“Oh,” I said turning back to the mirror. For some reason I hadn’t even thought of it. “I guess it’s not such a big deal.” After years of attempting to cover it with turtle-necks, scarves, giant necklaces, and cover-up applications, it was over. Somewhere between the previous summer’s wedding and this spring’s prom, I had decided it didn’t matter. I’m not sure what caused the change, what made me realize I didn’t really care as much as I thought I did, but it was a freeing thing to be able to wear what I wanted. Maybe I had grown up, or became tired of worrying about it all the time. Or maybe whatever scarring I had sustained was starting to clear up on its own.
If I had told the girl at Panera the entire story, by the time I finished, customers would have been yelling and anxiously tapping their feet. So instead of giving her everything, I just told her it was simple surgery. As I went to sit down, I rubbed my hand over the sunken portion of my chest, wondering how visible it was. I never see it anymore, but someone had noticed a couple days prior, too, when I was in line at the grocery store.

“What is that?” they ask, curious, pointing, moving in to inspect my imperfection. I can’t see it, but there will always be those who do, who need to point it out, who won’t let me forget it doesn’t look as it should.
I’m staring at a row of payphones from across Seattle-Tacoma Airport when one rings for the first time all day. I thought it would never happen. I’ve been trying to occupy myself for the last six hours with a book of *The New York Times* crossword puzzles, this month’s *Vogue*, and a copy of *The New Yorker*, but my current situation is making it difficult to concentrate.

Grandma gives me a concerned glance as I bound from my gray pleather seat, clear my luggage pile, and race towards the metal box. When I reach the end of the four-foot walkway and pick up the yellow receiver, I find it is not my boyfriend like I hope it is.

“Hello?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you missed your flight?” my aunt Cindy screams over the eighty-two miles of phone line separating us. She must have heard the news from Mom, the second person I called earlier when we discovered we wouldn’t be arriving in Michigan anytime soon.

“We didn’t want to trouble you,” I tell Aunt Cindy. And by we, I mean my stubborn travel companion, Grandma. The next few moments play out like one of those scenes in a movie when someone is held hostage at home. The
police eventually come knocking at the door, but the killer is off to the side with a gun aimed at the person, forcing them to act as if nothing is wrong.

“Why didn’t you call after I dropped you off?” Aunt Cindy asks.

“Well,” I say as Grandma listens and shakes her head at me from her seat, “we figured we’d just stay here until we caught the next flight.”

“When is it?”

“Tomorrow morning at 8:30.” Please realize how absurd that is.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come get you?” My mouth begins to take the shape of a yes, but I look up and see Grandma’s eyes still fixed on me, her pistol cocked and slowly waving in my direction.

“Uh, no, that’s fine. We’re fine here. There’s food, and we’ve already been waiting for eight hours, so what’s ten more?”

The killer nods in satisfied agreement.

“Why don’t you go stay at a motel?”

Looking over my shoulder, I see the armed felon has turned away for a moment. I whisper softly, hoping Aunt Cindy will interpret my suffering, “Well, Grandma thinks it would be a waste of money, and wants to make sure we’re here at the airport in time for our flight in the morning.”

“Put her on the phone.” The suspect has already walked over to me, so I hand the receiver over slowly—very slowly, knowing this is my last chance for
escape. But it’s too late because she’s already speaking with her, and I know I’m never getting out.

The best way to put yourself in such a dilemma is to display a certain level of confidence. The day before your departure, think of previous flights: Madrid sophomore year, North Carolina after graduation, Colorado to visit Uncle Tim. Now, remember how well all those flights have gone; you’re experienced and positive you’ll be on that plane.

Then, listen to your aunt when she casually insists tomorrow’s plan to leave at 8:30 a.m. is overly cautious. No matter how much of a mistake you think it may be, let her persuade you to leave an hour later. After all, she is chauffeuring you and Grandma from Shelton to Seattle and has boarded and fed you for two weeks. It would be rude to argue.

Next, make sure to dawdle. Say goodbye to relatives for too long. Stop at the strange roadside bakery for flaxseed cookies because your aunt is on a new diet every week, and then stop again at Fred Meyer for some other mid-flight snacks. Walk the aisles slowly, looking for whatever will meet your stomach’s needs in a couple of hours. Cheese sticks? No, warm dairy is bound to upset
your fragile stomach. Jonagold apple? No, too sticky, and you’re trying to avoid unnecessary trips to the tiny lav.

This is before airports start banning liquids through security, so go ahead and consider what you’ll be drinking today: Dasani, Aquafina, Fiji? Pick up a cheap bottle of Poland Spring, pause, return it to the shelf, and take an Evian—you’ve only spent half of the money set aside for this trip and it’s time for a little reward. You’ll be thanking yourself later, when you’re parched while waiting for the connecting flight in Detroit. Of course at this point, you’re still assuming you’ll make it.

Lulu and I knew we were running late as we carried our luggage through the automatic doors. (My grandma’s nickname was the result of our previous flight when I had explained the phonetic version of her initials L.W. would be Lulu Walter. This information, which I was positive at the time was correct, resulted from a momentary failure of my memory. Having once worked cleaning planes at a local airport, I had memorized the phonetic alphabet. In Grandma’s case, I think I confused L with Z’s phonetic version Zulu. The correct translation is actually Lima Whiskey—a pretty big difference, but I doubt Grandma would
want to be called Lima, or be directly addressed as a type of alcohol. So, as far as Grandma’s concerned, it’s Lulu.)

Check-in and security took no time, and we still had thirty minutes to spare. After a quick trip to the restroom, we headed to the gate. The digital screens on the wall informed us it was twelve-thirty. The flight was scheduled for twelve-forty. Looking at the empty waiting area at gate S8, Grandma smiled and nodded confidently.

“We must have time if no one is even here yet,” she said.

Walking up to the counter, we found what must have been Northwest’s employee of the month. Even though we were waiting at the desk, Jane didn’t look up. Her calloused and flaking orange hands were pattering away at a dirty keyboard. Even when I asked her about our flight, her face remained focused on the faded letters beneath her fingers.

“You missed it,” she snapped. “The doors are closed.”

She told us the flight had been rescheduled earlier in the day. Oh. Jane resumed typing and informed us that we had been paged “numerous times.” Also, if we had checked-in two hours earlier, this wouldn’t have been a problem. I was not about to argue with that; we had cut it too close. Opening my mouth to ask what the next step would be, I watched as Jane disappeared without
explanation. Grandma and I stood there dumbfounded for a few moments until she returned without as much as a sorry.

She did, however, offer us an “okay, let’s see” along with more aggravated typing.

“The only option is an eight-thirty a.m. flight tomorrow. There’s also a flight at five, but that’s full. You could stand by.”

I didn’t actually know what “stand by” meant.

“Uh, do you recommend we do that?”

“I don’t know,” jaundiced Jane said, flipping her bony hand in the air as if I had accused her of something. “I have no idea what goes on here at night.”

She printed off both tickets with a pass to stand by, and walked away with no further instruction. I turned to Grandma to discuss a plan, just as she made a suggestion: “Time to hit the bar.”

Now that it is clear you won’t be leaving until at least five, and that’s only if standing by is successful, find something to do for the next four hours. After ten minutes of convincing Grandma it is, in fact, the correct way, take the terminal subway system to security, and they will stamp your flight tickets for stand-by clearance. A cheerful guard in a white polo will wand and pat you down,
making small talk about your shamrock necklace in her comforting Southern accent. She’s Irish, too, you know. Every time the wand sounds with static over where your bra and underwear are, she’ll pat you lightly with pudgy fingers and say quickly as if it’s all one word “just your garments, just your garments.”

