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RECIPROCITY ACOLLECTION OF ESSAYS

Shannon M. Cole

RECIPROCITY
A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

By

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

RECIPROCITY

By

Shannon M. Cole

"Reciprocity" is a collection of creative non-fiction essays designed to demonstrate the theories and principles of the Interpersonal Communication and Media Studies fields through personal narrative. Two of the essays included weave communication principles with narrative, while three others focus on the author's personal experiences with the dynamics found in several types of interpersonal relationships. Issues such as divorce and blended families, recovered friendship, home care for an aging relative, the influence of the media, and failed romance are addressed within the collection, making it relevant to current social challenges. The author strives to maintain realism in her dialogue and choice of detail, as well as smoothly incorporate academic fact with personal narrative. By communicating her experiences, the author shares the benefits of her experience with the audience, thereby completing the circuit of reciprocity for which the collection is named.

Reciprocity*: The state or condition of being reciprocal; a state or relationship in which there is mutual action, influence, giving and taking, correspondence, etc., between two parties or things.*

– Oxford English Dictionary

You tell me your story, I'll you my story.

– Patricia Hampl

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This thesis is prepared using the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Well before I decided to pursue a Master of Arts in Writing, but well after I began defining myself as a writer, my undergraduate studies introduced me to the field of interpersonal communication, and I saw its use from a writer's perspective early on. Attention to simple glances, small movements, and particular word choices is the stuff of compelling writing. Interpersonal communication dissects and labels the minutiae of all human behavior, which I find both irritating and fascinating. A glossary of terms is not capable of conveying the emotional mayhem we humans are capable of producing among ourselves the way a novel or film or short story can. And yet, each time I begin a conversation with a stranger I think about Uncertainty Reduction Theory, and every time an acquaintance complains about her boyfriend, I like knowing I can lend some insight because I've read the chapter on relational dialectics. I am certainly not a professional researcher or therapist, and these concepts are not blanket answers to the interpersonal dilemmas, but a little bit of knowledge – a penny's worth of perspective – goes more than just a long way in every situation.

Because I noticed a tendency in my writing to focus on interpersonal relationships, I decided the purpose of this thesis project would be to demonstrate theories and principles from the interpersonal communication discipline through personal essays of creative nonfiction. The content of my proposed collection is taken from this first quarter-century of my life. I have chosen to write creative nonfiction from my own experiences and

memories because, as author Patricia Hampl states, "The authority of memory is the personal confirmation of self-hood. To write one's life is to live it twice, and the second living is both spiritual and historical" (315). Part of me does find it preposterous that I, at twenty-four years of age, write about events and relationships as though I have already found their ultimate significance, but in the greater context of communication I feel that age is irrelevant. By telling my stories now, I am inviting others to learn my lessons, to communicate my worldview at this moment; I am searching out and sharing the significance of my experiences with others, just as my favorite authors have shared theirs with me. This is our duty as writers whose material is memory. As Hampl says, "We must acquiesce to our experience and our gift to transform experience into meaning and value. You tell me your story, I'll you my story" (313).

The title of this collection is inspired by the interpersonal communication *norm of reciprocity* which suggests that communicators should "match the level and amount of each other's [self-]disclosure," revealing information about themselves at a depth and pace comfortable for both (Trenholm 217). I believe that writing and reading are intimate processes, and though they are often independent from one another they comprise a shared and mutually beneficial experience. Particularly, writing and reading about human interaction (in both fiction and non-fiction) serve to further develop both the writer's and the reader's *social cognitions*, patterns of thought that allow us to classify and understand social interactions (Trenholm 140). This development in turn increases what is called *cognitive complexity*, our capacity integrating a diverse amount of social cognitions, even at the abstract level (Trenholm 158).

As a writer, I seek to find deeper meaning in my interactions and relationships with others, and this thesis is my contribution of insights thus far in life. It is my hope that incorporating the principles of communication theory into narrative will enhance the impact of the stories I have to tell, and that my readers may learn something about patterns of human behavior, because whether we tell or listen to them, we learn and grown simply by sharing stories – the process is reciprocal.

✧ PART OF THE DEAL ✧

Mom wrestled a string of lights away from the dying Christmas tree. "I think it went okay this year, guys." Still facing the Fraser Fir, she addressed me and my step-dad, Brian. "I think this is the best Christmas we've had."

I was home again from college for the month of Christmas break and reading *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* to stave off the boredom. I peeked around the edge of the volume from my corner of the living room couch to answer my mother. "Yeah, actually. No fights this year." I felt, rather than saw, my mother roll her eyes as she dove again into the tree. My sisters had made the return drive to Chicago over a week ago, my aunt had departed for California two days later, and my mother's household was beginning to stabilize. Without the added tension of extra bodies, the house heaved a deep sigh and sagged with exhaustion under the new-year snow. This was my mother's cue to dismantle the Christmas decorations.

"What I mean is everything went smoothly." Mom disentangled herself from the branches, needles clinging to her new tan cardigan. "Everyone was satisfied with their gifts, I didn't have to make a big dinner, and yes, everyone got along. I think it felt like we were all a family for the first time."

Brian picked up the plug-end of a strand of lights and began wrapping it. "Only took twelve years, right, Betsy?" Mom gave a "ha" from behind the tree. Brian tied off his string of lights and offered to help her edge the tree away from the wall.

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"We're getting a divorce," my dad announced, "But you should know it's nothing any of you did." I could sense Dad was trying hard not to cry. Sympathetic at six years old, I slipped off the couch and crossed to the rocking chair where Dad gathered me onto his lap.

