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Ghosts of Summer

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GHOSTS OF SUMMER

By

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ABSTRACT

GHOSTS OF SUMMER

By

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My thesis is a series linked essays and vignettes dealing with family identity, coming-of-age, and personal identity. I describe my upbringing in a post-hippie, back-to-the-land, low-income household in northern Minnesota. I then explore the impact of my father's early death on my young adult development, examining how his life and decisions have affected my own.

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GHOSTS OF SUMMER: AN INTRODUCTION

The title of my thesis, "Ghosts of Summer," plays with the title of the Dylan Thomas poem "I see the boys of summer." Roger Kahn was inspired by this line of poetry to assign a nickname to the Brooklyn Dodgers as the title of his 1972 nonfiction book about baseball, *The Boys of Summer*. The Thomas poem starts with the line "I see the boys of summer in their ruin" (1), and Kahn links this first line to the World Series of both 1952 and 1953, the two years in which he followed the Brooklyn Dodgers and saw them lose each series to the New York Yankees. I've always liked the phrase "boys of summer*"* because it can refer not only to the fleeting, seasonal nature of the baseball season, but also to the fleeting nature of winning, of athletic (or any other) prowess, of youth, and of life. While baseball appears explicitly in only one of my essays here, the wistfulness and nostalgia of baseball culture have inspired me throughout the process of writing much of my material.

For me, as for many Americans, baseball links me to my past and to my father. My father died when I was in college, and as a result, my baseball-related memories with him feel more poignant than they may have been if we had continued to attend games together into my adulthood. For a time after his death, I attended games on a very regular (and perhaps even fanatical) basis, because I enjoyed watching the various baseball stories unfold: the stories of each game as it related to each player as an individual and as a team member, and how these stories built up over time to define a season and a team and a fan base and a culture and a history. Loss was always a major part of these stories:

losses of tempers, losses of players due to trades or injuries, losses of important games or series, and the losses of each summer as the baseball seasons wore on.

Kahn writes: "Losing after great striving is the story of man, who was born to sorrow, whose sweetest songs tell of saddest thought, and who, if he is a hero, does nothing in life as becomingly as leaving it" (xii). Loss, especially as it relates to the loss of my father's life, may be my most prevalent theme throughout these essays. My search for his memory and his ghost, as I moved through the years I shared with him and into my own story, were what compelled me through the MFA program at Northern Michigan University, a three-year spring training program consisting of practice and dedication and trial and error and learning from my teammates and coaches and the masters who came before me. In putting this training to use, I have tried to express my own nostalgia as effectively as possible by telling the story of my family as individuals, and as a team.

In addition to the inspiration I drew from baseball, there are several authors who have helped guide me in the ongoing process of effectively re-creating the emotional experience of nostalgia and loss. In particular, I admire the way David Sedaris is able to take dark subjects and make them light and humorous. My favorite of Sedaris's essays, printed in his book *Naked*, is entitled "Ashes," and is ultimately about the death of his mother. However, it starts out with a series of humorous anecdotes about how he didn't want his sisters to get married so that they'd continue to keep him company, and how finally, one of his sisters got engaged. Through these anecdotes, the reader gets a sense of the dynamics of the family, and a few basic details about his mother's personality, and his close relationship to her. It isn't until page four of the fifteen page essay that Sedaris

reveals the dark news: “Three weeks before the wedding, my mother called to say she had cancer” (237). Since Sedaris has already taken the time to get the reader invested in the family, this news becomes important to us. Everything that follows is about the reaction of the family to the news. The final section of the essay takes place during in the midst of the sister’s wedding festivities, and shows final scenes from the still intact family that reveals both the humor and tragedy of the situation. For example, he is able to sum up his parents’ relationship in one scene that takes place just after the festivities:

> My mother filled her wine glass and lit a cigarette.
>
> “What are you doing?” he followed his question with an answer. “You’re killing yourself is what you’re doing.”
>
> My mother lifted her glass in salute. “You got that right, baby.”
>
> “I don’t believe this. You might as well just put a gun to your head. No, I take that back, you can’t low your brains out because you haven’t got any.”
>
> “You should have known that when I agreed to marry you,” she said.
>
> “Sharon, you haven’t got a clue.” He shook his head in disgust. “You open your mouth and the crap just flies.”
>
> My mother had stopped listening years ago, but it was almost a comfort that my father insisted on business as usual, despite the circumstances. In him, she had found someone whose behavior would never vary. He had made a commitment to make her life miserable, and no amount of sickness or bad fortune would sway him from that task. My last meal with my parents would be no different than the first. (247)

Here, Sedaris shows how his father responds to the daily his wife's cancer diagnosis, and while it is shockingly funny that he is speaking to his dying wife in this way, the fact that his father is trying to keep her from smoking and drinking also shows his concern.

Sedaris' careful reconstruction of their manner of speaking, in this section and others, accomplishes a portrayal of the family that is realistic and touching. In the subsequent section, the family has gone back to the hotel, and he and his siblings leave to take a walk.

> We laid our Econolodge bedspreads over the dewy grass of the cemetery, smoking joints and trying to imagine a life without our mother…Why couldn't she just stay where she was and not have cancer? That was always our solution, to go back in time. We discussed it in the way others spoke of bone marrow transplants and radiation. We discussed it as though it were a viable option. A time machine, that would solve everything. I could almost see its panel of blinking lights, the control board marked with etched renderings of lumbering dinosaurs and ending with Lisa's wedding. (249)

This portion also contributes to Sedaris's establishment of the inner workings of the family by showing a specific scene of him and his siblings reacting to their mother's impending death.

All of his work on establishing these scenes and relationships leads to an ending that becomes much more meaningful as a result. He concludes:

> Our mother was back in her room and very much alive, probably watching a detective program on television. Maybe that was her light in the window, her figure stepping out onto the patio to light a cigarette. We told

> ourselves she probably wanted to be left alone, that's how stoned we were. We'd think of this later, each in our own separate way. I myself tend to dwell on the stupidity of pacing a cemetery while she sat, frightened and alone, staring at the tip of her cigarette and envisioning herself, clearly now, in ashes. (250)

This ending evokes much sadness every time I read it. It works for me as a reader because I now know each character in the family, and the nature of their interactions with one another. Sedaris's certainty that his mother was watching a detective program reiterates to us how well he knew her, which compounds the loss we feel as we read the paragraph. He again uses humor as a tactic that lightens the mood, while also expressing his regret, when he writes "We told ourselves she wanted to be left alone, that's how stoned we were." His knowledge of his mother and his humor both work to convey the family dynamic and make us feel involved in that dynamic, which makes his final line about his regret for not keeping her company that night all the more devastating. He has earned the tragedy of his final sentence with his careful attention to characterization, tone, and authenticity in the previous fourteen pages.

Since I was dealing with similar subject matter throughout my thesis, I found Sedaris's technique to be instructive. I attempted similar techniques in my essay "Five AM," in which I reveal the death of my father after detailing a regular trip to Minneapolis we would take together. While I don't consider this one of my best pieces, it was an important part of the development of my writing skills as I progressed through the MFA program. I began composing it in my first year and then revised it throughout the remaining two years, eventually taking its length from three pages to eighteen. Coming

to the program as a former journalism student, I had developed a style that was sparse and punchy. I had little practice in scene setting and character development because I was used to dedicating a line or two of text to concerns such as these, leading to opening lines that might have read something like, "My dad was born in North Dakota in 1952, and died cutting wood on his Minnesota property when he was forty-six." My journalism training led to a personal essay style that was rather dry and underdeveloped.

In my first draft of "Five AM," I spent the first half of the essay providing the basic description of the Minneapolis trip, without going into much detail about my relationship with my father. At the midway point, I abruptly introduced his death, giving a basic description of what had happened before wrapping up the essay. There was little dialogue to provide the readers an insight into our interpersonal dynamics, there was not much physical description of him or me or our surroundings, and the basic consensus among my workshop class was that the essay didn't do enough to re-create the experience and evoke any kind of emotion, positive or negative. As I revised, I used more of Sedaris's techniques. In the beginning of the essay, I dedicated much more space to developing my father as a character, and showing the particulars of our relationship: the closeness of it, and the humor of our interactions. In the section that followed, I used our trip preparations as a way to reveal more information about him:

> He stood at the foot of my bed for an extra second to make sure I was awake, then ducked under the door frame, too tall at 6'5" for even the house he built, his gray stocking cap already on, tan Carhartt jacket, flannel-lined Wrangler jeans. He disappeared into his trip preparations as I stirred myself awake. He was already packed, his Chicago Bears duffle

> bag had been sitting at the foot of my parents' bed since early the previous evening. He'd won it in a radio trivia contest in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, the most useful item he'd won in these contests. It was usually a record he didn't want, like the Neil Diamond Christmas album, or a book he didn't want, *Sweet Beatle Dreams,* about a teenaged girl's crush on Paul McCartney. I inherited that one.

In this paragraph, I was able to give a physical description of him as he left my room and then allude to his interest in music by going into the backstory behind his luggage, which also added an element of humor. The luggage, and later, the radio itself, became a characterization tool, similarly to how Sedaris used his mother's cigarettes as a way to reveal her recklessness in matters of her own health (as well as his father's funny yet angry reaction to this recklessness), and finally to show that smoking was a way in which his mother comforted herself in her illness and loneliness.

While my strong memory of my father's affinity for radio trivia was easy to conjure, those of my relatives were more challenging. Because of my journalism education, I was very dedicated to keeping my accounts as fact-based as possible. If I didn't remember something, or, if in the case of my father, I had no access to certain information, I would exclude that portion of the story. This had resulted in work that was accurate but not particularly engaging or complete, as in my first several drafts of "Five AM." By reading Mary Clearman Blew's "The Art of Memoir" and Jocelyn Bartkevicius's "The Landscape of Creative Nonfiction" I learned how to get around the obstacle of incomplete memory.

In her craft essay "The Art of Memoir," Blew explains that she came to essay writing from a fiction background. "…I used the techniques of fiction in these essays: plot, characterization, dialogue. What I began to discover was a form that worked for my purpose" (Root 283). After reading about her technique, I was prompted to read more of her creative work, and I discovered that she was able to continue developing and resolving her plots in a neat arc by weaving together the stories of various women in her family. For example, in her family history memoir *Balsamroot*, she didn't know the exact outcome of a thwarted love affair of her deceased aunt's. To solve this information gap, Blew simply shifted perspective and told the reader the outcome of her own thwarted love affair.

I tried this technique in the essay "Mom," which is about both my father and my grandmother. My still-living grandmother and I both lost our fathers in work-related accidents, and while I knew some facts about her father's passing, I wasn't entirely clear on the details and it was not something I felt comfortable interrogating her about. So, instead of asking these uncomfortable questions (which I may still do in the future, if the topic comes up naturally in conversation), I indicated in the essay itself that I didn't have the heart to ask. I then speculated details about her father's accident based on what I knew of my own father's work routine, as shown in the following excerpt:

> It happened during her second year of nursing school – he was in Cold Spring, Minnesota, in an industrial area, at a business, loading supplies into his truck. What kind of truck? I'm not sure. In my mind, it's a white box truck, and her dad is tall, brown-haired, in a one piece canvas jumpsuit, flannel-lined, recently washed and pressed for his trip into town. What kind of business was it? She thinks it was a place that sold seed.

> Maybe grain? I'm not sure, and I try to refrain from asking too many questions, from getting too excited about this similarity in our lives.
>
> All I can picture is the Swany White Flour Mill, in Freeport, Minnesota, my least favorite stop on my own father's pick-up and delivery route.

From this point, I described the appearance of the Swany White Flour Mill, in order to give the reader some way to visualize the scene, although it was a scene from my memory as opposed to my grandmother's. This technique allowed me to draw parallels between my life and hers without being too obvious about it. I was clear about the fact that I was "perhapsing," as Lisa Knopp calls it in her essay "Perhapsing: The Use of Speculation in Creative Nonfiction," defining the term as "speculat[ing] an interior life." With my use of questions and clear speculation with phrases like "I'm not sure" and "in my mind," I felt that I was as true as possible to the known-to-me facts of the situation. By switching the perspective to my own, it gave me a better chance of drawing whatever story I was telling to some sort of logical and satisfying conclusion.

Another solution to the lack of information I've encountered as I've worked my way through these various creative nonfiction pieces was outlined by Jocelyn Bartkevicius in her craft essay, "The Landscape of Creative Nonfiction." In this piece, Bartkevicius relates a childhood memory of spending time with her grandmother. The memory has many gaps. Bartkevicius can't remember, for example, how old she was, how this particular conversation with her grandmother came about, or whether or not her father was present. Bartkevicius wonders why she returns to the memory so often:

> I used to think that the memory drew me in spite of its incongruities and holes. But I am beginning to realize that this memory compels me *because* of the incongruities and holes. The pitted, nearly invisible

> landscape of the past is a mysterious, inviting place. Each exploration reveals a different topography. (Root 276)

This idea of using the gaps in our memory to our advantage as nonfiction writers was enlightening to me. I was under the impression that I had to remember something clearly in order to write about it, and this greatly limited my available material. It also prevented me from using many of my most intriguing memories as writing material. As Bartkevicius writes, these memories seem to call to us again and again as we try to figure out why they keep haunting us. Our writing does not need to relate these memories perfectly; it only needs to explore their meaning.

I tried this sort of exploration in my essay "Vote 'Yes' for the Kids." The essay revolves around the Halloween I spent with my brother the week after our father died. I was initially stumped as I approached writing this essay, because neither of my brother nor I could remember many details, in spite of the fact that we both often thought of the night. I decided to focus on what we could remember, and started the essay as follows:

> My brother Andrew doesn't remember the names of any of the teachers he had in seventh grade, only their faces. He doesn't remember what he wore as a Halloween costume. I took him trick-or-treating – the first and only time I was tapped for the duty – and I can't remember either. My parents couldn't take him; my mom was too busy honoring my dad's request: after he died, he wanted a party thrown in his honor.

Throughout the rest of the essay, I compiled several snippets of information that all began with the introductory line "Here's what I remember." In piecing together my fragments of memories, my goal was to create a cohesive story of the evening, with the gaps serving

as an unspoken reminder of the trauma of the event that caused my brother and me to forget the rest.

This essay was one of the ways I attempted to conjure the ghost of my father, which was my ultimate goal as I worked my way through the process of learning to write better. My process began with baseball fanaticism, which was followed by the obsessive reading of both memoir and craft essays, and then the thrill of being drafted by an MFA program, followed by the reality of that MFA program: a lot of hard work and coaching and nursing my way through injuries to my ego as I completed revision after revision after revision. I hope that this collection shows my progress as both a writer and a conjurer of ghosts – the ghost of my father as well as the other ghosts produced by the passing of time and the ongoing losses that passage entails: childhood, adolescence, and the fleeting coming-of-age moments that fade too quickly into adulthood.

MINNEAPOLIS

I hate the new Twins stadium. "*Oh, it's such an improvement over the Metrodome! You can see the skyline! You can breathe the fresh air, feel the breeze!"* I don't care, I don't care, I don't care. I love the Metrodome and want it back.

I wasn't aware of hating the new stadium until my husband and I were about to leave our Saint Paul apartment for a game during in the first month of the 2010 season, the first season in the new outdoor stadium, Target Field. I was dilly-dallying, trying several baseball cap, t-shirt, and jacket combinations, and everything he said to speed me along in my preparations received a death-stare in response.

"You know," he said, watching me, "You've gotten mad at me before every game we've gone to this year."

I thought about this for a second. It was true I was in such a bad mood at the previous game we'd gone to that he asked me if I wanted to leave early, and I almost said yes. I never leave games early and make harsh judgments about people who do. At the Metrodome, I would watch them lumber down the stairs and out of the stadium like cattle when the Twins were down by a run or two in the eighth inning. I would want the Twins to come back and win it partly out of spite, satisfied by the thought of these people driving home to the southern suburbs in their black SUVs, listening to the rest of the game on satellite radio, and gradually realizing their mistake during the long, long drive home.

I grew up going to the Metrodome. It was built in downtown Minneapolis in 1982, when I was four years old. My family lived four hours northwest of the city, and in the summers my brothers and I took turns accompanying my dad when he came into town for his semi-monthly delivery and pick-up run for the natural foods store he managed. We came in from the west, on I-94 in his boxy white truck. Throughout the drive, goods were shuffled and exchanged: we stopped at the flour mill in Albany, where he loaded the truck with heavy white-dusted cardboard boxes. We drove far off the interstate to drop off special orders for groups of farm wives waiting in pastel-decorated, cow-smelling houses: pounds of chocolate chips, vanilla, powdered milk, dried fruit. I tagged along while he ambled in and out of houses and businesses, taking huge steps with his long legs, greeting everyone by name. "Hey, Larry!" they called back.

Then we got back in the truck, Minnesota Public Radio or classic rock blaring as he turned the key. "Ready to go, kid?" he shouted, looking over at me. "Yep." I settled into my position: slouched in the seat with my feet propped on the giant dashboard. As we started to pass the faded wood sound barrier walls of the Northwestern suburbs, I put my feet back on the floor and sat up straight so that I could keep an eye out for the tall buildings of downtown.

I had two favorite buildings: the Riverside Plaza, two beige towers of slightly different heights, decorated with brightly colored panels: blue and yellow and red, which I thought looked like rainbows. They were right next to the Metrodome, that giant marshmallow-roofed building, a bright white parachute billowing over a base of concrete walls. These three buildings were the heart of the city to me, framed by the shiny

mirrored skyscrapers that reflected them and the sky. This was Minneapolis and we were going to a baseball game.

We parked the truck for free at a downtown fruit company where he'd befriended the workers, and then we walked to buy our tickets ahead of time. He usually got the cheap seats for four dollars, but occasionally he asked if I wanted to sit closer as we approached the ticket window. "What do you think?" he'd ask. "Should I get the seven-dollar seats on the lower level?" The thought of sitting closer was exciting, but I would never take a stand on the matter. I opened my eyes wide and shrugged. I was mostly just happy to go to a game; it felt greedy to ask him to spend more money. He considered me for a second, looked at the seat map again, and said, "Why not? How often do we get to do this?" He strode up to the window and bantered with the worker before counting the bills from his thin leather wallet and exchanging them with the tickets.

Before the game, we walked to Rocky Roccoco pizza in the heart of downtown, where he bought me as much food as I wanted. "Still hungry?" he asked after I finished a slice of pepperoni pizza. I thought about it for a second. Before I answered, he was up at the counter ordering us both another slice. We ate, refilled our Cokes, and looked out the window at the city people in nice clothes as they walked fast, caught buses, smoked cigarettes. I felt like I was seeing the world, eating at the fanciest restaurant, and about to go sit in the best seats at the baseball game.

Then we went back to the Metrodome and sat in behind the plexiglass in left field, watching the same players we'd seen win the 1987 and 1991 World Series: Kirby Puckett, Dan Gladden, Gary Gaetti. I couldn't believe I was getting to see them in

person. I loved the bright green Astroturf, the blue seats, the noise of the announcements coming from the loudspeakers ("Welcome to the Humbert H. Humphrey Metrodome, home of the World Champion Minnesota Twins"), and watching the players in the outfield.

We sat behind Gladden, the leftfielder, close enough to see his red hair, long and straggly in the back, sticking out under his dark blue cap. To Gladden's left, further back, in centerfield, was Puckett. I stared at him as the other team batted, trying to convince myself that he was real. He was more compact than he seemed on TV and his uniform was whiter and more brilliant. He paced around his territory, bouncing with energy, until he crouched down with his hands on his knees to wait for the next hit. It really was the same player who had leaped into the Plexiglass to make the catch that saved Game 6 of the World Series in 1991.

My whole family had watched that game in my grandparents' basement, on a Magnavox TV with a wooden console. We sat on and around the soft blue couch, surrounded by long windows peeking out into the dark woods. When the catch happened, we all stood and cheered. My brothers and I expected no less; Kirby Puckett always saved the day – that was his job. I looked around at my family after that catch, with everyone so excited, and couldn't believe how lucky I was to be sitting with them and watching this game. I got to sit and watch my favorite player win my favorite sport with my favorite people, and we all got to be happy.

And that was how I felt at the games with my dad, which, in my memory, were all won in spectacular fashion by Puckett, even though that couldn't have been the case

every time. He must have missed a catch here and there, or struck out from time to time, but I have no recollection of any of it. I just remember the bright colors and exciting noises, the players, the fun of sitting with my dad and getting him to myself, and when we left the stadium, the whoosh of air as we exited as the pressure that held up that fiberglass roof pushed us outside. Everything was perfect. Each time we entered the city, and I first saw the walled-off suburbs, I'd think, "I am going to live here someday." This was where the magic happened.

My wish came true. I attended a boarding school in a suburb of Minneapolis for my final two years of high school, and then went to college at the University of Minnesota. I was too busy with school and friends to think much about baseball. Although I went home in the summers, and occasionally rode with my dad to the Twin Cities, those trips now involved meeting my friends in the evenings, leaving him to watch cable in the hotel room.

I remember him telling me that he liked Mark Maguire, when Maguire was on the verge of breaking the homerun record in 1998. He was probably following Maguire's career because the Twins' luck was fading. At the end of the 1995 season, Puckett was hit by a pitch that shattered his jaw. During spring training the following year, he batted well, but woke up one morning unable to see out of his right eye. After four surgeries to try and correct the glaucoma, his retirement was announced. Our other favorite players were gradually disappearing, as well, and the team's record in the late 1990s was terrible.

That same year of Maguire's homerun record, 1998, my junior year of college, a few weeks after another terrible Twins' season ended, and two days after I'd seen him in the city, watched his white boxy truck pull away after dropping me off, "See ya later, kid," my dad died in a woodcutting accident at age 46.

When he was home, he was always working: in the garage, on the house, under the car, in the yard. When I visited, he always stopped working to chat, to check in, to ask how school was going, to tell me about what he was working on. The accident happened on our land, when a branch from the tree he was cutting down snapped off and hit him behind the ear. *If he'd only had a helmet*, one of his friends said after the funeral. *Those branches come down as hard and fast as baseball bats*.

Kirby Puckett died of a stroke in 2006, a few days before his 46th birthday. When I got done with work that day, I took the train to the Metrodome. I hadn't planned on going there; it was in the opposite direction of my apartment, but I felt a pull toward downtown.

It was March and a half-frozen drizzle fell as I made my way from the train station to the shrine that fans had set up near the ticket windows. I took a long look, crouching down to be closer to all of it. Many of the items I recognized from the collection my brothers and I amassed as kids: little souvenir bats with burned-in Puckett autographs, red and white homer hankies, white and blue ticket stubs with faded black print, plastic souvenir cups with their logos scratched from repeated washings. There

were newspaper photos of Puckett during that World Series: making that Game 6 leaping catch, pumping his fist as he rounded the bases after the game-winning homerun, leaping to hug his teammates after the win. There were t-shirts, jerseys, bobbleheads, baseball cards, baseballs, and piles of freezing white flowers in funnels of cellophane.

My brother called me that night, from New Orleans, where he was living, and in a strained voice, asked, "Did Kirby Puckett really die?" We talked about him for a few minutes, and then talked for an hour about baseball, past and present. We talked about our dad as a little league coach, about the time my brother was up to bat in a clutch situation, and an annoying kid on the team tapped our dad on the shoulder over and over again.

"Hey Larry. Larry. Larry. Larry."

"*What*?" he finally responded.

"What's your favorite color?" the kid asked.

We both felt better when we got off the phone.

I had started going to games at the Metrodome again in 2002 with my then boyfriend, now husband, Frank. He rekindled my interest in the Twins by watching the games on TV, and telling me little tidbits about the players. The first thing to grab my attention was when he pointed out Doug Mientkiewicz, the first baseman, sitting on the dugout floor during an extra-inning rally. He looked like a little boy, sitting there below

everyone else on the dirty floor and nervously watching the game. He did that, Frank said, out of superstition, because once when he had done it, the Twins won. And there must have been something to it, because during the 2002 season they won the majority of their extra-inning games.

This quirk reminded me of being a kid, watching Puckett bat. He'd make the sign of the cross, tap the plate with his bat, and wiggle his bubble butt (my dad's term) as he waited for the first pitch. My brother and his little league teammates would imitate this ritual at practices to make each other and my dad, their coach, laugh.

The second thing to reel me back into Twins fandom was seeing a spectacular Torii Hunter catch on TV, and his subsequent smile after he tossed the ball into the crowd. I learned that Hunter was Puckett's centerfield protégé, and he had a similar exuberance that made him fun to watch; fans called him Spiderman because of his ability to scale the outfield walls to get to a ball. Frank was able to talk me into going back to the Metrodome to see him play.

We sat in the outfield, behind Hunter. Tickets had gone up to seven dollars for the cheap seats, and the plexiglass was gone, but the view was the same, and the blue seats were the same. In the later innings, we moved from the upper level to the lower, once the staff had stopped guarding the entryways. There were still empty seats. We found a five-dollar parking lot only a few blocks away, so parking was still easy. It didn't matter that it was raining and cold as we walked to the game: it was a short walk, and once we got inside, we were warm and dry and protected.

We started going to more and more games. By the time Hunter left the team in 2007, I had gotten to like some of the newer players as well. I read somewhere that Justin Morneau, the first baseman who replaced Mientkiewicz, would eat the exact same meal before every game for good luck: a turkey sub that he'd buy from a sandwich shop in Saint Paul on his way to practice, and a Mountain Dew Slurpee from a machine in the clubhouse that he would allow only the second baseman, Nick Punto, to prepare for him at exactly six p.m. Punto would sometimes hide from him just before six, heading to the field when he knew Morneau was looking for him in the clubhouse, until word would travel out to the field that Morneau was frantically asking around for him.

The 2009 season was the last in the Metrodome. In the final month, the Twins came back from a seven game deficit to win the division, and it seemed only natural that they should win the World Series during their final year in the Metrodome. Their last game there, though, was a post-season loss to the Yankees.

Throughout that winter, Frank read me news excerpts about all of the features of the new stadium. "Did you know that all of the wood they used in construction was grown in Minnesota?" "They're going to have themed food stands based on what the old players liked to eat." My responses were half-hearted. "Cool." "Oh, really?"

That spring, the single-game tickets were already sold out, so we had to buy a cheap season ticket package, twenty games in the same seats, which were about as far back as you could get. There was just enough room behind us to seat two loudmouthed, scraggly-bearded guys in their 30s who loved to state the obvious. "What he needs to do here is get a hit."

So, yes, I was typically in a pre-game bad mood. And now, we were trying to get out the door to make it to our third game at the new stadium, and Frank was waiting for me to explain why I was holding up our departure.

"I hate it there," I said. "I hate finding parking, I hate the crowds, I hate how every seat is full and we can't move forward, I hate how expensive it is and how cold it gets. Everything was easy and fun in the Metrodome – we knew where to park, we could get cheap seats, it was warm, it wasn't too crowded to move, and it felt like *my stadium*, the one where my dad took me."

He nodded and said that he understood. He didn't really: he never liked the Metrodome because he grew up in Texas and had always gone to a fancy outdoor stadium to see the Rangers with his dad. That stadium was still there; they could still go. But he listened, and after that, I was finally able choose my outfit and get out the door.

We had to walk about a mile from our parking spot and shuffle through crowds of people to get to our seats. We walked up and up, and sat down in front of our neighbors, who wasted no time getting into their hard-hitting analysis of the game. "Man, he needed to *catch* that ball!" Frank and I looked at each other. "Wanna go down to the standing room section?" he asked. We made our way back down the stairs.

We found a decent view, in a section not too crowded, just behind first base. As it began to get dark and cold, and I began to get annoyed that I didn't have a heavier jacket, I looked out over the field as the stadium lights came on. There was Morneau, glowing in his white uniform. He was arranging the dirt behind the base with his cleats, right foot and left, back and forth in a fan formation, over and over again, like he always did.

FIVE A.M.

My dad tickling the bottoms of my feet. Five in the morning, no daylight yet outside the small curtainless window above my bed. I jerked my feet under the blanket, woke up enough to hear the rumble of the truck parked in the driveway, and then remembered. Spring break was over; it was time to leave home again, return to Minneapolis.

I'd gotten more sleep than usual and was in a good mood, not my usual sullen five-in-the-morning self. I'd been accompanying him since I was eight, one or two times each summer, on his delivery route for the health food store he managed. These trips were like a vacation for me: two hundred miles of relaxation as we made our way southeast to the low sounds of Minnesota Public Radio, driving by lakes and cornfields and dark rolling hills that gradually faded to sprawling suburbs lined with fast food restaurants and big box stores, until we rounded a curve on I-94 and the silver buildings of downtown Minneapolis appeared. When he was done with his deliveries in the city, we'd go out for pizza – and at the end of the day, the B. Dalton at the Brookdale Mall so I could buy a Sweet Valley Twins book, or the Metrodome for a Twins game in the cheap seats. Once, when he finished his work early, we did both.

But now I was seventeen, going back to my boarding school after spring break. He stood at the foot of my bed for an extra second to make sure I was awake, then ducked under the door frame, too tall at 6'5" for even the house he built, his gray stocking cap already on, tan Carhartt jacket, flannel-lined Wrangler jeans. He disappeared into his

trip preparations as I stirred myself awake. He was already packed, his Chicago Bears duffle bag had been sitting at the foot of my parents' bed since early the previous evening. He'd won it in a radio trivia contest in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, the most useful item he'd won in these contests. It was usually a record he didn't want, like the Neil Diamond Christmas album, or a book he didn't want, *Sweet Beatle Dreams,* about a teenaged girl's crush on Paul McCartney. I inherited that one.