Put your shoes back on. Talk for too long with Grandma about the correct way to take the tram back to S8.

Call your mother: Hi mom, we’re still in Seattle, so don’t come pick us up at five...I’ll let you know when we get to Detroit.

Hang up.

Sigh.

Return to your pleather recliner.

While groups of noisy travelers pass by, their luggage falling against your legs, try to read Atlas Shrugged and give up as soon as Rearden walks home from the office holding that bracelet of his. It is impossible to read like this.

Tour the entire concourse and all there is to see. Starting at S6 there will be sparkling bathrooms on the left. Farther down you will find the food court, home to Runway Deli, Burger King, Udon Station, and the Cascades Lounge. Then, circling the end of the concourse, there are the escalators, World Passage Gifts, a duty-free shop, Seattle’s Best, and Hudson News. Go in and buy a few magazines—something shiny with pictures maybe.
Back at your campsite, read David Sedaris’ commencement speech in The New Yorker while Grandma pops in disc two of her audio self-help book. She leans back, so relaxed, so content. It’s enraging. Crumble Sedaris in your hands and dash him to the ground.

Two more hours—you hope.

Standing by was unsuccessful. For a while, before they began offering free tickets to bump volunteers to later flights, I sat hopeful, holding my carry-ons as if they’d be moving somewhere soon. I watched a girl’s basketball team in matching warm-ups shuffle by as a woman talking loudly on her cell phone took the seat next to me.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” she whined. “Our flight is delayed, so I’m stuck waiting here for 15 minutes.” Before I could completely snap and cause any physical harm, she and the other ticketed passengers boarded and flew away without us. It was then I saw Jane, walking quickly down the terminal—going home, no doubt. I should have caught up with her, should have said something about her rude behavior, but the thought of confronting her created a tug in my stomach so strong that I stayed there.
A few moments later I retrieved information from a more helpful attendant about an eight pm flight for which we could also stand by. I ran back to Grandma and relayed the message, the beam of hope from my face giving her third-degree burns.

“Let’s just wait it out,” Grandma said, going back to her Michael Bublé CD. “I don’t feel like going through all the security again.” Ah yes, I could see how taking the train for two minutes to have someone wand us down and stamp our tickets for two more was definitely worse than staying here for ten more hours. Taking off those shoes can be so strenuous. This logic didn’t appeal to her, though, and neither did finding a place to stay for the night.

“I don’t want to risk missing our flight at eight,” she said. “I’m going to be sitting right here when they start boarding.”

It is after five now, and we are still sitting “right here” at the calm end of terminal S-6/7. It’s a quiet area except for the intercom’s persistent recording of a male voice informing me to keep a close eye on my bags. With each repetition, the volume seems to rise, gradually taking my blood pressure with it.

I decide to make some calls. First, I call my boyfriend Joe, who is supposed to meet me in Grand Rapids after my arrival, but there is no answer since he’s working. After him, I call my mom and sister, but no one answers.
Turning and leaning my back against the yellow payphones, I see Grandma still sitting in those awful chairs, smiling, legs crossed, cheerfully bobbing her hanging foot up and down.

Dragging my feet back to my mound of belongings, which consists of a black shoulder bag displaying a funky print of colorful fruit, a red zip-up sweater, and a box of mushroom-shaped glasses I am bringing back for Joe, I pull out my journal that Grandma had given me before the trip. “Eight thirty,” I record in blue marker-pen, my writing becoming more and more illegible as time passes, “so now here we sit…” It’s pointless. I don’t want to write, or read, or even look at the colorfully dressed models in June’s issue of *Vogue*. So, instead, I sit and stew. I stare at nothing, thinking of everything.

And then, again by some psychic power, I look to the phone just as it rings from across the shining black expanse. Again, I dash my things to the ground and hurdle my belongings to reach the sounding device. Again, it’s not who I hope it is.

“Howdy?”

“Cindy?”

“Yeah...who’s this?” Answering a payphone takes some getting used to.

“Kali.”
“Kaliiiii.” Though it’s not the guy I expected, I spend at least a good hour chatting with my cousin I have just spent the last two weeks getting to know. We discuss how both unfortunate and asinine this situation is, and eventually she says she has homework to do. I say maybe I’ll leave my post at the phone to eat. Now, with no one on the other end of my only form of entertainment and the concourse almost empty, tomorrow morning’s eight am finish line seems an impossible goal.

I tell Lulu we should go out to dinner—leave the terminal, in other words—but she fears we will lose our way on the intricate subway system with which Sea-Tac has provided us. We settle for eating at the Cascade Lounge, the only non-fast-food restaurant offered to us in our new home. Sitting down, I admire the wooden bar in front. Behind it, a glowing white wall boasts clear glass shelves filled with perfectly spaced and cleaned alcohol bottles. I order a Miller Lite, planning on making this little slumber party more interesting, but Lulu refuses to drink with me.

“I’ll just have a water,” she says when I ask behind my menu what she’s drinking. So much for her earlier promises. Even offering to pay for the overpriced alcohol doesn’t change her mind. We split a French dip and watch a sports report from a TV hanging on the wall.
I eat, drink, and dip slowly, trying to enjoy the fact that I’m doing something, anything.

ATTENTION PASSENGERS, DO NOT LEAVE BELONGINGS UNATTENDED. PLEASE REPORT ANY UNATTENDED ITEMS TO AIRPORT PERSONNEL IMMEDIATELY.

After dinner, return to S6 and look at the pretty pictures in Vogue again until someone calls on the magic yellow phone. At last, it’s your boyfriend returning your call, who informs you he’s been walking away from taking orders all night to listen to your messages. Talk for an hour—this is the call you’ve been waiting for, after all—and make sure to plan your reunion. When finished, walk slowly back to your seat, blissful before the glow of your phone conversation is absorbed by the dark realization that you’re still in the airport.

Begin the process of attempting to sleep in the concourse of South Satellite. First look for a place where there is little foot traffic. The corner between S6/S7 seems like a good idea, seeing that S7 never seems to be in use. The windows, however, leak cold air, and though it’s dark now, the bright white blinking of taxiing jets is sure to disturb you. The row of seats behind the help desk seems like a logical and dimmer area than most, so give it a try. Slide in slowly, turning onto your stomach to squeeze beneath the metal chair arms.

The terminal is silent now. You will hear some sleepy travelers waiting across the concourse, but apart from that and the endless announcements that
you’re surprised the airport hasn’t tattooed on your ass by now, you hear only the sound of Lulu snoring a few feet away (she checked the suitcase that holds her breathing machine).

It’s not comfortable. The seats rise up at the edges and put pressure on the body in strange places. But, slowly, and hopefully, you will feel yourself falling asleep. Before it happens however, a breeze drifts in from the ramp doors, and freezes you out. Find a new location.

The booths in the food court are long and plentiful, not to mention padded. But are they worth the harsh light generated by the neon signs? Perhaps. It’s warmer in there for sure. Grandma has taken the cue as well, and you two settle in. Turn your back to the Burger King sign, and shove your face as far into the corner of the booth as possible. Nonsense will begin to overtake your brain, and it will be clear that you will soon be blessed with sleep. Now you can successfully move to your back; the air feels warmer, and everything is silent. Just as this is happening, however, you will feel a sharp and urgent tap in the middle of your forehead, jolting you from whatever soothing state you might have entered. Startled, open your eyes to investigate. It’s Grandma. Irritation overtakes you and shoots from your eyes to hers.