"So . . . why?" My oldest sister Cris, then nineteen, nearly sneered.

Mom answered, "It's just the way things are."

My two sisters, brother, and I had been called to a "family meeting" so our parents could tell us "something important." The room was lit soft yellow and was just overly warm from the woodstove.

"I'm an alcoholic," Dad explained, and my parents shared a familiar unhappy stare as a deeper silence settled over us.

I was the first to break it. "What's that mean?"

"It's a problem I have to fix. Alcohol is bad for me, and I have to try not to drink it anymore."

I concentrated on the Velcro of my tennis shoes, dangling just below Dad's knees. "And you have to go away to do that?"

Dad responded in a choked whisper. "Yes." He pressed his lips to the back of my head.

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Having performed my post-Christmas duty of removing the ribbon, glass bulbs, and hand-crafted elementary school ornaments from the Christmas tree, I felt no remorse watching

my mom and step-dad grapple with the seven-foot tree. I returned to the third installment of *Harry Potter*, just as Mom launched into further analysis of Christmas.

"On Christmas morning the girls asked me if they *had* to wait for the Vos kids to get here. 'Can't we just do it now? Do we have to wait for *them*?'" My mother's imitation of her older daughters was spot-on. "I told them we were going to wait and that they just had to suck it up and smile through it. And look how good it turned out."

For years my siblings had resisted taking part in family events with Brian's kids. When participation was unavoidable they were cordial, but they always preferred to celebrate holidays without our four step-siblings.

Brian nodded in response to Mom. "Getting through to you kids was about the hardest thing I ever had to do."

I realized he was addressing me and sunk *Harry Potter* to my chest. "Huh?"

"When I married your mom, I knew it would be hard for you kids to get used to, my kids too, but you and your sisters especially made it hell for me when I moved in here. And they're still getting over it."

I laughed. "They're snobs."

"Shannon . . ." Mom admonished.

"Well? They are," I said huffily. The peach walls warmed as Mom flicked on a lamp near the tree.

Brian chuckled. "Hey, you were no picnic either at first. God, I remember thinking I had messed things up with you for good. That time I spilled beer on you?"

Mom shook her head as she put the bundles of light strings into brown paper lunch

bags. A strangled sigh of recognition and commiseration escaped her throat. "That was awful."

My cheeks heated; obviously the event had been an embarrassing one. I squinted at the ceiling as I shuffled through some memories. "Oh, at Pizza Hut. I forgot about that."

"I didn't." Brian's voice was firm, but not unforgiving. "If someone had asked me right before we went in there, 'Name three things that would really piss Shannon off,' that would have been the first thing out of my mouth. Here I was, trying to be a great guy taking you and your mom out to Pizza Hut, trying to get this very angry, sad daughter of my future wife to like me, and I do one of the worst things I possibly could to her, totally on accident."

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I did not want to be at Pizza Hut. I did not want to speak to the man across from me. I did not want to hear Mom laugh with him. I did not want to complete the word search on the back of my placemat but did so in an attempt to ignore them. The waitress brought our beverages and asked for our order. I dragged a blue crayon through a maze too simple for a seven-year-old, elbows on the chest-high table, leaning into my work.

When Brian reached blindly around his menu for his beer as he gave our order, his knuckles collided with the glass and it tipped, flooding the table top.

Before the waitress could run to grab a rag, I was on my feet.

Beer run-off had drenched my new purple sweater with the white Scotty-dogs on it and my favorite black stretch pants. "You spilled beer on me! I smell like beer!" My face was hot, and my hands were fists. Beer was the most repulsive liquid I could imagine. Beer

was alcohol. Alcohol was bad. I clenched my eyelids, damming up tears of anger and shame. "We have to leave. I smell like beer. We have to leave." I opened my eyes enough to glare at my mother and her incompetent beau.

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Harry and his magical dilemmas were put on hold. I adjusted myself into sitting position and absent-mindedly flipped pages under my thumb. Just after Mom and Brian were married, I had taken to describing my new blended family as "the Brady Bunch plus two." Of the eight children distributed in age over two decades, I was the youngest – six years separated me and my closest step-sibling. Due to time and distance I had become as close to the Vos kids as I was to my biological sisters and brother.

"I can't believe the girls wanted to segregate Christmas again," I said. "It was fun with all of us here, and I think they ended up having fun this year, too. They played with the grandkids."

"They liked the kids," Mom agreed, then paused. "I want grandchildren." This was a favorite refrain of my mother's. I explained, once again, that Brian's sons' children are her grandchildren, and that I am not the one she should be expressing this particular desire to; she has many other offspring of child-producing age not concentrating on finishing a college degree.

She edged the tree skirt, the traditional white sheet, from under the tree while Brian scooped up piles of dead needles from the carpet and deposited them on the sheet. "I want more," she said.

Harry Potter's circumstances were enviable to mine.

"It's a good thing, seeing your kids become parents. You get to watch them grow all over again because they have to grow into being a parent. You miss out on a lot of life if you are never a parent." Ignoring Brian's lecture, I opened *Harry Potter* again. "Your mom and I, we got to learn how to be parents twice."

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The concrete garage floor felt chilly in late fall, the cold seeping through my socks. Stubborn by nature – particularly so at age nine – I shifted my weight from foot to foot, refusing to verbally acknowledge the cold. Mom had told me to go to bed about twenty minutes ago but suggested, as she did on most nights, that I say goodnight to Brian first. Early on, I scrunched up my face or stuck out my tongue and sighed a lot in response to her request, but eventually my curiosity about Brian's developing work bench in the garage edged out the resentment. A year into their marriage it was now a nightly routine to stand, silently, and watch him measure and cut wood before blurting an awkward "goodnight" and darting back inside.