My dad won these contests because he was at work before anyone else, left the house at five so he could have the store to himself for a few hours, blare the classic rock station through the aisles as he filled orders, stock orange bottles of vitamins on the metal shelves, repackage giant paper sacks of flour into small heat-sealed plastic bags. When the early morning trivia question came on the radio, he would almost always know the answer, and he would be one of the few people awake and near a phone.

"What year did Keith Moon die, and what was the name of his replacement drummer for The Who?"

My dad had a phone in the back stockroom, and he had the number of the station memorized. I would imagine, based on his commentary when the radio was on at home or in the car, that he gave the DJ more information than he needed.

"Kenney Jones, used to drum for The Faces, replaced Moon in '79, the year after Moon died. Jones lasted about ten years; Daltrey wanted him out and I heard they just got Ringo Starr's kid to go on tour with them this year."

"Okay! Wow! Well, thanks for calling in, Larry! I guess you know your Who history! Why don't you stay on the line so we can get this duffle bag sent out to you!"

I had never witnessed what he did these Minneapolis trip mornings; I always slept until the last possible moment. I knew that the doors of the house and garage and truck opened and shut with more frequency as we neared our departure time, and that the radio was on in both the garage and truck, loud enough for me to hear the dulled sounds of DJs talking, music playing, newscasters casting as he opened and shut the doors. I got dressed – jeans, Sonic Youth Goo t-shirt, black blazer – and packed a few remaining things – toothbrush, checkered pajama pants, journal. I heard him in his bedroom, murmuring to my mom, probably leaning over her to say goodbyes – her bangs wound around two pink foam rollers coming loose and the rest of her highlighted hair splayed out over a worn pillowcase. There was the sound of a kiss, her half-cranky groan as she tried to find sleep again, and then his footsteps over the stoop separating their room from the front door. The door opened and closed, and I knew I had no more time to spare – once he said goodbye to my mom, he didn't come back inside. It was one of the last steps in the process of leaving. He was ready to go.

The big white box truck was parked in front of the garage. It was still dark outside, but the cab light was on. He sat in the driver's seat, writing down the mileage and whatever other details he wrote down in a spiral Garfield notebook.

I opened the door, took the big step up into the passenger's seat, and he looked up from his jotting, said, "Hey, kid." Minnesota Public Radio played, too loud as always, droning voices that I tuned out, catching only snippets – "President Clinton," "reelection campaign," "Super Tuesday."

He grabbed my duffle bag, blue and white Guatemalan print, and brought it around to the back of the truck, where I could hear him performing his final checks, like a

pilot. I heard the thuds and scrapes of boxes being moved – boxes full of Swany White flour, chocolate chips, prunes, dates, figs – being placed tightly together so nothing shifted during the drive. He rearranged the cover to the giant Styrofoam cooler, made sure the blocks of farmer's cheese, the bricks of bulk American cheese, the clear jars of wheat germ would keep until they arrived to the farmhouses where he was delivering them. Then, the sound of the door closing panel by panel, the slam shut, the clank of the latch, and his footsteps back to the cab. He jotted a few more numbers in the notebook and reached across me to put it in the glove compartment, his jacket musty from summers of being stored in the garage. When he shifted the truck into gear, it climbed out of the long driveway, taking a right toward Ashby, our first stop on the delivery route.

I leaned my head on the window and fell asleep, waking up for a second in Ashby as he pulled the truck out of the loading dock after making his delivery. More droning news on the radio, Al Gore talking through his nose about balanced budgets. I woke up again when we pulled into the Hardee's in Alexandria for breakfast, an hour east on I-94. Cinnamon and raisin biscuits, bacon and egg croissants, and orange juice.

My dad asked me if I was still hungry when I finished the first order, and when I said yes, he smiled and nodded, impressed by my appetite. He got up from the orange booth and went up to the counter to order four additional cinnamon and raisin biscuits. These were a delicacy to a kid who'd grown up in a health food house. My favorite part was the frosting – a sticky white sugar glaze. I could eat as many as I wanted, not having to share food or attention with my younger brothers.

We probably talked about my future; he liked to ask me about it.

"Where do you think you'll be in five years?" he asked.

My answer was always the same. "I want to live in New York and write for Rolling Stone."

"Well, you're a good writer." He nodded his approval and I felt like the world was wide open for me. I imagined my life, in a minimalist apartment painted in primary colors, shiny-haired friends drinking red wine as Prince played on the stereo and the lights of the city glowed outside. I looked out the plate glass windows of the Hardee's in Alexandria; Travis Tritt played in the background. My view was obscured by a giant decal advertising Hot Ham 'n' Cheese for ninety-nine cents.

My dad once bought me an entire box of Little Debbie Oatmeal Cream Pie cookies. When I was at school in Minneapolis, he would come to see me when he finished his pick-ups in the city, on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month. He took me shopping at Target for whatever I needed – toothpaste, notebooks, socks – and as we neared the end of our shopping trip, we would pass the snack aisle where he'd ask me if anything looked good. This time, I picked out one of the individually wrapped Oatmeal Cream Pies.

"Good idea," he said, starting to get one for himself, and then glancing over at me with an eyebrow raised. "Should we get a box of them?"

"I'm not gonna say no," I said, laughing.

He picked up a box and then noticed a sign saying they were two for two dollars.

"What the hell," he said, throwing a second box into the cart.

My family never had a junk food supply in the house – our cupboards were filled with the same clear bags of wheat flour and brown rice and lentils that my dad packaged

and delivered –but we all had our secret ways of supplying ourselves. My mom had a stash of fun-sized Almond Joy bars that she'd buy after holidays; my brother Jeremy was usually able to locate them in her underwear drawer and sneak them slowly enough that she didn't notice. My dad bought himself Hershey bars (without almonds – he needed his chocolate pure) at gas stations and ate them before he got home. I drank Diet Coke and ate jelly sandwiches on white bread at friend's houses.

The Oatmeal Cream Pies would be our secret; neither of us even needed to say it. My dad had the clerk separate my stuff into its own plastic bag, and made sure one of the boxes of cookies was in it. When we got into the truck, he placed his box of cookies on the floor between us and we ate two apiece on our way to dinner.

This was our routine: first Target, then dinner, another junk food loophole: either at Arby's where we'd each get our own tray with two roast beef sandwiches, a large order of curly fries, and a Coke (when my mom took us to fast food restaurants, it was for a sandwich and a water only); or the Chinese buffet where he ordered hot tea and I ordered Orange Crush and we went back again and again for cream cheese wontons, sweet and sour chicken, lemon shrimp, egg rolls. When the waitress brought the bill, he would put his half on a work credit card and my half on his credit card, and then we'd break open the fortune cookies and read each other our fortunes. I saved all of mine, put them in a shoebox – it didn't seem right to throw them out. They told the future and I saved them whether they were good – "You will receive many stamps in your passport" – or dumb – "You will succeed in business ventures." Part of me believed they would all come true, but only if I had proof of their prediction. And part of me wanted mementos of these

trips with my dad – "Keep some souvenirs of your past, or how will you ever prove it wasn't all a dream?"

I last saw him on the fourth Tuesday in October, 1998. Clinton had been re-elected – my mom had voted for him and Gore while my dad voted for Nader, and although I hadn't told him this and he hadn't asked, I had done the same. I was a junior at the University of Minnesota. New York University had been too expensive. Now, I lived with a roommate in Saint Paul in an apartment cluttered with her barely-used makeup vials and the mis-sized Marc Jacobs shirts and designer high heels she bought off the sale rack at the downtown Dayton's on her lunch break from a temporary receptionist job.

My dad had come on the second and fourth Tuesday every month for four years now, but this time, for the first time, I forgot he was coming. I was at a coffee shop, The Purple Onion, multi-leveled, many-windowed, and dingy-floored, in Dinkytown, Minneapolis when I remembered. I had ordered the special, mocha with a shot of raspberry syrup, and was chatting with a friend from my freshman dorm, Lindsey. We'd set a date to come here the week before, and never in the course of the week had I remembered that my dad was coming today. Lindsey was from Wisconsin, but she affected a sophisticated, almost European accent. She was little, with long blonde hair, and wore dark purple eyeliner and jeans so wide-legged they looked like a skirt swishing around her legs as she walked. They were meant to enhance her dancing at the raves she attended every weekend. She'd been talking for an hour about raves (Chanomi, you *have* to try it) and Radiohead (their new album is *unreal*).

I'd felt uneasy all afternoon and then it hit me why. It was four o'clock, which was usually when my dad showed up at my apartment. I ran to catch the 16 bus. It pulled up as I approached the bus stop, one bit of good luck. Once I boarded, though, it crawled along University Avenue during the afternoon rush, past campus, up the hill by the witch's hat water tower –old and concrete with a green conical top. At the top of the hill, the sprawling brick TV studio – KSTP in red block letters at the top – that marked the line between Minneapolis and Saint Paul. I had signed up to attend a journalism networking event there later that night and I was already dreading it.

The bus puttered along past fast food restaurants until arriving, forty-five minutes later, at the connecting bus stop, in front of the endless parking lot of Rainbow Foods, half the full bus disembarking, me at the end of a line of slow-moving workday people. I was irritated by the crowd – I usually skirted rush hour with late morning and early afternoon classes.

I speed-walked along the route of the connecting bus, too impatient to wait – past Kmart, Borders, Target – checking back over my shoulder to make sure my bus wasn't about to pass me. I made it half of the two miles home before the bus caught up, another twenty minutes lost. It dropped me off on Selby Avenue, in front of the convenience store where a group of teenagers had once stuffed a wadded-up five-dollar bill into my hand and talked me into buying a box of Swisher Sweets cigars for them, but the clerk wouldn't sell to me because he'd seen our transaction outside. I was seven blocks from my apartment – dingy vinyl-sided houses in whites and beiges gave way to freshly-painted Victorian houses in pastels.

As I entered my neighborhood, duplexes and brick student apartment buildings, I kept my eye on the street, waiting to see my dad's white box truck parked on the side, towering above the sedans and minivans. At two blocks away, I still hadn't seen it and I wondered if he had given up on me and left. And then, a block away, it was there, parked on a side street. I picked up my pace, blew into the door of my building, hopped the stairs to the apartment and rushed inside. He was washing his hands at the kitchen sink, bent down so he could reach it, out of place against the retro turquoise paint job in his grey stocking cap, red flannel shirt, and Wranglers. I patted him on the shoulder and apologized for being late. "No problem, kid," he said, wiping his hands on a paisley dish towel and putting his arm around me. "I just got here."

He sat on my roommate's vintage couch in the living room – mint green with gold metallic thread woven throughout. I sat next to him and my roommate sat on the floor. She had just been to the craft store, where she bought some googly eyes, the kind that kids stick to their drawings during art class. She was sticking them to her eyelids and then rubbing her eyes and stretching her arms as if she was just waking up, all while humming the song "Morning Mood." My dad and I laughed, he harder than me. I was used to her antics and anxious to get going, to go eat with him. I felt guilty about being late, relieved that I got to see him anyway, and possessive of his time, of our time together. My roommate had never been part of our twice monthly routine: he picked me up, we shopped, we ate, we talked. That was what we did.

We walked toward the restaurants on Grand Avenue, our feet shuffling through orange and yellow leaves along the sidewalk.

"Why don't we go to that Italian café we saw on our way to the sub shop a couple of weeks ago?" he asked.

He wanted to go there then, but I told him that I thought it was too expensive. Its black cloth awning with white block lettering – "D'Amico and Sons" – set out against the yellow brick of the building and the flowerboxes beneath the windows had always seemed prohibitive – too nice for me, for us – similar to the logo and sparse décor of J.Crew, where I had also never been. We stepped inside to workers in black uniforms standing behind glass display cases. We ordered ham sandwiches on focaccia bread, six dollars apiece, and sat down at a table made of shiny hardwood. This was the fanciest place we'd eaten together. I wondered why he wanted to go there, why it stood out to him so much that he'd remembered it two weeks later, mentioned it again, came as close as he ever came to insisting that we go.

When we'd gone to the sub shop two weeks before, I was excited about the low prices. "Man, $3.25 for a sandwich? That's such a good deal! I could eat here a couple times a week and it would be as cheap as groceries!" He had smiled, but without making eye contact. After we ordered, we sat down at the tall stools at the counter and didn't talk much.

A few weeks before that, as we sat in his truck chatting before I got out at my apartment, he had asked me his usual question: what did I think I'd be doing in five years? It was still summer then, and I was working full-time as a temporary receptionist at a company that sold faulty home security systems and where I was the first point of contact for disgruntled customers with tripped alarms.

"All I know right now," I said, "is that I don't want to be working full-time. This job is taking it out of me. I want to have more time."

He and my mom had always worked part-time; it had allowed them both to spend more time with my brothers and me.

"It has been nice having time," he said. "But I've been thinking lately that it would have been nice to have money, too."

He spoke in the past tense – "it would have been nice" – which I found odd. His best friend Mike was dying of lung cancer at the time, and I wondered if this made my dad feel older than forty-six, like it was too late to make a change. Not long before Mike was diagnosed, my dad's same-aged cousin had shot himself, marking the first funeral he'd attended for someone his own age. Maybe once people of your generation began to die, you started to feel like your life was moving along like water, along a path that had already been carved, lower and lower, until it joined up with everything else, too late.

Mike had died on Labor Day, and now, less than two months later, we sat for the first time in a restaurant that served water in glasses instead of paper or plastic cups.

This time, my dad had just returned from the funeral of Mike's older brother in Minot, North Dakota. He'd died of a heart attack at forty-eight, one month after Mike.

I asked how the trip went.

"About as well as a funeral trip can go," he said. "I've been going to too many of these things lately."

"Yeah," I said. I tried to smile in a comforting way. I looked at the window at a small oval logo etched in white – D'Amico. It was getting dark outside.

I looked back at my dad, changed the subject. "How are Grandma and Grandpa?"

"They seemed to be good. I didn't get to see much of them. I got in late the night before the funeral and had breakfast with them in the morning. I told your grandma that I was using their house like a motel. They asked about you, of course, asked how school was going."

We paused as one of the black-shirted waiters came by to refill our water glasses, his hands fluid.

"Did you see Harold?" I asked.

His brother, two years older than him, still lived in Minot and hadn't been to our house in Minnesota since I was a baby. He was the opposite of my dad – unmarried, stout, with a beard that never changed lengths while my dad's facial hair was always transforming – stubble, scraggly beard, trimmed, mustache-only, clean-shaven. Harold ran a print shop downtown, and when we'd see him at Christmastime in Minot – he'd stop by my grandparents' sterile rambler house when he could get away from work –he'd sit on the floral loveseat next to the gas fireplace stacked with the most recent issues of *Reader's Digest*.

"Hey, kids," he'd say to my brothers and me in his booming, nasal voice. "How's school going?"

"Good," we'd say in small voices, never quite used to this guy.

"You like your teachers?"

"Yes."

After this was out of the way, the adults would take over the conversation which was almost always directed by Harold and only ever about the print shop.

"Well, Sven Olsen just died. You remember him, Larry? He was Johnny's dad. Anyway, I've gotta do about 250 programs for that funeral, so that'll keep me busy until the end of the week, and then there's the Thompson/Smith wedding. You know her, Larry, right? Carol Smith?"

My dad would have already disengaged, his focus shifted to my brothers and me putting together a puzzle at the table. "Uh huh."

I'd never asked about Harold before, or really even thought about him, but now I was curious. My dad took another bite of his focaccia sandwich, took his time to chew, then a sip of ice water before he answered – reticent, dismissive. "Yeah, I saw Harold. He was at the funeral."

I wanted to know more about his brother, my uncle. All I knew was that he ran the print shop, lived in Minot, and used to throw famous New Years Eve parties; my dad still talked about one he brought me to when I was a baby. Harold's little white house by the railroad tracks was packed with all of his and my dad's Minot friends and thumping with the Rolling Stones latest album , probably *Some Girls,* probably bought for him as a gift by my dad. My dad was in the process of feeding me some eggnog from the punch bowl when Harold ran over to yell, "Larry! There's rum in there!" He and Harold would still laugh about this at Minot Christmases. "Well, I think she turned out okay," my dad would say.

"How's Harold doing?" I asked him now. He savored his final bite while I waited for an answer.

"Same old, same old. He just works at the print shop and that's all he talks about. All work and no play make Harold a dull boy."

I gave up. Our sandwiches were gone. The gas lamp streetlights outside had come on.

"Want some dessert?" he asked.

"I don't think I have time. I have to get to a journalism networking thing in Minneapolis by seven – what time is it?"

I usually would blow off something like a journalism networking event, but after a shaky start to the semester, I wanted to prove to him and my mom that I was serious about school now, that I was going to make a go of it.

He looked at his watch. "Six fifteen," he said. "Where's it at?"

"It's at KSTP, right on the border of Minneapolis, on University."

"Oh," he said. "That shouldn't take too long. Rush hour's over. We'll just head straight over there from here. Let's get some dessert."

We walked up to the counter and instead of picking a ramekin of cocoa-dusted tiramisu or a rectangular plate of powder-sugared cannoli, we each ordered a dish of Haagen Dazs ice cream – two scoops apiece packed into perfect half-spheres in stemmed ice cream dishes: strawberry for me and chocolate for him. He always said that Haagen Dazs made the best chocolate ice cream. I ate mine too fast, worried about the time. He glanced up at me, and picked up his own pace, both of us quiet, neither of us savoring these desserts that had cost three dollars apiece.

It was dusk when we left the restaurant, shuffled through the leaves back to the truck. "Thanks for dinner," I said. "That place was good. Good call."

"No problem, kid," he said.

He pulled onto Grand Avenue, then Snelling.

"Hey, is this where Cheapo Records is at?" he asked, recognizing the street.

"Yeah, it's a couple of blocks from here."

"You wanna go?"

I wasn't sure if he'd forgotten about my event, or if he remembered and didn't care. I thought about saying yes, about forgetting the whole thing and hanging out with him instead.

"I should probably get to the TV station," I said.

"Okay."

He drove past the record store, took a left onto University, past the same ugly fast food restaurants I'd passed on my way to see him – letters burnt out in their glowing signs – Ary's, Wndy, Aplebe's – their interiors brightly lit, illuminating window decals instead of the people inside.

He dropped me off at the top of the hill, KSTP studios. I took off my seatbelt and reached over to hug him.

"Love ya, kid," he said.

"Love you, too. Thanks for the ride."

"Good luck in there."

I started to close my door and the wind did the rest of the job for me, slamming it shut harder than I'd intended. I shrugged and smiled at him, stood on the wide sidewalk outside the studio and watched as he turned the white truck around, passed me one more time and held his hand up – a trucker's wave – as he drove back the way we came. I watched until he took a left, made his way toward Highway 280 and his room at the Motel 6 on the western edge of the city, chosen because of its proximity to me and to the

freeway and his morning pick-ups. As I made my way toward the glass doors of the studio, I could still hear the rumble of his truck.

He would take 280 to Highway 36, exit at Fairview Avenue, pull up just outside of the too-low blue overhang in front of the lobby of the Motel Six, against a backdrop of three-stories of white evenly dotted with blue doors. He'd leave the truck running, grab his wallet from the dash, duck inside to pay. He'd back into his spot on the edge of the parking lot, walk up unpainted concrete steps in the open stairwell to the door of his third floor room, his Bears duffle bag in hand.

He'd keycard his way in after a try or two, turn on a light switch that illuminated a tiny lamp on the nightstand, set his coat and bag on a wood-framed chair upholstered in scratchy maroon fabric, sprawl out on a shiny polyester bedspread, its loud splatter pattern featuring the blue of the door and the maroon of the chair – a few cigarette burns to match the stale smell in his nonsmoking room. Turn on his TV, find Seinfeld reruns or a half-finished World War II documentary on the History Channel, watch until 9:30 or so when he'd unzip the duffle bag, place his flannel shirt inside and retrieve his bathroom bag – dark brown faux leather, inherited from his dad. He'd set it on the beige plastic sink illuminated by a strip of fluorescent light, take off his glasses, and unpeel the thin, shiny, blue-logoed paper from the tiny bar of soap – the antiseptic smell of generic Dial invading his nostrils as he tossed the wrapper into a plastic garbage can whose liner clung to the sides only because of static. He'd hunch to get close enough to the sink, look close in the mirror for a moment before he began washing his face – rub the dark red ovals imprinted on the sides of his nose, see the permanent crinkles around his blue eyes, the lightness of his brown hair newly mixed with gray, the tiny scar on his left earlobe from a

thirty-year old piercing. Maybe he thought about the ice cream, the focaccia bread, his lost brother, cousin, best friend. Maybe he fell into bed without thinking.

I walked inside the TV station. Inside was a dark lobby and an empty front desk. Beyond the lobby was a lit hallway and a propped open door. I followed the hallway around a corner, and to my left through propped double doors was a fluorescent lit conference room with no windows and confetti carpet. It was filled with better-dressed and more punctual people than me. They stood with punch cups in half-circles of awkward conversations.

I hovered by the door for a moment – I was still in the light wash jeans and a maroon wool jacket I'd been wearing all day. The girls my age were in black pants and cheap blouses, the boys were in khakis and polos, and the adults – the station workers, journalists, networkers – were in dark colors, the women in pencil skirt suits and high heels and the men in swishing wool pants and shiny black shoes. I lingered for a moment longer, wished I had stayed with my dad, and then walked in toward the plastic punch bowl, filling a clear cup with watered-down red punch and standing at the table alone, nodding at anyone who came over for more punch, and waiting for a keynote speaker in a hot pink blouse who would talk about opportunity and extracurricular involvement and making contacts.

Less than forty-eight hours later, my dad would be dead, lying in orange, yellow, and red leaves at the base of an oak tree trunk on our property. As he chainsawed it down for winter firewood, a branch had snapped off and struck him behind the ear.

I went home. A few days before the funeral, my mom convinced me to walk with her to the spot where it happened; I was the last in the family to go. I put it off, made excuses – "I have to work on homework," "I'm going to take a nap right now." She convinced me by telling me that it was a peaceful spot, that he died on a sunny day, looking up through the trees at the blue sky. We walked through the half acre field on the hill behind our house – she led – she was shorter and thinner than me now, her hair blonder from a spray with dark roots starting to show, her body draped in a too-big red and black checked wool jacket and a pair of light jeans my youngest brother had outgrown.

We waded through overgrown yellow quack grass until we reached the old farm road – rutted on sides with a strip of dead grass down the middle – until we saw his orange Chevy truck, a beater from the 1970s that he'd bought from a local guy a couple of years before. It was parked at the entryway to the woods, at an angle next to the road. She walked me past a fallen oak – a thick, long trunk and branches at the top that seemed too thin and small to hurt anyone. She pointed at the ground beyond it.

"There's where we found him."

I looked at the spot, flat and clear of the brush that surrounded us. It was marked by the earplugs he wore while he chainsawed, blue foam connected by a bright orange string, resting on top of the leaves. A white one-gallon ice cream bucket was turned on its side between us and the truck, a black bottle of chainsaw oil inside – maybe he had kept his work gloves there, too, his earplugs, his safety glasses. I looked up at the sky through the bare trees: a different shade of blue.

A few months later, I went to an early morning yoga class in Saint Paul. I got up before the sun and drove my boxy white Volvo to the gym. At the end of class, as dawn was breaking, we did the corpse pose, lying on our backs, closing our eyes, trying to empty our minds. My mind felt clear for the first time since it happened. I was nearly dozing I remembered – my dad tickling my feet to wake me up. The instructor told us to open our eyes, turn to our sides, return to a seated position. I stayed flat, kept my eyes closed. I could almost feel it.

OCTOBER 1998

I took a spot in the back of the stadium seating of the lecture hall, realizing too late that I had given myself a perfect view of the square-headed jock in front of me as he spit tobacco juice into a Pepsi bottle. My journalism professor was a fast-talking, pink-shirted, mustached former publicist from Los Angeles who took great pride in his work on *America's Most Wanted*. The dull headache that I'd felt all day on the right side of my head intensified as he spent the first hour of class detailing how to use any method necessary to get interviews from families who had just experienced a death.

I had a paper due for my Spanish class the next day and walked in the dark to Folwell Hall, an ominous 1906 four-story red brick building on the edge of the University of Minnesota campus that stretched across an entire block. In the daylight, you could see that it was in ill-repair: chipped, dulling bricks; the pale stone window trim turned gray from pollution; granite stairwells with rough, chipped banisters where gargoyles used to be. I entered through ancient revolving doors that led to worn beige linoleum floors and a mausoleum-like smell. The dark wood door to the computer lab felt hermetically sealed; there was a suction as I opened it, and it slammed shut behind me. The people inside turned to look, then turned away. I wasn't as interesting to look at as I used to be. My vintage punk look of freshman year – cat eyeliner, blue butterfly-collared jacket, chain wallet, green suede Vans skater shoes – had faded over the past two years into a

makeupless face, a pair of oversized olive green corduroys, white leather discount sneakers, and dull brown hair grown out from a bright blonde dye job.

I made my way toward a blue plastic chair in the back of the first row, unpacked my literature text, my notebook, my green plastic folder stuffed fat with handouts from all my classes, my floppy disk, which I popped into the beige Mac all-in-one. The paper was only three pages long, an analysis of a poem in my Latin American Literature class, but I was already overwhelmed. I opened my notebook to scan the notes I'd taken, hovered my fingers above the home row.

"Is there a Chanomi in here?"

The computer lab attendant, a portly graduate student with a sweet face, was holding up a telephone, looking around.

"Uh, yeah! That's me!" I walked to grab the phone from him. "I wonder how anyone found me in here?" I asked and he shrugged, smiled.

"Chanomi?" It was my roommate, Amy.

"Hey! How did you know I was here?" The attendant was not paying attention anymore, had sat down at his desk.

"You need to call your mom." She was stern as usual, but louder, with a shrillness around the edges.

"Why?" I asked, laughing at how serious she sounded. "Did something *bad* happen?" The attendant glanced up at me and then looked back down.

"You just need to call your mom. I'll be there in a few minutes to pick you up."

"Oh." I said. Then, "Okay."

I handed back the phone to the attendant, both of us straight-faced now. I tried to acknowledge him, smile again, but it may have looked like I was grimacing. I watched him hang up the phone; he set it down crookedly the first time, fiddled to get it right. His desk was cluttered – plastic boxes of floppy disks, coffee cups full of cheap Bic pens, reams of printer paper torn open, like he opened a new one each time the printer ran out of paper without ever remembering the old ones. I wonder if his brain mirrored his desk, forgot assignments, missed work shifts, barely kept everything contained.

"Thanks," I said, and he said, "Sure," and I paused before walking away, a moment of liking him, his scattered desk, his pleasant face.

He smiled, held up a hand as if to wave me out of this world.

I returned to my computer and repacked my things – textbook, notebook, folder, floppy disk. I focused on controlling my hands, which had started to shake. I pried open the hermetically sealed door and walked to the end of the dark hallway, where a payphone was mounted on the wall, lit in dim red by a Coke machine. I dialed my parents' calling card number with my mind flipping through possible scenarios. Maybe my brother Jeremy got himself into drug trouble at his arts high school. Maybe my youngest brother Andrew was in a bus accident on the way home from a Tae Kwon Do tournament. Maybe my dad.

I had seen him two days before when he'd come into town for pick-ups for the health food store where he and my mom worked. I was late meeting him at my apartment, and my roommates, Hailey, a high school friend, and her older sister Amy, both dramatic fashionistas with hair dyed black and deep orange respectively, had let him in. When I arrived, he was washing his hands at the kitchen sink, out of place against the retro turquoise paint job in his red flannel shirt and Wranglers. I patted him on the shoulder and apologized for being late. "No problem, kid," he said, wiping his hands on a paisley dish towel and putting his arm around me. "I just got here."

My mom answered the phone. Her voice was strained, an octave higher than usual. She often sat at the kitchen table as she talked, her white work shirt replaced with a heavy wool Aztec print sweater, her eyes with tired black mascara circles underneath, the cordless phone cradled between her ear and shoulder as she inspected the ends of her shoulder-length hair, blonde from the Sun-In she sprayed on it at night to cover the encroaching gray. Now she was out of breath, probably still wearing her work clothes. "Do you have anyone with you right now?"

"No, but someone's coming."

"Well. I hate to tell you this," she breathed and sighed. "Your dad was killed today. There was a chainsawing accident."

This information didn't register, but I whispered, "Oh my God," as if I was horrified. The Coke machine next to me began to make thudding noises, as if the cans inside were being reorganized one by one.

"Where is he?" I asked and then wondered if that was the right way to ask the whereabouts of someone who had died.

"At the hospital in Fergus Falls," she said. It occurred to me that maybe he was still alive if he was at the hospital. Why would they take a dead person to the hospital? The Coke machine continued to thunk and thud – the sound of cold, slippery cans bumping against each other – like ghosts were ordering from inside the machine, soda after soda.

"I need you to keep it together right now," she said. Until she said this, I didn't know it was possible to come apart. What would that entail? Shrieking and wailing, pulling the soda machine to the floor?

I was resting on one knee on the floor, as if I was proposing. I wanted to sit down but the cord of the payphone wouldn't reach far enough to let me. It didn't feel right to stand back up, like I was supposed to at least try to sit down after being told my dad was dead.