“What?” You’re tired, and cold, and uncomfortable, and angry, but she is waking you up with a shaking poke on the forehead to offer you her neck pillow,
which means you can’t be angry. You feel even worse now; you’re not just tired, and cold, and uncomfortable, and angry anymore; you’re also guilty, and horrible for snapping at your grandma who is offering you her only pillow.

Try to say “no thank you” as nicely as possible and lie there for an hour more until around three when the sound of disorder fills S10. Watch in confusion as a man dressed in army camouflage runs through the terminals.

“This is bullshit!” he yells, red-faced, at a flight attendant who apologizes and scurries away. Observe as the shouting continues and the frightening man stomps up and down the concourse. Tell Lulu not to make eye contact and hopefully he won’t attack the two of you. Now, try to sleep.

ATTENTION PASSENGERS, DO NOT LEAVE BELONGINGS UNATTENDED. PLEASE REPORT ANY UNATTENDED ITEMS TO AIRPORT PERSONNEL IMMEDIATELY.

It’s 4:30 and the cold is getting to me. Has the airport turned down the heat, or is it just the lack of people that generates this arctic air? World Passage Gifts opens at five, so I can’t buy a Seattle sweatshirt until then. I am not sure I want to be reminded of this experience later on anyway.

Again, in the dim booth area, I start drifting off to sleep, and finally a sense of calm is settling within me. It starts slowly and quietly at first, so I think I’m beginning to dream. Soon, it becomes louder and the food court is overtaken
by the hum and squeak and beep beep beep of a big blue floor cleaner. This is why sleeping in the food court is a mistake.

At this point, I give up, go to Hudson News, and have the aforementioned thoughts about sweatshirts and unwanted memories. Deciding against the forty-dollar souvenir, I return to my booth to watch the terminal come back to life. Gates are pulled up, lights turned on, and Burger King begins frying some circular hash browns. Third in line, I order cini-minis, hash browns, and a coffee, hoping they don’t upset my stomach. My Styrofoam cup taunts me with big white letters displayed across the front: JOE.

Breakfasting in bed, I eat while Grandma sleeps comfortably and unaffected. I feel detached and loopy, and the coffee is making me even jitterier. That’s a weird word. Jitterier. Seems like it would be proper to say “more jittery,” but apparently not. I can’t focus. I’m trying so hard to focus.

Thirty minutes pass quickly as I watch a family eat breakfast. I observe what appears to be a mother’s boyfriend making small talk with her son. I listen to the voice advise again for probably the 250th time since I’ve been here not to take anyone’s bags or to leave mine unattended. At least, this news is finally relevant to me again. It will only be a couple of hours until I will actually board a plane. Yes, I have practically made it.
Pass the remaining time with a crossword puzzle, or three since you’re too impatient to think about the answers you don’t know. Eventually, Lulu will stir from her cushion and find herself in a bustling food court. She will eat, and you will talk about the night.

From your booth you can see a small group of travelers forming at your gate, proof that you will, in fact, be leaving. When it is time, when that door to the glowing hallway opens and you are welcomed to board, grab your bag and say goodbye to the terminal you have seen at every stage of the day. Pass through the hallway, feet bounding against the dirty carpet with every step, and with a feeling of surreal accomplishment, board that plane.

Once you’ve found your seat, there is a technical problem which causes you to taxi for an hour, but it is a new location with a new view so it doesn’t bother you.

After a few hours of reading and ginger ale, walk into Detroit Metro. As you exit the small hallway of the ramp, appreciate the tall ceilings and natural lighting the airport has to offer. Walk farther, feeling a fresh breeze on your face, and notice there are numerous shops, restaurants, and even an interesting fountain before reaching the moving sidewalk. Captivated by this sign of life and change, move towards it and watch as it shoots individual spurts of water
through the air like small pellets of metal. Realize that compared to Sea-Tac, Detroit Metro is a booming and beautiful metropolis.

The two hours there are nothing, even when a delay turns them into three. Just sit patiently. Sip your Frappucino and watch a young girl across from you repetitively slather Burt’s Bees on her waxy lips. Experience this contentment even when you arrive in Grand Rapids and your luggage does not appear on the carousel. Eventually you will find it propped against a wall near the entrance, unsure how long it had been sitting there. Apparently the airport doesn’t follow its own policy of not leaving belongings unattended. This careless treatment of your luggage, however, doesn’t bother you like it should. Nothing matters at this point, nothing except for the fact that you are not spending another second in that drab box of an airport.

Later that night, after parting quickly with Lulu, and riding thirty minutes home to your car so you can drive thirty minutes to Joe’s apartment, the two of you are finally reunited. When you tell Joe the whole story, arms waiving wildly in the air, he will ask why you didn’t tell your aunt to just come get you. Shrug to indicate that you have no answer. When he asks why, at least, you didn’t tell your grandma you weren’t going to stay in an airport for eighteen hours, again, shrug and provide no logical response. When he suggests that you at least call and complain to the airline about the rude attendant, nod and say okay, knowing
it will never happen. Months later, he’ll ask if you did, and when you shake
your head, he’ll ask why not. For this, too, you will have no answer—you just
won’t. For some reason you can’t argue with these people. And you really hope
that it doesn’t make anyone angry.
Redial

Maybe I’m just romanticizing it, but I miss the weight in my hand, the springing back of the square buttons, the way I could rest it between my neck and shoulder for hours before any pain set in. Today my cellular phone isn’t working, so when my boyfriend calls on my office phone, I let it ring twice because I miss the sound. He’s calling from one of the cell phones we bought before moving to Marquette for graduate school. When we arrived, it didn’t seem necessary to have a home phone, but lately I have been considering it for emotional reasons.

* * *

My family’s first phone was an oval cream rotary that hung on the floral wallpaper in our farmhouse. Its cord was a long mess of spirals that were shedding their rubbery coating to reveal the wires beneath. I remember watching my oldest sister Angie as she used the phone endlessly. Every night she would take her position next to the fridge and begin a continuous slow turn until she was wrapped completely in the cord that normally stretched down to the floor. Sometimes Dad would come by, cursing, and attempt to unwind her. Other
times he’d just yell at her to hang up, and she would stretch the flimsy cord around the corner into the dining room.

One day at my friend Mary’s house, I saw her run to a ringing phone and answer in a sing-song manner, “Hello, Mary Rachel speaking.” What a fabulous way to answer the phone, I thought. I didn’t realize the only reason my six-year-old friend offered her middle name so callers wouldn’t confuse her with Mary senior.

Later that day, as Mom prepared dinner over our dull counters, I sat staring at the telephone, waiting for it to ring.

“Mom, what should I say if the phone rings?”

She turned to me, large knife in hand. “Just say, ‘hi.’”

“Hi” seemed a little informal, definitely not special. “What about, ‘Hello, Cynthia Anne speaking’?” My mom laughed.

The only other memory I have of that phone is an inexplicable image of Dad throwing it out the kitchen door—maybe a result of Angie’s endless conversations. What was she talking about all that time? Was she telling her friends the news, hiding around the corner, whispering into the receiver to Cheyenne, or Charisse, or Shenoah that she was pregnant? Was she calling the father? Was she still pretending it didn’t exist?