Again this night the garage had a faint odor of hot wood. The fluorescent lights hardened the shadows of the tools on the shelves and Brian's sharp nose and broad forehead. This man was still too new, too foreign, too rough looking, too unlike my father with his scruffy beard, longish hair, and thin tail of a braid. I watched him work and scrutinized him for character flaws. He poked his cigarette between his lips to free a hand, turned on the circular saw, and guided through a plank for a future birdhouse. He glanced up at me and removed the cigarette, blowing the smoke upward with the force of his bottom lip.

"Does your dad ever do projects like this? Build stuff, wood work?"

I hesitated. Though it had been decided we children should continue living with Mom, I had remained close to my father. He had found an apartment to rent in town, and I stayed with him over the weekends. "Sometimes. He does other projects. This weekend he . . ."

Brian was primed to hit the switch on the saw but paused to listen. He prompted me with a cock of his head.

"Well, I mean . . ." I shuffled my feet more rapidly, staring at a fluffy pile of sawdust. "Am I allowed to talk about my dad? With you?"

Brian lifted and dropped a shoulder. "Only if I'm allowed to talk about mine."

I anchored my feet, considering. "Okay."

Brian nodded. The saw thrummed to life and screeched through another plank. He smiled, cigarette still clamped between his thin lips.

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Mom gathered the corners of the tree skirt and set it aside. Conversation lulled. I stared out the window at the pine forest that composed our front yard. A tangle of tree limbs and boughs, drooping with snow, blocked my view of the road almost entirely. A car swished past, headed further out of town. I scanned a page of *Harry Potter*.

Brian's thoughts spilled over into dialogue. "My kids had trouble adjusting to the situation, too." The Vos kids had suffered their parents' divorce just months after my mom and dad's.

I fiddled with the tassel on my bookmark. "Yeah, but they lived with their mom. They weren't around as much. Marci, Ben, and Cris weren't either, I guess. They had cars

– they could leave. But I was still little. I had to be here." I rushed through the last of my words, my voice close to cracking, but only *Harry Potter* got to see my eyes fill with tears. As the youngest, most dependent child, I had experienced the brunt of the divorce fallout: a truth my siblings, particularly my sisters, rarely acknowledged.

"That's true." Brian pressed the lid on the large blue Rubbermaid storage container marked *Christmas*.

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Dry summer heat exhaled from the dark interior of the green Mercury. The dashboard was hot to the touch as I climbed in.

"Ready?" Brian asked.

I nodded, clipping my safety belt in place. The engine turned over, and stale air-conditioning blew in our faces. The evening sun was angled directly into my eyes as we pulled out of the driveway and rounded the first corner.

We made our usual swipe through Burger King's drive-thru before arriving at the hospital. Brian ordered an extra fry "for Mom," even though we knew she would refuse and we would end up sharing it, as we had during all the previous Wednesday evening visits that summer.

Four months earlier, Mom had tried to organize another family meeting for another important announcement. She was unsuccessful and instead angrily spat her news into the phone at my sister Marci, who was at a friend's house and refusing to come home. "Dammit, Marci, I have cancer. I just thought you should know." She smashed the receiver onto the wall jack.

Mom began chemotherapy three days before my brother's high school graduation ceremony. On alternating Wednesdays throughout the summer she went to the hospital to stay overnight for treatment, and Brian and I would visit over a fast-food dinner. We were always her only visitors.

I dug into the bag for a warm fry. "Mom doesn't smile a lot anymore." I was ten and beginning to feel the gravity of the world – of my world.

"She doesn't, does she?" Brian kept his eyes on the road. "Maybe that's something you and me can work on over the next few months. Getting her to smile more."

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My mom and my step-dad laughed as they orchestrated the removal of the Christmas tree. From the couch I watched them smoosh the large tree through the front door and crunch across the porch, past the windows, to the driveway. They reentered, stomping snow off their shoes.

Mom enumerated her To-Do List aloud. "Okay, vacuum, then dinner."

"You vacuum, I'll make dinner," Brian offered.

Mom assented with a nod and smile. "And you . . ." she wiggled a finger in my direction. "You can—"

"—help me with dinner," Brian completed, probably saving me from a worse fate.

I tossed off my blanket, set *Harry Potter* on the coffee table, and followed Brian into the kitchen. I dug vegetables out of the refrigerator for a salad.

Brian dodged me with a plate of soggy defrosted chicken as I pulled out the cutting board. "Oop, oop, 'scuse me."

"Sorry," I said as I chopped a green pepper in half. "And sorry I was such a brat for so many years. And that my sisters still are."

Brian shrugged as he tore apart the chicken. "I'd do it again, as long as I got to marry your mother." Mom started the vacuum in the living room. He raised his voice over the roar. "It was all part of the deal."

✧

✧ SLUSH ✧

Ducking my head against a pointed gust of wind, I sighed down at the slush. It clung to the blades of the battered hockey skates strapped to my feet, smoother in texture than the crushed ice of a Sno-Cone, but dense enough to hinder movement. From the center of the cove, I squinted against the snow in search of the dark sliver representing my friend James and pushed off before the slush froze me in place.