Two weeks before, I had dropped out of school with a manic plan to get myself to California. I spent the previous year studying in Costa Rica, and was not impressed with Minnesota since my return.

I wasn't worried about disappointing my parents; they had both dropped out of college to go to San Francisco in the early 1970s. My dad had gone first, in the fall, after he and his best friend were kicked out of their University of North Dakota apartment for playing their Grateful Dead records too loud. He was a daily pot smoker, tall and thin, with long brown hair that he pulled back into a low ponytail, a self-pierced ear, and thick, dark-rimmed glasses. He set up an independent study project in philosophy with one of his professors, and he and his friend headed west, stopping at communes and meditation centers along the way.

When he came back to North Dakota for Christmas, he decided to drop out of school and move back to California. He asked my mom to join him; she was just a friend at the time, a friend who'd made him food after he'd starved himself for two weeks to avoid the draft. She was a former cheerleader and current hippie with long sandy brown hair parted down the middle. She wore her grandmother's shawls with flowing broomstick skirts, outfits that accentuated her long leanness. She was between semesters, and presented her dropping out to her parents out as a break from college. My grandpa begged her not to go, told her she'd never go back to school, that she was setting herself up for a life of poverty and failure. His arguments didn't sway her; she said she'd never felt surer of anything: she was going to California to be with my dad.

They were there for only a semester, heading back to North Dakota at her request, where she finished college and he didn't. They moved to an old farmhouse in Minnesota, an hour east of Fargo, got jobs at a food co-op, had kids. They told San Francisco stories to my brothers and me: an apartment on Lyon Street, her job at the B. Dalton bookstore,

his job at the JC Penney sandwich shop, the time they were mugged by a guy who wanted ten dollars and my dad asked if he had change for a twenty. They were twenty when they headed west. I was twenty now.

I dropped all my classes late on a Friday afternoon, October 2, the last day to get a full tuition refund. I had been mulling over the idea all week, but on that Friday, there was a chill in the air, which I took as a sign that it was time for me to leave town. I was shaky but determined as I walked up the wide granite stairs of Williamson Hall to the registrar's office, and then a little disappointed by how bored the retirement-aged clerk – one of many in a labyrinth of help desks inside the cavernous office – seemed by my request, glancing over her reading glasses as I asked her to drop me from my classes and then lowering her gaze to her computer, where she typed the information by rote. "All set," she said, still looking at the computer. The transaction took only a few minutes, and as I walked outside and felt the cold air, I felt triumphant. I wanted to throw my books into a garbage can as I made my way to the curb, where I would jump into a moving car that would whisk me away to the ocean.

Instead, I walked to the bus stop several blocks away as the wind picked up, rattling orange and yellow leaves across the sidewalk. I did my best to keep glimmers of doubt from my mind: how I'd need to break my apartment lease, quit my job as a receptionist at the school paper, and then get myself to the coast with two-hundred dollars in my bank account and no car.

My roommates weren't home when I arrived. Hailey recorded a message on our answering machine to tell me they had gone to their parents' house for the weekend. She

would have been excited for me, full of ideas about where I could go and what I could do. We had met at an arts boarding school when we were juniors; she was a visual artist and I was in the writing program. Our friendship had been sealed one night when she invited me to an eighties theme party at a nearby roller rink. She dressed up for the event, in rainbow legwarmers and bright red plastic-framed sunglasses that set off her dyed black hair, while I stuck to my tomboy uniform of jeans and an oversized, striped t-shirt. We hit it off that night, spending most of the evening sitting at the snack bar talking about our shared love for Beck – the *cowboy* suits? The *dancing*? I *know*!

Before that, she had seemed out of my league, sashaying through the campus in her vintage dresses as if she had somewhere better to be, often getting back to the dorms at the exact moment of our 10:30 pm curfew after using her sister's old driver's license to get into dance clubs in the city. She always had ideas about what we could do around town – a smoky 24-hour vegan restaurant near the University where we could drink coffee and watch dreadlocked college students play chess with bearded homeless men, a suburban Perkins where we could get banana cream pie and empty bread bowls for under five dollars, an all-ages jazz club in downtown Saint Paul where people read open-mike poetry set to horn music. I had been hoping she could keep me distracted this weekend.

Instead, I called home. My mom had probably already made dinner, breezing through the kitchen after work, sock-footed on the brick-patterned linoleum floor, mixing a dark green salad as bison burgers sizzled in the cast iron skillet, the circular slices of her ten grain bread machine bread cut into triangular buns. By now, my 12-year-old brother Andrew would either be marooned at the dinner table having a stand-off with his salad or

downstairs watching *The Simpsons* on TV, his skinny body stretched out across a black futon, in a too-big, hand-me-down Beastie Boys t-shirt from our brother Jeremy, and Levis with inseams he was forever outgrowing. My dad would be washing dishes, bobbing his head as he listened to his bulbous black headphones, the cord spiraled across the living room into the kitchen, the sounds of the Rolling Stones filtering through.

"Hello?" my mom answered, a pleasant upturn in her voice.

"Hi, Ma. How are you?"

"Oh, pretty good. Same old nothing. How about you?"

"Well…I decided to drop my classes." I talked fast, tried to head off her next question. "It was the last day to get a full refund, so I won't have to pay anything."

"*What*?" my mom asked, her lilt lifting into high-pitched incredulity.

"Um…I dropped out of school." I began to pace the wood floors of the living room.

"You did *what*?" I could hear her call to my dad, "Chanomi dropped out of school." I heard him say something muffled, and her answer, "Yes, it's going to cost us." Then, back to me. "So, what's your plan?"

"Well, I thought I could…go out west and get a job." I sat on the couch, stood up, circled the coffee table littered with magazines: French *Elle,* Italian *Vogue, W.*

"You need to have a plan if you're going to do something like this. And didn't you just get done doing something like this? We're still paying for the plane tickets from

your Costa Rica trip and now you want to leave again?" She was building up steam. "And if you're not in school, it's going to cost us a thousand dollars when we do our taxes."

"Oh. I didn't know that," I said. I widened the radius of my pacing to include the kitchen, opened and closed the refrigerator that contained nothing of mine.

"We get a tax deduction for each kid we have in school." She sighed. "And what about your financial aid? Do you lose it now?"

"I don't know." Back to the living room, standing over the coffee table as I flipped *Elle* magazine from perfume sample to perfume sample without sniffing.

"Well, you're going to need to try to get it back. We already filled out all that paperwork. You were all set; you had grants covering almost everything. What if you can't get that again?"

"I don't know." My voice was getting smaller. I was in the kitchen again, turning the burners of the stove on and off.

There was no fighting; I was already beat. She instructed and I conceded. On Monday, I would go to the financial aid office first thing and try to talk my way back into school.

She gave the phone to my dad.

"Hey, kid," he said. "So, you can't take Minnesota anymore, huh?" His voice was lighter than my mom's, but I couldn't appreciate it. I was in the process of burning

the corners of a coffee shop receipt that I had taken from my wallet, a raspberry Italian soda, large. I had gone from elated to defeated to panic-stricken in the course of a few minutes. "What are you going to do this weekend? Are you going to be okay?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll try to do homework for my Spanish class, in case I'm able to re-enroll on Monday."

"I don't see much point in that," he said. "You should go for a walk to clear your head. Take a break this weekend. I'll be there on Tuesday, so hang in there. Here's Andrew. Maybe he can cheer you up."

Andrew sounded less bored than usual. "What's going on?"

"I dropped out of school," I said. My receipt was now more black than white, the center looked like a cartoon character – Curious George or Odie or one of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

"Yeah, right," he scoffed.

"You don't believe me?"

"That just doesn't sound like something you would do."

But I'd done it. And now that I'd come clean about it, I wasn't sure how I felt anymore. My life in Minnesota felt dull after a year of impromptu weekend beach trips and reggae concerts and living in the constant challenge of trying to communicate, *poco a poco*, the phrase my host mother would use to comfort me when I felt like my Spanish language skills weren't developing quickly enough.

Minnesota was challenging in another, less appealing way. I dreaded the approaching winter – frigid walks to the bus stop surrounded by windy skies rattling gray trees, getting on a late bus with sweaty air bound for a stifling classroom in a stuffy brown building. The building where I'd had most of my classes at the University of Costa Rica was earthquake-cracked concrete, painted pale yellow, each classroom accented with latticework perforations through the top of the walls where during a night class you could see the blue sky turn to pink and then to stars, where the breezy outside air was undistinguishable from the inside air and you needed a jacket almost never. I wanted to be there still, but it wasn't my country, my friends were no longer there. California seemed the closest substitute – on the Pacific Ocean, like all my favorite beaches in Costa Rica. I'd never been there and I imagined it to be a longer and vaster version of the same thing – easy bus travel, warm water, pastels everywhere, a *poco a poco* attitude.

I took my dad's advice and went for a walk. It was so windy now that leaves were whipping around the sidewalks in funnel formations, high enough to hit me in the face as I passed through. It was cold enough that I should have gone back inside for a stocking cap, but I didn't. This was something I could defy: the weather. I came back to a message on the machine: my other brother, Jeremy. He was two years younger than me, attending the theater program at the same arts high school where I'd met Hailey. He told me he was coming over to keep me company; our mom had called him, worried. When he arrived, he slouched onto Hailey and Amy's mint green couch in his oversized skateboarder gear, his limbs splayed out in all directions.

"What's the worst that could happen?" he asked with awkward bravado, flipping his bowl-cut hair out of his eyes. "If they don't let you back into school, you get to do what you wanted to do. You don't want to be here, do you?"

"Not really," I said. "But mom and dad are mad at me now. I might lose them a bunch of money on their taxes and if I can't get back into school, I'll lose my financial aid."

"Eh, they'd get over it," he shrugged.

We ordered turkey subs from Jimmy John's and watched *Harold and Maude*, quiet and companionable – how many hours had we spent watching movies together? Our dad's brother would tape movies from HBO – *Stand by Me*, *Ghostbusters*, *The Man Without a Face* – and we would watch them back to back on summer days until just before our parents got home from work. Then we would rush to do our chores for the day – I'd sweep the upstairs, he'd sweep the downstairs, I'd feed the dog, he'd pick up his room. *Harold and Maude* ended just before his curfew, but he didn't seem worried and I reminded him of the time only once. "Don't worry," he told me as he left. "You'll be all right."

On Monday, I successfully begged my way back into school. Not enough time had passed for me to lose my grants, and I could re-register for classes with professor signatures. I increased my number of Spanish classes – enrolled in literature, linguistics, and culture – and got myself back into the Introduction to Journalism class. I decided without much thought that Journalism and Spanish would be my double major. On

October 22, the day of the accident, I was about to write one final Spanish literature paper in the Folwell computer lab, the one that would finally catch me up on all the coursework I had missed. I was to analyze a poem by Carlos Vallejo, "*El Momento Más Grave de mi Vida*," where seven men talked about the gravest moments of their lives. I would focus on the final line, *el último hombre*, who said, "*El momento más grave de mi vida no ha llegado todavía*." His moment hadn't arrived yet. I would argue, in my paper, that he was speaking of his own death. I would discuss whether or not it was possible to know your own death, to rank it among other moments in your life.

Hailey, Amy, and Trey, another high school friend, walked into the Folwell Hall basement. I stood up, embarrassed by my half-kneeling stance. Trey studied theater, and I was sure it would be obvious to him that I didn't feel the grief I was acting out. He walked toward me with purpose, like a school principal headed toward an unruly classroom, swishing in his wide-legged raver jeans, reaching out to hug me for what felt like an overlong time. Was he acting, too? Hailey and Amy lingered behind him and patted me on either shoulder. We walked outside without talking, out the revolving door where I had come in less than an hour before. It had gotten darker and colder, and the sky was cloudless and starry. The air felt too cold and the sky looked too real for me to convince myself that this was a dream.

At the apartment, I was on autopilot as I stuffed clothes into my duffle bag: dark wash Abercrombie and Fitch jeans, blue cotton sweater, white button-up shirt, three pairs of white socks, all seven pairs of adult-sized day-of-the-week underwear that I had

bought at Target thinking I was hilarious. The last thing I packed was a black and white dress I'd found the week before at a consignment shop; I could wear it to the funeral. I wondered if it was normal to think of funeral attire so matter-of-factly, so soon after a death.

On my way out the door, I grabbed a stack of CDs. My hands were still shaking, though, and as we walked out to the car, I dropped one of them, a compilation called "Funkgasm." The case broke apart in the street. I picked up the pieces, inspected the CD itself, and trying to break the tension and silence, I yelled, "Funkgasm is O-K!" and we all laughed harder than the joke called for.

LANDMARKS

It was assumed that I would sit in the front seat. Hailey took her spot in the back after helping me put my backpack in the trunk; Trey was already starting the car. We were all silent as we began the trip to our old suburban high school, made our way north on Lexington Avenue in Trey's tan Corolla, the neighborhood transforming from 1920s brick apartment buildings and sandwich shops to vinyl-sided houses and convenience stores with unlit signs. We pulled onto I-94, past the wide concrete housing projects at the Midway, then the box stores: Target, K-Mart, Wal-Mart. We rounded a curve and approached the Mississippi River bridge, downtown Minneapolis on the other side, dazzling. The stars glittered in the mirrored windows of the IDS tower, the flat planed glass halo on top of the US Bank building glowed in the curving river below us, the half-illuminated white clock on the City Hall tower was stuck on three o'clock, before any of this happened.

That summer, on one of his delivery runs, my dad drove through the western suburbs, passing the Carlson Towers. "I saw something pretty neat," he said when he picked me up for dinner. "You know those two big buildings off 494, before you get into town? The rectangular ones with the triangular tops?" I nodded. "Well, the sun was setting – a great sunset – the whole sky was purple – and there are so many windows in those buildings that they were reflecting the sky. It was like two sunsets." He leaned his head to the side and didn't say anything for a few seconds. "I'd never seen anything like that." I watched his profile from the passenger seat as he spoke, felt sad without knowing

why, like I wanted to be closer to him, sit on the metal milk crate between our two seats, rest my head on his arm and my hand on his shoulder, affection unrelated to saying hello or goodbye.

Downtown Minneapolis had faded into industry as we rolled along in the Corolla. The lights grew dimmer outside the car, barely illuminating a one-story water purification plant made of gray concrete, where I imagined the vast darkened filters that our water passed through on its way to being clear, to being safe. I tried to swipe a tear from my face before anyone saw it, pretending to scratch my nose and then running my hand across my cheek before setting it back on my knee. Trey reached for my hand, squeezed. I squeezed back, and he smiled in a way that turned his mouth into a straight line. I'm sure he imagined it was comforting. I looked out the window, couldn't bring myself to continue eye contact. The interstates were a curving labyrinth of cloverleaf intersections now. In my memory, all the highways were empty.

We pulled onto Highway 100, and I was amazed by the familiarity of the old landmarks, wondered how they could still look the same. There was Benilde St. Margaret, a tall red brick cross breaking out of a long red brick chapel, the matching school with a smaller cross where I had taken my ACT test in a warm little classroom, sniffling back a cold as my number two pencil filled the answer bubbles with black, and a heavy October blizzard whited-out the windows. We pulled onto Olsen Memorial Highway, and approached the intersection for our school, Trey getting into the left lane where we waited for the arrow signal that could take up to five minutes to turn.

To our right was Norwest Bank where I had opened my first checking account four years before, cosigned by my dad and funded by $400 from my summer candy shop job. The money represented five-dollar hours of heat-sealing tiny cellophane packages of black licorice loons, taking breaks to rub the right side of my neck as it developed its daily crick. As we walked back to his white cargo truck, me inspecting my pack of starter checks, plotting how to spend my hard earnings, my dad put his arm around me. "Well, I guess this is it," he said with a tense smile. In the prior year, whenever the topic of me going away to school was discussed, he would look down and remain silent. He hadn't taken me to the open house or helped with my application – my mom had done all that.

Next to the bank was Denny's, where I had spent my evenings before curfew at a corner booth with Trey and Hailey and whoever else was around, where I'd learned to bite two tiny holes on either side of a mini-creamer and then squeeze it rhythmically into my coffee mug as if I was milking a cow, where Trey would pick up the laminated menu, crusty with ketchup smears and busy with colorful photos of specials featuring over-bright yellow eggs and names like Lumberjack Slam and Moons Over My Hammy, and in the high voice of a busybody lady, say, "Hmm, let's see what looks good in here." He'd open the menu, shut it, and in the same breath say, "Done."

He pulled into the parking lot of Delta Dormitory. He, Hailey, and I got out of the car to walk inside, as we had done so many times before, returning from Denny's or downtown dancing or the Ridgedale Mall. The dorm looked the same – things looking the same would continue to surprise me –three stories, pale concrete with alternating

rectangular plastic panels of turquoise green, a modernist masterpiece as far as I was concerned, but the consensus among my friends was that it was ugly. When we walked inside the double glass doors to the lobby, it was filled with people shorter than I remembered us being, with more obviously dyed black hair, less expertly applied eyeliner, grosser acne, louder clothes. When we were noticed, the room went from hushed murmurs to complete silence.

From behind the front desk came the tiny, big-haired dorm director, Paula Q. "*Hiiiiii*," she said, in a voice too young for her middle age, pursing her frosty pink lips and looking at me for a beat too long. She smiled her sad approval at Hailey and Trey – how nice of them to bring me here. She reached out to hug me, her thin body holding itself as far from me as it would go, her shoulders as bony as twigs. She stepped back and cocked her head to the side, made the same sad face. "How are you *doing*?" she asked.

"I'm OK," I said, matching her moves, upbeat enough that I could get out of the conversation quickly but subdued enough to express my utter devastation. "Well," she said. "Your grandma and grandpa just got here, and they're upstairs with Jeremy in a conference room where you can all have some *privacy*."

I looked up at the winding staircase, wide stairs of glossy graveled concrete with banisters painted the same turquoise of the panels outside. I used to fly down these stairs on my way from my third-floor room, bursting out into the lobby to first check the front desk for pink messages in a black plastic carousel, and then to stake out the lobby in

hopes of getting myself involved in a Denny's run or a downtown coffee shop trip, ideally with whichever crush I had at the time.

Paula Q. entered my line of vision again. "Before we go up there, do you need a glass of *water*?"

"No, I'm OK."

I hugged Hailey and Trey goodbye. Trey squeezed my hand again before he left, smiled that tight smile and narrowed his eyes. Paula Q. cocked her head and mirrored his smile – they were just so sorry for me – before leading me upstairs.

She opened a door, where my grandparents sat at opposite sides of a long table. I had seen them the weekend before at their house; he had been raking leaves and she had been digging up tulip bulbs in their endless yard, both of them white-haired in blue jeans and bright yellow sweatshirts from my uncle's short-lived sporting goods store. They looked smaller now, their hair a grayer white, wrinkles deeper-set, her in a dark trench coat and him in a beige windbreaker, nothing colorful anymore.

Jeremy was in black at the end of the table; he glanced up when the door opened, meeting my eyes. I thought of us in elementary school, riding with our dad in the burgundy station wagon – me in the front seat, and Jeremy in the back – both of us sleepy with the flu, on our way to the Wagon Wheel Grocery Store to get cans of 7UP and chicken noodle soup, to see if we could keep them down. Overwarm, humid air oozed into the open windows. I'd spent the morning taking twitchy naps interrupted by stomach pain and sticking my head into a five gallon ice cream pail which my dad would

then empty. As we rolled along the four mile twisting gravel road, gold hay fields alternating with dividing lines of dark oak and maple and sumac, our dad drove slowly to not upset our stomachs, and I closed my eyes, my stomach calmer.

Jeremy's eyes looked stunned now and mine probably looked the same. We looked away.

"Oh, Chanomi," my grandma's voice cracked as she got up to hug me. "I just can't believe it." Her face was damp against my neck. When she pulled back, I saw that her blush had been erased, that her face was pale everywhere but her red-rimmed eyes and her forehead where foundation still creeped into the horizontal wrinkles. She could have blended with the grey-blue conference room tables behind her. We all could have.

My grandpa stood up then, his nylon jacket swishing as he rose, billowing around his body. "Chanomi," he said, regarding me, holding out his arms. His voice had less of its deep, booming power but his hug was strong.

Jeremy got up then, more out of obligation than desire. We never hugged. If we did, it meant that this was true. He walked slowly over to me and we half-hugged, two slouch-shouldered skinny kids in a broken can-can line.

FUNERAL

Trey came to the funeral in black raver jeans and a blinding polyester club shirt. Hailey wore a vintage black lace dress and platform heels that weren't meant for the off-again, on-again sidewalk system of Richville, Minnesota, population: 124. The two of them arrived so late that they had to sit in the overflow section, on metal folding chairs in the cinderblock basement of the Richville Methodist Church, where the upstairs service was being piped in through a staticky speaker system.

The crackly voice they heard was a minister I had made fun of with my dad a few weeks before, after we'd all attended a service at my grandparents' Baptist church. After the service, at the cookie and coffee social, he had introduced himself to our family. His face and his hair and his glasses were all the same washed-out color. His handshake felt washed-out, too. In our two-minute conversation, he managed to mention how charitable he was for inviting some local group home residents with Down's syndrome to his house to eat a meal his wife had cooked. "They're just like *children*," he kept saying as I tried my best to make a polite face. For the rest of the day, whenever my brothers would argue, my dad would say, "They're just like *children*."

Now this man had been hired by my mom to run the funeral service and he talked about how a man takes care of his family, and how my dad died doing just that, cutting wood that would keep us warm in the winter, an honorable death, hollow words that I'm sure were further obscured by the static in the basement overflow room. Also obscured were the sweet-voiced songs my uncle sang – Amazing Grace and Forever Young – and

the eulogy my dad's friend Tom gave, during which he talked about how they met at a farm, picking melons, how Tom had mooned him from across the field and my dad had doubled-over laughing, his laugh that sounded like a gasping hyena. "Larry was one of the best of his generation," Tom declared. "And his kids will be among the best of their generation." My brothers and I would typically make faces at each other after a comment like this, but this time, we stared straight ahead, played to the audience sitting behind us in the pews, accepted our roles as tragic figures, behaved.

At the reception after the funeral, Hailey told me that she and Trey had entertained themselves in the basement by trying to harmonize with whichever voice was speaking, singing the song "Break My Stride" under their breath, "Ain't nothin' gonna breaka my stride, I'm runnin' and I won't touch ground, oh no, I got to keep on moving."

I laughed but wondered how much they had stood out down there with their city clothes and shitty attitudes among all of the acquaintances my parents had accrued in their twenty years of living in a small conservative town – people in somber, unflattering clothes purchased from Fleet Farm and Pamida – men who spent twelve hours a day baling hay or sorting potato chips or driving a semi, women who worked as nurses or grocery store clerks or assistant teachers, couples who didn't believe in birth control and had produced as many kids as that entailed while the women still managed to set their hair every night and the men still managed to polish their boots for trips into town. I was sure they'd arrived on time – these acquaintances who probably didn't even like our family all that much. They'd sat in their chairs with somber looks on their faces, hadn't

mocked the proceedings, had looked at my friends who were whispering and stifling laughter and wondered what the heck this world was coming to.

Charlie, another friend from high school, called the night after the accident.

"I've been worried *sick*," he said in the exaggerated way an overprotective mother would speak, an attempt to be funny. I laughed weakly.

"How are you?" He switched to a serious voice.

I paced the lower level of my parents' house, hovering near the wood-burning stove to keep my bare feet from getting too cold on the blue concrete floor. "I'm okay," I said. "It's all really strange. I'll feel devastated one minute and like nothing happened the next."

"Well," he paused, and I wondered if he would say something comforting. A log inside the stove shifted, crackling and shooting sparks up the chimney. "I sent you a book. Maybe that will help you feel better. Look for it in the mail, okay?"

I stopped pacing then, crouched, and stared at my reflection in the dark glass window of the fireplace. "Okay," I said, as the sparks worked their way up the chimney and outside where they were extinguished by the cold.

The other calls I received were from acquaintances, and it was unclear what we were even supposed to talk about. I had returned from Costa Rica only a couple of

months before and hadn't been in touch. "I'm really sorry," was how the conversations would usually start. And when I thanked them for their concern, convinced them that I was fine, there would be a pause, and then, "So…uh…how was Costa Rica?" I wondered what to tell them. I wasn't convinced that I'd returned from Costa Rica, that this wasn't all a dream I was having in my bedroom in my host family's house, in the tiny twin bed with the dark wooden shelves above my head where a mouse had once scurried in the middle of the night and made me stir with its feet scratching on the wood and then woke me completely when it jumped on my pillow, across my hair, and I leapt from the bed and onto the cold tile floor, running to turn on the light and find a shoe to try and chase it out of the room. It looked like a Minnesota mouse, moved like a Minnesota mouse – darting and dingy and nondescript, and after I scared it outside, I wondered what it found, if it ran across gray snow and dead oak leaves on smooth sidewalks or if it ran under palm trees on jagged sidewalks wet with warm rain. Maybe this was like that night, that mouse, and I could chase it away, wake up comfortable in that little wooden bed and wonder if it was ever really there, if any of it had ever really happened. Instead, I offered my acquaintances a few minutes of scenery and weather-based small talk, and they offered me a relieved goodbye.

I thought about my friend from the coffee shop a few days before, on the last day I'd seen my dad, who chatted about Radiohead and raves while I missed a few more of the remaining minutes of his life. We were supposed to go to a rave that weekend, the weekend of the funeral, but she never called. I wondered if she was snubbing me with or

without knowing about the rest of my week. I hated her either way. I added her to the list: people who didn't call, people who did call but didn't let me talk about anything real, people who didn't come to the funeral, people who did come to the funeral but didn't care enough to arrive on time, people who made jokes that weren't funny.

My brother Jeremy was not on the list. After the funeral, at the reception in the church basement, he had walked over to where I was standing in the food line with Hailey and Trey, holding a plate piled with macaroni and cheese, scalloped potatoes, jello salad, and brownies.

"How did you get that so fast?" I whispered, keeping my head close to his so that no one could see that I was not maintaining the image of a bereaved person who didn't care about matters so trivial as jello salad. "I was sitting with you at the funeral and we were the last to leave." I stood behind him in line as we waited to exit the church, saw the way his shoulders tensed and his knees bent forward to walk, his whole body willing the people in front of us to stop mourning and move.

"I walked up to the front of the food line," he said, as if it was obvious.

He re-enacted the scenario for us: standing there with his head hanging down with a sad Snoopy demeanor until an old woman noticed and said, "Oh, dear, go ahead. Such a tragedy about your father." And his response, dejected and deadpan, "Thanks. It's been really hard." He pantomimed facing the food table with a big cartoonish smile on his face, gloating as he loaded up his plate with an obscene quantity of food.

I didn’t look at the people around us, not wanting to see their reactions to my brother holding his overloaded plate which he’d started to eat from as he stood, continuing to joke and gesture with his mouth full, and me laughing and laughing as I planned to eat, too, to fill my plate and then go back again, as if this was just a funny day at church, as if we were growing children whose stomachs were bottomless pits.

VOTE ‘YES’ FOR THE KIDS

My brother Andrew doesn’t remember the names of any of the teachers he had in seventh grade, only their faces. He doesn’t remember what he wore as a Halloween costume. I took him trick-or-treating – the first and only time I was tapped for the duty – and I can’t remember either. My parents couldn’t take him; my mom was too busy honoring my dad’s request: after he died, he wanted a party thrown in his honor.

Here’s what I remember:

Nine days before Halloween, ten hours after the accident, sliding open the glass doors to my grandparents’ dim, cool basement TV room at 2 am, having just returned from college, my brother Jeremy behind me, his black clothes and lanky legs moving through the dark like a spider. Andrew was sleeping on the scratchy pastel couch, in a red t-shirt and jeans, no blanket or pillow, curled into a tight fetal position. My mom was sitting on a low stool a few feet away, on the phone, lit only by a reading lamp, rubbing her forehead, eyes drooping and smeared with mascara, her white work shirt untucked, crumpled. She was saying, “Uh huh,” and “okay,” in a slow, almost inaudible alternation, probably getting advice from her older sister Sue. I sat down by Andrew; he had made himself so small that Jeremy was able to sit on the other side of him. I put my hand Andrew’s head, the prickle of his buzz cut, the heat of his head not yet turned to sweat. He stirred, squinted up at me. I put my arm around his shoulders and he moved closer until he clung to my side. Jeremy scooted over to fill the gap on the couch, put his

arm around him. We sat like that until my mom said, still low, to the person on the other end of the phone, "The kids are here."

Here's what I remember:

Two days later, thirty-six hours after the accident, driving to town with Jeremy and Andrew through the familiar hills of Ottertail County, the trees bare and brown, the grass dead and beige, and the sky blue and cloudless in a way that felt comforting and terrible at once. I'm driving, talking. "He asked me to go to Cheapo Records with him on Tuesday, and I said 'no.' I keep wondering if I'd said yes, if it would have set everything back a few minutes, and that branch would've fallen down in a different place, wouldn't have hit him." The car was quiet.

I thought about Superman flying backwards around the earth, reversing its rotation, flying so fast that a white line trailed behind him like jet exhaust, setting everything back to before Lois Lane was crushed in her car. If this was all a dream, it was possible that I could wake up and it would be Tuesday morning, where none of this had happened yet. I could wake up in Saint Paul and go to Cheapo in the afternoon and change human history.