***
I miss coming home to an answering machine, the small joy of finding that red light glowing from across the room. It was a lovely kind of suspense waiting to hear whose voice would come through that tiny speaker. That was the benefit of a time before caller ID, when if someone wanted you to call them back, they would have no choice but to leave a message and tell you why. Everyone’s intentions were clear then—well, clearer.

***

A picture of our second phone is absent from my mind, but I was still only six and my sister Lisa, my mother, and I had moved to a duplex across town because my parents were separating. I’m sure it was there though, sitting on the orange countertop that hovered over a partition covered in green shag carpeting. I wonder if the phone saw much action, if other men ever called, if Dad ever called, if that’s how he got her back. I only remember him bringing coffee cake after his AA meetings and them talking at the table.

***

I miss Angie’s hot-pink telephone earrings. I saw the future in them once. On one ear, she had an earpiece dangling from its cord, and on the other was the base, its cord cut and waiting for the receiver to slip safely into its cradle. Once, when I was making one of my frequent unwelcomed passes through Angie’s room, I
saw the pink earpiece earring lying in the bottom of a heat grate in the floor. She must have moved on because it stayed there for years, covered in dust, and dirt, its color fading in that forgotten world, its worth made imperceptible by the shine of a new pair.

* * *

The third hung from the wood paneled walls in our double-wide. Mom and Dad were trying again, and the owners said that we could live there rent-free if my parents improved the property. For two years they gradually transformed those couple of acres between corn fields into a little less of a dump, even with the five or six broken-down cars still sitting to the left of the yard.

By the time I was in sixth grade, the phone had taken a more active role in my life. Most of the time I was calling my friend who lived on the other side of a cornfield only a quarter mile down the road. But soon I found this would be the phone that ruined our last chance, the phone that continued to ring one night when Mom wasn’t home, and every time I answered, a man would ask why she wasn’t home. I don’t remember what I said, or even where she was, only Dad looking suspiciously over his book from the couch each time I placed the receiver
back on its clear plastic hook. The voice was unfamiliar, but I thought instantly about the man who had dropped her off after work one day.

“There’s no need to tell your Dad about this,” she said in answer to my questioning. “He just brought me home from work.”

Again?

The ringing and answering continued throughout the evening, and Dad eventually beat me to the phone.

“Who the hell is this?” he said into the receiver, finding what he suspected was true, thus ending our relationship with said phone, said house, said father.

* * *

I miss the separation between phones and society, how a phone ringing didn’t necessarily mean an instant response. It was rude to answer your phone when you had company. “Oh, I’ll let the machine get that.” These days calls are taken anywhere, during a movie, a date, a conference with your professor. There is never the chance for someone’s undivided attention.

* * *
Not too long after we left our phone, we three girls were back in the same duplex. Except instead of taking the same unit, we took the one next door, with blue carpet and gray countertops—an upgrade. The phone there usually sat unused because most of the time the bill went unpaid. On summer days, Lisa and I would ride our bikes the 1.6 miles to the Food Center and use its payphone next to the two-lane highway. Who were we even calling then?

Finally, when we were able to keep up with the cost of a phone line, I was blessed with my own phone, a turquoise, purple, and pink combination that I kept next to my bed.

* * *

And payphones? What happens when your cell phone dies and you need to make a call? When this happened to me recently and I went in search of a payphone, it wasn’t too long before I realized that unless you’re in an airport, usable payphones have almost completely disappeared. And if they are still in the parking lot, the entryway of a grocery store, or wherever you were used to finding them, they have been pummeled by a careless driver, have no dial tone, or look like they should be reported as a bio-hazard.
Payphones are becoming extinct because even six-year-old children have cell phones. Why do children need cell phones? Even without the thirty-five cents for a phone call, I still managed to survive. There was always the option of pulling the collect call trick. Using the gap of time in which you are supposed to provide your name to shout “pickmeupatschoolmom,” was a perfect way to deliver the message to your parent without them having to accept the charges. It was a lesson in beating the system and excellent practice in the art of a succinct statement—something some cell phone users are almost completely incapable of.

* * *

The summer before junior high, my mother rented a four-bedroom house from our same landlord, who also hired me to do yard work at his house three lots over. It was our first experience with a cordless phone, which sat in a built-in hole in the kitchen wall. Before we misplaced it or left it off the charger for too long, the large white box had seemed like a novel invention.

One afternoon I was using the cordless to catch up with my oldest sister Angie, who had recently brought my new nephew home from the hospital. She was in midsentence, lamenting that her recent haircut and color still didn’t make her look like the woman on the dye box, when her words were replaced with
something closer to choking sounds and then the rattle of pots and pans. After a
moment of silence, except for me repeating her name, my oldest niece, Brittany,
began shouting, “My mom is dying, my mom is dying!” My mom heard me
screaming for Brittany to pick up the phone, and she ran into the room. Stealing
the phone from me, she told Brittany to get help from the neighbors while we
called an ambulance.

As my mother drove to meet the ambulance, I told my sister and my
mother’s boyfriend about the situation. The three of us waited in the kitchen for
close to an hour, staring at the white cordless as it sat quiet, its gray rubber
antenna jutting out of the phone and across the table as if it were accusing us. I
wonder if we didn’t call Dad to inform him of the situation to avoid taking up
the phone line, or if there was something else that kept us from letting him in on
the wait. Not that one wants to have to wait through something like that, but
how many important phone calls can you be excluded from before you’re living
a completely separate life?

When that loud chirp of a ring finally sounded, my sister picked up to
find Angie had suffered a seizure caused by a nutrient deficiency. She would be
fine, and the phone returned to its lighthearted position perched within the wall.

* * *
I miss the quirks of the older machinery, the large buttons, the crackling receivers, the old community lines. One afternoon, I took the cordless into my bedroom to confirm a tennis date with a friend. Throughout the entire conversation I could hear a faint hum in the background. When she hung up, the receiver emitted a loud burst of static which quickly transformed into the sound of two ladies talking. Pleased with the prospect of eavesdropping on an unknown conversation, I did so, sitting on the edge of my bed for thirty minutes.

The two elderly ladies discussed things like who had been seen with whom, and I couldn’t stop listening. I was afraid if I hung up, I would be missing my opportunity to find out something I was destined to hear. My head was filled with scenarios of picking up later to hear murder confessions and trying to decide how I would figure out who was on the other end of the line. These two old ladies, however, didn’t have the most stimulating conversation. Even though I was enjoying my detective duties, I couldn’t continue to listen to much more of their gossip.

When I picked up later, hoping to find my phone’s special powers still intact, there was nothing but a dial tone. I even tried calling my friend again and waiting for her to hang up, but still nothing.
The same turquoise and purple phone that I had set next to my Super Nintendo in the fifth grade reappeared in my freshman dorm and eventually in my sophomore, junior and senior-year apartments too. This phone didn’t get much use, or at least many outgoing calls, since I had to use a phone card to be able to call anyone off campus. Instead I waited for people to call me on their cell phones, a contraption I had tried senior year in high school. When I realized it made me a little too reachable, I decided I could do without.

So I dug out the colored plastic phone I had been happy with for years, even when it got in the habit of not always ringing when someone was trying to call. Most of the time was enough. One of my last conversations on that phone occurred when my mother called me for help. She had suspected that her boyfriend of five years, with whom she had been living with for one, was making long-distance phone calls to another woman.

“On Christmas he had made a phone call to this person, but I don’t know who it is. He wouldn’t say.”