Two hours ago, when James and I had glided onto it, the inland lake rink was only dusted with white. But as the swirling snow collected on the damp ice, it created a frosty concoction not at all conducive to ice-skating. The local weatherman had predicted heavy snowfall as a result of an Alberta clipper colliding with the warm air over Lake Michigan, but as I weakly shoved my way out toward my once-best-friend-turned-boyfriend-turned-absent-friend I found it more likely the heavy snow was a cosmic sign.

Give up, the wind and snow and slush whispered.

In hopes of fully resuscitating our comatose friendship, I had borrowed a pair of skates and invited James for a spin on the ice; I promised a smooth surface that, in places, had frozen so quick and so clear it was possible to watch the seaweed waving twenty feet below. Those truly had been the conditions at the time of the invitation. But a few days, a warm spell, and an Alberta clipper later, there I was on the ice, fighting to keep my wobbly ankles straight and an undernourished friendship alive, determined to wage my battle despite the omen of crappy weather.

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I met James in fourth grade. I remember Mrs. Summers writing his name on the chalkboard as an example of how an apostrophe didn't need to be followed by an *s* if the word already ended with one. For a few months, James' desk and mine sat side-by-side in the classroom, according to Mrs. Summers' seating chart, and at recess I told my girlfriends that I thought James was "just okay," but admitted to myself that I was curious about him, that I hoped our futures would collide somehow. All James remembers from fourth grade is that he was relieved the other kids were no longer calling him "James THE giant peach," as they had in third grade.

During seventh grade, James and I had Mrs. Jefferson for Language Arts during fifth hour. She called him Jim, which bothered me (because it removed his special *s*-less apostrophe status), even though it didn't seem to bother him. We sat across the room from one another and rarely spoke. Mrs. Jefferson was in the habit of announcing top grades on quizzes and papers to the class, and she called my name and "Jim's" most frequently. Over the sea of desktops, I silently made James my rival; each assignment became a competition for the best grade in the class. James remembers that I sat across the room and that Mrs. Jefferson called him Jim.

At some point in eighth grade, I began to talk and joke with James occasionally during lunch times, but never in the mornings when I saw him walking the halls holding Jessica Wheelock's hand. At the end of that year, I swapped yearbooks with him during the lunch period, and we avoided the sticky patches on the tables as we scrawled our best wishes to one another. I remember that James signed my yearbook with a compliment

about my smile. James remembers Jessica Wheelock and that I signed his yearbook, but not what I wrote. (I also remember that I never liked Jessica Wheelock.)

Freshman year, James and I forged a friendship based on the number of classes we shared. We had Language Arts together again, this time during first hour with Mrs. Krantz, whom we also had for study hall during seventh hour. She liked me but not James, because by that time James was learning to love attention from his peers, becoming a class clown. We had a writing workshop and Civics class together, too, and used to collaborate on homework during study hall – to Mrs. Krantz's dismay and repeated shushing.

Also that year, James began to seek me out on the school bus in the mornings, so I started saving a spot for him by blocking the other half of the green vinyl seat with my backpack until the bus reached his stop – no small feat since my stop was first and his second-to-last. After school, we walked to the bus together and shared the reverse route until he got off. He had, I noticed, started paying a lot of attention to Amy Wing during study hall. One afternoon on the way to the bus, I told him that I thought he liked her. "Wow, how did you know?" His eyes widened in amazement while I tried to hide my disappointment. I remember ninth grade as the year I first fancied myself in love with James, but I don't know what James remembers about ninth grade other than Mrs. Krantz and Amy Wing.

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The dime-sized snowflakes, carpet of slush, and gusting wind muffled all sound – I could hear the clatter and swish of my skates only vaguely. Halfway across the cove James was a silent black snowflake dancing to an unheard rhythm.

Crisscrossing earlier tracks, I wandered toward him, not wanting to appear too obvious in my attempt to close the distance between us. As a general rule, personal proximity plays a large role in determining the strength of our relationships. Simply put, the more time we spend in the same room, same school, same city, the better friends we become. Time together allows us to create common memories and generate inside jokes. Friends often establish routines or rituals, activities they only participate in with one another. James and I attended the same youth group in high school and each time we gathered for a prayer, he and I stood close enough for our shoulders to brush and interlocked fingers. At the end of the prayer, James would squeeze my hand before letting go. He and I also developed the perfect hug: I wrapped both arms around his neck, which meant I lifted onto my tippy-toes, while his arms encircled my ribs.

The more often we enact shared episodes like these, the stronger the bond between us grows. We spend hours reminiscing with old friends because repeating those stories and jokes reinforces a connection that might otherwise fizzle. On the other hand, the lack of shared episodes is one reason long-distance romances rarely work out. I gouged a waffle pattern in the snow with my skate blades and mulled over the fact that my enrollment at a university six hours and three hundred miles away from our hometown, where James attended community college, had hampered any sharing of experience. Actually, it had almost killed interaction altogether. Thus our friendship suffered – much like my ice-skating skills – from lack of practice.

Closer now, I could discern James' limbs as he zoomed back and forth on his sleek skates, deftly cutting through the slush. His skating was not taking him further out on the

ice, but his constant movement made it difficult for me to clamber my way into his path. Grudgingly, I realized that even if I happened to stumble within conversational distance, I had nothing to say. Feeling it enough to be near him, I persisted, forcing my way through the slush.

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There once was a time we were close. Our junior year of high school, after years of calling ourselves best friends, James and I decided to attempt romance by upgrading our titles to "boyfriend" and "girlfriend." We didn't go on dates, though, because we didn't want to tell our parents we were together, but two or three times a week we shared the front seat of James' big Bronco as he drove me home after school. Sometimes we even shared space, holding hands between gear shifts. Despite the fact that a cornerstone of our relationship was our ability to talk together for hours, those rides were spent in silent trepidation of our goodbye kiss – an awkward new addition for old friends.