Jeremy was still quiet in the passenger seat, looking in the floor. Then, from the backseat came Andrew's voice: quiet. "It's not your fault." We rounded a curve and passed the expanse of brown fields leading to the long, white-sided shacks of a pig farm where no matter what the season or how tightly closed the windows, the smell of manure would permeate the car for at least ten miles.

Here's what I remember:

A photo of Andrew taken at Christmastime, ten months before the accident, sitting in the TV room, his head framed by the dark walls made from old barn wood, a gray striped t-shirt draping between his wide shoulders and his skinny waist, his posture straight and his arms wiry with muscle tone – products of the Tae Kwon Do class he takes twice a week. His face is sharp-angled, his eyes big and brown and alert, his cheeks pink, his dark hair cut close with clippers. He is smiling, cocking his head to the side, his mouth opening, probably about to say some know-it-all thing, like when my mom would call him Fatboy Slim when he wore that too-big shirt, and he would groan and say, "*Mom*. Do you even know who that *is*?"

Here's what I remember:

A photo of Andrew taken the following winter, three months after the accident. He's in the same spot, surrounded by the grey brown walls of ancient barn wood, but lying down, his head this time is propped by pillows covered with worn quilted cases in Christmas colors. He is wrapped in a purple cotton sleeping bag with white stuffing poking out along the seams. His arm, in a too-tight black t-shirt, secures the sleeping bag to his torso. The muscle tone is gone – he quit Tae Kwon Do – and his eyes are downcast, staring toward the TV but not at it. His skin is pale, almost gray. When he gets home he watches TV, eats dinner, does his homework, watches TV – he does this every night of the week now that he quit Tae Kwon Do. He has lost his turtle power – the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were his reason for joining Tae Kwon Do; in his room

rest the Michelangelo nunchuks my dad had made him with a piece of rope threaded through two sanded, narrow pieces of scrap basswood. He's done spinning them. By the time he feels better, he'll be too old. Now, he nests.

Here's what I remember:

Late in the clear-skied afternoon of Halloween, nine days after the accident, our two-story house that my dad had built was filled with my parents' friends. They sat and talked in hushed tones in the dim barn wood-walled TV room downstairs, they ate potluck lentil soup and lasagna and carob chip cookies upstairs in the bright light of the south-facing solar windows in the kitchen.

My friend Trey had driven three hours from St. Paul for this event, this party to honor my dad's life. He wore his usual uniform of wide-legged jeans, grey suede New Balance running shoes, and a band t-shirt, probably Blur. He'd made me a mix tape that started with "Song 2." I'd listen to it after he left. "Woohoo! / Woohoo! / Woohoo! / Woohoo! / I got my head checked / By a jumbo jet / It wasn't easy / But nothing is, / No."

I brought him through the house to get to the food and we were stopped each step of the way by these friends, these middle-aged hippies who now worked as health food store managers and auto mechanics and social workers, who didn't dye the gray from their overlong hair, who owned one overthick Guatemalan print sweater that they wore every cold day of the year, who had known me all my life and were worried and wanted to talk and I felt like I had to cheer them up, show them that I was okay. I answered questions about how I was doing as their spoons lifted lentils to and from chapped lips, as they talked about how much my dad had meant to them, how special it was for my mom

to throw him a party. My face hurt from smiling and my head hurt from looking on the bright side. “I’ve finally gotten caught up on school work, so that’s nice.” “The memorial service was beautiful, yes – the musicians did an amazing job.” I hadn’t gotten to take my hours long nap that had become routine since the accident. Trey stayed by my side, silent, using monosyllables to construct answers to any questions he was asked. “Saint Paul.” “Yes, it was a long drive.” He wasn’t even trying to be polite; I had to do all the work and answer all the questions and be nice and it wasn’t fair. His dad was still alive.

Here’s what I remember:

Halloween night: sitting in Trey’s gold Corolla in Perham, a town of two-thousand anchored by a dog food factory, a potato chip factory, and a lefse factory – a twenty minute drive from home. I had gone to school here. From the time I was in sixth grade, my classes had been in the crowded three-story dark brick high school that took up its own block on the Southeast side of town and was dotted on its perimeter by burgundy modular classrooms. Now, Andrew attended the new middle school, a sprawling light brick building in a former field on the outskirts of town. Our dad had worked on the committee to get the bond passed to build it; for the month before the election, he’d knocked on doors, made phone calls, given everyone he encountered circular yellow stickers that said “Vote YES for the kids!” I was twelve, Andrew’s age now, and I’d worn mine on my stonewashed jean jacket.

Andrew was in the backseat with our eight-year-old cousin Ben, brown-haired with small, button-like features and a skinny body that was always fidgeting, poking

someone's arm for attention. I directed Trey to the section of town where our family's dentist lived, on a long, secluded street at the southwest edge of town, near the new school, where each house took up half a block and had too many windows and roof angles. Trey and I sat in the car while Ben and Andrew ran from block to block, house to house. When we greeted them at the end of the row, Andrew held up an apple.

"Guess who this is from?"

"Oh, God. Because he's a dentist? Lame. Did you get good stuff from anyone else?"

"Not really. Mostly just Smarties."

Ben piped in. "One place gave us a popcorn ball!"

We drove to another neighborhood with smaller houses – ramblers and one and a half story places with simple triangular roofs. Here, Andrew and Ben got better candy, filled up their paper grocery bags. It was cold in the car as Trey and I waited for them, and he made fun of every other person we saw: the trick-or-treaters ("nice Darth Vader costume – is that supposed to be Darth Vader at bedtime?"), the parents opening the doors to their houses ("Oh, is she supposed to be someone who goes on Oprah to get a makeover in 1988?"). I liked him better in this situation, this escape from that party my dad had wanted, that party that highlighted only his absence, that party that only his presence could have made tolerable.

Here's what Ben remembers:

Fourteen years after that Halloween, I ask him. He's twenty-one now, and writes back within the hour, stream-of-consciousness, an email that sounds like a poem. He remembers more than Andrew and I do.

> Strange town never been there before. Super excited jumping in and out of the car running around a lot. Mostly dark streets maybe a gas station. Face paint possibly fake hillbilly teeth. Pop corn balls. Scream mask? Maybe a bon fire. Getting the stick hot enough to make smoke traces. Lol sleeping upstairs living room maybe super marios game-that was my favorite. Gum in my hair the next morning.

The Scream mask would have been Ben's – our family's costumes were more makeshift than that. Andrew had probably dressed as a hillbilly – fake teeth and face paint smudged on his face to look like dirt. There was always face paint involved – our faces had to be the focal point because our clothes and hair would be covered with coats and stocking caps.

And when we returned from trick-or-treating, of course there had been a bonfire. There were always bonfires at my parents' hippie parties. Ben had sat by it making S'Mores, eating too many and staying up too late because his dad, my mom's brother Bill, who had known my dad for twenty-five years, was in the garage playing guitar and singing the saddest of my dad's favorite songs, Harvest Moon and Helpless and Lay Lady Lay. Ben was getting the S'Mores stick hot enough to make smoke traces, planning a trip into the house to play a video game, falling asleep with gum in his mouth. He would wake up before anyone else, like he always did, tiptoe into Andrew's bedroom at dawn

and poke him until he woke up. "What?" Andrew would say, his voice trying and failing to conceal his annoyance. "Wanna play Mario Brothers?" Ben would ask, and Andrew wouldn't want to – to wake up, to face another day like this – but he'd do it anyway because he had to wake up sometime, and if he did it now, he could slide from the stupor of sleep into the stupor of Super Mario.

Here's what I remember:

The next afternoon, Trey had gone home and I was sitting at the kitchen table with Jeremy, Andrew, and our uncle John. John was sipping from a bottle of Miller High Life, setting it down, picking it up, sipping as the waffled polyester of his pink golf shirt rustled. Jeremy was fidgeting, opening and closing the cabinets behind the table, when he pulled out a folded paper grocery bag. He looked inside, looked at us, and, in a taunting voice said, "Ben made a mistaaake." He opened up the bag to show us it was full of candy. We all grabbed a candy bar. In the flat affect he saved for a good punchline, John said, "Welcome to the adult world, kids."

HATS

When I pressed "play" on my answering machine, there was no voice, only a hollow whir that went on and on until I pressed "stop." It was two months before the accident, late summer 1998, and my dad was already a ghost.

For years during my childhood, he shopped for a hat; he had a picture in his mind based on a hat he'd had as a kid. He described it to us as the "perfect red baseball cap": old-fashioned, fitted cotton, bright red. A classic. He finally found it in the Land's End catalog. It was about twenty-five dollars, a lot of money for a hat, even now, but this was twenty-five years ago. He had bypassed a lot of hats waiting for this moment, hats with mesh in the back (*cotton only*), adjustable plastic bands (*too cheap*), sports logos (*needed to be solid red*). He wouldn't settle for anything less than a replica of his childhood hat. What had happened when he'd worn that hat? Maybe a homerun, a perfect pitch, a perfect catch. What position did he play? I never thought to ask.

The only splurge he allowed himself was an occasional vinyl record, and only when his favorite musicians (Neil Young, Bob Dylan, Tom Petty) put out something new. The rest of the time, he'd check with the bookmobile librarian who came through town every couple of weeks in the summer. "Hey, Tom!" he'd wave as we boarded the narrow metal steps up to the tiny trailer packed to the ceiling with books and cassettes. My dad would have take off his straw hat he'd worn roofing the house that morning and leave it on the front seat of the station wagon – it took up too much space in here. He had to crouch so he didn't hit his head on the low ceilings. Tom sat behind a small desk,

bearded, long-haired, and small enough that he could stand up straight to shake my dad's hand.

"Larry! Good to see ya!"

"You, too, man. That new Replacements album come in yet?"

"Yep, I've got it right here. Saved it for ya."

I'd search the shelves for *Little House on the Prairie* books, and later, Pixies and They Might Be Giants cassettes, as the two of them talked – Tom, in jeans and a Viking Library t-shirt, and my dad, in cutoffs and red Converse high tops.

"You hear Moody Blues is coming to the Fargodome?" my dad's low voice lifted when he was in here, excitement cracking through.

"Oh, yeah? I'll have to look into that. I saw them back in '75. Pretty good show." Tom's voice was nasal, the sound of a librarian.

Occasionally, Tom took a break to help a kid or a housewife find a book, and my dad would check in with me.

"How's it going over there, kid? Finding some stuff?"

"Yep."

The bookmobile was only there for twenty minutes, and Tom had usually started the engine by the time my dad and I checked out. "Good to see ya, Larry! I'll try to get that new Tom Petty album by next month!" They waved to each other as Tom pulled out from in front of the post office, and my dad and I walked to the car, where he set his cassettes and books in the backseat and put on his straw hat to drive home.

He bought the red hat just in time for our Lake Superior vacation. Our family drove the four hours to the north shore of Lake Superior, near Duluth, almost every summer for a weeklong stay. This particular summer, my mom told my brother and me that we were staying at a resort with a swimming quarry. We didn't know what that meant, but it sounded promising. Lake Superior was so cold we would only swim in it on a dare, running in only long enough to dunk our heads, prove we were brave before screaming and returning to the shore and shivering in our towels for fifteen minutes. A quarry sounded compact, warm, somewhere we could swim all day, get used to the water.

On the way to the North Shore, we stopped at a rest area full of old stone buildings. After we ate peanut butter and honey sandwiches at a picnic table, Jeremy must have done something to instigate a game of "Monster." Maybe he threw a pine cone at our dad, who in turn stood up and made a roaring noise. This meant that it was time to hide. He gave us a head start, and we ran, disappeared. From our hiding places, we could hear him roar again as he made his way toward us.

The stone buildings had old fireplaces and closets and tables to hide in and under. I would clutch my knees to my chest and listen, not moving, scared of my dad's footsteps. Once we were caught, he would hold us upside down, our knees hooked over his forearm. Jeremy got caught more often but escaped more quickly, squirming down toward the ground until he broke free and ran, ready for the thrill of hiding and being chased again, his legs spindling away, a blur of red shorts and brown hair on a round Charlie Brown head. When I was caught, I hung onto my dad's arm with my hands, my upside down brown hair forming a 'v,' pink corduroys and a purple windbreaker, a plastic necklace with pastel hearts dropping in front of my chin. I held on as if I was on

the monkey bars, tight so I wouldn't fall and so he couldn't put me down, because putting me down would mean that the game was going to end soon, then the day, then the vacation, with my dad working again, gone by six each morning, and evenings in the yard, under the car, in the garage.

My mom, in the era of her short, permed hair – dishwater blonde, she called it – and her blousy pastel shirts, took photos of the game – my brother squirming and me hanging on – and in all of them, our dad is wearing that red cap. He's handsome, with sharp bone structure, a prominent nose. He stands with his chin pointed up like a warrior proud of his kill, thin and muscular from all his work lifting boxes at the health food store where he and my mom work – rice, flour, lentils, vitamins – and from building and fixing and cleaning things at home – always with a broom or a shovel or a screwdriver in his hand, always in motion. In the photo, he wears cut-offs, gray canvas sneakers, a thin beige *Prairie Home Companion* t-shirt, and square, dark-framed glasses. He looks like he could be a hip young professor on vacation with his kids.

He was actually a three-time college dropout who argued with his professors about inaccuracies in their lectures. He received straight A's during the semesters he finished at the University of North Dakota, took classes like journalism and philosophy and history, would later use phrases like "academic barbell lifting," and "intellectual masturbation" to describe his experience in college. In the fall of 1972, when he was twenty, he escaped. He submitted a proposal for an independent research project in California studying eastern philosophy, had it accepted, and within a week of the fall semester starting, he and his childhood friend Mike drove west together in a bright

orange Volkswagen Beetle, shared an apartment in San Francisco. He was able to earn enough money making sandwiches at the JC Penney snack shop to afford room, board, marijuana, and meditation retreats. Mike studied psychology and took his drug use a little further. The two of them went to parties, Grateful Dead concerts, the ocean, Big Sur National Park.

When they went home to North Dakota for Christmas, Mike's girlfriend convinced him to stay. My dad wanted to return to California, not for a school project this time. He had written his independent research paper, turned it in, dropped out again. Before he left, he invited my mom on a walk. They were friends at the time, skirting into romantic territory. They had stayed up late at a party one night the summer before, sat on the floor side-by-side – she was probably in one of her long skirts, a crocheted vest, her hair parted down the middle and nearly waist-length, while he wore dark jeans, had shoulder-length hair held back with a red bandana. They talked for a long time about a drawing on the wall, an illusion that could have been a vase or two faces. My mom said that she had a moment, staring at that drawing, when she could see a husband, three kids.

And now he was home from San Francisco, asking her on a cold walk through a flat white park in Grand Forks. They circled around and around, their fingers numbing as they talked about not much – her semester, his months away, his upcoming trip – as he worked up his courage to ask her to join him. "And then *finally*," my mom would say, "after more than an *hour* he asked me. And I said, 'Yes! Yes!'"

She didn't like it there like he did. She didn't like being away from home; she didn't like the wildness of the people in the streets, the crowds everywhere they went, the drug culture that surrounded them. To him, this all felt like energy and soul, things that

had been missing from his life, that made him feel more at home than he ever had in North Dakota, but to her, it felt alien and dangerous, the wet cold from the Bay sinking into her bones in a different way that she couldn't get used to. By the summer of 1973, she talked him into heading back to Grand Forks. He didn't think this was permanent. California would wait there for him.

They made it back just in time for Mike's wedding. My dad re-enrolled in college the following semester, wrote in a journal he kept at the time:

> Nearly done with my first semester in two years and while it has been better than working, in many ways a drag. The level of games both inside and out of school is rather amazing. Everyone has their role and they play it desperately. 'Hi! I am married and middle class.'

He criticized his married Midwestern friends, wrote about a party where one of his female friends spent the evening clutching desperately to her husband, a cigarette, or a book, "nervously kicking her left shin with the heel of her right foot" throughout the night. His journal has a quote from Thoreau written more than once, "The *mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."* My dad saw his friends choose prefabricated houses and lifestyles in Fargo, Grand Forks, Minot – fighting, and then becoming, their parents.

He and my mom had moved in with her parents, to take care of her youngest brother. Since my parents weren't married, they weren't allowed to sleep in the same bed – he stayed in the basement while she slept in her childhood bedroom. This arrangement lasted five months, until the beginning of February, when they decided to have a wedding, planning it for two weeks later, Valentine's Day 1975. My grandpa, a judge,

performed the ceremony. My mom wore a gauzy blue dress she'd bought in San Francisco, my dad a rented gray tuxedo with a white ruffled shirt, a gray top hat to match.

He dropped out of school for good. His parents had offered to pay for his college education, but he had refused. He had worked for his own tuition money, full-time in a bread factory assembly line in Minot, full summers spent in a hairnet and rubber gloves in what I imagine to be a windowless factory, floors dusted with white flour. He would later tell me that the only difference between the white bread and the whole wheat was brown dye. But the job paid well, enough in a summer to pay a year's tuition. If his parents had paid, he would have owed them. They would have expected bragging rights in return. "Our smart son is an architect/engineer/professor," they would tell their friends over sugar cookies and weak coffee in the basement of the Episcopalian church where he had been an altar boy.

My grandparents were Republicans, lifelong North Dakotans. My grandpa was an insurance salesman and a Lion's Club member, and my grandma was an administrative assistant at the Minot Air Force Base, even though she hated the work. She loved her garden and dreamed of working in a greenhouse. But she had gone to secretarial school in Cleveland at the command of her parents, and it wasn't practical to waste all that tuition money. My grandparents lived in a rambler house on a block of square yards and other rambler houses. They bought a color TV when everyone else bought a color TV, then a microwave, then a treadmill. My dad wrote in his journal that they were "addicted to the comforts of the middle-class."

In the spring of 1977, he and my mom bought an abandoned farm on a gravel road in the woods of West Central Minnesota. Their land was accessed by a rutted driveway, a patch of tall grass growing down the middle and wild plum trees on either side. The driveway sloped down, past a small field on the right which they would lease to a nearby alfalfa farmer. Next to the field was an old barn, a hexagonal roof topping a vast shell of graying hardwood, a short concrete silo to its side.

The driveway hooked to the left, past a faded red woodshed where my parents would stack the logs they chopped in the surrounding woods, and a second floor where they would store boxes of books and schoolwork and journals. Then a gray brick pumphouse they'd use for drawing water from a black iron handpump, washing clothes in a wringer washer, bathing in a clawfoot tub using water heated in ten gallon aluminum pots on the woodstove inside the house.

The house was two stories, chipped white paint, the green shingles of its roof peeling, a porch with torn screens in front. Inside was a root cellar where my parents would store the jellies and pickles and dandelion wine they made, a wood stove where they'd burn the wood they cut, a bedroom that would eventually contain a crib and a bunk bed to accommodate their three kids, and a living room that would double as their bedroom with a futon that would be rolled into a cylinder each morning, draped with an orange and yellow afghan knitted by mom's grandma.

That first spring, my parents tended to the new land. They planted an apple orchard in the tall grass behind the house, tilled a garden next to the barn – grew cucumbers and corn, beans and carrots, squash and strawberries. Everything grew well in the dark, fertile dirt from the cow farming that had previously been done here. My

mom would joke that Ottertail County was a fertile place; she was pregnant with me within a month of moving there.

She worked as a camp director that summer, and my dad would sometimes help with maintenance. The rest of the time, he worked on the property. He grew pumpkins that he brought to a farmer's market in the late summer, at a table where he also sold the records his brother in Minot had sent. I'm sure he still had long hair then, sitting with his long, bell-bottomed legs stretched out under a card table, his stub-toed sneakers threatening to trip the blonde farm kids and lumbering dairy farmers and frazzle-haired moms who walked by, families who couldn't help but stare at him and his California clothes and his display of overgrown pumpkins and Peter Frampton albums.

My dad was excited for the new life, excited by the prospect of a family, of self-sufficiency, wrote that they had bought the land "in a state of high idealism." He was also lonely there. My mom got a job as an elementary school teaching aide that fall, and was gone all week. He missed his friend Mike, wrote in his journal that his one regret about living at the farm was the "separation from people I care about and seldom see," that he wanted to see enough of Mike that they could "become best friends again."

The winter after I was born, in March 1979, he wrote of wanting to drive to Kenmare, North Dakota, where Mike and his wife Joanne were living, to see a solar eclipse. But then, a winter storm hit, and we were snowed in, so much snow that year that he and my mom would talk about that winter as the snowiest of their lives, marvel at it years later. "And do you remember when you walked out to the orchard?" my mom would say. "It was like you were drowning in quicksand! It kept getting deeper and

deeper as you went up the hill, it up to your chest, and I was yelling and yelling your name, 'Larry!', 'Larry!' I was so worried; I thought you might drown in the snow."

My brother Jeremy was conceived that winter. He was born in October 1980, the same year Mike and Joanne built a house nearby. They had the first of their three kids, a son named Joseph, the following March. Jeremy and I would be friends with Joey, walk the half mile to their house along an old wagon trail road, passing an anthill, a rusted old hay baler, a hundred foot spruce tree, then through the woods, past the lake, down into a dark marsh we called the swale, and then up again, to Mike's house – plywood and cement floors and south-facing windows, a second floor that was reached by a ladder.

Mike would open an auto repair shop nearby. My dad would take our cars there when he couldn't figure out how to fix them himself. He would stay for hours, sitting at a stool at the front counter, listening to Mike yell stories about his customers from under a car. I half-remember these tales relayed over the dinner table – a man who tried to pay his repair bill with food stamps, a woman who had her twelve-year-old son drive the car into the shop and do the negotiating.

Mike applied his psychology training to figuring out the locals of Ottertail County – he had finished his degree at UND, then gone on to get a master's degree at Pepperdine University in Malibu. He was a drug counselor for a while, in Minneapolis and Kenmare, and he didn't like it. His dad had owned an auto shop in Minot, and Mike had always worked on cars. He started taking auto mechanics at the technical school twenty miles from his new house, bought the gas station, opened his shop. When my dad was there, and probably when he wasn't, Mike took frequent breaks to sit behind the front desk and

roll a cigarette from a yellow canister of Top tobacco, to smoke and gossip and laugh a wheezing laugh that usually turned into a cough.

My parents' old farmhouse had had rats in the walls, bats in the attic, and it was drafty everywhere – there's a picture of Jeremy and me covered in sleeping bags, watching Saturday morning cartoons, resting our stocking-capped heads in our mittened hands. The house also had a leaky roof – those same pots used to heat the bathwater were set strategically throughout the attic when there was a storm; a few of them were even necessary downstairs, where the water would find its way through. My mom remembers her mother-in-law sitting in the house during a rainstorm, just after I was born. Her short hair, set and sprayed, was dyed orange, her tennis shoes were pristine white. Her mouth was tight and she turned her head sharply to each sound of a raindrop hitting one of the pots.

My dad started building a garage on the property about the time I entered kindergarten. When he told my mom that he'd be insulating the walls, she told him that she would be moving in. They decided to build a new house instead. He began deconstructing the barn, days of climbing a ladder, wrenching nails from the gray wood, stacking it, accumulating a pile big enough to build the siding and walls of a new house. These were red bandana days. The new house had a stone foundation, solar windows, a brown tin roof that made rainstorms sound like a typewriter broadcast through a loudspeaker. It was finished when I was in fourth grade, 1986, the same year my youngest brother Andrew was born.

My parents both had steady work now; a nearby couple, two former hippies from Minneapolis, had started a co-op out of their garage that had turned into an ever-growing health food store they called Meadow Farm Foods. My parents had been involved from the beginning; there was write-up in a local paper that showed me as a well-fed baby in a knitted jumpsuit and stocking cap, sitting on a concrete garage floor, supporting myself against a plastic-wrapped block of cheese, a quip written underneath about how I was "helping" to fill orders. After the store moved into a warehouse, then a bigger warehouse, my dad worked as the produce and bulk food manager, and my mom worked as the office manager.

He worked in the early mornings, in a fluorescent lit room with boxes of bulk grains and dried fruits, metal tables and scales and heat sealers, and she worked later in the day in a back office, at a computer with a green screen on a desk stacked with inventory sheets and catalogs and check deposit slips. She was home in the mornings to make us a breakfast of ten grain hot cereal, send us off to school, and he was home in the evenings to greet us, make us a dinner of cream of mushroom soup, tuna, and rice. Their jobs didn't pay much, but they did receive a discount on food and would sometimes bring home bulk items that were about to expire: bags of flour, nuts, pasta. Between Meadow Farm Foods and the garden, we ate well, and my parents were able to save enough to bring us to Lake Superior almost every year.

After we checked into the Lake Superior resort, we walked to the old swimming quarry. It was the size of a hotel pool, but round. It went down deep, the owners told us; they weren't sure how deep. A metal ladder descended down the steep rock edges and

into the quarry. Jeremy and I ran to get our swimsuits. The water was warm and as we treaded water, we could see down to our feet, but beyond that, it was dark. We tried not think about that, about how the darkness could be concealing sharks and stingrays and eels who watched and waited as we swam around and around the circle until lunchtime, splashing, throwing a ball, trying and failing to climb out without using the ladder by crawling up the steep sides.

The quarry made our stay frenzied, with Jeremy and me running out to swim half an hour after every meal. We had to have someone watching, and that was usually my dad; he liked to swim, too, and he wore that red baseball hat, back and forth, cabin to quarry, every time. It would sometimes get lost in the shuffle. "Where's my hat?" he'd ask on the way out, and Jeremy and I would race from room to room to find it, him always faster, beating me to our parents' bedroom where he checked under the wheeled bed, inside the pine doored closet, while I checked under the couch, the chairs beneath the dining room table. Suddenly, he'd be at the kitchen counter, or at the door of our parents' room, holding the hat up in the air.

"Found it!"

"Good *job*, Jeremy! You are so fast!" our mom said.

Three or four times this must have happened. He found it every time. My searching became more dejected. I stopped racing him to the bedroom, just walked, scanned the other rooms as he ran, crouched, stood on his tiptoes, peered, returned with a hat in hand.

On the last day, when we were packing and loading the car, I spotted the hat on the couch on my way inside. I looked out to make sure no one else was coming, picked it

up, and hid it in my parents' closet. My dad would ask where it was and I would know just where to find it.

We were halfway home when he slapped his head. "Oh no!" Was it anywhere in the car, he asked. Jeremy and my mom looked frantically around. What did I do? Did I pretend to look? I only remember the feeling, my insides hollowed out as I turned away from everyone, watched the pine trees out the window get smaller and thinner and then fade into the dusk. I never told him what I'd done. A few years later, he replaced it with a fitted, pin-striped, old-fashioned Yankees cap that he wore only on special occasions.

On my sixteenth birthday, my dad drove my same-aged cousin and me to Fargo so we could all go to a movie and a Chinese buffet. He sat patiently through the movie, a teenage romantic comedy, and afterwards, we all went to a hat shop. We walked around trying on hats, showing each other, laughing, and taking pictures with my camera. My dad's favorite was a jester hat, a series of red and dark green velvet panels with bells sewn to the pointed ends. It was forty dollars, though, so he didn't buy it. Later, when I got the film developed, my mom saw the picture of him smiling in the hat, and loved how it looked on him. It was a good photo; his blue eyes were lively, and he leaned to the side with his foot sticking into the air. The next time she drove into Fargo, she went to the store and bought him the hat. He never wore it in public, but he'd wear it around the house: as he cooked dinner, washed dishes, or read. It made our household seem whimsical.

Later that same year, I left home to attend a boarding school near Minneapolis, three hours away. My dad helped me move in, packed my boxes of notebooks and CDs and shoes, my dresser, the contents of my closet into the back of a two-door Ford Festiva hatchback. His eyes teared up after we hugged goodbye in the parking lot, and even though I would soon be calling home a worrisome amount, at that moment, I was embarrassed, looked past him at my future classmates sitting in the grass in front of the dorm, in hair colors ranging from gothic black to electric blue, hoped they didn't see.

I went home on occasional weekends, and I'd also see him every two weeks, when he drove into the city to pick up orders for Meadow Farm Foods. We would go out to dinner and afterwards, we'd shop at Target where he'd buy multi-packs of Ivory soap and dental floss and Suave shampoo and I'd buy cat eye sunglasses and clearance clothes and Clearasil; or we'd shop at a used record store – Bruce Springsteen and John Mellencamp cassettes for him, L7 and Breeders CDs for me. When the school year ended, I moved home for the summer for what would be my last time living with my parents.

After my freshman year of college at the University of Minnesota, I came home for a week to go on one final Lake Superior vacation with my family. As we made our way toward the resort, we passed a ditch full of daisies.

"Did you see that?" my mom asked.

My dad was already turning the car around. He pulled over next to it, next to a ditch carved neat as a spoon filled with long prairie grass and thousands of perfect daisies. My brothers and I got out of the car; Jeremy ran toward the daisies with his arms

swaying, a sarcastic hippie, while Andrew and I held back, walked in after. My mom wanted to take a picture, set up the tripod as we picked bouquets. I tucked a flower behind my ear, Andrew put one into each buttonhole of his jacket, Jeremy held one between his teeth. The five of us posed with smiles like game show hosts: my mom held a bouquet to the side and beamed like Miss America; my dad had pulled daisies through the holes on top of his Yankee cap.

I didn't make it home much the following summer, but I saw my dad in Minneapolis when he drove in for work. One day, toward the end of the summer, he arrived at my apartment building before I got home from work. He was sitting on the ledge outside, dirty beige brick like the rest of the building, when I pulled up on my black Fuji mountain bike, the one he had helped me buy, paid half so I'd have a good bike and not a Huffy, a brand he placed in the same category as white bread.