“Why don’t you look on the phone bill?”

“Because he does all that online, probably so I can’t see who he’s calling,” Mom said, the familiar paranoid tone in her voice coming out. It was the same
The tone she used when she asked me if her boyfriends ever made me uncomfortable or did anything I should tell her about. After I looked up the phone bill and read Mom the telephone numbers with no unusual discoveries, she still wasn’t satisfied.

“He’s probably using another phone,” she said. “Thanks anyway.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And Cindy,” Mom added, before saying goodbye.

“Yeah?”

“Please don’t tell your sisters about this.”

* * *

I miss filling out address books and the challenge of memorizing new phone numbers, not just storing them into an electronic device. And the cost of long distance is something I actually value now. With cell phones, and even with most landline companies, most calls are covered under one fee. Life seemed much quieter before, when it cost ten cents to dial that area code. People thought about the other options first: would it be better to send a letter, an email, or just nothing at all? Sometimes it would be better to receive a letter, an email, or, yes, nothing at all.
And then, when I graduated and lived with my mom and her boyfriend, there was the phone with which he was supposedly calling that other woman. It was a black cordless with an orange screen that glowed when it rang, revealing who was on the other line in black letters, an eerie color combination. Her boyfriend, always captivated by whatever new gadgets he found at Best Buy, bought the most expensive phone he could find. And he bought a set of three. The handset’s screen would indicate which phone you had—number one in the kitchen, number two in the bathroom, and number three in their bedroom—so you would know which cradle each phone belonged to. I always wondered what might happen if I put handset number one on number two’s stand. Would they all fail? Would number one spark and shake, shattering its orange lights all over his recently remodeled bathroom? No, it took its unintended pairing without any trouble, without any resistance.

I conducted interviews for the local paper with that phone, putting the person on speaker so I could easily jot down notes about whatever story I was to report on that week, a remodeled hotel, a sandwich shop opening on the beach, a new church cookbook. This phone arrangement only lasted a month or so until

* * *
one night an argument about the mysterious phone number began again. Thirty minutes after the muffled yelling and smoke began seeping beneath my bedroom door, my puffy-eyed mom opened the door to inform me I might as well begin packing in the morning. A week later I was setting up the first phone bill in my name at our new duplex outside of town.

But then that “bastard” called one night from his black cordless.

“Mom,” I said, eyebrow raised, lip curled, “it’s him. Do you want me to tell him you’re not here?”

“No, it’s fine,” she said, taking the phone from me.

A couple of nights later he was in the driveway, and things were back to normal. Back to normal until she spent a night calling him because he said he would be out of town, but really he was taking his mother to a concert and didn’t want to bring her. And that was it. Except for a week later when it wasn’t. And when two years later the phone we had put in my name was packed in a box and moved back with all her other possessions to the house of the black phone.

And now it sits in the same box in their basement.

* * *

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Before I moved up to Marquette for graduate school I didn’t take any past phones, just a recently purchased cellular, a tiny, weightless, silver piece of sadness. The purchase was really one made for the sake of my mother, who, unhappy about my decision to move seven hours away, insisted I have a phone with me at all times. While others are constantly trading their cellular devices for new and improved pieces—smaller, thinner phones that are practically miniature laptops—I’ve had the same phone for two-and-a-half years. And today, I have to buy a new one. I’ve been avoiding it for weeks, even though my cell phone shuts off every time I make a call. I keep pushing it off until tomorrow, because I know when I get into that store, the model I have will no longer exist. I’ll be forced to buy something smaller and shinier, when all I want is a weighty, imperfect object of character. I’m not interested in what this new phone can do, or how sleek it looks, because it will never equal the original. It will always be a flawed simulacrum of something I grew so used to, something I didn’t realize I’d soon be going without.

But why the nostalgia for a collection of metal, a mess of plastic and tangled wires? Why am I unable to accept this change, to forget about what might have happened without it? Why am I constantly wondering what it would be like now if one phone hadn’t been thrown out the door, if the other hadn’t rang that evening, if we hadn’t left it there alone? Why can’t I just realize
that what I have will always be a result of a constant change? Why can’t I find a replacement that will be just as good or better than the impossible image to which I am so stubbornly holding on?
BEFORE THE CLOCKS

My parents had said their goodbyes, and getting ready to head back out that shrunken doorway, I thought again about the clocks on my grandmother’s wall—the ones I still can’t picture because I never noticed them during our summers there, because then, in the days and nights and mornings of books and baths and baking, time had no importance, no presence. Though our summers there might have seemed ageless, it is clear to me now that we were not immune to time’s effects. Just as it was time that stopped there in my grandmother’s house, it is time that gradually chips away at my memories with every slow tick it takes. In fact, whenever I try to remember Grandma—the woman—all that fills my head is the memory of her house and the way it was before she left it empty, with the speakers quiet, time’s hands stuck in place, and a line of plastic dogs showing still, bowed heads.

Maybe it was because we had been busy, or maybe it had something to do with my parents’ slow slip into divorce, but three years had passed since my family had been to my grandmother’s. A week earlier, Mom had called me at a friend’s house to say Grandma had suffered a stroke, that she had lain on her kitchen floor for hours before anyone found her. Days later, we discovered the doctors were wrong about her “definite” recovery. Problems arose. Problems that they
said had passed. Problems that we hoped—and eventually believed—had passed. After all, it was during those hospital visits that Grandma had been painting her nails again, careful not to splash the pink paint on her white gown. Soon after, they called us back to wait and eventually to say goodbye. But this isn’t about her, but what she left behind.

After her funeral, a few families drove back to Grandma’s house. We pulled into the sun-dried yard and parked on the grass next to her Brown Buick. Before exiting the car, my family of five sat and surveyed the yard. The house was chipping white paint to reveal black board beneath, and the porch my father used to paint every year was no longer a dark green but peeling and warped. Stepping out of the car, I pictured Grandma next to me in her usual summer location, perched over an old well as she sprayed dried grass with a drooping hose. She was careful not to let the leaky nozzle wet her short pants and striped socks. Eventually she moved her tanned arms and directed the hose into a dented watering can, filling the yard with echoes of rushing well-water.

While my family walked up to the house, I stayed to appreciate the image a little longer—memories of Grandma and not just her things. In my mind, my older sister Lisa and I were also in this yard, playing in the circle of bushes on the left edge of my grandmother’s property. There was our fort, where we would carry out our mystical and make-believe summer lives. Behind the old
farmhouse, which was built in the late 1800s, was the tree house where Angie, our oldest sister, and my cousin Dari used to play before they each married and moved on. On the right side of the house grew a large blackberry bush from which we would pull our daytime snacks.