March came in like a lamb that year. Clumps of carded wool floated in the sky as the earth sheared itself of white. The air was unusually warm and welcoming, and one afternoon I rolled down the Bronco's window to suck in the crisp air and soak up the soggy colors of the farmlands between the high school and my house. I felt James smiling, felt him entwine his fingers with mine.

"How long do you think this'll last?" I asked, meaning the weather.

"Forever," he answered, meaning us.

But March went out like a lion – she roared, and the world grew cold again. Confused and unconfident, I told James that I didn't want to be his girlfriend anymore, that

I wanted to downgrade back to best friend status. Shortly thereafter James didn't drive me home anymore. He also didn't speak to me until after our high school graduation. Just before he cut off all communication, he wrote me to say that I had broken his heart.

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As I stared at the slush it struck me that the James across the cove was not the same James I fought to stay friends with, at least not by definition. If we no longer shared a best friendship, what sort of relationship did we have? Close friendship? Casual friendship? Or, worse, acquaintanceship? I could find nothing to say to him because I could no longer define who or what we were to one another.

Our brains have on file millions of organizational structures called schemata that help us make simple, observable distinctions. Take two ice skaters for an example. We can identify that one ice skater is a boy and the other is a girl based on body shape, clothing, and maybe movements. But we harbor other, more complex schemata that help us characterize relationships, too. If the two skaters don't seek out each other, we might conclude they don't know one another. However, if the ice skaters talk together, we might classify them as friends. If the pair laugh and bump shoulders, linger near one another to speak, we might decide they are close friends, but because they do not hold hands or kiss, we would not assume romantic involvement.

So where to start? What to say to a potential friend who shares so much history? I searched for the words as I dipped in and out of slushy figure-eights.

✧✧✧

Before the heartbreak and the long letters filled with teen angst, before the years of silence, before tentatively skating back into each other's lives, James and I knew we were friends like we knew the way home. It was instinct. Our friendship made sense in a way we couldn't fully explain, although we understood the basics. James needed someone to listen, and I needed someone who gave me the courage to speak. James thrived on foolish jokes and stunts in groups, while I lingered around the edges, feeding him material almost as often as I scolded or apologized for him.

But, truthfully, I remember our high school days together as friends less clearly than the days I spent without him. The day we first reconciled has been bleached by its own sunshine. In June, a week or so after graduation, we happened upon each other at a mutual friend's open house. We spent the rest of the afternoon party-hopping, catching up on the last year and half during the drives between houses. I remember we took my car, though I don't remember what was said that day or when and why our relationship fell apart again. But I know it did, and our first three semesters of college passed in relative silence.

The human memory is far from perfect. In fact, schemata are responsible for a good percentage of our active recall. Our memories use schemata to fill in their own gaps with particulars that are not the actual details but the most probable ones based on our accrued experiences. So when I recall the winter Sunday that James approached me after Mass and said, "We'll talk," I see sunlight filling the vestibule, James earnest in his snowboarding jacket, Father Jerry milling with parishioners, James' step-mom impatiently waving him toward the door. But in reality I maybe only saw James' facial expression and assume he wore his snowboarding jacket because that was his typical attire. The rest of the scene I add

because those images are representative of my years of church-going experience and have become my schema for which activities take place after Mass. I know I scoffed, "Yeah, right," in response to James, but whether I tossed the cynical comment over my shoulder or spat it in his face is uncertain. Chances are I did neither, because those are probably schema prototypes for angry retorts I've developed from watching movies. Either way, he kept his promise. We talked. And we made a plan to go ice skating.

I often wonder what else I have forgotten, what other false details I have crammed into the cracks and fissures of my memory. Years' worth of time and space had separated James and me, reshaping our personalities in ways that periodic, perfunctory e-mails could not convey. That day on the ice, I had little idea who that James was – it was my memory of the James who used to be I was striving to keep alive.

✧✧✧

I bent to tighten the laces on my skates and lost a mitten to the soggy white layer now so high it hid my skate blades. I stood just in time to see James scrape sideways to an abrupt stop, rooster-tailing slush up to my knees, and I laughed in surprise.

"Ready to give up?" he asked, meaning the weather.

"No," I answered, meaning us. "But I'll call it quits for today."

✧

"Comin' through! We're on a mission for the potty." Mom ushered Grandma around the kitchen table, her hands hovering above Grandma's lower back and hips for small corrections in balance. Mom stepped aside as Grandma reached her walker and zoomed across the Formica wood floor toward her bedroom suite.

Once Grandma had rounded the corner I asked, "How'd it go?" I stood at the stove, stirring a pot of boiling water and noodles in preparation for lunch.

Mom sighed and posted a hand on a chair back. She was flushed from the summer heat and frustration. "The doctors' appointments went fine, but then she wanted to go to the craft store for yarn, and she fell in the parking lot and I yelled at her." Mom's shoulders slumped, defeated.

"She fell on the pavement? Is she okay?" I stopped stirring and sat.

"She's fine." Mom, clearly exasperated by the events of the day, went on to explain that Grandma had extricated herself from the car while Mom got the wheelchair from the trunk. "I saw her before she fell, but couldn't get to her quick enough. I was so mad I just kept yelling, 'I told you to stay put! Look what happened!' There was a woman a few spots over and then I'm thinking 'great, this lady thinks I'm some horrible, abusive person, letting my mother fall and then yelling at her.'" Mom bounced the heel of her hand off her forehead. "If she would just do what I say, she would be okay. It would be okay! She

can't stand by herself! I told her to *stay put* and I would come get her but she just doesn't listen."