He wore a button-up shirt, a dark blue nylon jacket, and his least faded Wrangler jeans – his work pants. No hat. He looked drawn, smaller, his posture inverted. Mike had been diagnosed with lung cancer that winter, and in the past few weeks, had been in the hospital more often than not.

It seemed to take some effort for my dad to get up off the ledge and follow me up the stairs of the building. He used the bathroom while I checked the blinking answering machine. As the blank, tinny-sounding message finished playing, he stood in the hallway, staring at the machine.

"Weird, right?" I asked him. He looked startled to hear my voice. His eyes were downcast, their blue faded a bit, the wrinkles between his eyebrows visible from across

the room. The glasses he wore now were subtle, wire-framed, and almost imperceptible on his face. His hair had taken on a lighter shade as grays worked their way in.

"Oh," he said, glancing at me before looking back down. "That was probably me. I tried calling you from downstairs and when the machine picked up, I didn't know what to say." A cold feeling passed through me. Why couldn't he think of what to say? And why didn't he hang up the phone? I tried not to think about his manner, the blankness in his face, how his body looked hollowed out, concave.

I acted cheerful for the rest of the evening, as we progressed through our usual routine of Chinese buffet, record store, Target. I filled in the conversation, chattered about my stupid job as a temporary receptionist at a burglar alarm company where the phone rang constantly and I spent the day hearing angry voices against a backdrop of tripped alarms. The last time my dad came to town, he'd given me advice, said that the callers would calm down if I just listened to their stories for a little while, that they would be nicer, less impatient when I had to place them on hold. So I did that, and it worked. I told him this. "Huh," he said.

Later, I promised to make him a mix-tape of the CDs I bought: the greatest hits of both Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Grateful Dead. It took him a moment to register that I was talking; he looked over and turned up the corners of his mouth, something resembling a smile. "Sounds good," he said. He didn't call me "kid."

On an earlier summer visit, I had complained about the stuffiness inside my apartment. "What do your screens look like?" he asked, and I shrugged. I walked over to look at them. "They look normal."

He came to look, and flicked the screen. Blobs of clotted gray dust came loose and drifted down to the alley. I saw then that the screens were filthy, but the filth was the same color as the screens, camouflaged.

"See that?" he asked. "They just need to be cleaned. You can rinse them out in the bathtub."

I cleaned the screen in the bathtub the next day after work, and globs of greasy city dirt and dust made their way down the drain. When I replaced them in the window frames, cool air circulated the apartment for the first time in the two months I'd lived there. My roommate noticed the difference within minutes of getting home. I told her the trick.

"Your dad's a *genius*!" she said.

But as the summer progressed, it was becoming clear that Mike wouldn't make it. His cancer was undiminished by cutting out meat and sugar and alcohol, undiminished by my parents bringing him health food and teaching him and his wife how to grow and juice wheat grass. Mike looked better and felt better and there was hope for a while, until the late summer and a bad check-up.

When I went home just before Labor Day, I swam at the lake near our house with my family, and I saw that my dad had developed a pot belly. This was new. My grandpa had had a larger version of the same thing and I wondered if my dad was finally going down that road after looking like a skinny young professor for so many years. He was also watching television at night instead of reading, and not just the good shows, but all the shows. When he was growing up, the only books in his house were a full series of the

World Book Encyclopedia, and he read through all of them, every entry. And throughout my childhood, he read every night – fat books about history. Now, he was watching TV, as his parents had done.

Mike died on Labor Day. At the memorial service, there was a framed picture of him on display; he was mustached and his skin was putty-toned, large-pored. It had never looked quite as vital as my dad's did. His smile in the photo looked weary and sad, but with friendly lines around the eyes. Propped on top of the picture frame, as if it was propped on his head, was the hat he wore at his shop – a black mesh trucker's hat, gray with auto grease.

Later that weekend, my dad and I drove to town in separate cars so that one could be dropped off at the dealer. We now had to drive thirty miles to get the car fixed instead of the five miles to Mike's shop. Each of us had some errands to run prior to the car drop, and there was a point when we passed each other on the main road through town. He was in the red Geo Metro, a car in which he used to look comically oversized, like a Gumby figure. Today as he drove, he looked small and distant, even as our cars approached one another at the four-way stop. I waited for him to recognize his brown van, then look up and see me, his face brightening as he waved or honked. But he didn't look up, just straight ahead, or maybe even down. I had the same feeling I'd had in the apartment.

A month and a half later, my dad was cutting wood on the tree line between his and Mike's properties when the accident happened. A tree branch fell and hit him behind

the ear. He wasn't wearing his yellow hard hat. When my brother Andrew found him after school, he was already cold, lying on his back with two black eyes and blood under his nose. His glasses had been knocked off by the impact. Andrew ran to Mike's house for help, and Joanne called an ambulance. The autopsy report said that he had died within five minutes of the blow. We couldn't find his glasses for days, didn't know how far they'd traveled or what they saw now, dead leaves on dark dirt, tract housing on flat plains, or further, freeways through yellow fields, bison on badlands, rising up, finally finding the spot where the mountains meet the ocean.

My mom wanted my brothers and me to put together a collage of photos to display at the funeral. Her favorite was one taken on that last Lake Superior trip, a year and a half before. My dad is alone in this shot, standing in front of a fast river with his arms stretched out to the bright sky, pine trees all around. He smiles wide, eyes crinkled and happy. He's wearing his favorite Yankees cap. He's about to take it off, jump in the water.

RETURN

It's dark when I get to the bus station, dawn breaks as I board, and I watch everything get lighter out the window as the bus moves through the brightly painted tin-roofed houses of San Jose, then Alajuela, then up into the thick trees and pink and purple flowers covering the mountains that take us out to the coast. I gaze out the window until I fall asleep, so happy to be back here, away from the gray freeze of Minnesota. When I started taking this trip twelve years ago, my luggage included Derby cigarettes, shredded Levi's cutoffs, a sixty-dollar waterlogged surfboard, and a retro blue checked bikini with high-waisted bottoms and a halter top with applique daisies.

I didn't realize the power of this swimsuit at the time, didn't quite understand what happened the evening I ran past an outdoor hotel pool lined by short palm trees and full of tall boys from my exchange group, oblivious to their presence and assuming they were oblivious to mine. I was a tomboy, a punk: cut-offs and Hanes v-necks and clownish Vans sneakers on a skinny, clumsy body speckled with bruises from bumping into corners of tables and tripping over small variations in sidewalks. I was also inexperienced with anything more than boy friendships. When I attended an arts boarding school at sixteen, the ratio of girls to boys was 2:1, half those boys were gay, and those were the only ones whose attention I attracted. But these boys in this pool in Costa Rica – all of them juniors at elite East Coast colleges who had bought multi-hundred dollar surfboards for themselves – had stopped talking and started staring and I checked my swimsuit to make sure there wasn't a problem. One of them –blondish and

blank-faced like they all were to me then – addressed me in a tone I only recognized from movies, in the scene where the male action hero sees his lady scientist collaborator without her glasses for the first time.

"Are you coming in the pool or what?"

And even though he was a year ahead of me in college, he seemed young at that moment, full of a kind of earnest bravado that made me forget that I was only interested in potheaded, sarcastic boys in Converse All-Stars and bands. I forgot my own bravado, told him that yes, I was coming in the pool. The water glowed bright blue from lights in the mosaic tiled pool walls, circular traffic lights telling us to proceed.

On this trip, twelve years later, I have brought along a black one-piece swimsuit for swimming laps in my grandparents' condominium pool, Capri pants, a loaf of gluten-free bread for my grandma. My grandparents were the reason I first came to Costa Rica: to visit them in their new condominium during the spring break of my freshman year of college – they had recently retired from practicing law, he at 72 and she at 65, and bought the condo they had rented during a cruise of Latin America.

Before Costa Rica, I'd only ever traveled to Duluth, Minot, Minneapolis, and when I was in fifth grade, a train trip with my mom to visit family in Chicago, New York, and Boston. I knew only the northern U.S. and as my grandparents drove my mom and me the three hours from the thatched roof Liberia airport and the inland heat that surrounded it to the breezy little town of Nosara on the coast, I looked out the window of their red Toyota 4Runner and saw palm trees and hibiscus plants surrounding the airport

and lining the roads, women walking in bright plastic sandals carrying red and white striped nylon grocery bags, Catholic churches of stained glass and cracked white concrete in the center of each town adjacent to soccer fields filled with darting boys in faded Nike t-shirts. My life in Minnesota had been a cold monotone; I was being cured of colorblindness I didn't know I had.

It was dark when we arrived at their place and my cousin appeared at the car door, asked if I wanted to walk to the beach. I followed his flashlight through half a mile of muddy jungle trail that threatened to suck the flip-flops off my feet, brushing skinny tree branches from my face as I walked, until I could hear the crash of waves, and then through a clearing, see the stretch of pale sand, the moon illuminating flecks of quartz, and the water beyond it, rolling then calm. "I'm going in!" I yelled, kicking off my sandals and running in my corduroy shorts toward the white water, splashing into water that perfectly matched my body temperature, diving beneath waves, resurfacing, licking my arm to see if I could taste salt. I signed up for a study abroad program in San Jose, the capital, for the following year. I've done what I could, again and again, to return. When I'm not there, I can paint the picture in my mind, feel the salt in the air, see the soccer boys, watch out the bus window as pink flowers float by.

I turned 32 this year, and I'm shocked each time I come back: I keep getting older. I used to wear headphones as I walked through San Jose so I wouldn't have to hear hissing men harassing me, but I don't need to do that anymore. Not only did my airport cab driver not flirt with me, he dropped me off two blocks from my hotel. I keep

expecting to run into the boys from my exchange group on the streets of San Jose, where we will divert from whatever menial errand we are completing – exchanging traveler's checks at Banco Nacional, walking to an evening class at La U – and reroute to the Casino El Rey or Tropical Tiny's Sports Bar to plan a weekend beach trip. I expect to see them at beachside restaurants where we would drink buckets of Imperial beer together before crashing on the beds and floors of four-dollar-a-night cabinas, waking up at dawn, headachey but happy, for an early morning surf session. Now, I go to these restaurants with my grandparents, and they brag about my year of study abroad to English-speaking Costa Rican waiters who are not impressed. "¡Mi nieta!" my grandpa will say, "¡Español muy bueno! ¡Un año aqui!" to a twenty-year-old waiter in Ralph Lauren glasses who went to a bilingual school and has served gringos for five years, who'll smile over at me, bemused. "¿Sí?" he'll ask, and I'll nod, look down. "Sí."

The bus lurches from the paved road onto gravel, and I am jarred awake, sweaty and hungry. It is late morning now. We have gone from the lush green of the Central Highlands to the heat and dust of the tropical dry forests of the Guanacaste Province. The trees are shorter now, with fat leaves covered in the dirt kicked up from passing vehicles. Hot air blows in through the sliding glass windows of the bus, billowing the scratchy blue curtains around my face as I try to sleep again. We stop in the center of each village at whichever business has agreed to house the bus company. First, a pulpería, convenience store, thin wood in a faded pink paint job with barred windows and a corrugated tin roof turned orange with rust. Then a tiny post office, Correos de Costa

Rica written in blue on brick painted white. Then a soda, snack shop, a cinderblock kitchen and a dining area with handmade picnic tables sheltered by that same corrugated tin, supported by 4 x 4s.

The aisles of the bus fill: a tiny teenaged girl in a tiny cotton tank top, a stout older woman in a grayed floral dress who lugs heavy red and white striped nylon grocery bags in each hand, fraying at the seams, and places them between her feet, a wiry old man with a muted white button-up shirt tucked neatly into crisp blue uniform pants. It gets drier and dustier as we amble along the gravel road, our view of rocky, sparsely vegetated mountains, until a few palm trees appear alongside us. Soon, there are groves of them, until finally, after a curve in the road, the Pacific Ocean appears, blue as a tourist brochure. The old woman shifts, cranes her neck to see it through the window. "Que belleza," she sighs, her eyes soften, and the tank-topped girl smiles. The air is cooler now.

I do the same, watch out my window for Nosara. We turn inland for a few miles, more heat, another pulperia, teal green this time, where we pick up three laughing and elbowing boys in faded surf shorts, twelve or thirteen years old, one of them taller with startling blue eyes that I imagine he inherited from an American surfer father, someone who came here for the first time around the same time I did, met a local girl in a tiny tank top on the bus or on the beach, and stayed.

We pass the first Nosaran landmark, La Dolce Vita, an Italian restaurant with grounds landscaped in dense bougainvillea and ivy-covered arches. On the outskirts of Nosara, near Playa Guiones, the southernmost beach in the area, is an expatriate community of Europeans, Americans, and the businesses they've started, staffed with

Costa Ricans. My grandparents brought my mom and me to La Dolce Vita on my first visit and I had felt like we were rich, ordering my favorite dish, fettucine alfredo, the noodles denser and the sauce richer, more garlicky than the pasta bar in the Bailey Hall cafeteria. I drank two glasses of red wine that my grandpa had insisted on pouring for me. "You're legal here!" he'd said, winking, his face flushed from his own glasses of wine, his white hair wild from our windy ride here.

It was my first glass of wine from a bottle; the only other wine I'd tried was pink zinfandel, taken from a box in an industrial refrigerator at the summer lake camp in Northern Minnesota where I worked with my friend Alison the year before. We poured it into a plastic Minnesota Twins World Series cup until it reached the brim, walked down to the lakeshore, and passed it back and forth until it was gone before performing our last duty of the night, wobbling down the boat dock, steadying ourselves against each other as we checked that each speedboat was securely tied to the side. I wondered if my grandpa knew that this was not my first drink. After he winked, he told the table a story about the 3.2 beer he and his friends secured in junior high school, that it was so weak that in order to get drunk they'd need to stand in the woods with a bottle in one hand providing a constant stream into their mouths as their other hand facilitated another constant stream.

The bus rattles by the thatched roof of the Café de Paris, a combined restaurant, bar, and hotel set low and down from the road as everything starts to slope toward the beach. It is nearly obscured by trees and tall, long-leaved plants, easy to miss if you aren't looking for it. I always look for it, the main headquarters of my study abroad

decadence. Twelve years ago, beer cost two-hundred and fifty *colones*, the equivalent of a dollar, and I came close to matching my grandpa's junior high intake as I sat for hours at the dark varnished tables of the restaurant with a rotating cast of temporary surfers from the East Coast. After watching the sun set over the ocean as we bobbed on our surfboards, we came here, to the place we always stayed, ate chicken sandwiches and margherita pizza and strawberry ice cream sundaes, smoked Derbys, drank Imperials. I still come here sometimes, alone, to eat lunch. It gets more crowded each year, more expensive. The same waiter still works here, soft-spoken with the same wide eyes and thin face, black t-shirt tucked into pleated khakis, black plastic oxford shoes that look like they might have been from his high school uniform. He doesn't recognize me anymore, one of a thousand foreign faces.

The foliage is dense now and everything is shaded as the bus clings to the inside of the road to avoid the steep drops into gullies carpeted with ferns and vines. Two more sharp curves and the road opens up into sunshine again as we arrive at my destination: the five corners, where the road cuts five directions like rays of the sun: two up either side of a mountain situated between the road and the ocean, two down that same mountain, and the main road where the bus will continue inland into town. My grandpa is standing at the center of the sun, waving down the bus. He looks the same as ever: trimmed silver hair and a neat beard to match, spry in his white Costa Rica Pura Vida t-shirt, khaki shorts, and running shoes, his legs muscular and tan.

His hug is decisive, wiry. He's as fit, he likes to say, as a seventy-year-old.

"Give me your backpack," he blusters in his tuba voice that he can also make quaver and whine about his nonexistent health problems to telemarketers.

"Thanks, Pa," I say, handing over the green canvas bag. I'd rather carry it myself but I know better than to argue.

He maneuvers it onto his back and we start the mile long walk to the condominium, me keeping up with his brisk pace, around the road that goes up the mountain, carves through scraggly, low-lying brush – small, dark leaves on spindly branches.

"How was the bus ride?" he asks after a few silent moments.

Conversation always takes a while to flow – we both have the tendency to avoid chitchat.

"Pretty good – I'm happy to be here."

He nods.

We are still rounding the mountain, our sneakers kicking clouds of dust behind us, the shrubbery ascending to thick formations of skinny cashew and pochote trees that stretch up to provide us some shade. The Condominios de las Flores complex is visible through the foliage only once we enter the chain link back gate to the upper grounds. A palm tree canopy covers fans of ferns and plump bushes of delicate pink ixora flowers with fans of palm bushes waving like hands. Red tile leads to a wide white gazebo with a Spanish tiled roof and hammocks strung between each pillar, then a turquoise-tiled,

kidney-shaped pool where my grandma has either taken or taught water aerobics classes three times a week for the past fifteen years – white haired women, some with tiny poodles that wait under the gazebo, stretch and sway in synchronization in bright, one-piece swimsuits.

Now, my grandma is downstairs in the condo, in the midst of a meeting with many of these same women, planning a fundraising dinner.

"Let's sneak down there so we can change clothes and come back up here and swim," Pa says. "Then we won't have to get involved in that meeting."

We walk down the red-tiled stairs to their condo, the third in a row of red-roofed, white stucco rectangular buildings with arched porches in each of the units. Each building is painted with a small flower at each corner that corresponds to its name: Poinciana, Camelia, and Gardenia – flowers that have the same names in Spanish and English, allowing the Americans who live here to either forget or remember where they are. We walk around to the back of the Gardenia building without speaking, enter through a back door that leads to my grandparents' bedroom. We can hear the sound of women laughing through the slatted door that leads to the living room. He hands me my backpack, points me to their master bath, mouths, "Go change."

When I emerge, flip-flopped and swimsuited, I hand him a white Minnesota Twins cap that I got at a game that summer and knew he would like – white caps keep the heat of the sun off of his head. "Thank you," he whispers, patting me on the shoulder on his way to the bathroom. I sit on a wooden chair next to their bed, cringing as it creaks,

but the sounds of laughter continue, interrupted by sporadic bouts of planning, "Well, the fish at Harmony Hotel is *much* fresher than the fish at Harbor Reef. I was at Harbor Reef the other week and their tuna tasted like it was *canned*."

I hear my grandma pipe in, ever-practical, "Well, let's keep in mind that Harbor Reef costs half as much, and we want as much money as possible to go to charity." She's probably wearing her white sundress dotted with tiny pastel daisies, her bare arms long and freckled, her legs crossed and foot bouncing, her white hair popping against her tan face.

Pa comes out then, in pale blue swim trunks and the new white cap. I give him the thumbs up – it looks good on him, boyish. He hands me a towel and we tiptoe out the door, up to the pool.

My grandpa designed the grounds up here, volunteered to research the pool and gazebo and tile options and present the best ones to the condo board, sketched blueprints for the final layout, still has them rolled up and perched on the floor of his closet. He brought them out to show me one morning a couple of years before. We had been sitting on the patio of their condo, looking through the arched concrete at grapefruit trees and skinny leaning palm trees on the grounds below as we lingered over coffee and the remaining pineapple and papaya from breakfast. My grandma had gone up to teach water aerobics, and her absence left us silent for a moment until Pa boomed, "Did you know I made that pool she's using up there?"

We hang our towels on the back of a blue and white plastic lounge chair.

"What's the longest you ever held your breath?" he asks.

"Probably thirty seconds." I know where this is going.

He looks at me in mock horror. "Is that all?"

And then we're on the shallow end of the bright blue pool, the sun at high noon above us. We're standing bent at the waist with our faces under water, in the midst of a breath-holding contest. His white cap and his black plastic Casio watch are perched on the rough ledge of the pool; the watch is there so the loser can mark their own time and then the winner's. I'm the first to emerge, of course; the Casio tells me it's been forty-five seconds. And now there's the wait.

My mom once told me that when she and her siblings were young, they would go to the lake and he would hold his breath so long that they would get scared, start beating on his back and yelling, "Come up, Pa! Come up!" He would never come up until he was ready.

I know he's okay because every thirty seconds, a small bubble will rise from his mouth. I hold the watch, sit in the lounge chair. When I first started coming here, you could see a wide expanse of the ocean below. The residents would have five pm happy hours up here to prepare for the sunset at six. But now, it's mostly greenery. Bamboo plants at the foot of the condo driveway have grown so tall that they lean to the side and stand several feet above the palm trees next to them. There is still a small half-moon of the dark blue of the Pacific visible, but that will disappear soon, too.

I check the watch. It has been two and a half minutes and I watch for another bubble. His legs have floated up to the surface; this is what he does when it begins to

take too much of his effort and breath to keep them anchored to the floor of the pool. Watching him face down and motionless makes me understand why my mom and her siblings would lose their cool. I move closer. I sit on the ledge, risk snagging my swimsuit on the concrete to try to get a better vantage point on any bubbles that rise. I alternate my gaze between him and the watch. He's still, no bubbles yet. The black numbers on the watch spill ahead, becoming seconds and tenths of seconds, another minute or two, another year or two, or thirty-two or ninety-two, or 1919, when he was born in Rolla, North Dakota, or twelve years later, a bus bringing him to elementary school, him with his head and arm out the window smoking a cigarette, deciding to show off, climb to the roof, his body halfway outside before a bump in the road jolted him back to his seat and his senses, the bus tumbling toward a future I can't yet yell or pound onto his back to control. He'll come up when he's ready.

And he does. Within a few seconds he lowers his feet to the bottom again, lifts his head from the water, takes one deep, smooth breath. Water drips from his beard.

He slicks his hair back with both hands, smiles. "What's my time?"

MOM

Her white hair glows against her tan skin and she wears a sleeveless dress in gauzy blue cotton. Her arms float like streamers. We are up by the pool, my grandma and I, watching the sun set above the small patch of ocean visible through the royal palms and tall bamboo below. "I never thought we'd end up in a place like this," she says. We're both holding insulated plastic cups – screwdrivers prepared by my grandpa – she has a standing order for one, every day at five.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" she'll ask him, her voice light, and he'll slap his forehead, run to the kitchen, pull out the ice, vodka, *jugo de naranja*.

A photo of her as a young mother in Fargo shows her staring into space, her hair black, her face slack, pale except the dark eyes and dark lipstick, a glass in her hand – maybe a screwdriver. Two toddlers are at her feet, one with long hair and one with short, vying for her attention, which is always hard to come by. Her youngest, Richard, now in his early 40s, likes to do an impression of himself as a kid, trying to get her attention. "Mom, can I have a carrot? Mom, can I have a carrot? Mom, can I have a carrot?" he says. Even now, I'll say to her, "Hey, Mom?" about to ask which vegetables she'd like chopped for a salad, and I'll get no response for several seconds, having to try again, until she answers, a vacant but good-natured, "Hmmm-mmmm?" comes out of her mouth. We all call her Mom: her kids, their spouses, her grandkids, their spouses. She said to me once, "Do you think I would have had six kids if there had been birth control options available?"

She wanted to go to Arizona. She had just finished high school in Austin, Minnesota, when World War II began. She decided to become a nurse, to do what she could to help the war efforts. In 1944, she began nursing school in Minneapolis, at the University of Minnesota. She's talked about a lecture hall so big her professor's voice echoed, about sitting in one of a thousand dark wood chairs as she and the other young women, in smart dresses and set hair, learned how to tend to the soldiers. She's talked about carrying a toboggan on a streetcar with her nursing friends, from downtown Minneapolis to a park in the western part of the city. I imagine them smoothing thick wool skirts over their legs as they arranged themselves in the toboggan on top of the hill. I wonder if my grandma had that faraway look in her eyes, if her friends had to repeat things to her, backtrack in the conversation, explain why they were laughing. I wonder if this was before or after her father died.

It happened during her second year of nursing school – he was in Cold Spring, Minnesota, in an industrial area, at a business, loading supplies into his truck. What kind of truck? I'm not sure. In my mind, it's a white box truck, and her dad is tall, brown-haired, in a one piece canvas jumpsuit, flannel-lined, recently washed and pressed for his trip into town. What kind of business was it? She thinks it was a place that sold seed. Maybe grain? I'm not sure, and I try to refrain from asking too many questions, from getting too excited about this similarity in our lives.

All I can picture is the Swany White Flour Mill, in Freeport, Minnesota, my least favorite stop on my own father's pick-up and delivery route. It was halfway between home and Minneapolis, in a town that, as far as I could tell, had two businesses: the mill

and Charlie's Cafe. Charlie's Cafe was advertised by an old two-story house next to the freeway, boarded up and bright yellow, inscribed with giant red letters "just ahead Cafe Charlie's" and a small black and white smiley face. I sneered when I saw this house, as we pulled off the interstate and backed into the single-truck loading dock of the old flour mill. I didn't have a good reason for my distaste for this town; I don't think the stop took all that long, and I'm sure the townspeople were friendly enough. My dad hated smiley faces, I remember, thought that they pandered to idiots. Ronald Reagan was somehow involved in his feelings. My mom had bought him a smiley face piñata for his birthday one year, and his friends cheered as he took off his blindfold, wanting to fully experience the moment of breaking it open with a baseball bat. Maybe I made his dislike my own, came to the conclusion that we weren't welcome in this place.

Cold Spring, where my grandma's dad loaded his truck, was 28.6 miles to the southeast of Freeport. Train tracks cut through the back of the loading yard. The business where he loaded his truck was loud with machinery, loud enough that he couldn't hear the train. Was he pulling his truck out of the business when he was hit, or was he still in the back, stacking and arranging sacks of seed? I don't want to ask, make her think about something like this.

He was taken to a hospital in Saint Cloud, and my grandma was called at college in Minneapolis to come and see him before he died. I wonder what she was doing when she got the call. I wonder if someone like Nurse Ratched marched in white shoes down a long, dim hallway to pull her out of class or knock on the door of her dorm room as she studied or laughed with friends or watched bare trees out the gray window and dreamed

of being in the desert with the smell of sage and the sight of saguaros and perfect pink sunsets every night.

She wanted to go to Arizona. At the end of the nursing program, she had to complete six months of service. The choices were psychiatrics in Rochester, pediatrics in Minneapolis, or general practice at an Indian reservation at an unspecified location. The most recent students to choose the Indian reservation had gone to Arizona. She tried to talk a few friends into signing up with her, but they wanted to play it safe, stay close to home. So she signed up without them. She was sent to the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation near Rolla, North Dakota, fifteen miles from the Canadian border, with an average low of -4 degrees in January. Grain elevators decorated the drab outskirts of this flat, one-story town, elevators filled with summers of work: women rising at 4 am to milk cows and cook custard for breakfast, women and men rumbling through endless acres on tractors that hauled sharp metal machinery, blades that seeded and threshed the wheat and oats and barley and rye that would all be shuffled away by the Great Northern Railway. Did she think of this place as a temporary setback, think she'd make her way south when the six months were up? The war had ended; she could go anywhere.

There was a little house on the reservation, near the house where the nurses lived. A white man who worked as a land clerk for the Bureau of Indian Affairs lived there. The summer my grandma arrived in Rolla, this man's son, returned from the war and from law school in Grand Forks, lived with him, had come home to study for the bar exam. He and my grandma first met on the tennis courts, and I'm sure she caught his attention with her dark hair and eyes, her way of carrying herself, like a ribbon on a

breezy desert day. I'm sure he found a way to get her attention – clowning with the tennis racket, making a smart-assed comment loud enough for her to hear. I wonder if their rapport was instant – if she rolled her eyes at his antics like they'd known each other for years, had a snappy retort for whatever dumb joke he told. One of his favorites recently has been, "Did you hear about the man who poured a vat of pickle juice down the mountain? He wanted to see if dill waters run steep."

There's the story of her pouring a glass of milk over his head when the two of them were visiting his friend on the other side of town – he had been making fun of her, mostly just so she'd pay attention to him. She doesn't remember what he said, only that he was being "his usual obnoxious self." She put on her coat – it was winter by now – and started the miles long white walk into town. At one point the mailman pulled over to see if she needed a ride. She told him no, that someone would be fetching her shortly. And a few minutes later, another car pulled up. He'd waited a few minutes to chase her; he wanted her to sweat it a little. But she knew he was coming. She knew she wasn't going to Arizona.

They got married within six months of meeting, on Valentine's Day, at the Presbyterian manse in Rolla, where the minister lived My grandparents knew him because my grandpa attended services at the Presbyterian Church, and my grandma taught Sunday school there. The only other person in attendance was my grandpa's dad; their families were too far from Rolla to make the drive in the middle of winter – my grandpa's mom worked at a sanitarium in northern Minnesota, and my grandma's mom ran a store in southern Minnesota. All their siblings were grown and moved. I've never

seen a photo of the event and I wonder how it all looked, how fancy the manse, how elaborate my grandmother's dress, how sharp my grandfather's suit, if at all. Maybe it was all perfunctory.

They rented a basement apartment in Rolla for fifty dollars a month, slept on a foldout cot that had to be put away each morning to make space for the fold-up table where they ate. My grandpa tells a story of her yelling at him one night, something about the mechanics of opening the cot. It must have been a blowout, because they both still remember the night. She threw a plate on the floor as she washed dishes, told my grandpa not to talk to her until morning.

"What was going on, Mom?" her son Rich asks her after my grandpa tells the story.

"I was tired and I was cross!" she says, unapologetic.