It was there in that endless yard an hour and a half north from my parents’ place in Hamilton, Michigan, where the three of us spent the majority of our summer days. Down a beaten path, past the group of bushes, and through the gap in the trees, was my Aunt Jeanie’s. Though it was only a three-minute walk away, Aunt Jeanie’s yard felt like a different country. Her front lawn, which bore a dilapidated tin sign identifying the property as “Hell’s Half Acre,” consisted of not the usual oak and maple trees spread everywhere else, but a stretch of crowded and hovering pines that begged to be wandered and wondered through. Occasionally, I would find toys, clay pots, or other objects my cousin Dari had forgotten or left behind. These finding were artifacts of a previous childhood ended, evidence of the invisible change of time, and I would welcome them, fascinated, as my own. I’m sure if I had thought to walk over to Aunt Jeanie’s the day of the funeral, I would have found those toys and even a few that I once held dear before abandoning them in that dark forest of lost summer days.
Farther down the dirt road was the weedy tangle of land my father owned but used only for an occasional visit with a camper. Some days, when neither could satisfy our inquisitive minds, we’d walk down that dusty road and scour the surrounding grass fields for arrow heads or Indian beads—something Angie and Dari had taught us. Other days, we’d find entertainment by stumbling down the steep, grassy hill beyond her back yard. There we could stare at the unlimited hills and crooked trees forever. Springing from the branches we weren’t supposed to be climbing, we’d enjoy the soft breeze of a downward fall and embrace the crunch of moss beneath our toes. These were the sights and textures of our summers and what really comes to mind when I think of Grandma. Returning with my family the day of the funeral, I walked across her neglected yard and attempted to see and feel whatever remains of those times I could.

As our family stepped inside Grandma’s house, we had to duck in the doorway. Her front room, which once seemed to be an everlasting expanse of interesting gadgets, now looked cramped and littered with junk. Under a wall of shelves that held everything imaginable (tools, toys, containers, canned goods) still sat Grandma’s trash-sorting system: three plastic trash receptacles for paper, glass, and metal. There was also a coffee can to fill with combustibles, items that
would slowly decompose and disappear over time, like banana peels, coffee
grounds, eggshells, and old memories.

Taking a step up into the kitchen, I noticed the room felt curiously
crammed, as if we had eaten Alice’s wonderland mushrooms on the way over,
enlarging us beyond reality, except there was no mushroom to bring us back
down, to reconstruct that normal viewpoint of the room. The synthetic, creaky
table in the kitchen seemed different too. It was almost weaker than in younger
days when my sister and I would breakfast before our day of play.

Going into the tiny living room, grey from a lack of light, I thought back to
the afternoons when Grandma’s prisms hanging in the windows would cast tiny
rainbows along her mint-green walls. When we weren’t forcing the specks of
color to dance around the room, we would watch miniature dogs atop
Grandma’s speakers bob their heads to Mozart. I walked over the uneven
flooring to find five of those fuzzy figurines still standing in a neat line. I stood
staring a while, realizing I had never asked her what she called them. I suddenly
wished I had, so I could remember them all with names. Perhaps I had known
their names at one point and forgot them over time. Why has my memory
worked so hard to replace live beings (or even objects that were once considered
alive) with possessions and surroundings, images and feelings? All I do
remember of that pack of hounds, besides what’s already been said, is the image
of us running around that mint-green room trying to shake the ground enough to move their wobbly heads. The day of the funeral, my family members merely walked up to them and gave their heads a careless nudge.

Grandma’s house was home to other marvels as well, things our parents didn’t have and were therefore mysterious and wonderful. In her kitchen, Archie comics and crossword puzzles sat in organized piles on a metal bookshelf. Next to the books, a gold tray held a fine collection of red erasable pens. The red Eraser-Mates fascinated me—there was something miraculous about ink that erased, but now I see them for what they are: ink for the unsure, ink with the ability to erase and transform once-solid thoughts into faded flecks of dust on a worn and cloudy canvas.

Another collectible for Grandma was windsocks. Hanging freely around the yard, these silky chutes of colorful patterns were strung from whatever tree limbs, clothes lines, or porch covers could spare the room for a knotted, white string. These floating fabrics were visible proof of the summer breeze, and when Grandma wasn’t looking they were also the occasional victims of our run-by slaps or tugs.

In the bathroom, a selection of clear scented soaps always lined the edge of her bathtub. Exploring the small room that day, I found only shriveled and cracked rectangles resting on a dusty tub. One thing that had remained the
same, however, and that was the shaky toilet resting on even shakier flooring
next to a trap door. When I was younger, I would hate using the bathroom.

Sitting there on the warped boards, I always feared any movement too abrupt
would send me falling in toilet water to the basement below. But the bathtub,
only inches away from this danger zone, was strong and safe, a porcelain cradle
of warm, soap-scented water. It was those baths combined with those chunks of
translucent soap that made bath time and any nightly feet washing a
comfortingly fragrant moment. These days when I come across a bar of soap, not
flowery or food-scented, but pure and antibacterial, I can’t help but close my
eyes, inhale, and let the enchantment of summers in that old bathroom overtake
my currently lackluster world.

These are the fragments that make up my memory of this place and this
woman, and these days, smells and sounds that recur at random take me floating
from the present to these scattered memories. The problem is that barely any of
these pieces can be joined to form a complete moment, a whole memory.
Instead, I have bits of plastic cups, library books, a brown Buick, a dog named
Toto, confetti-filled batons, random German phrases yelled out the front door, a
chain grown into the tree-trunk in the front yard, bumper-cars at the fair with
Grandma watching from the gate, a discussion on the meaning of fish and chips,
and even Grandma ushering us quickly to bed one evening because a sitcom
suddenly took on the topic of homosexuality. I remember proudly showing her an afternoon’s stenciling job and a hurtful remark about how it would have been good if it were a drawing. I remember the smell of corned beef hash and trying to wash it down with milk, and I remember the worse smell of the next night’s reheated corned beef hash. There is the mystery of Aunt Kate, Grandma’s older sister, behind the door across the hall from our bedroom. Then there is the other mystery of Grandpa, who died when I was young, and whose only image I recall is of him descending the attic steps to take his seat at the kitchen table, his blue shirt, white hair, and heavy black-framed lenses. Or perhaps this image is only created by the photograph my father still displays on his bookshelf. What’s worse is that these fragmented memories aren’t even clear; they are memories of memories, as if I read them out of someone else’s diary.

The adults were talking around the tiny table, so Mom gave Lisa and me permission to go outside. We immediately took the opportunity to meet up with our old tree friends, still resting their peelings trunks and wavering branches on the hills behind the house. We wandered in the heat, looking for a good tree to climb, and eventually settled for two next to each other. After a slow and awkward climb, and once we were high enough to see the dull roof of Grandma’s house, the two of us sat for a moment, unimpressed. It was almost
evening, but the July sun was generating a sticky sweat on our skin. Dusty bark clung to me. In a few moments, we gave up waiting for our old sentiments and headed back, strapping on our sandals when the pokey moss began to irritate our feet. Walking up to the porch, I noticed a couple of Grandma’s windsocks, their reds, yellows, and blues hanging muted and frayed on a drooping clothesline.

In the kitchen, the adults were scanning the shelves for coffee. They found maggots in the malted milk jar. Soon someone realized the kitchen clock above Grandma’s window had stopped at the exact the time of her death. We stared in disbelief. It didn’t take long for someone else to discover a living room clock with its hands stopped in the same mysterious position. Perhaps they didn’t stop on the same day, or maybe one was a.m. and one was p.m., but it is hard to get over the fact that they both held their hands and halted at the same exact position—like one last bit of magic before she left.

In the bedroom off the living room, the family was sorting through her things as they tried to decide what to take and what to give away.

“Cindy,” Mom said through the doorway, “if there’s anything you want, you can take it.”
There wasn’t much worth anything, but I found value in the playfulness of her colorful wardrobe and took some polo shirts and a pastel necklace. Returning to the living room, I walked past the piano to the window. I snapped the unmoving wire of her biggest prism to save in my pocket. Though it was hideous, I wished I could peel the paint off the bumpy walls and spread it everywhere back home, paint everything Grandma. Over on the speakers, the dogs were dusty and dim, so I let them be. Best not to disturb the fellow mourners. Grandma’s two clocks didn’t need to tell me; it was clear that time had stopped here.