I gave my mom a sympathetic cringe. "I bet she thinks she's helping you. She knows she is a hassle to help, so I bet she's trying to make less work for you by doing things herself." I glanced over my shoulder to check on the bubbling pot and shook the packet of powdered cheese. "Ask her why she did it. I don't think it's that she doesn't know better, I think it's that she knows you are stressed out."

"She has to understand the risk." Mom sighed again. Though she is near sixty, the only traces of her age are the few wisps of silver in her dark hair. "What are you making? Mac and cheese? Can Grandma have some?" I nodded, and Mom offered a quick, "Thanks."

From the other side of the house we heard the soft padding of Grandma's footsteps and the rattle of her walker. Grandma passed into view and out again as she entered her den. Mom followed. Standing to strain the noodles, I heard her explain, slow and loud, "You can't do things like that anymore, Mom. If you keep taking risks like that, you will hurt yourself so badly that we will have to put you in a nursing home." There were tears behind my mom's voice now, and I could picture her in the computer chair she'd rolled over to Grandma's recliner, leaning forward and searching her mother's face for understanding. I heard Grandma's high-pitched response, but her words were garbled. As they talked, I added the butter, milk, and packet of cheese. Mom emerged from the room, and I heard the electric pop signaling Grandma had turned on the television.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"That she doesn't know why she falls. That she's trying to help." She shrugged and fetched a bowl from the cupboard for Grandma's serving of macaroni and cheese.

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Although Rita, my mom's mom, has had Parkinson's disease for almost twenty of her eighty-eight years, she has lived with my mom and step-dad for only the past five. In those most recent years, Grandma's condition has degenerated from minor hindrance to full-on disability, and my family – Mom particularly, though she seldom can bring herself to admit it – is fast approaching a breaking point. As soon as Mom steps in the door after a hectic day as mammography tech at the local hospital, she is perpetually on-call. As Grandma's primary caretaker, her roles include pharmacist, personal hygiene assistant, laundress, hair dresser, financial consultant, and taxi service. Mom is also her computer guru. Grandma likes to keep in contact with friends and family over e-mail, but she often unconsciously clicks the mouse buttons and opens sometimes hundreds of windows by accident; once she even erased the hard drive. Mom has since hunted down a Parkinson's-appropriate mouse – a rectangular apparatus with large inset buttons and a fist-size tracking ball.

My grandma looks like many other women who are approaching the century mark. Her skin is like vellum, thin with age and marbled with blue veins; it hangs off her arms from lack of muscle mass. Her breasts have sunk to her waist, where they blend with the roll of excess weight around her middle, and her shoulders are rounded. Her mouth wears the sour expression imposed on it by wrinkles. Her blue eyes are murky and yellowed behind her glasses, but they reflect an inner curiosity or, perhaps, mild bafflement that comes from long mistrust of her hearing. It is my grandmother's physical movements that

betray her, reveal her disease. Grandma has lost her ability to sit perfectly still. Her hands jostle at the wrists in resting position, and her right leg writhes and wanders as though trying to escape its bond to her wriggling body. Grandma slumps to the left of whatever chair she occupies and cannot rise from a seated position on the first try. Because she lacks the ability to climb or descend stairs, she is limited in her mobility around the house, dividing her days between her den and bedroom and the family dining room and kitchen. Grandma's most recent degeneration owing to Parkinson's disease is urinary incontinence, a condition she is not particularly ashamed of, but which has unfortunate side effects such as diaper rash and a curiously permeating odor.

Mom told me that Grandma used to call her condition "the Curse" and refused to learn more about it or discuss it. Only recently, now that the disease's symptoms are almost beyond control, does Grandma occasionally admit independence has finally eluded her. But most of the time she appears to forget she has the disease at all, which means Mom must operate several steps ahead of her. Mom sets the kitchen table before she goes to work with every item Grandma might possibly need to use during her meal, including a carafe of coffee with the lid tight enough to stay warm but loose enough to unscrew. We have all learned to anticipate Grandma, running interference to keep her provided for and stable. In my family, though, nothing says loving like making fun of something, and we persevere with humor.

We each have our favorite anecdotes, and somehow there is relief in repeating them to each other and to people outside the family. Mom likes to tell about the time Grandma called the dentist a geek. I like to make people chuckle as I tell them about her efforts at

completing jigsaw puzzles, how she always concludes there are missing pieces when actually she just hasn't aligned them correctly because she can't see well enough. We both like to imitate her sloping knitting posture. At night, as we sit in the family room watching television together, we listen for "Thumper" moving around upstairs. Together, we remember that one night at dinner, shortly after Grandma first moved in, we heard a rhythmic pat coming from under the table. We thought it was the dog thumping his tail, but it turned out to be the palsy in Grandma's right foot.

Grandma even takes digs at herself. A few years ago I came home one evening and was surprised to see her sporting a black eye. "You shoulda seen the other guy," she told me – "the other guy," I discovered from Mom, was a Tupperware container she'd been carrying when she stumbled and fell. And when I found her lying on her back in the kitchen one morning, I asked her what she'd been up to. "Oh, just dusting the floor," she quipped.