It seems that she's still not quite over the fight. Or maybe she's not over living in an apartment with no light in a town with no light. She was pregnant soon after the wedding and they had their first baby in Rolla. Afterwards, they moved to Minot, one-hundred and twenty miles southwest, so my grandpa could start a radio station with two friends using a small business grant from the army. Was he a DJ? Did he play the bouncing polka records that would fifty years later sit faded beneath a curving mahogany record player next to their dining room table? Did my grandma listen as she changed diapers and washed laundry and prepared dinner and hung curtains over another set of gray windows?

The arrangement didn't last long; one of my grandpa's friends, the one charged with finances, gambled the army money away within the year. My grandparents moved to Fargo where my grandpa got his first lawyer job, and the second and third babies were born there, all daughters so far, all with big eyes, light hair. The third was my mom. Another brother and sister were born after her, everyone two years apart, five kids in ten years.

My grandma raised them while my grandpa worked. She was always going somewhere: Toastmasters Club, Get out the Vote drives, meetings for Republican women, then the Democrat women. There is a photo of her riding in a float after having been crowned Mrs. Fargo; she was nominated based on her contributions to the city, and those dark good looks that caught my grandpa's attention back in Rolla may have played a role. She sits on the back of the seat of an old convertible, waving a flowing wave and smiling with the relaxed confidence of a person who has spent her life in the spotlight. The sheen of her pale satin dress is visible even through a black and white photo. She bought it at a fifty percent discount from an expensive dress shop and fixed the torn seam and broken zipper.

When she was in her 30s, she won the North Dakota Toastmistress of the Year Award – the prize included a plane trip to Los Angeles to perform in the national competition. She used the plane ticket money toward a rented camper so that the family could see the West: the Badlands, Yellowstone, the coastlines of Washington and Oregon, the redwood forests of California. When they arrived in Los Angeles, the rest of

the family camped on Santa Monica beach while she stayed in her paid hotel room – there were too many kids to fit.

It was a two-night visit. She went to her competition during the day. Was she intimidated by the size and scope of the event, of women in professional hairstyles and designer clothes? More likely she made friends, found out the particulars of these women's lives. More likely she charmed the judges, her gestures soft and natural and her voice lilting, but incapable of the coastal city pizzazz of the winners. At night, she went to her hotel room to sleep – a single moment of solitude. Maybe she had a balcony where she could step out to feel the warm air, smell the salt. Did sleep on the same side of the bed that she did with my grandpa? Or did she sneak over onto his side, luxuriate in the soft white sheets, the bed that she didn't have to make, sleep in until she was interrupted by her family knocking on the door, the kids yelling "Mom!" ready to chat and shower and sightsee and swim in the ocean through shades of gray and blue and white that were too soft to remind her of the skies at home.

My grandparents have spent their winters in Costa Rica since 1994. "A lot of good memories here," my grandma says to me after the sun's gone down and the sky's still pink. I agree with her, but wonder why she said it. Are the good memories coming to a close? We're picking up our empty screwdriver cups, walking down the stairs past globes of shrubs dotted with tiny bunches of red ixora flowers, making sure we're not late for my grandpa's chicken stir fry dinner.

She's 84, and he's 91. I remind myself how healthy they are right now. The place they live in Costa Rica is a "blue zone," one of the healthiest places on earth, with one of the longest average life spans. The food is nutritious and colorful: melons, bananas, papayas, avocados, rice, beans, fresh fish and meat. She always talks about how good she feels when she's here.

For years, she had stomach trouble, staying up sick too many nights, weak during the day. After years of struggle and small town medical tests, she made a summer visit to the Mayo Clinic, where she learned the source of her sickness – celiac disease. Wheat gluten – in the pancakes and pepperoni pizza and strawberry shortcake she loved so much – all that flour had been scraping the cilia from her digestive system. In Costa Rica, she felt better because she didn't eat these things. Flour was occasional here in Nosara. There weren't so many *padres* driving around the country, filling big white trucks with it.

My grandparents' house in Fargo was small and white on a tiny lot. As my grandpa's law career progressed, they bought a two-story house in West Fargo, pale brick on bottom, wood painted burgundy on top – enough room to hold everyone, on a corner lot with a river and a park a few steps beyond their backyard. I remember being there for Easter, sliding down the carpeted staircase on my stomach, getting extra slip by wearing snowpants and a parka, then heading outside. Everything was white, as it had been since the last time we visited in November: the flat backyard, the river, the park, the pine trees along it.

In the early 1970s, my aunt Nancy, the second daughter, planned to take the LSAT. My grandma was in the middle of doing laundry one day, wandering through her weekly routine in the thin light of the basement, probably rubbing warmth back into her hands, red from the cool air and cold water, when she came across an LSAT study guide. She remembered her year of working as legal secretary in Austin, between high school and nursing school. She had liked the job, asked her bosses a lot of questions. She flipped through the study guide, thought, "I could do *this*." So she ironed my grandpa's white dress shirts, paired and rolled his dark socks together, and she studied, took the test, and entered law school at the University of North Dakota two years after Nancy did, in 1974.

Since UND was in Grand Forks, an hour and a half drive from West Fargo, she lived in a boarding house during the week, and went home on the weekends. Only her two youngest were at home by that point – Jan was in high school, and Rich, her second son, born ten years after Jan, was five years old. My parents, still in college, moved into the house. They lived with my grandpa and took care of Rich. Rich was not planned. I wonder if my grandma had other plans. I have it in my head that she went through a depression when he came along. Did she tell me that? Did my mom? But she kept on, folding and ironing and cooking, as she thought about the good news, a smiley-faced nurse delivering the results of the pregnancy test, giant red letters on a bright yellow house next to a flour mill.

My grandma was 47 when she went to law school. She remembers having hot flashes during her classes, having to get up to go to the bathroom and soak up sweat with rough brown paper towels, one after another, not caring that they were wrecking her makeup, just trying to get herself back to class. When she finished school, she and my grandpa and Rich moved to Chicago, where my grandpa had been hired as a federal judge. She got a job at the EPA by walking into the office and asking for one. She worked there for nine years, visiting industrial job sites around the Midwest – Hopkins, Minnesota; Grand Rapids, Michigan – and all of these stories seem to take place in the winter. She made sure the companies were complying with environmental regulations, forced them to pay for clean-up if they weren't. She didn't have a problem being tough; my mom would say that her tactic was to kill people with kindness. She would tell people what she needed from them with that same Toastmistress lilt in her voice, a beatific smile.

She liked living in Chicago; the photos of my grandparents from that time show them with their clothes a little larger, their faces filled out. She still talks about the food there: the Thai restaurant, the steakhouse. And their combined federal pensions, as well as the additional pension credit she petitioned for – for the time she spent as a nurse, would eventually allow them to buy the place in Costa Rica.

They traveled to other places first, possible retirement spots like Destin, Florida and Weslaco, Texas, places where they had siblings or friends. But nothing really stuck. Costa Rica wasn't even on the table; it was just one of the stops on a vacation tour. They

were scheduled to stay at the condo complex for a week. They extended it to three, then returned the next year to buy the condo in the building furthest from the parking lot, closest to the shade of the jungle and the sound of howler monkeys each morning, with a perfect view of landscaping that looked like a botanical garden, everything bright and alive.

It's their twentieth year of Costa Rica. There's talk of calling a realtor, putting the place on the market. Association fees have doubled since they first bought it, and so have plane tickets, food prices. They've both had some bouts of unpleasantness – his surgery for bladder cancer, her sciatic pain that would get so bad she'd have to rest after walking from one room to another. But his cancer was caught early, removed, and her dentist friend in a neighboring condo recommended some pain pills that helped her move more easily.

Rich, their youngest, sent some pictures of his recent visit with his wife and two kids, a baby boy and a kindergarten girl. In one, my grandma sits on the balcony in a wicker chair with her granddaughter, an ocean of green behind them. Both are long and graceful and light-haired. They lean toward each other, playing on an iPad with relaxed faces, gauzy dresses, satisfied smiles. Everything is lit in hazy sun coming in from the coast, and their memories are here now, away from flour mills on flat-toned land, frozen clouds in snow stilled skies. Her memories have moved here now, like pollen pulled from flower to flower.

EXPERIENCIA

Lauren had shoulder-length brown hair, and wore pastel v-neck sweaters and what she'd later refer to as "Gene Shalit glasses." She was going to school for nursing. I had decided at the airport in Houston, where our exchange group of about twenty sat in a row of beige pleather seats waiting for our Continental flight to San Jose after descending from our various cities, that she would not be my friend. The group in general looked like they were doing this to build their resumes – a lot of khaki and talk about how study abroad looked good on law school applications.

I was doing this because I had enjoyed my spring break trip to my grandparents' beach condo three months before; in particular, my successful surfing lessons on white water waves, and on the last day of the trip, a conversation with three Costa Rican men fishing from a cliff, where they told me a local legend about a *tiburon* that ate *pescadores* by pulling their boats under the waves. Between their slow talking and exaggerated gestures and my multiple questions, I was able to understand the story. The vocabulary lists and verb charts I'd studied for four years of high school and college Spanish classes, the ones that had made my eyes cross with boredom, had come into focus.

My dad convinced me to take Spanish when it came time to choose a language class in ninth grade. My friends were taking Latin and French, but Spanish, he said, would allow me to talk to more people from more countries. So I signed up for classes with *Señor* Johnson, a gangly man from Minneapolis who had studied in Mexico for a year in college. He spoke rapid Spanish on the first day of class, and a dark-haired older

girl, Tanya, who rode my bus, looked around the room in a panic and left after a bathroom break, never to return. I stayed, and liked, that *Señor* Johnson smiled a lot, revealing his overbite, his cockeyed friendliness, as if he didn't mind laughing at his own private Spanish joke on us, because we would soon be in on it, too. As the class period wore on, he slowed his speaking and made his gestures more obvious: pointing to himself when he said "*yo*," pointing to us when he said "*Ustedes*." He had also posted the most important phrases on signs around the room in black marker on white posterboard like "*¿Puedo ir al baño*?" next to a rudimentary drawing of a toilet.

Later, he would throw parties in class for *Día de los Muertos* and *Cinco de Mayo* where he'd paint his face like a skull or wear his rainbow-colored poncho and cook us flan, he'd teach us how to sing "*La Cucaracha*," and the theme song to "*¿Qué Pasa*, U.S.A.?", he'd show us photos of his time in Mexico, standing among Mayan ruins, looking a little bit younger and just as goofy, with his arm around a laughing dark-haired girl.

"*Mi novia*," he said, and we said, "Oooo-ooooh! *¿Donde está*?" and he pretended to wipe a tear from his eye. "*En México*."

He was still single, living in a little white house by the dog food factory. Why did he decide to move here to this town of two thousand people in the middle of the Minnesota, where his chances of meeting a new girl were next to nonexistent? Was it because if he couldn't have her, he'd rather just be alone, teaching the language and culture of her country to teenagers who were nearing the age he was when he met her? Was it so he could take his wealthier students on spring break trips to her city, have an

excuse to get together with her once more for coffee, laugh about how her mother still called him "*ese gringo extraño*," reminisce about their bus trips to *las montañas y la playa*, hear about her new *novio* and imagine that it wouldn't last, that one of these years, the *gringo extraño* would come back and stay?

As I sat in the first day of orientation class for our exchange group, a small Costa Rican man in a beige suit talked in Spanish too *rápido* to understand about the history of banana plantations. I alternated between gazing out the open door to the wrought iron railing obscuring the tops of yellow-flowered trees in the courtyard below, and glancing around the room to check again for someone interesting in this God-forsaken group. Lauren was sitting a couple of rows over, her hair in a sedated low ponytail, not looking at the teacher, but staring at her desk with glazed eyes. Her right hand was held like a flower not yet opened, and around the petals spun a blue ballpoint pen, twirling as it touched each fingertip, occasionally accelerated by her thumb. I cocked my head to the side and watched, losing interest in anything else happening inside or outside the room. Then, she flipped her hand and caught the pen, like Geena Davis catching the ball in *A League of Their Own*. She looked up then to notice me looking and cocked her head to the side with a hangdog smile. I gave her the thumbs up and nodded before turning back to the teacher, bouncing my leg until class ended and I could rush to her desk and talk to her, ask about her technique. She told me in a nasal, embarrassed voice about how the pen needed to be equally-weighted on both sides, how longer pens worked better, how she had a collection of the best spinning pens if I ever wanted to practice. She

demonstrated then, and others in the group gathered around to see, some people laughing, some cheering, and others walking away bored.

The laughers and cheerers and Lauren and I decided to get lunch together at a nearby mall of high glass windows and concrete adorned with a yellow sun and bubbly art deco type "*Plaza del Sol*." We walked there along *Avenida Central*, past *joyerías* with gold-plated cubic zirconia rings displayed in the windows and *zapaterías* with plastic high heels perched on shelves set outside with pink posterboard signs advertising *dos pares por cinco mil colones* in black marker and *panaderías* with open doors, revealing spiraling pastries the size of plates sprinkled with sparkly sugar granules, their sweet smell combining with the diesel smoke of school buses converted into city buses, some still yellow and black, and some painted in thick stripes of new colors – green and white; orange and yellow; red, white, and blue like the Costa Rican flag.

We *gringos* navigated our new land – our sneakers and shorts standing out among the gold chains and Armani Exchange jeans and shiny black shoes of the people around us – until we found familiarity under the pointy red roof of the Pizza Hut next to the Plaza, people in uniforms of black trousers and red shirts and gold nametags serving oversized platters of pepperoni pizza and red plastic cups of Pepsi with free refills.

When we finished eating, we waited at the bus stops outside, watched the stream of bright buses for the signs in their windows – Zapote or Sabanilla or Curridabat. We waved to one another as we boarded, handed the driver enough silver and gold coins to pay the fare of fifty-five *colones*, the equivalent of a quarter, and made our way toward our host homes: Lauren's in Sabanilla, on the other side of the campus, and mine in

Curridabat, further past the Plaza del Sol on Avenida Central, a right turn near *Casa Mueble*, a two-story building filled with windows displaying furniture of bamboo and teak wood and wicker. The bus wound through a neighborhood of concrete houses with chipping pastel paint until it pulled up at the final stop, an open-air restaurant with a red and white striped awning and matching white sign painted with a single strawberry and the word *Fresas* in red cursive below.

Around the corner was the Catholic Church, Parroquia San Antonio de Padua, the centerpiece of Curridabat, two blocks long and the tallest building I'd seen outside of San Jose, ivory, three arched bell towers and an arching doorway flanked by palm trees. . The roof of the church had domes like a mosque, topped with wide-winged angel statues and crosses. The black barred fence that surrounded the church was also topped with crosses, these ones sharp-pointed for security.

Across the street was the *Parque Central*, four blocks long and wide, which I walked through diagonally as a shortcut to my host family's house, down crumbling concrete steps where teenagers sat and kissed, through a stout grove of viney-trunked trees and their full, dank shade.. At the end of the grove, perched on concrete blocks built into the sidewalk, glowering men with greasy hair drank and hissed as I walked by. As I reemerged onto the street, taking care not to fall into the foot-deep gutter that lined the sidewalks throughout the city, I was greeted by the sun again, by mothers pushing strollers, by the convenience store called the Mini-Super Paloma, its name indicated on a red Coca Cola awning. My host grandmother corrected me when I called it a "mini-super" in my best Spanish accent "MEE-nee soo-PEAR," saying that it was too *moderna y Americana* to call it that, that it was called a *pulpería*.

On the next block was another smaller *pulpería* with a plain yellow awning and no name to speak of, no Coca Cola sponsorship. A block later, I took a left at the post office, *Correos de Curridabat*, open to the street during the day and shuttered with silver garage doors at night. Then a quick right at the *farmacía* and down my host family's block, past the dark orange house with the roosters that sounded off every morning at *la madrugada*, about four thirty, when the sky was still mostly dark. My house was the *penúltima casa en la izquierda, blanca con techo rojo* – this is what I had been instructed to tell cab drivers: second to last house on the left, white with a red roof. Past it were a few overgrown lots, and then a long perpendicular street with peaks and valleys of potholes that crossed in front of the soccer fields beyond.

I had two house keys on my keychain – the first for a gate of black bars that protected the front of the house, the sides and back protected by brick fences topped with a rainbow assortment of jagged glass bottles. The second was for the black metal door that led inside, to a parlor room with white tile floors. My host mom cleaned these floors every morning with a red rag fastened to a broom, even though the room and its contents – a green velvet couch and a shiny hardwood table with matching brown-vinyl cushioned chairs – were never used.

Through the next door was the heart of her work, a u-shaped bar that surrounded her kitchen, her stove with an always-piping pressure cooker of black beans, her floral patterned rice cooker with an ever-lit red light showing that the rice was ready, her refrigerator door covered with picture postcards from her previous exchange students in Ohio, New York, Delaware – and its shelves filled with the eggs and filets of meat she'd fry for any of us on a moment's notice, the *refrescos de fruta* in a yellow pitcher she'd

make by doing whatever magical thing she did to the fruit to liquefy it into a well-balanced concoction of water, sugar, and *limón* or *sandía* or *mora*. I never saw a blender – did she peel and press the lemons, deseed and scoop the meat out of the watermelons, mash blackberries into a bowl and strain the juice?

Jackie, my host mom, was ten years older than me, thirty years old at the time I lived with her. She had a solid build, like she was constructed from Duplo blocks, each small, sturdy piece fitting into place just right, her dark brown eyes so striking they looked painted on, a regular uniform of a striped or floral t-shirt tucked into belted Guess jeans, and house slippers as she cleaned the house, or high-heeled black sandals as she walked to the post office or the farmer's market or the Palí grocery store. There was a muscularity to her movements as she walked or washed clothes or swept or slung our meals from shelf to stove to table, a determinedness to her low voice as she taught me new words in Spanish, not satisfied until I had proven my understanding of both the word and the accent. The verb for rain, "llueve," would be pronounced "you-wave-ay," in most other Spanish-speaking countries, but in Costa Rica, it was pronounced "ju-wave-ay." When I said it the first way, she had me repeat it until I had excised the common pronunciation, telling me that if I was living in Costa Rica, I should sound *costarricense*.

She and her husband Luis had three kids – Gabriel, a ten-year-old who the family nicknamed *Flaco* because of how tall he had gotten; he was the size of a teenager before his time and not quite used to the length of his new limbs. He would knock on my bedroom door whenever I was holed up homesick and ask me to play soccer or volleyball, and let me in on phrases too proper for my host mom to teach like *pura mierda*. Seven-year-old Fabiola would ask me for help with her homework and teach me

songs from her school – "Goood-byee, goood-byee, English class is oh-vare," and dressed in pink and purple clothes printed with Disney princesses, and snuck candy and cookies from the kitchen or my room when the opportunity presented itself. The youngest, Alejandro, was a big-headed baby when I arrived and a medium-headed toddler by the time I left, finding his way into my room when the door wasn't locked to climb up my desk chair as I worked and grab my hair or kiss my cheek or crumple up papers on my desk.

Luis, their dad, was built like Santa Claus, his face round with a thin mustache and tired eyes. During the week, he left the house early and returned late, worked as a security guard at the *Banco Nacional* in downtown San José, and spent his evening hours at *El Sesteo*, a local bar near the Catholic Church. When we did see each other in the house, we'd exchange quick greetings: "*HOLA*, Chanomi," "¿*Como está*, Luis?" and "MUY *bién*." When he was charged with feeding me one Saturday night, when Jackie and the kids were at her mom's house, he drove me to *El Sesteo* and ordered us both the *arroz con camarones*, rice with shrimp, *y una cerveza*. We watched soccer on the television as we waited, sipping our beers, glancing at each other from time to time until one of us thought of a question like, "¿*Y cómo está TODO*, Chanomi?" or "¿*Le gusta trabajar en el banco,* Luis?" Mostly, though, we didn't talk besides me raving about the food when it came: "*Delicioso*!" and Luis nodding, "*Es mi FAVORITO.*" The fried rice managed to be soft and crunchy at once and the shrimp was tiny and abundant and fresh. We ate in satisfied silence with occasional breaks for cheering "Ooh – PAH!" and clapping as his team – either Saprissa or Zapote, whoever wore the yellow uniforms –

won the soccer game. As we walked back into the house, he patted me on the back and we each walked to our respective rooms.

After this, he talked to me a little more often, usually in the form of announcing my activities to the rest of the family. When I returned from a weekend beach trip, he'd shout from his seat in the kitchen, "¡*Chanomi viene de la playa SIEMPRE quemada*!" referring to the common occurrence of me getting sunburned. Or, when he'd catch me at the door after one of these trips, as I carried the used surfboard I'd bought, he'd say, "¡*A Chanomi le gusta SURFIAR*!"

When, during the last week of my first semester, my backpack was robbed from the back of a rental car after my travel companions and I parked it on a side street in Curridabat, far from the parking lot and the security guard hired by the seafood restaurant where we ate, my host dad had been philosophical, saying that it was lucky that only our luggage was stolen and that we hadn't gotten hurt, that we would know now that it was only safe to park in certain areas. He wrapped up his speech with, "*Experiencia*, Chanomi. *Experiencia*." This went over well with my actual dad when I talked to my parents on the phone that night. "That's a good dad line," he said.

He repeated it a few times when I was met with other minor misfortunes – leaving my wallet on the bus, forgetting my favorite jacket in the computer lab, losing a night's worth of work on a paper to a computer malfunction. *Experiencia*. I didn't hear it yet, this advice that was passed from dad to dad through three thousand miles of phone line, five years after *Señor* Johnson had taught me how to understand. In a few years, *Señor* Johnson would become a dad, too, meet a wife in that little town after all, and let the

other teacher take the kids to México while he updated his house with fresh white paint and waited for his new phase.

DAD'S

I ate the last peanut about an hour ago, but I haven't let myself stop yet, a self-punishment for getting myself lost in the middle of Washington. The passenger floor of my rented silver Mazda, the smallest sedan available, now contains a mosaic of empties: the Planter's peanut bag, a can of sugar-free Red Bull, a banana peel, two apple cores, and a bottle of BP-brand water.

Yelp.com has two reviews for Dad's Family Restaurant in Toppenish. One is from Bryan B, who gives the restaurant two out of five stars and lets his readers know that he ordered a grilled cheese and onion rings, that he liked the "old-school phones at each table for placing orders," and that the experience "wouldn't have been too bad if not for foul smell from the slaughter house in town."

I don't notice the slaughterhouse smell. All I know is that Dad's is calling out to me after hours of driving through the low, one-toned grass hills of eastern Washington, only to be greeted by the chain link fences and chain restaurants of Toppenish – a strip mall Subway, a combination KFC/Taco Bell – all fake stucco, all inspiring me to keep driving hungry, until, just beyond them, I find Dad's, with its red roof like an old popcorn box turned upside down, its brick walls in a thousand shades of beige and brown, its faded, flat-topped drive-in around back, an oasis of old in a desert of new construction.

The other Yelp reviewer, Ian L., wrote that Dad's used to be an A & W, back in 1995 when he last came through. "Other than the name change, little is different. Your basic burger and shake place." He also gave it two stars.

I wonder what would satisfy Bryan B. and Ian L. This is a Dad's Root Beer-themed restaurant, a marvel. It's been so long since I've seen Dad's Root Beer, the blue twelve-ounce can stamped with a red-framed yellow square with "Dad's" written across in blue block letters, that I didn't think it existed anymore. I call my husband from the parking lot, tell him about my find, about how I'd go with my dad to the Wagon Wheel Grocery Store near our house and he'd tell me I could get a pop, and to get him one, too. I'd pick out a can of A&W for me, a can of Dad's for him and say, "I guess you *have* to get this one," or he'd beat me to the punch and say, "Oh, look! It's my root beer!"

I linger in the car, cellphone to ear, in the Dad's wraparound parking lot, the middle of a sea of ten other parking lots divided by medians of well-watered grass. My husband sighs at my story, says, "Don't quit your day jobs, Chanomi and Larry."

I laugh, and we're silent for a second as I tap at the open driver's door with my foot, debate whether or not I should pull up to the drive-in.

"Go eat and call me back," he says. He can tell when it's been too long since I've eaten – my voice drops an octave and he knows that it's only a matter of time before I start yelling at him or traffic or weather or whatever else might be around. We hang up. I decide it would be weird to pull into a drive-in alone. I walk across the motor oiled pavement of the parking lot, past planters of red flowers that match the roof, and then

inside, wood paneling everywhere like a lake cabin from the 1970s, tulip-shaped orange and blue and white lamps that without the Pepsi logo and the blue, would be the same as the ones in my childhood house. The menu is spelled out in bubbly white letters on a blue backdrop behind the counter, along with faded photos of bacon cheeseburgers and chocolate milkshakes in paper cups. A high school girl with a smooth blonde ponytail takes orders, and on the counter next to her are rows of Ziploc baggies filled with fresh cherries. These are my favorite fruit, and my dad's.

I take a bag and order a BLT in his honor; BLTs were one of his specialties, dark tomatoes and funnels of thick lettuce from the garden, slab bacon from the butcher, dense, nutty bread from the bread machine. The BLT here won't be as good, I know, thin bacon and iceberg lettuce and bland tomatoes, but this is what I always wanted as a kid anyway, the kind of food that my friends ate. My taste for it still sticks around. I also order a root beer, diet. I know my dad would not approve. "How can you drink that stuff? It tastes like aluminum! You're not trying to lose weight, are you? Remember what happened to Karen Carpenter?"

The root beer is frosty in a heavy mug, and tastes almost like the real thing, but still disappointing. The BLT, too, is about what I expected – white bread and Miracle Whip. The cherries are the stars of the meal – dark without dings or dents, none of them too ripe. I look out the plate glass window as I eat, across the two-lane street that's wide enough for four lanes, into a park that's mostly parking lot, lined with a sparse row of dumpy trees, an American flag on a pole that's the tallest thing for miles, grass beyond that is not as well-tended as in the medians between businesses.

I finish my food and dump the rest of my root beer, my dad's voice still in my head. I pick up another bag of fruit on my way out the door, as if he's sitting in the car, waiting to share cherries and further opinions on NutraSweet.

Nine days from now would be his sixtieth birthday. I'm driving from Spokane to California, reversing a portion of the same route he hitchhiked in 1974, where his ultimate destination was Fargo, North Dakota, and my mom. My destination is the San Francisco Zen Center, and him. He stayed there for a week or two in 1972, worked and lived as a Zen student, and even though he was there a short time, it affected him, gave me a childhood of family meditations, of few chores because he did them all – dishes, sweeping, dusting, scrubbing – always keeping a clean space, moving with purpose and perfect posture, maybe because of Zen. Maybe the Zen Center is where I'll find the way he was, find his ghost through the ghosts of the monks who taught him.

I've made it only two-hundred miles; I started from Spokane at 6 AM and missed my exit at Kennewick, wound up in Toppenish, too far north, halfway to Yakima. The scenery was flat and yellow and dead, and I was tired, mad that I'd lost an hour in my detour of dumb-assery, frustrated with myself for always missing exits; I'd once driven for two hours in the wrong direction in New York state while my husband slept. But today, as I approached Yakima, tried to find my way to Highway 97, I saw the overturned

popcorn box beacon of Dad's in a sea of parking lot pavement and strip malls and I knew this was the way I was supposed to come.

At the Oregon/California border, at the agricultural inspection station, the dark-uniformed inspector tells me he needs to confiscate my second bag of Dad's cherries. I have the same feeling I had when I was five and my pink helium balloon hit the popcorn ceiling of my grandparents' hotel room and burst. I try to turn and reach for the bag before the inspector sees my face, but I must have been too late, because when I turn back, cherries in hand, he looks like his balloon has popped, too. The squint lines between his eyes go slack, fade into his forehead. "You know what?" his face perks up. "Why don't you just pull over and eat them?" He points to a row of dark cars behind the inspection building. I thank him with my hand to my heart and pull my car in next to the others, watch the tufts of yellow tumbleweeds, the straggly trees dotting dull-colored mountains in the distance: California. I finish my Dad's cherries, spit the pits into a Diet Dr. Pepper bottle.

I want to sleep in the town of Mount Shasta tonight because I like the name, like the sound a soda can makes when you open it. The sky has started to fade, turn pink around the edges, and I hope I'll make it before dark, see a big mountain instead of all these shrubby ones.

I'll find out later that my dad saw it on his hitchhiking trip, wrote in his journal, "More fantastic scenery. Mt. Shasta rising up into clouds and rivaling the Redwood forests of the day before."

By the time I pull into Mount Shasta the town, it's too dark to see anything. But if I stay here, I'll see the mountain in the morning. I would have caught it at sunset if it weren't for that two-hour nap in the parking lot of a northern Oregon BP station, the only building in the state, it seemed, situated at the base of a low, undramatic mountain covered with brown grass interrupted only by the gray, twisting line of Highway 97.

I drive past motels, deciding whether or not I will pull in based on their signs – assuming that the crummier the sign, the cheaper the rate. One sign, for the A-1 Choice Inn, features a painting of a blue first-place ribbon on a fading green backdrop. Promising. The building itself is a dimly-lit two stories of faded peach doors against dirty cream-colored siding, a green tin roof. I park and walk into the lobby where a curly-haired manager, fifty or so, sits heavy in a wheeled chair.

"You're lucky," she says. "Someone cancelled, just called now. One room, two beds, one hundred dollars, best deal in town. Visa or MasterCard. Muffins in the morning. She speaks as fast as an auctioneer.