I took a left off the kitchen to discover our old room had lost its inviting smell and comforting glow. The wood floors seemed jagged and sloped, and the air produced a musty odor. I stood and waited for old recollections to turn up. Though many have clearly faded, the most complete memories I have are those of the evenings we spent at Grandma’s house. Lisa and I would retreat to our wood-paneled room, climb into the twin beds, and read with our books tilted towards the yellow glow of the wall-lamps above us. Classical music and the occasional calm voice of the radio host floated freely from the living-room speakers. At times the music would go quiet and was replaced with the sound of Grandma’s accordion, drifting into our room and out through the two open windows, framed by flowing sheer curtains. We could hear Grandma’s every
movement, every slow creak she made through the house, the squeak of the screen door as she called Toto and he came pattering in, nails scratching against the boarded deck. An occasional car would slowly drive by on the dirt road—a sound more soothing than one would think—and a breeze would brush the hair from my forehead as I tried to turn in the tightly tucked-in sheets. Sleep would come in time. Then we would awake to another morning, singing with the sounds of Grandma’s cooking and the creaks of her old wood stove.

After our parents said their goodbyes and we found our way out that shrunken doorway, we loaded all our memories into the car with us. As my father stopped at the end of the driveway, I inspected the big oak in the corner of the yard where a tire swing was once attached. By the time I began spending my childhood summers there, it was just an old chain around a tree branch. The day of funeral, there was even less to see. The tree had grown even more, and the thick metal continued its slow disappearance into the expanding bark of the tree.

Rolling down the window, my attention was caught by a glare of sun reflected off the few remaining chain links. I squinted to see them clearer and wondered how much bark would cover those chains the next time I returned. As we started down the dirt road, I dreaded the day when that magical glow of my childhood wouldn’t be visible at all.
When thinking about that night, I don’t recall if I actually walked down the half-mile of snowy dirt road to Sherry’s house from ours. My mother might have carried me, but I was a heavy six-year-old, and I imagine the night’s events must have left her exhausted. Whenever I do try to remember anything about that evening, I can only drag up a few flash images. Unlike most of my childhood memories, which are either a clear picture in my mind or completely non-existent, the memory of this night, the night of our abrupt departure from our family’s farmhouse, consists of a few perfectly clear images with befores or afters immediately dissolving into a frayed edge. I am constantly trying to determine the cause of this event in attempt to reproduce a seamless progression.
of moments just to understand why my mother, my sister, and I made that midnight walk down our dirt road. I can continue to reflect on what I do know, but illuminating those dark corners lurking next to them is tricky. Yet I try.

5. **Shouted name in sitcom “Cheers”**

Crossword puzzles are harder to make than you’d think—especially if you don’t have a fancy computer program to do it for you, and definitely if you are trying to use a certain group of words in a certain order. Starting this exploration of my mind and memory, I imagined plugging my words into a program that would organize my thoughts into a controlled puzzle. Not so.

According to many crossword-puzzle-development guides, there are two types of puzzles: the symmetrical and the freeform. While freeform puzzles are much more lenient in their creation, symmetrical puzzles come with a large list of rules for construction.

*Each letter should be part of both an across and a down word.*
This works fine for most puzzles, but in one dealing with memory, clues and facts aren’t always neatly arranged. They don’t often correspond or connect, but here is my attempt at managing it all.

6. ___ and white

*Black squares should be diagonally symmetrical.*

How can these areas of darkness, the unknowns, be expected to follow the same pattern of production? Perhaps they do at times, but here, when forced down on paper, they cannot possibly match up.

How mysterious are those expanses of black. I often wonder what waits beneath those dark portions between those boxed-in answers. It is true that what occurs within these lines will never be discovered, but perhaps they aren’t important. Maybe these facts, these hidden bits of knowledge, are completely separate from the event in question, and therefore were X’d out as they took place. Maybe there was some extra space or time the creator didn’t quite know how to fill, so in these blocks we find whatever incomprehensible matter that brings the puzzled from one clue to the next.

8. Mouse solution
Maybe the house is to be blamed for the events of that night, the farmhouse where every summer our screen door would become a black obscurity of flies moving slightly in the summer heat. We couldn’t open the door without letting in a little of the bad. We could try, quickly swinging open the entrance to our home and risk leaving it vulnerable for the moment we would attempt to slip in, but the buzzing black melancholy always found a means of entry.

10. Billy Joel’s “Don’t Ask Me ___”

“But you are still the victim of the accidents you leave, as sure as I’m a victim of desire.”

13. N.Y. slice

Perhaps it had something to do with the weekly pizza nights, the Fridays that would always end with my father bending over our old television set, pounding and yanking this cord or that, his jeans revealing the crack below his belt. Or maybe it was his constantly inappropriate choice in movies, the ones that always prompted my mother to squeal, “Jesus, Pat, did you even look at the rating?” Don’t worry Dad, I barely remember the things I saw—something, once, about cavemen sex maybe.
15. 1990 Macaulay Culkin Film

What did he do after we left?

16. Backstreet Boy’s song of inadequacy

Crossword puzzles are tricky sometimes. I try to fill in all the blanks by memory, a little research, and sometimes even lucky guesses, but even when I do fill all the boxes, there are those blackened spaces between that will never be uncovered. Usually, I deny their existence, fearing the possibility that maybe these dim spaces aren’t irrelevant at all. It could be possible that they are filled with facts that aren’t meant to be revealed. Maybe the night we left used to be a clear answer in a neatly-lined box, but now it seems as if time and the desire to heal could have encouraged me to fill these blocks with that sweet black obscurity.

18. Small, winged insect in Madrid: la ___

Surely the flies had different effects on my mother. They may have motivated her anger, but they also deterred her attempts at departure. They blocked the farmhouse windows, obscuring her vision. When one looks to a window—an escape route—and sees nothing but the black uncertainty of the world outside, it
is hard to push through that heavy door, even with hope of the light and life beyond.

20. Suffix with any or every

No cluster of answers should be isolated from the rest.

In other words, no single thought should be separate from others. Adhering to this rule is difficult because sometimes all you really have are those small glimpses of fact in its own secluded corner, a bellowing accusation, a telephone tossed through the front door, a snowy road lined with colorless corn fields, stiff and littered with the remains of shredded stalks.

22. Will of documentary “Wordplay”

Surely the master of this puzzle must understand the challenges of memory, the need for just one more fact to reveal itself before you can complete the puzzle.

24. Street

That night, I remember the Green Monster, our mother’s pea-colored Cutless Supreme, wouldn’t start, forcing us to leave my father by foot. Was it the battery? Had it run out of gas? Or was it just too fragile and worn to continue in such bitter conditions?
26. Edward Powell Foster’s language

Maybe they just spoke different languages and Mom was sick of translating.

27. Female siblings

I don’t remember any comforting words from Lisa as we left our home that evening. Nor can I remember her reaction at all—or mine for that matter. Was I concerned, confused, crying? How does one forget their reaction toward leaving their home and father? Perhaps my six-year-old mind didn’t realize the significant change taking place, or perhaps this missing memory is the work of some necessary black ink.

29. Mesopotamian god of water

Was it Dad’s spontaneous nature? His barefoot sprints across our snow-covered lawn, his naked back-yard dances in the rain?