For all her bravado, Grandma's lack of caution and forethought about her movements carries serious risk. If she falls and breaks a hip or elbow the resultant hospital stay could lead to a case of incurable pneumonia; physical therapy recovery time would land her in a nursing home. Unfortunately, Grandma doesn't take these things into consideration. She seems to forget that the rigidity and bradykinesia (slowing of voluntary movement) caused by Parkinson's disease gives her a shuffling, highly unsteady gait. The truth is she falls down. A lot. Sometimes she falls for silly reasons – like when her bottom is not planted far enough back in her chair, and she slips off while leaning forward. Sometimes she falls because she's doing too many things at once instead of using her walker as she is supposed to – like when she holds a crumpled napkin and other bits of trash in one

hand, a cup of coffee in the other, and tries to push aside a chair with her toe. And sometimes she falls just because she forgets that she is susceptible to falling – like when she turns around, leans forward, or bends over too fast. Grandma isn't dotty. Falling down hurts; she gets bruises on her back and legs. It's her logic about movement that is problematic. She is always looking to save time and trips, so she does more than is safe. Instead of walking into her bedroom, sitting on the bed, then taking off her shirt to change into pajamas, she starts stripping on her way down the hall, thinking that saves her from having to sit down and struggle to stand again. Sadly, it usually means she has to struggle up from the bedroom floor rather than the bed.

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Every time I return home on hiatus from school, Grandma welcomes me with an embrace involving a walker, tangled eyeglasses, and fuzzy-chinned kisses. During the days I have off from work and the hours I am home and my parents are not, I step into my mom's role. I become Grandma's extra pair of hands, lend her a sturdier back and keener eyes. Even though there is no question or debate in my mind about helping Grandma – it's just what has to be done – she is always pleased by my granddaughterly attention. I share the breakfast table with Grandma as often as I can. I make her bed while she is still eating, or while she naps in her chair. If she is napping before I go to work or out on errands, I leave notes telling her where I am going and whether I will be home for dinner. I sit at her puzzle table poking pieces in place to help her finish. I pop into her den to chat when I come home, ask her how her day went, and tell her how busy it was at the store where I work. When Grandma and I are the only ones home and I am downstairs, I listen for her footsteps

to make note of where she is and what she might be up to, but also so that I am ready to help her if she falls or drops something.

Late one August afternoon last year, I was in the downstairs family room working at my computer when I heard a light tumble and thud through the ceiling in the general location of Grandma's bedroom. My trained ear knew that the thump wasn't loud enough to mean she went down – more probably she had dropped something. Two minutes later, several more tumbles and one reverberating thud informed me Grandma was on the floor.

I pounded up the steps, and when I reached her bedroom door, Grandma was on the floor in front of her closet with five or six shoe boxes strewn about her, one in her lap. "What are you doing down there?" I asked, pretending to be surprised and amused. Grandma smiled up at me. I knew, without her having to tell me, she had tried to fish the shoe boxes from the top shelf of the closet and lost her balance.

Wanting to get her up and get back to my work, I cajoled her to set aside the shoe box, but when I reached for her hands she said firmly, "I don't want to get up yet." Instead we spent twenty minutes sorting through each shoe box – twice. In the first box we found white pumps with some minor gray scuffs about which Grandma said, "I can give these away." In the second box was a pair of brown pumps. In the third, more brown pumps. "I can get use out of these still," Grandma said.

No where in my imagination could I locate a scenario in which Grandma would be steady enough to wear pumps again, but I didn't contradict her logic. I stood next to her, setting the boxes aside and reminding her of her decisions when she got them confused.

After two more pair of black pumps, she returned to the box of white pumps. "I will keep those. I may get use out of them still. They are good for summer." I pinned my tongue between my teeth for patience.

Before I could suggest we get her up off the floor, Grandma pulled another box from a low shelf. This one held black walking shoes. She picked one of them up and examined it. "I don't need those," she said, tucking it next to its mate.

A burst of disbelief almost escaped me. "Okay. We'll set those aside. How about we try to get –" But I was too late again.

Grandma was leaning back, craning her neck to see the top shelf again, her mouth in a wondering O-shape. "There are more boxes up there! What's in those boxes?"

Reluctantly, I brought down the last three shoe boxes, but I snatched up the half dozen from the floor and positioned them back on the high shelf before she could open every lid and examine each of the occupants a third time.

I hoped maybe we were done, then, and offered once more to help her off the carpet. But something magenta and fuzzy caught her eye, and with the full-bodied enthusiasm of a three-year-old she crawled deep into the closet and began to tug at it. From between a low shelf and a little-used suitcase popped an old knit hat. "A hat!" she exclaimed. I half expected her to put it on her head and grin at me like a little girl playing dress up. Instead she handed it to me and plunged her awkward body into the closet again, this time rummaging past her winter snow boots and to a small soft luggage bag. Finally resigned to closet exploration, I didn't try to stop her, didn't say a word as she turned the bag over in her hands, legs splayed out straight in front of her. I knew if Mom were there,

she would say, "No," and shake her finger and take the bag away from Grandma. But it seemed preposterous for me to tell an eighty-eight-year-old woman, my grandmother, "No."

Later that night I repeated the story to Mom in the kitchen while Grandma watched television in her den. I knew just what parts to emphasize with animated accompanying gestures to get her to laugh, to distract her from the worry and frustration that constantly weighs her down and threatens to overtake her. Our giggles were drowned out by the ominous tones of a "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" rerun from the den, the volume level an assurance Grandma couldn't hear us.

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Parkinson's disease is sort of a grab bag of physical complications, many of which undiagnosed patients incorrectly ascribe to old age. My grandma knows the source of her symptoms, though, and is defiant in her efforts to combat them. Like a child, her determination is pure, and she can visualize the end result even though she lacks the typical adult dexterity and control for success. But she rarely admits defeat.