It's ten o'clock and I've been driving for fourteen hours – I'm running on Diet Dr. Pepper fumes. I could sleep, see the mountain. I survey the old orange carpet in the office, the cluttered particleboard desk she sits behind.

"I think I'll check around for a lower price," I say, a half-hearted attempt to haggle.

"We won't have room anymore."

I look out at the dim parking lot: full. "I'll just check," I say, and she shakes her head, still not having moved from her chair. As I leave, a European couple enters, still wearing wraparound sunglasses at dusk, ready to rent the last open room at the base of Mount Shasta, full price. I can't bring myself to spend so much on a mountain. I pull out, pass the Evergreen Lodge, the Treehouse Motor Inn, both with signs painted with leaves and pine needles too intricate for me to stop. I retrace my steps to the freeway, remember a McDonalds in Weed, a few miles back, where I can get a hamburger and internet service, figure out my next move.

When I was twelve, my dad and I planned to drive from Perham, Minnesota, to Crater Lake, Oregon, a lake in the middle of a mountain. My grandparents had given me a *National Geographic* guide to the national parks for Christmas a few years before. I scanned all the other entries, but I turned to the Crater Lake section again and again, knew it by memory. I could quote the nightly rate at the Crater Lake Lodge: forty-five dollars. I knew the depth of the lake: 1,943 feet. I knew that there was only one spot where you could legally swim, and that it would be cold, between thirty-eight and sixty degrees.

My favorite photo in the spread was of a hiker who stood far away, his back to the camera, next to a skinny hemlock tree that drooped and leaned toward him like they were companions. Below them, taking up most of the shot, was the lake, or half the lake, the other half obscured by the cliff where the hiker stood and the tree leaned. The part you could see was a perfect half-moon, a blue like I'd never seen that managed to be both dark and translucent, no vegetation to murk up the water like in Minnesota lakes. It was surrounded by the zigzagged stone and white of the mountain that had created it, the dark and light of rock and snow making the blue bluer.

I looked at the photo so often that the book would turn itself there when I opened it, to the precision of the circular lake, its containment inside the mountain, the kinship of the tiny man hovering above and the tree at his side. The scene felt protected, stored inside a snow globe, and when my dad asked me where I wanted to travel that summer, I said Crater Lake. "That will be a pretty drive," my dad said. "Lots of mountains." His eyes lost contact for a moment. I don't think he told me he'd hitchhiked some of those same roads.

We left on the trip the same day I finished sixth grade. He picked me up from school as I said goodbye to my friends in an outfit carefully chosen for both the last day of school and the first day of the trip: a white t-shirt with purple flowers and my favorite shorts – white stretchy cotton with lace sewn to the hem by mom – a lower budget, baggier version of the style most of the girls in my class had bought on shopping trips to Fargo. My dad wore his usual red t-shirt and jeans, his hair still dark then, bushy.

His play-by-play of potential mountain sightings started as soon as we left his parents' house in Minot the next morning.

"You see that? The state line is coming up; you're about to be west of North Dakota!" "Only another couple of hours until we hit the mountains, kiddo."

I had dozed off by the time the mountains appeared. The day was hot and gray with an obscured sun still strong enough that it was easier to close my eyes. I remember his voice speaking the word, "mountains," into some dream I don't remember, waking me for them. "Check it out, kid…there they are." I blinked, checked the view out the passenger window: the same – fields of prairie grass still dead from the winter, a silent farm set back from the road, a few rocks. Out the front window, dark shapes floated in the distance like an illusion, hazy and jagged and low against the edge of the sky. I squinted, thought I might be missing something.

"I thought they'd be bigger," I said, sleepy.

"Really?" his voice cracked. "You're not impressed?" He shook his head, looked beyond the road, adjusted his glasses, glanced over at me.

"Maybe I'll be more impressed when we get closer?" I watched for another couple of minutes, for his benefit, and then rested my head against the window again, closed my eyes.

I wonder how disappointed he was with my indifference. As the mountains drew closer, my major contribution to the scenery conversation was to make fun of the road

signs that showed the distance to Butte, Montana. He joined in, "Only ninety miles to Butt!" but I doubt he found it as hilarious as I did.

I wonder what he thought about in the long silences between my proclamations of ridicule and boredom. On his hitchhiking trip twenty years before, he caught a ride from Idaho Falls to Butte with "a beautiful woman named Sylvia" who "loaded [him] up with good Lebanese hash." He had felt "extremely relaxed with her – conversation on an unusually intimate, personal level – partly the drug and partly just the click of two people who intersected at the right time." Did he think of her, dark-haired and sophisticated, and wonder if he could have lived a life of no kids, of deeper conversations and better drugs than the marijuana he grew in a patch on an old Minnesota farm? Did she love the mountains, too, see beauty in the haze of oversized rock? Did this fuel their conversation – the power of gravity and plate tectonics and wind and weather moving them to this moment, mountains all around so they'd remember, then continue the shift and drift toward stationary lives, stuck on opposite horizons?

After we'd driven ten hours and set up our tent on the eastern edge of Glacier National Park, the mountains looming larger but not quite surrounding us, the land beneath us still flat and yellow, we cooked a box of organic whole wheat macaroni on a camp stove, sprinkled it with the white packet of powdered parmesan and herbs that smelled like sage, my favorite dinner from the health food store. As the sky faded and I washed our tin dishes under a spigot, he spread out a map at the picnic table. He drew his finger to Crater Lake and showed me – we were about two thirds of the way there;

Montana was mostly behind us but we still had to cover the tip of Idaho, the southeast corner of Washington, most of Oregon.

"Okay," I said, nodding, excited to see the blue dot of Crater Lake on the map, as close as I'd ever been to it.

"That's going to be another thirty hours in the car if we go there and back," he said.

"Yeah?" The air was getting sharp now, making me wish I had my sweater from the car.

"We'd basically drive there, spend a day, and drive home. We'd have to leave here early tomorrow to make it."

He looked at the map again, and then at me. "Are you sure that's how you want to spend the trip?" I was sure, but his lawyerly tone let me know that he wasn't. I stayed silent as he continued his argument, about really getting to experience this area, the national parks all around us, having more time to stop and see the sights. I didn't care about the other sights, but I didn't say this. I didn't want to disappoint him, make him spend so many days driving for something only I wanted to see. I was the oldest of three, pleased my parents by being agreeable, going with the flow when my brothers yelled louder opinions than mine – Hardee's instead of Dairy Queen, mini-golf instead of the mall. I blinked hard, said that maybe we could go to Crater Lake someday when we had more time. He clapped his hands once, refolded the map, and stood. "Great."

We spent the next two days in Glacier as he ogled the mountains, drove us into the midst of them, stopped at each scenic overlook so we could see tree-covered rock rising up to snow. We camped under those mountains at night, and when I'd wake up, he'd already be outside, cooking eggs on the camp stove, moving with a bounce, an energy that lit him up, made him glow. We had each campground to ourselves. The *National Geographic* book had said that early summer was the best time to visit Crater Lake: no crowds.

We made our way down to Wyoming next, my dad drumming on the steering wheel whether there was music or not, drove to the sulfur stink of Old Faithful, the soft pastel roll of the Badlands. As a consolation prize for not seeing Crater Lake, he took me to Wall Drug and each of the park gift shops, in search of a sterling silver ring in the shape of a snake, something I'd seen on a girl at summer camp the year before. We found it in the Black Hills, in a paltry selection of silver among walls of green and rose gold. I put it on my right index finger as we walked outside and wore it every day until the silver snapped, the snake's head getting caught on a thread of the passenger seat of my friend Hailey's boxy blue Honda Accord as we smoked Parliaments in the school parking lot during our lunch hour, coated the filters in dark Revlon lipstick, Toast of New York.

We also stopped at The Corn Palace, the presidents' heads, and Evan's Place, an indoor hot springs waterpark the size of a mall – *Black Hills Oldest Attraction*! – with three waterslides, one of them landing in a pool outside. My dad seemed as excited as I did about this place, both of us turning in a slow circle to see the span of the place, the

long white walls splashed with paintings of tropical fish and frogs and eels, a blue and orange slide snaking around a dark pool that we could hardly see the end of, steam rising from the top. He set his glasses on his towel on a plastic lounge chair and speed-walked with me to the tall stairs of the tubular outdoor slide, waited on the steps to shoot through the warm water of the tunnel and into the sun.

This would be the part of the trip I'd remember best, four hours of running and swimming and sliding on our second-to-last day, watersliding into the outdoor pool enough to get our first sunburns of the summer.

When I finally went to Crater Lake, it would be with my husband, twenty-two years later, an overcast and freezing day in June. He slept as I wound the car through the cedar smell of skyscraper-sized redwoods on a two-lane road that rose and rose as my stomach effervesced with anticipation. We paid the man in the log cabin ranger station, and as we pulled into the park, the sky pelleting snow. We parked the car in a lot already filling at 9 AM on a weekday, walked through the wind toward an observation area, too many families in fleece and flannel taking too many photos, acting too impressed. The lake appeared, churned cold and ominous, reflecting the grays above. None of the blue of the photos. Maybe there was vegetation in the lake after all. Maybe the photos were retouched to make it look clean. It sprawled uneven, too big, not neatly circular and compact as it was in the *National Geographic*. The mountain that rose around it was dark and craggy, not a pretty multi-toned frame for a photo of a perfect lake. It was littered with cars and pavement and people and entrance fees. It was just another tourist attraction, just another mountain.

ARRIVAL

The rain disguises the ding on my windshield, the result of driving behind a tar truck on a mountain road near Crater Lake, Oregon. Two days of anxiety are alleviated as I pass inspection at the off-brand car rental place by the San Francisco Airport. I wonder if it'd be worth it to just get the insurance next time, so I don't have to spend my time worrying about other cars, parking at the ends of streets, at the perimeters of parking lots, at spots next to trees, places where my chances of getting dinged or dented are cut in half.

I linger for a moment after I've retrieved the luggage from my car, a bullet-gray Mazda 3 sedan with no cruise control that since yesterday has taken me from Spokane to Toppenish to Bend to Mount Shasta to the Redding Quality Inn to the BP station in Vallejo that declined my credit card because it had been used in too many places in too few days. The trip was sunny until about fifty miles from Berkeley; now, rain splatters the black plastic paneling inside the driver's door as the attendant vacuums up stray pistachio and peanut shells. Rain soaks my green computer bag and I start to worry about its faulty zipper leaking through. I walk inside the office and take my backpack from my shoulders, my computer bag from my right arm, my grocery bag and purse from my left, so I can sit in a blue plastic chair and stare out the water-dotted plate glass windows, waiting for the blue and white Advantage van to splash up to the front of the building and take me to the airport BART station.

When the van arrives, I'm more annoyed than relieved: each time I switch locations, I have to either gather or remove my luggage: backpack, computer bag, grocery bag, purse. Luggage on, walk to van through the rain. Luggage off, into seat. Luggage on, walk into BART station through the rain. Luggage off, rifle through purse, buy BART ticket. Luggage on, wait for BART. Luggage off, into seat. Pass through rainy skies and grubby pastel houses placed too close together – the suburbs of San Francisco; then underground, the city of San Francisco – each stop filling the car with more people as I try to consolidate luggage under my seat, make room, watch the stops tick down: watching for my stop: Civic Center.

Luggage on, get off at the Civic Center, hike the stairs to the top. Emerge onto Market Street where drizzle falls into humid air and onto concrete buildings with dark windows or none at all. I walk by car lots, Subway, Dollar Market, look for a street name I recognize from the Google map I have printed and folded into my backpack but that I'm too proud to pull out now in front of harried city people who listen to headphones and cell phones, who look straight ahead, who don't read the street signs. I want Hayes or Van Ness or Gough, but all I see is Jones, Leavenworth, Taylor. My hair is frizzing in the rain and my neck hurts: two days in the car and now four bags filled with too many books and clothes and shoes. I turn around, walk into a Walgreens where the air conditioning fuses cold sweat to my body, where I hide behind a rack of pantyhose to not attract attention to myself. Luggage off again to find my map. The Zen Center is behind me, blocks in the direction I came from. I take a sip from a bottle of water in the grocery bag then put my luggage on, into the drizzle and past streets whose names I know: Gough, Van Ness , and finally, Page, a right turn on to the street where I will live for

eight days, and where the neighborhood turns to pale Victorians that look bright against the dingy sky.

I know the Zen Center when I see it, maybe from the website – did the website have a photo? Or maybe I know it from something else, something innate, a pull, like the building is built into my genetic code. I did get lost on the way here, though, so it's also possible I don't have a homing device, an internal witching rod that points me in the right direction, something both magical and scientific that ignited at the moment of my conception or that shot into my soul at the moment of my dad's death. Maybe this place just looks like a Zen Center. It's burgundy brick, four stories, built into the rising angle of Page Street as if it grew directly out of the ground: white pillars push up to support the arch of the entryway, arched windows trimmed in white flourish along the first level.

I'm not ready to go inside yet, nervous about what I'll find. Maybe my dad at twenty years old will open the door in a low ponytail, rectangular glasses, bare feet, dark cotton pants that don't quite reach his ankles. Maybe I'll understand what happened to him here, how this place made him calm, made him lose his temper only twice in the twenty years that I knew him –when I refused to leave a friend's trailer house at five years old, screamed and cried and mimicked the brassy way my friend talked to her parents, and then when my brother and I snickered over late night video games as teenagers, our voices carrying through the vent into his room, rocketing him out of bed and into my brother's room, his body tense and livid, used to sleeping hard and early, waking up to get to work before anyone else, maybe holdovers from his 5 AM Zen

Center meditation sessions. My brother and I watched wide-eyed as he whisper-hissed about getting the hell to bed, his neck forming ropes as he spoke.

When I had my few big trouble events as a kid, like when I was caught cheating on an earth science test in ninth grade, pressured into taking a copy of an answer guide from a funny future homecoming queen with a husky voice (I liked her; I couldn't say no), he'd said, "But you studied for that test!" By this time, I'd already spent a day of self-imposed penance sequestered in my room, completing extra credit assignments to make up the lost test points. He decided my punishment then. "You're so hard on yourself that we probably don't need to punish you." Did the gentle slope of this brick building against the severe hill where it stood help shape the contours of his mind?

The summer before my fifth grade year, I had insomnia, couldn't quiet my mind at night for fear of a new junior high school in a larger town, and what I'd find there. I didn't know how to fill the time when the rest of the family and the rest of the world were asleep and I should have been asleep, too. I'd already memorized the basswood ceiling above my bed, dark knots in light wood – a duck with a swooping beak, a pregnant mom with her hair blowing behind her, a ghost standing by the ocean.

Anxiety would begin to bubble in my stomach after dinner, as my dad did dishes and my mom put the leftovers in the refrigerator and my brothers and I went downstairs to watch TV. Each show marked another half hour closer to bedtime: on a Tuesday, *Who's the Boss* would take us to 7:30, *Roseanne* to 8, then my parents would watch *Moonlighting* until 9 as my brothers and I went to our rooms. My youngest brother would be getting ready for bed now, out before *thirtysomething* and the 10:00 WDAY

Fargo news. My other brother would be out before John Wheeler predicted the weather. Once Ed Schultz had recapped the baseball scores, my parents would disappear, too, leaving me alone and awake, left to stare at the ceiling and wonder about how mean the kids would be in junior high, about whether or not my fifth grade friends from our class of sixteen in Dent, Minnesota, would leave me for the cosmopolitan kids of Perham, which was big enough to have two grocery stores, a roller rink, a bowling alley, and its own library in place of a biweekly summer bookmobile.

When my dad caught me looking glum one night after the news, as I made my way into the bathroom, he patted me on the shoulder. "When hungry, eat," he'd said. "When tired, sleep." It was something he'd learned from a Zen Center monk, something that had sprouted in his brain and grew.

This burgundy building in San Francisco looks grown from a hill, sprouted from a single brick and a set of Julia Morgan blueprints that has transformed into four stories of refuge for three and a half generations: as a residence home for single Eastern European Jewish women after World War I, as a residence club for women war workers during World War II, and after the wars, as a subsidized boarding house for low-income women who needed therapy. The San Francisco Zen Center bought the building in 1969, three years before my dad would stay there and learn a six-word life philosophy. "When hungry, eat; when tired, sleep."

At the time, his advice had made me angry; I made a face after he passed me at the bathroom. "When tired, sleep." Easy for a person to say who fell asleep within thirty seconds, every night of his life. But then, it helped. I started watching the TV at low volume, the shows that came on before everything turned to fuzz – infomercials for

Kevin Trudeau's Mega Memory, for juicers, for knives that could cut a Coke can in half. I would read, too, sometimes whole books, often books I'd read already – *Sweet Valley High*, *Sweet Valley Twins*, *Dicey's Song*. It was boring but it was better.

Even now when I can't sleep, I'll be mad for an hour and then sigh and throw myself out of bed like a petulant teenager to do something else. I didn't forget his advice. And I hadn't forgotten the Sunday mornings sitting cross-legged on the sunny oak floors of our upstairs living room while he made us meditate, made us stop talking and close our eyes for ten minutes. I didn't know what I was supposed to see or feel; I just watched the shapes my eyelids would form from the dark: tiny stars and squiggles of red and circles of purple. My brothers and I would peek at each other, grimace and yawn and roll our eyes and laugh as silently as we could. Our mom would shoot us sharp looks while our dad remained still, his face serene as ever.

Although a couple of cars have splashed by me – a burgundy Subaru, a white Volvo – I am the only person out here on the sidewalk. The rain has slowed to a sprinkle and the clouds are lighter, almost ready to reveal the sun. I sit on the steps to the Zen Center – luggage off. Across the street is a restaurant, on the pink-painted first floor of a light gray Victorian house. From the outside, it looks like a coffee shop –plate windows, brown block letters on a white sign that say "Tea & Food."

I get up – luggage on – and cross the street to it, but as soon as I open the door, I can see that it's too fancy, patrons in dark clothes, sharp-edged, dark-framed glasses who turn to look at the door as it creaks and crinkles against my plastic grocery bag. I glance at a chalky menu – twelve dollars for a pot of velvet cacao tea, thirteen dollars for a TLT (tempeh, lettuce and tomato) – and leave.

I cross back to the Zen Center, pause for a moment, and then climb the stairs to ring the doorbell. I'm tired of carrying my bags and I don't know where else to go. The directions the guest student manager sent me were written in 14 point red Comic Sans, a big and bubbly font more suited to a preschool newsletter than a set of instructions that might reveal my father to me. She informed me that since I'd be arriving on a Sunday, their day off, I'd need to wait and maybe even ring the bell a couple of times. "But," she continued, "I guarantee you someone will eventually come." I wonder if it will be someone familiar to me, someone who feels my presence at the door, who knows why I've come.

After a few minutes of waiting and peeking through a dark window with no detectable motion behind it, I ring the bell again, start to second-guess the Comic Sans. Then, I hear footsteps creaking. The man who opens the door – not a man, actually…more of a guy – is maybe thirty, gangly with those same sharp glasses as the people in the overpriced tea shop, designer jeans, a factory pre-faded shirt, leather flip flops his toes don't fully grasp. He looks at me as he keeps the door barely propped with a limp arm, his eyebrows half-raised, no smile, no words.

"Thank you *so* much," I say. I can see that he is proud of himself for going to the trouble of opening the door. I enter the building to a burgundy floor, dark wood molding along white walls, a chandelier like a circle of candles, windows all around. It looks like our kitchen: the faux brick linoleum, long plates of glass, and old wood that my dad cobbled together from sales at Menards and the barn he tore down.

I explain my reason for being here to the door opener, and he points to a plastic envelope at the front desk with my key inside: room 26. A good sign, a lucky number? I

was born on February 26th, and my mom was twenty-six when she had me, same as her mom. Does this mean something?

"Your room's up here," the door opener speaks his first words, nodding toward a wide staircase with wide wood banisters, a wheelchair ramp to the side. "I can show you because I'm going up there anyways."

We walk up and around, me behind, slowing to match his pace past the second floor, and onto the third, a broad white hallway, more burgundy floors, through dark double doors and into a dimmer, narrower hallway. I feel like Alice in Wonderland, wondering if I'm getting bigger and bigger or if the building is getting smaller and smaller. I wonder if I've come to the right place, if I'm following the right rabbit, if I'll find what I'm looking for. He indicates a door to the right. "That's the bathroom."

We take a left down another narrower hallway lined with doors, doorways lined with mats, mats lined with shoes. We come to a room on the right, number 26. "That's yours," he points with the same limp-armed gesture, and continues his shuffle down the hall. There are four sets of shoes outside the room – two pairs of flip flops – one pink-sequined and one gold, a pair of purple high-heeled sandals, a pair of pink and white sneakers. The shoes down the hall are earth-toned, worn in, tired-looking. My doorway looks like a discotheque.

The room is white, and dimmer than it should be with its three blue-trimmed windows facing the tea shop, the smallest of them opened like a door to the street below. I watch a silver Saab pull in front of the tea shop, and a woman with a black bob and red

lipstick step out, beep her car closed, and walk inside, probably to buy a wasabi Caesar salad with wild-caught Alaskan salmon.

The cool outside air blows into my room, making a commotion against the middle window, the biggest. Its white blinds have been closed to street: to the pink tea shop, to the red-flowered trees of the community garden, to the vine-covered fence with heart-shaped leaves so shiny they look like they've been waxed, to two Victorian houses –one in sage with peach striping along the arched doorway and crown molding, the other in teal with magenta trim. Instead of this view through our big window, our blinds have been converted into a holder of cat photos and cat cartoons that rattle and shake in the wind, threatening to fall to the floor.

There are two beds covered with colorful clothes and comforters, mounds of pastel polyester. I sit on the third, a bare twin mattress stacked with a folded brown blanket that reminds me of the cotton sleeping bag that served as my childhood bedding. I lean against the wall to survey my new home. It looks like an all-girls Christian summer camp, smells like the oversweet perfume sold in mall shops.

When I was ten and we moved into the new house my dad had built, he asked me what color I wanted my room. "Pink," I'd said. And he painted the whole thing pink, a color I'd chosen from a paint sample, the color of a Care Bear.

I was the only one who liked it. "Are you *sure* that's the color you want?" my dad asked daily. My mom would throw out alternatives, "What if we did…blue?" My parents' friends would come over and say, "Wow! That's pink!"

"Yep!" I'd answer, thinking it was a compliment.

While I was at school one day, a few weeks later, my dad painted the top half of the room white. "It was just too much," he told me when I got home.

"But it was my room!" I said.

"I'm sorry, kid. But it was giving me a headache." We both looked around at my toned-down room, still pink on bottom. "It looks better, right?" he looked over at me. I shook my head, determined to stay mad. He put his arm around me, said, "I just…I had to override your decision, as the builder of the house." He stared at the wall, his face going vacant for a moment.

There was a dark purple trailer house on his way to work, all the trim painted pink, tucked back in the woods. I thought it looked like a house where a movie star might live, or a princess, someone rich enough to paint their house whatever color they wanted. I would do the same thing if I had a house. Whenever we'd pass it, he'd offer different versions of the same opinion. "That house is hideous." "How obnoxious." "What makes someone decide to do that?" Once, he told the story of how he and some high school friends had planned to repaint a pink house in Minot in the middle of the night, how they'd almost done it once, how they'd have bought green paint if the hardware store hadn't just closed. I wonder if they sat in his friend Mike's 1952 Nash four-door, the one my dad described as "the perfect vehicle for dragging Main Street." A girl he liked was in the car; she hated the purple house the most of everyone. Did the two of them talk too fast, fill the air with chatter that drowned out the others as they shared

their disdain for pastels and their preference for sage green? Did his heart beat fast as he imagined a life almost like the one he got, with a girl who wasn't gaudy in a house that looked as though it could have grown from the ground?

I wonder if it's possible he stayed in this room in the Zen Center, this austere room, white with blue trim, natural light on wood floors, that has been converted to fluttering cats and pink and purple polyester and perfume that are as annoying to me now as that pink house and my pink room must have been to him then. Is he here laughing at me, teaching me a lesson?

I flop onto my new bed, smell the mustiness of my brown blanket instead of the chemical flowers in the air. The ceiling here is white, no wood knots or brides or ghosts by the ocean. I hear cars slosh through still wet streets, expensive cars, picking up in frequency now that it's stopped raining. The sun is out now. My heart beats slow, waiting for whatever's coming.

LUNCH

The guest student manager gives us a tour, takes us to the basement and the boys' dormitory, or the men's dormitory I should call it, but it smells like a boys' dorm – musky, thick air pushing past us, dispersing in the airy hallway. I look inside at dark support beams and sheetrock partitions between beds, misty light peeking in from the egress windows, a concrete floor scattered with dark clothes in cotton and wool and nylon and canvas, following the same dress code I was sent as I planned my trip here: "clothes that are subdued in color, dark and comfortable, for meditation."

I wonder if this was the boys' dorm forty years ago, when my dad stayed in the Zen Center for a week, as part of an independent study project approved by his philosophy professor at the University of North Dakota. This is where he learned how to meditate. When his time here was up, he decided to drop out of college and live in San Francisco for a year, maybe to maintain the feeling he got in the meditation hall, free from thoughts of seven-month winters and his disapproving parents and their worship of his old friends who were studying subjects like economics and already saving for their first mortgages in Fargo and Grand Forks. I wonder if he took refuge in this room. The thought prickles my eyelids and I'm convinced that it's true, that he stared at the dark beams of this ceiling as he made his choices, to stay in this city, to ask his mom to join him, to commence the first part of his march to Minnesota to marry her and make me and my brothers.

At lunch one day, an older woman sits next to me. She must be a priest: her head is shaved, and her face has settled into the easy lines that I've seen on many faces in my three days at the center. She is probably the same age as my father's mother, but her face moves like water.

My grandma's mouth is surrounded by fiery lines, a sharp mouth that judges people who aren't like her – the Asian newscaster, the reservation Indians in the rusty car, the granddaughter who doesn't cook – her voice strained, her breath barbed, her opinions marching forward with the same intensity as her white-sneakered feet on the treadmill at 5 am.

This woman's face is filled with the lines of someone who has collected hours of sitting still, working silent, allowing breaths and thoughts and people to pass free. The other residents know her name, ask her if they can get her another napkin or more tea as she continues to sit at the table after the meal. She shakes her head and smiles as the sun arches through the windows, making her pale head glow against the sage walls behind her.

She tells me she first started sitting meditation in 1969, at the Berkeley Zen Center, started by a student of Suzuki Roshi, the founder of this place. She came here next, was ordained in 1977.

I should ask her about Suzuki Roshi, about her becoming a priest in the 1970s, about whether or not she felt accepted, respected. But instead, I blurt. "How long have the men's dorms been used as dorms? Would a student who came in the early 70s have stayed there?" I want to know if what I felt outside the dormitory was real, if my dad's spirit is one of the many that reside inside those walls, if he left a piece of himself there

for me to find, if I could walk around the room like an antenna looking for a signal and know where he slept and where he stared at the ceiling and thought about the rest of his life. Did he want to stay in San Francisco for longer than a year? My mom always said that he was happiest in this city, that it was a better match for his spirit than Minnesota, where he had to lower his voice a little more, bounce as he walked a little less, match the lack of color in the landscape a little better.

The priest looks beyond me, her pale eyes scan for the memory. "When I first started coming, there were so many people who came to see Suzuki Roshi that they didn't all fit into the main room. Those rooms would have been overflow rooms back then – people sat in there and listened through a speaker system."

I tell her why I'm asking, that my dad came here in 1972, and that I'm wondering where he might have stayed. She considers this, remembers that Suzuki Roshi died in the winter of 1971, that there were no overflow rooms after that. "It's possible they were dorms," she says.

I nod, take this as a confirmation.

"What does your father do now?" she asks, a question that I still dread.

"He died in a woodcutting accident about fifteen years ago," My body tenses as I speak, ready to launch from the table as the conversation goes south.

"What did he do before that?" she asks, not hesitating or grimacing or filling her eyes with fake pity or changing the subject, all of the reactions I have become used to over the years of relaying this information.

I think about his mother, pounding on the treadmill, and how he and my mom liked to cross-country ski as they explored their new Minnesota property, his shoes

snapping into smooth and shaped and waxed wood, gliding through hills and fields and frozen lakes, easing his transition from one place into another. I tell this priest, this person who might have seen him in 1972, this person who he might have seen, about his life after Minot, North Dakota, after San Francisco – the house he built in the woods, the wood he chopped to heat the house, the truck he drove to stock the health food store.

She nods her head once. "That sounds about right."

We're quiet for a moment. She looks past me, outside to a courtyard filled with crooked trees, bougainvillea and wisteria in terracotta planters, a stone statue of the Buddha, his face serene, surveying the surroundings.

MEDITATIONS ON DISAPPROVAL

On Tuesday, I crash into a monk on the staircase, send his black robes spinning. It's the mean monk; I recognize him from the meditation hall – his severe, unsmiling face, and hawkish nose held high as he scans the guest students, waits for us to make a mistake: sit in the wrong spot, walk into the room without bowing, hold our hands in an incorrect position.

I am running up the stairs to pack an overnight bag – tomorrow is the Fourth of July, and I have the day off – a friend visiting San Francisco has invited me to spend the night in her hotel room so we can go to the Fisherman's Wharf and the Cable Car Museum in the morning. Even though I already paid for the day of room and board at the Zen Center and I've already been to the Fisherman's Wharf and I don't care about the Cable Car Museum and I see this friend all the time, I'm leaving anyway.