31. Gatherer and shaper of yarn

The images loom, but I haven’t been able to make anything out of them yet.

32. Deceived
Who knows what promises they made and broke, what or whom they promised to quit?


It’s clear that opposites attract; is this what happens when they collide?


Could we blame the lime green appliances? They didn’t even match the kitchen’s floral wallpaper. Putting the stove and refrigerator color assumptions aside and considering the three years that followed where they reunited and re-separated, it’s clear that the evening was inevitable. Most household appliances have an electric current that alters at a frequency of 60 times per second. Change keeps them running.

38. Classic fill-in-the-blank game

There is something comforting about the method of crossword completion. Every piece works together, each word or answer intertwining with the next. While working through sets of clues, one hopes to find just one answer, no matter how vague, that will generate further enlightenment—whether it be about
the beginning, middle or end—just a small fragment of the truth with which to piece together a final product.

42. **Attack command, to a dog**

Did he come after us as we left? Closing my eyes, I try to squint through the thick shadows of memory, but I don’t see anyone following us down that dirt road. Perhaps he was there and couldn’t catch up, but I never did hear any cries of despair.

43. **East of VT**

*No answers smaller than three letters.*

But memory cannot meet these restrictions either. It cannot be controlled, placed schematically aside itself to alter the number of connections that are made.

44. **Beginning and end of “love”**

Was I present for either? Perhaps there never was a beginning, or maybe it ended long before I arrived.

46. **Something scaled**

I’m not sure how it all adds up.
47. Solvent that separates materials by dissolving

Maybe it wasn’t the flies. Maybe it was all those cans of Raid, creating a chemical reaction that slowly dissolved the bond. They did, after all, spray that nasty chemical until it was hissed into all the corners of our life.

48. ___ and curls

We hung fly strips—ribbons (yes I’m giving you the answer that easily). My mom hung them all around the house, those sticky contraptions twirling in the summer heat. They rarely worked, and very few of the small yet numerous problems were eliminated by this process. Even if some were caught and my father saw them hanging before him in midair, the problems never actually disappeared. And then those ribbons merely sat suspended from the ceiling as my mother’s reminder of those black nuisances hanging and rotting in our home.

DOWN

2. “A Wrinkle in Time” villain

I never saw much of a villain. But maybe he was there, hiding beneath the beds under which my mother only cleaned.
3. Railroad sign

Were there any signs before this night?

4. Tea brand

Was it the grocery money? When on the subject of shopping a few months ago, my mother told me that my father only gave her forty dollars a week to spend on groceries for our family of four.

6. Short goodbye

Did we say anything to him before we left? Did he watch as his wife pulled his two daughters through the front door and down the driveway? Maybe he was in the bathroom and came out to find an empty house and the screen door letting out all the heat.

7. Twin of 38 across

Do not duplicate words in the grid

It is impossible to stop some memories from repeating, especially those so ambiguous.
9. Spray canola oil

Was there another woman?

10. Anguish

Did he feel any?

11. Thoughtful sound effect

I can’t remember the response of my mom’s friend as we showed up to her house that snowy night. I try to remember the look on her face as she opened her door. Was it shock? Or concern? Or one of complete expectation?

12. Separation

14. Senior senility disease

Crossword puzzles are recommended as a successful method of deterring the development of Alzheimer’s (you’re welcome).

15. Highest possible water level: Abbr.

Too many ups and downs?
There is only one thing that is clear (oops) after all this time—I try to remember where I slept that night, the couch or the Lazy-Boy, or if I took anything with me, but for some reason none of these memories have stuck—I do, however, remember the sprint from my room to Lisa’s, the soft sheets heated with the warmth of her body, and the way in which her heavy blanket, fluffy pillows, and unsteady breathing momentarily shielded me from the chill of the snowstorm outside.

Was there another man?

Perhaps she grew weary of his complete indifference. I only make this prediction based on my experience with the bored look that builds in his eyes whenever I talk to him, his nonexistent response.
Did we resist? Did Mom have to drag us from Lisa’s bed, pull us down the shag-carpeted stairs, and force us through that screen door?

23. Worn, shabby

It could have also been that mess of a room he kept off the dining room. Peeking in the cracked doorway as I passed, I would see him in there, blue sweatpants and a Weber apron, sitting feet up in his cluttered den that smelled of Stroh’s, gunpowder, and pot.

25. Clint Eastwood film “For a Few ___ More”

I think she had just started working, so maybe it was just a matter of her finally having the money.

27. Beginning of “something”

28. Stay the night

Once we arrived at Sherrie’s house, Lisa and I slept in the living room. Lying in the smoke-scented room lit with the pale green glow of the VCR clock, I wondered how I would get my clothes for the next day of school.
30. Assists

Because I still can’t bring myself to ask my mother what happened, to make her remember the story she has probably trained her mind to forget, I turn to my older sister Lisa for help. Riding with her recently to one of our niece’s basketball games, I surprise her by asking what she remembers about the night we left the farmhouse.

“I just remember waking up in the night,” she says, “and Mom coming in and saying ‘get your stuff, we’re leaving.’ I remember thinking how much stuff, what stuff, how long will we be gone, and tomorrow is the first day of school.”

She goes on to say she heard a “smashing” and the breaking of a lamp or something else. She also recalls the three of us sneaking out and running down our road.

“All I remember is that it was sort of a scary situation.”
34. Maybe

It could have been the carpet. That might seem extreme, but I could find reason to blame that shaggy mess of flooring, our living room’s ragged brown matting on which Dad would often pass out drunk.

36. Invent

The inventor of the crossword puzzle, Arthur Wynne, found a place for his creation in the New York World on December 21, 1913. It is said that the first version was printed without black spaces. I wonder what made him realize their necessity.

37. Take a ___ (If for some reason you’re thinking the answer is drink, walk, minute, break, vacation, or vow of silence, it’s not.)

Even before my sister confirmed it, I did I have a memory of something breaking against the kitchen wall that night—a kitchen chair in my mind.

39. Idiot

Did he see it coming?

40. Heats
It was probably because the house wasn’t heated very well—one vent for the entire second floor. On cold days, I could be found there in the hallway, hovering over the large grate in the floor. The warm air would blow up my soft pink My Little Pony gown, pushing out the sides and filling out the long sleeves. If I stood directly on the metal, my feet would burn after a few minutes. But it was worth it, just to feel the warmth for a while. And soon the breeze would quit—no more cozy updraft to keep me from freezing—and my pink pajamas would fall back to their normal size, the sleeves losing whatever heat I had tried to trap in for just a while longer. Time to bear the cold. Time to find some nice winter clothes.

41. Sound of uncertainty

“What about the snow?” I asked Lisa.

“It wasn’t snowing,” she said. “It wasn’t even cold.” Of course. It all happened the day before school began at the end of August.

The inaccuracy of my memory seems impossible. How we can have two drastically different accounts of what happened? Her night was a frightened rush down a late August road, while mine was a chilled stroll, a slow and silent realization of our growing distance in the dark.
45. Fairy-tale Finish: The ___

Completion of a crossword puzzle is often greeted with satisfaction and a final understanding. Except in this case, I can’t get over the fact that there will always be those spaces, the black areas that reveal no clues. Even flipping to the answers section in the back of my parent’s mind might not yield such clarity. Still, I cannot decide whether to move on to a new and easier-solved puzzle, or to keep searching those darkened corners for some new realization, hoping they haven’t been blacked out for a reason.
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Works Cited