I've been here for two days and I thought today was going to be better than yesterday. My morning work assignment was to help the bookstore manager with inventory. It felt like a promotion. Yesterday, I spent four hours in the basement, mopping concrete floors and moving old furniture with a moron, a co-student who must not have had my months of experience in manual labor summer jobs, who didn't know that you need to sweep before you mop or wring out the mop before floor application or pick up desks in a way that the top won't detach from the bottom. I spent four hours grimacing a smile then rolling my eyes at his back, at his dumpy beige sweatshirt and

shaggy, hapless hair probably last cut months ago by an old girlfriend. He was a recent returnee from the Peace Corps and liked to educate me about customs in Sri Lanka. He was staying here because his new girlfriend in Berkeley was dragging her feet on letting him move in, or, as he wrote on his application, because he had read a book about meditation once.

The bookstore is on the main level of the Zen Center; light entering the giant arched windows and splaying out on shiny wood floors, books shelved into sections like "sutras" and "koan commentaries," an altar with a little bronze Buddha sitting on a burgundy pedestal and beaming onto two smaller Buddhas of granite – one standing and one sitting, sticks of incense stacked neatly behind them, sold for eighty cents apiece.

My first task today was to find the overstocked books among these unfamiliar sections, move through the two aisles of the shop with a two-page list and check off my successes with a pencil. I asked the manager for help only at the end, after I'd given up on finding two books with Japanese titles and authors. She looked like a bald ballroom dancer – pink cheeks and bright eyes against a dress of dark robes that swishes through the store, a lightness in her motions that disperses the dense smell of jasmine incense. She swooped beneath the cashier's stand and returned with the two Japanese books in her long hand. "It looks like we hadn't shelved those yet, Chanomi," her voice lifting, singing my name.

My name is Japanese – chosen by my parents from a list of Japanese family names my aunt had acquired in a language class. I was originally going to be Crystal, a name they took from the musical *Hair*, which they had seen in Fargo a few weeks before

my mom got pregnant. The finale featured long-haired dancers in flowing clothes dancing through the aisles, raising their arms to the sky while the audience clapped and swayed – exultation in the auditorium, a dawning of a new age, a "mystic crystal revelation." My parents thought I'd be an Aquarius, but I was a Pisces, and I didn't look like a Crystal. So they called me Chanomi instead, which meant "fruit of the tea plant," and which they pronounced with a soft "Sh" instead of the hard "Ch" that was more authentically Japanese.

The bookstore manager pronounced it the same way as my parents, even though she had learned the language when she was in Japan studying Zen. She also remembered my name right away, never having to ask me to repeat it the way most people did. She prefaced her requests to me with my name, her voice lilting, making each task – "Chanomi, will you please box these books?" "Chanomi, will you please dust the shelves?" – feel like an honor.

"Chanomi, will you please take out the trash?" was my final mission. I asked her where the dumpster was and she pointed toward the kitchen. I breezed through the hallway with my sack of garbage, opened the kitchen door, and nearly crashed into a troll. I recognized her, this compact woman in stonewashed jeans; she lived on my floor and greeted me with silence when I said hello, looked straight ahead and kept walking. Now, she stood in the kitchen door in a way that didn't allow me to pass, looked at my trash, and said, "This is the *kitchen*." I stammered about the bookstore, the dumpster. She cut me off, said, "You need to go *behind* the kitchen," and closed the door. As far as I knew, the kitchen had only one door, and I wasn't about to reopen it to ask her for directions.

My grandmother kneeled in plastic slippers and a polyester bathrobe as she retrieved eggs from her refrigerator. I stood in the hallway outside her kitchen, keeping my bare feet warm on the furry brown carpet of the hallway, holding my hairbrush in my hand. I'd heard her start breakfast while I was in the bathroom and wanted to say hello. I got her attention by waving my brush, thinking I was being cute. I must have been eight years old. She turned from the refrigerator, her dyed-red hair in curlers beneath a clear plastic cap. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of me, and she raised a sharp finger, pointed to the waving brush. I stopped the waving, lowered the brush to my side. She spoke in a voice so low it could have been used to scold a dog. "We do not…brush our hair…in the kitchen." I ducked back behind the door, and dashed to the room I shared with my brother, the room with the scratchy white sofa sleeper that my mom would joke was bought by "the only woman on earth who would buy a white couch…and then keep it clean."

This was the room that used to be my dad's, the room where he would study for math tests while high, become convinced that marijuana made him smarter. Did he put towels under the door before he smoked? Did he hide it, or did my grandma pretend it wasn't happening? My mom tells a story of going to visit his parents for the first time, after they'd returned from San Francisco. They had hitched from Grand Forks to Minot, and were disheveled, unshowered, both with muddy bell bottoms and tangled hippie hair, his shoulder length and hers to her waist. He introduced his new girlfriend and my grandmother turned up the corners of her puckered mouth to say hello. My dad walked over to the record player in the living room then, put on the new Elton John album – it

was 1973, so it must have been *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. He turned the volume up to the point where it shook the walls – I like to think he skipped ahead a bit to "Benny and the Jets," each thump of the piano and bass making my grandmother wince as they all sat silent on spotless couches, my mom terrified and my dad smiling like an angel.

I sought revenge on the Zen Center kitchen troll by disregarding her advice. Instead of searching for the dumpster, I walked to the big trash can in the dining room. I stuffed my trash bag inside, where it landed with a thud that reverberated from the high ceilings to the empty, heavy tables. I hoped that she'd be the one who had to take it out.

At lunch, I joined the long line that waited for the brown rice and curried lentils. People, ranging in age from thirties to eighties, stood with expressions either serene or smug, hands clasped in front of their bodies. The other guest students and I were instructed to walk like this on our way to meditation sessions, hold our hands over our stomachs, make a loose fist with the left hand and cover it with the right. "Keep your body contained," our teacher told us. "It's a sign of respect." I stood this way now, too, watched the line file forward and the people scoop grains and legumes from steaming pots onto white plates that they held close to their bodies, and carried out to a dining room where they sat at identical tables beneath towering windows. The bookstore manager entered the line a few people behind me and I broke my stance, waved and said, "Hi!" loud enough to catch her attention. Heads jerked to look at me, and the manager smiled, closed-mouthed, and put her finger to her lips. I cringed, whispered "sorry," and

turned to face the food again, the steam rising from my rice in spikes. I'd done something else wrong.

This morning was my first early meditation, at 5:25 AM. I stayed silent as I made my way to the meditation hall, remembering to ball my hands against my stomach as I approached the shelf where we put our shoes, not tripping as I slipped off my flip flops, then proceeding to the next shelf, where I grabbed a circular black canvas cushion, a zafu, remembering our teacher's advice to grab a firm one, to give ourselves more support. Then, I tucked my elbows to my sides and held the zafu in front of me like an open book.

The entryway had no door, only a white curtain down the middle, tied at its center to make space on either side. We were to enter on the left side of the curtain, step into the room with our left foot first, bow our heads as we entered, and proceed to our predetermined spots. We situated our zafu in the center of one of the square black mats that dotted the long wooden platforms, waist-high, that stretched the length of the room. The sunrise peeped in through the egress windows all around. We sat, lifting our feet from the floor and spinning our bodies to face the wall, making sure to spin to the left, making sure not to invade the space of the person next to us, making sure our feet didn't touch the edge of the platform, because it was used for a breakfast ceremony on Saturdays. We crossed our legs, sat up "straight but natural," held our hands in our laps in an oval, right fingers cupping left fingers, palms arched upward, thumb tips barely touching.

The ting of a bell made the beginning of meditation official. And we sat, eyes open but unfocused, looking down toward the angle made by the wall and the platform,

paying attention to our breath as it entered and exited our bodies. Right away, my right groin muscle felt overstretched, my right foot fell asleep. I tolerated this for a few minutes before I lifted my right knee to let the blood flow back into my lower leg. I was worried this movement would make too much sound in this still room, but it was imperceptible. I put my knee back down, triumphant. Within moments, my foot started to tingle and my groin resumed hurting. I wondered what people did who found themselves in quick need of a bathroom as they sat here. Now, instead of my breath, my meditation was focused on my leg and my foot and estimating how much time I had before I needed to complete another knee trick. Each knee trick was a little less effective.

By the time the bell rang, thirty minutes later, my right foot was dead. The others in the room spun to their left, and put their feet on the floor. I was shaking my foot, trying to resurrect it, when the three people in my vicinity formed a small circle and each person took one step to the left. Walking meditation. I had forgotten about this part, a slow walk in a small circle, reminding us to be mindful in motion as well as stillness. The older man across from me caught my eye, nodded toward the others, prodded me forward. I set my right foot down heavy, and then picked it up again, hopped on my good foot like a flamingo two steps to my left, my clomping reverberating through the room. Each time the person in front of me took a step, I hopped again.

After I'd done a half circle, the man across from me tapped me on the shoulder. He held his hands in prayer position in front of his heart, then nodded at my hands, which were held out to the sides, trying to balance. I shook my foot again and set it on the floor, moving my hands to the correct position, and dragging my foot behind the other now, this time creating a shuffling noise. I felt another tap. This time he pointed straight ahead, to

a spot in front of me. I gave him a confused look and he pointed again. Maybe I'd left too big a gap between me and the person in front of me? I remembered our teacher saying to keep the walking meditation evenly spaced. I took two shuffle steps to the front, looked over, and he shook his head, pointed in front of me again, this time stabbing his finger in the air at the same nothing as before. I took another shuffle step and heard him sigh. I didn't look at him this time, and hoped he would stop tapping me. The bell rang, which meant we were to walk the circle back to our spots. Thirty-five more minutes of meditation. Before we sat down, he looked at me and shook his head.

My family would spend part of each Christmas holiday at my dad's parents' house in Minot. One morning, after breakfast, my brother and I were poking and pinching each other, stifling our giggles, moments away from wrestling, when my grandmother clapped her hands and sent us outside, because a little fresh air "would do us a world of good." Later, when we were both chain-wallet wearing teenagers and sporadic attendees of the Unitarian church near our house, she would use these same words to get us to attend the service at her Episcopalian church.

But for now, our only sin was having too much energy. My brother found a can of tennis balls in the garage, and we played catch until I got bored. While he played fetch with himself, throwing the balls into snow banks and digging them out, I decided to get back on my grandma's good side. I knew she liked flowers – she would bring us yellow roses from her garden each summer when she and my grandpa came to visit – so I decided to pick her a bouquet. I thought of the cedar tree she had in the front yard – its lacy leaves would be pretty in the arrangement. I sat next to the tree, on the stairs leading

to the front door, and began to tear away leaves from tough, wiry branches, scraping my palms and fingers and wondering if I should go inside and ask for a pair of scissors, but worried that would give away my secret. I had amassed two wide leaves and was working on my third, thinking about where I might find a red ribbon to tie them all together when I heard an angry rap on the window above me. I looked up to see my grandmother's narrowed eyes and pinched mouth. She turned her head from side to side, slow and deliberate, moving in unison with a single, scolding finger.

I'm picking myself up after running into a monk on the staircase as I'm on my way to pack my bag to stay with a friend for a night after this bad Zen Center day. Besides his hawkish face scanning the guest students from the corner of the meditation hall, all I'd noticed before this was his posture, his back drawing a severe line to his shaved head. I hadn't noticed the color of his eyes, an aqua like a tabletop in a kitschy fifties diner. Right now, his face looks sweet, not much older than mine, deep crinkles around his eyes as he smiles, and then winks. And I think that maybe he was just keeping tabs on us, making sure we did the rituals right so we could stay out of the sights of those less benevolent. He winks to let me know that he has played his records loud and picked bouquets and taken the stairs two at a time to escape oppressive places, that he has risked crash landings to keep his spirit intact.

LIMBO

"Made it to Marquette…I can't wait to get to the bookstore and load up on gear from Northern Michigan University! And by "bookstore," I mean "pharmacy"! And by "gear" I mean "anti-depressants"!

This was my Facebook status update on August 8, 2010. My husband and I had just pulled into Marquette, Michigan. We were unimpressed, having been greeted by chain stores, gray skies, and sticky humidity. The campus where I had signed a contract to teach for a year was a sea of empty parking lots and ugly buildings and bleached out grass. All of this was made worse by the fact that in one day, Frank would be turning around to drive back home to Minnesota. I would stay behind in the Soviet Bloc- style student apartment I had rented.

Long-distance relationships don't work. This was how I felt in college. I saw the effects of distance on several couples I knew: one person would go to college in another city, and it would be over within a semester.

"Why is he taking so long to call me back?" a friend asked one time; she was at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and he was in his first semester at the University of Chicago. "Maybe he met someone else," another friend told her. She wasn't happy to hear this theory, but it turned out to be correct.

Another friend, who I met when we both studied abroad at the University of Costa Rica, had a boyfriend back in Nebraska. For the first couple of months, she talked about nothing but her boyfriend. She loved him so much, she'd tell me. She had just used up her local calling card for one five-minute international phone call to him; how could she possibly be separated from him for a whole semester? After the second month, her mentions of him began to taper off. The next international call was to break him some news: she had a new Costa Rican boyfriend.

It just doesn't work, I decided. I made my judgment and moved on. I met Frank in Minneapolis during my senior year of college. He had graduated the year before, and his life now consisted of working for a catering company and hanging out with his friends at the student cooperative where I had just moved, a big former fraternity house with twenty-eight tenants. After we met, he would convince his friends to invite me along when they went out.

I didn't pay him much mind until one night when a group of us had gone to a bar and he was driving me and another girl home. He made a joke about how he liked to find old mix tapes he'd made because then he could re-listen to them and remember his state of mind at the time. When he re-listened, he would think, "Oh! I was depressed then, too!"

I laughed hard enough at this joke to get a funny look from the other girl. I'd been spending a lot of time with my brother, who would give me a hard time whenever I said anything remotely negative. Depression would have been a taboo subject with him.

Frank didn't seem to care about censoring himself or anyone else, and it was a relief. Something clicked into place.

We watched the move Raising Arizona on our first date. We moved in together after I graduated six months later. We lived together for the next ten years. The longest we were ever separated was when I re-visited Costa Rica for a month, about a year into the relationship. I emailed him a lot, and called him on my calling card. Luckily, it was only a month.

In the years after college, while Frank and I stayed together, jobs came and went. I graduated in 2000, and it was easy to find work. I saw jobs only as a way to pay for our rent, happy hour beer, baseball tickets, and the road trips we'd take whenever we had vacation time or a long weekend. It never took me more than a few weeks to find a full-time, decently-paying job with benefits. I worked as a clinic assistant, daycare assistant, administrative assistant. Each job lasted about two years before I grew bored, quit, found something new, and repeated the cycle.

To counteract my job boredom, I began taking and enjoying community writing classes. Six years after graduating from college and moving in with Frank, I decided that I wanted to go back to school for a master's degree in writing, a degree that would also qualify me to teach. I quit my job as a salaried non-profit worker. My work weeks had gradually increased to fifty hours or more, and I wanted to find a new, less time-consuming job so that I could focus on writing.

It was the summer of 2006, and this time, replacement work was not so easy to come by. After a year of working sporadic receptionist jobs through a temporary employment agency, I finally found another permanent position, as a secretary at a small private college. The job was half-time with no benefits, and there was no work in the summer months. This meant that Frank and I traveled and ate out less, and stayed home more. There were advantages to the new job, though; I had more time, like I had wanted, and I could take free writing courses at the college.

Over the next three years, I cobbled together a writing portfolio, and applied to several graduate programs in 2010. Many of these programs informed me that I'd been waitlisted, indicating that they had received record numbers of applications that year. People were returning to school because they couldn't find jobs. Eventually, I made it to the top of one of the waitlists. I was offered a teaching assistantship, a full scholarship in exchange for teaching freshman composition. The only catch was that the college was located in Marquette, Michigan, a small town in the Upper Peninsula, where jobs were even harder to come by than they were in the rest of the country.

By this point, Frank had been working for four years as a Fed Ex courier, a job he loved and which provided us both with benefits. He called the manager at the Marquette station to ask about a transfer, even though he knew it was unlikely. Fed Ex openings were diminishing, and the company was enacting periodic hiring freezes to save money. The Marquette manager told him that there were six couriers working in the area, and that it had been several years since anyone had left the station. He recommended that Frank

check the transfer openings weekly. "You never know," he said, but Frank was not encouraged by his tone.

I was not encouraged by the situation that was developing. The degree program lasted three years, the drive from Minneapolis to Marquette took seven hours, and both of our cars were getting old. But we agreed that I couldn't give up the opportunity for a funded graduate degree and Frank couldn't give up a stable, well-paying job. It was time to rethink my position on long-distance relationships.

Now that we had spent ten years together, I was less concerned about fidelity, and more concerned about the actual experience of living apart. I was thoroughly used to living with Frank. He had a noisy left knee that snapped and popped as he walked, the result of a high school track injury. When we'd hang around the apartment, I would typically be in the bedroom writing for one of my classes while he watched TV. Approximately every twenty minutes, I would hear his snappy knee as he made his way toward the bedroom. He'd peek into the bedroom door, I'd glance up, wave, and look back down at my work. Then he'd do something to get my attention: a favorite tactic was to open the door wide enough to throw a bouncy ball at the wall behind me before he ran back into the living room, snapping the whole way.

He had also figured that I needed to eat approximately every three hours to stay well-mannered and functional, so he checked up on me, brought me apples and sandwiches, and would eventually convince me to stop working so we could get dinner together. He saw to it that I ate and laughed on a regular basis, and I made sure he paid his bills and got to work on time. We were a good team.

Our friends Sean and Julie had been together even longer than we had. They met at the same place where I met Frank, the student housing cooperative at the University of Minnesota. Sean was a graduate student in Chinese, while Julie was studying art as an undergraduate. Julie stood out in a crowd back then. She wore rainbow-colored socks and brightly patterned thrift store outfits which rarely matched. Her red hair was twisted into skinny dreadlocks.

She remembers that Sean, who was born and raised in suburban Minneapolis, would wear silk mandarin-collared jackets that he had bought when he studied in China. He had long brown hair and tiny glasses. When he hung around the common areas of the coop, a timer on his watch would go off after a few minutes, and he would excuse himself. She figured out that he was trying to keep himself on track with his Chinese homework. Whenever he left his bedroom, he'd set his timer so he wouldn't get distracted for any longer than seven minutes. She thought he was weird.

On her twenty-first birthday, a group of people, including Sean, went out to a bar. Julie was receiving drink after drink from the others in attendance. Late in the evening, Sean walked over to present her with a Shirley Temple.

"I don't want you to get sick," he said.

She still threw up that night, but she was touched by the gesture. A few months later, they were both in the coop kitchen, chatting with a group of people. Sean's timer

went off and he made his way back upstairs. Julie watched him go absentmindedly, and one of her friends commented.

"You were totally checking Sean out!" he said.

She denied it, but she was blushing. She got so flustered that others took notice, too, making her even more flustered. Maybe she liked him after all. They confessed their feelings for each other at a Valentine's Day party a few weeks later. Within a couple of years, they moved out of the coop and into an apartment together. Julie worked odd jobs as I had done – artist's assistant, barista, substitute teacher, office manager – until she eventually decided to complete a degree in massage therapy. Sean worked as a carpenter for several years, until he too decided that he wanted to go back to school: law school.

Luckily, he was accepted into a program in Minnesota. He and Julie had a house by then, a little green one-story they bought in 2004. They liked their neighborhood – it was clean, safe, filled with trees, and only a few blocks from the Mississippi River – perfect for walking their new Scottie dog, Skye. Julie's dreadlocks were gone by this time, and Sean's hair was short. Julie had started a massage therapy business in a restored brick warehouse building a few blocks from home, and Sean was going to use saved-up carpentry money and loans to pay for law school.

During his second year in the program, he landed a two-month paid summer internship at a law firm in Shanghai, China. It went well. He liked the firm, and he liked having the chance to get back to China and use his prior education. After his return to the

U.S., during the spring of his final year in law school, the firm offered him a job. This was a big deal; there were many graduates from the class before him who had yet to find work. The decision to go was easy for him. It seemed the perfect way to combine his education and interest in both Chinese and law.

Julie was not so excited. She had spent the last few years building up her business, acquiring a steady stream of clients. Plus, she loved Minneapolis: her friends, the organic farms where they'd buy produce every summer, the river, the bike trails, their backyard, all of it. Sean's job was a good one, though, with good pay, and Julie had an interest in Chinese medicine and an adventurous spirit.

Selling the house wasn't an option; it was worth thousands less than when they had bought it five years earlier and they couldn't afford to lose that much money. Instead, they decided to pack up and store their possessions in the garage, and start searching for renters. Sean would head to Shanghai in October to start the job, and Julie would live in a sublet for four months while she phased out her business. In February, she and Skye would join Sean in China.

When Sean left, it turned out to be more difficult for him than it was for Julie. Julie, for the most part, was still in her regular routine. Although she was living in a different part of town, she still went to work at the same place, and saw her usual people: coworkers, friends, and family. She still had Skye to keep her company. Sean liked his new job and liked his boss but he was lonely. He spent a lot of time on Facebook. Before he left for China, he would only make an occasional smart-assed comment on the site. When he was studying for the bar exam, he wrote, "In case you were wondering,

you have one year from the date you discover a foreign object in your body to make a claim against the doctor who left it in there... I know that now, but plan to forget it after I take the bar exam in July." After a few weeks in Shanghai, he was writing things like "She's cute!" whenever someone would post a picture of Julie. He also started a Facebook page for Skye, with many, many photos and status updates like "Woof! Woof! Woof!" He was homesick.

I was afflicted with homesickness the moment I watched Frank pull his car out of the student apartment complex after helping me move in. I started driving to Minnesota to see him probably more than I should have, starting with the very first weekend. After that, I went at least every two weeks. I didn't have much time to spare; I was as busy as I'd ever been in my life, teaching composition and grading the resultant piles of essays and taking work-intensive classes of my own. Frank worked at Fed Ex every day but Sunday, so when I came home, we'd spend less than twenty-four hours together, and I'd be doing homework for much of it. I'd feel a little nauseous the entire time I was there, because I knew I'd be leaving soon.

Then, on a Sunday in October, when I was about halfway back to Marquette, my old Volvo made a thudding sound. It kept running, though, even as the brakes got softer and one of the rear wheels started leaking a dark, smelly liquid. When I called Frank for advice, he confirmed my instinct to keep driving as far as I could. No repair shops were open, I had to be at school the next day, and we couldn't afford to get the car towed two-hundred miles. It made it the remaining four hours to town, and the next day it was sent

to a junkyard with a cracked rear axle. This development made our visits more sporadic; I was only able to go to Minnesota when I could catch a ride, and Frank was only able to drive to Marquette about once a month. Three years was starting to seem too long.

Julie and Sean spent their tenth anniversary apart that fall, then Christmas. They had a lot of Skype dates, but the dates often turned into conversations about the logistics of Julie's upcoming move, or the logistics of getting Sean a bank card in China. They still got frustrated with one another occasionally. Why hadn't Sean gotten a new bank card before he left? Why was Julie making such a big deal of it? And then they'd feel guilty for turning a conversation into an argument.

There were a few advantages to living apart. Sean was getting used to his new surroundings and his new job without worrying about Julie's adjustment. He had more time to work extra hours, go to work functions and get to know his co-workers, and hopefully make a good impression to help solidify his position there. And Julie was getting to spend more time with her friends and family. She was going to movies she wanted to see that she knew Sean wouldn't like. She had time to tie up loose ends at a leisurely pace. But she was also tired of doing things and going places by herself, and so was he.

Frank, on his Facebook profile, had jokingly changed the name of the city where he lived to Limbo, Ecuador. We had two and a half years left to go. Winter was in full

effect, and bad weather was further diminishing my available weekends to get back to Minnesota. Frank's diesel engine on his own car wasn't starting most days because of the cold, so in addition to cutting off his ability to visit me, he was often forced to walk the three miles to work. I was also doing miles of walking due to my carless status. Both of us were losing weight, not eating enough, and spending a lot of time alone. When we talked on the phone, it was usually to complain about our circumstances.

One night in late January, he went to the emergency room with stomach pains and an irregular heartbeat. He was there for several hours having tests run, and he'd call to update me when he could. When he'd had an appendectomy the year before, I stayed in the hospital with him for eighteen hours keeping him company, getting him water, communicating with the nurses when he was asleep, and doing what I could to help. This time, I could do nothing but wait for him to call. I couldn't sleep. Instead, I looked on the internet for low-residency graduate school programs where I could live at home and do the work remotely. At about two in the morning, Frank called to tell me the diagnosis. His stomach pain was attributed to constipation, and the irregular heartbeat indicated a panic attack. The emergency room doctor had asked him questions primarily about our separation and sent him on his way with a bottle of laxatives and a psychologist referral.

Later that week, he got together with Julie and another friend who studied alternative medicine. This friend told Frank that his stomach pain was probably caused by a lack of circulation due to the stress of our separation. "You're lovesick!" Julie said. That weekend, Frank saw a television program about the clown loach fish, a bright orange tropical aquarium fish. He explained to me over the phone that when the clown

loach is in a group, it is friendly and active, but when it is in an aquarium alone, it gets sluggish and depressed, becomes more susceptible to disease, and often dies young. "I'm just like that fish!" he said.

When I visited Frank at the beginning of February, we discussed our options. Neither of us was ready to give up yet, so we tried to think of a way to make the separation more manageable. We needed a good car, so that I could get back and forth more often. Neither of us had ever owned a car that wasn't first owned by our parents, so this was a big step; we were going to go into debt together. When we got married, my mom had given us a 100 ounce bar of silver as a wedding present. It had quadrupled in value since then. People were losing trust in the stock market and putting money into gold and silver instead. What it meant for Frank and I was that we had a down payment on a car. We shopped until we found a reasonably-priced hatchback with low mileage, and big tires and all-wheel drive for the snow. I drove it back to Michigan. Frank would continue walking to work when his car was frozen. I would drive to see him whenever I could. Two days after I returned to Michigan, he called with some news: there was an opening at the Fed Ex station in Marquette. The next time I drove the new car to Minnesota was to help him move.

Julie was posting a countdown on Facebook. Sean was getting close to heading back to the U.S. where he would help her take care of their final business in Minneapolis before they both departed for good. "29 days til Sean," she wrote one day. Then: 17 days, 2 weeks, 1 week, 49 hours and 29 minutes. Finally, she posted a photo of her and

Sean at the airport. There were no more Facebook posts for a while, even on Skye's page. They made it.

There was a part of me that wanted to hang on to that feeling of missing Frank. I never loved him so much as when he wasn't there. When he first arrived in Marquette, it felt like we were dating again. We held hands, went to the movies, ate out for nearly every meal just because it was fun and we had one less rent check to write and a new car to drive around and explore the town. It felt like a new life.

The old life started to creep back in, of course. When Frank's bill for the emergency room visit arrived, we had to start eating in again. His old car started collecting water in the driver's seat whenever it would snow or rain, and we discovered that car insurance in Michigan cost twice as much as it did in Minnesota. And we still had to get oil changes, buy toilet paper, and go to work. But for a long time, things seemed more manageable. I relaxed about my schoolwork once he was around, and he started to count on me again to make appointments and wash the dishes or yell at him to do it. We started to settle back in.

Sean and Julie's reunion in Minnesota was a whirlwind: taking care of visas, banking, taxes, dog logistics, and last-minute goodbyes. It was a relief for them to be back together. Julie was especially happy to have someone else make the coffee in the morning, and they were both laughing a lot more than they had in the preceding months.

They flew to Shanghai on Super Bowl Sunday. And then finally, they were living there together, with two college-aged German roommates, Sean working six days a week, and Julie without much to do in a busy and crowded foreign city. Sean realized how much he had acclimated to Shanghai when they took their first subway trip together. Before they left, he was in a rush to go, and hurried Julie along as she got ready. Once they arrived to the station, he walked quickly and pushed his way through the crowd so that they were sure to get a spot on the train. This was frustrating to Julie. Why was he so impatient with her when she had just gotten there? He had developed these fast-moving habits while he was living there alone and rushing to get to work on time. But now, he was a tour guide, too. He had to slow down a little, while Julie had to speed up.

They continue to learn how to make things work between them. And Frank and I do the same. A friend recently asked the two us whether or not we would live separately again. "No!" I said, without thinking. Frank was more diplomatic. "Well, you never know," he said. "What if one of us gets a job in another city, while the other is still working somewhere else? We might need to do it again."

Sean feels more like I do, and says that he will try to coordinate any future career moves so that he and Julie can go together. Julie, though, thinks it is very possible and likely that they'll live separately again at some point. She is already starting to look into various artist residencies in India and Thailand. For now, she's only looking at residencies with shorter durations; she doesn't want to live apart for four straight months again. But, she says that with the international economy in its current shape, they may have to take whatever jobs and opportunities they can get, and work the rest out as it comes.

I cringe when people talk about the economy. I don't like to be reminded of it. I'm enjoying the hiatus from job hunting that graduate school is providing me. I graduate in one year, and sometimes I can't sleep when I get to thinking about what the future might hold. Will I be able to find a job? And if I do find one, where will it be located? Will we have to live apart again? Luckily, Frank is there to talk me down. The degree will eventually help me find a job I like. If that means living apart again, it will be temporary. We'll do what we need to do until we get where we want to be. Out of limbo.

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