Grandma once did beautiful handwork. She needle-pointed pillows, cross-stitched pictures for friends, sewed clothing, embroidered pillow cases, crocheted sweaters, and knit blankets. Shortly after Grandma's first great-grandchild was born, she decided she wanted to commemorate his first birthday by completing a pre-packaged counted cross-stitch pattern. The picture was simple: two blue baby footprints bordered by pastel blocks. When completed, the pattern would fit in a 4x6 frame that could be hung on the wall. Grandma asked Mom to retrieve her sewing things from storage downstairs and set to

work. But she had trouble threading her needle, so Mom purchased a handy thread helper. Grandma squinted at the instructions and tried to count her squares carefully, but shaking fingers, faulty memory, and poor eyesight collaborated to prevent her from achieving her best results. She asked Mom for a magnifying glass to wear around her neck, for a magnifying reader to move along the instruction sheet, for aida cloth with larger holes. And still her results didn't meet the high standards she insisted on keeping for herself – they couldn't match the mark she'd set over decades of meticulous work.

Mom would call me while I was away at school to report, among other things, Grandma's progress on the project. In pursuit of perfection, Grandma ripped out her stitches so many times the aida cloth began to unravel. One day, Mom said, she came home from work to find Grandma attempting to repair the aida cloth by weaving in the threads that had fallen out. When I visited home on breaks that year, it was painful to watch Grandma struggle with the cloth and needle and thread. She sat in her chair for hours, her abdomen wriggling and head weaving, infinitely patient with the work. Once my brother insisted my mom make Grandma give up the project, take it away from her because having to watch her attempt the work was borderline grotesque. "And take away her joy?" Mom responded.

Eventually, though, Grandma knew she couldn't finish, and she handed the work off to me. The aida cloth was grayish from much handling, and particles of crusted food from her fingers stuck to it. Some of the stitches were uneven or miscounted, and the card of embroidery floss used to organize the colors was mismatched. I finished the small project in a week, after consulting Grandma for her approval (she had me change the font of

the stitched writing announcing my second-cousin's name and birth date). I jotted a note to tuck inside the frame: *To Joshua, with love from Great-Grandma's heart and Cousin Shannon's fingers*. Grandma held the note tenderly as she read it and smiled, her shoulders and torso slowly squirming with delight and her disease.

Knowing she no longer possessed the finger finesse for cross-stitch, Grandma decided to try knitting again. She began watching a knitting show on television in the afternoons. After a few days of the knitting program, Grandma pulled out her needles and asked Mom to buy her some yarn. Though knitting has proven easier than cross-stitch, Grandma has trouble remembering how many loops she makes from line to line. Though she spends hours every day knitting, she never produces much more than a trapezoidal, loose-looped dishcloth.

"That's okay," Mom reassures her each time. "It's just for dishes." But Grandma rips out the entire cloth and starts again, saying, "It isn't good enough."

Further complicating Grandma's knitting process, the muscles on the left side of her body are no longer strong enough to combat the rigidity that has overtaken her right, and the inequality causes Grandma to slump left when she sits. As she knits in her recliner, she leans over the chair's arm, her hands and knitting needles almost bumping the carpet. She never seems to recognize the awkwardness of her position, but from an observer's perspective her pose is either tragic or highly comedic. Grandma focuses so intently on the interplay of her needles and yarn that she doesn't notice that her lips curl inward, her head lolls around her shoulders, or that her right foot writhes and taps the floor. When she takes a break from knitting to get a snack from the kitchen or go potty, sometimes she doesn't

notice that she has snagged her yarn on the leg of her walker, and she unknowingly unravels her skein as she travels from room to room, spinning great webs of multi-colored thread in her wake.

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I didn't know my grandma well before her disease, before she moved in with us. The stories and images my mom conjures from her childhood do not jibe with the wrinkled and wiggly woman I call Grandma. "She used to boil our vegetables for dinner every night. She boiled the nutrients and flavor right out of them. I didn't know it was safe to eat vegetables raw until I was in my twenties and out of the house," Mom reports. She remembers how she was forced to sit at her plate of cooling and congealing vegetables as a child, and how Grandma had such low tolerance for the family dog that he wasn't even allowed in the house during meals. During dinners at home, I watch Grandma scrape bits of meat and vegetable from her plate into her hand and palm them off to our family dog – a now robust golden mutt.

When I listen to my mom's stories, she incorporates her thoughts and feelings, interprets the norms for the decade, shows me how and where her life fits in the grand scheme, how her world outlook has developed. Mom tells me that the combination of the Cold War, President Kennedy's assassination, and the Vietnam War was almost enough to convince her and her Catholic school peers that Armageddon was approaching, that it was a scary time to be alive. She admits to the shame she felt when she discovered she was pregnant, that it took her a long time to forgive herself, that she still knew girls who were sent to live with family in obscure parts of the country for the same offense, even in 1970.

When I listen to Grandma talk about her past, I usually get just the immediate facts; she doesn't appear to have a world outlook or feel much emotion over major events. She once told me that it was useful to have a baby in the family during WWII (her firstborn, my Aunt Marilyn) because the government gave her more ration stamps that way, but she never mentioned feeling the threat of war or worrying about international affairs. She has never referenced the Great Depression as the Great Depression. Instead she remembers, fondly, that a runny navy bean sandwich on a hamburger bun and a chocolate cupcake with swirled frosting ("A complete lunch!") cost only ten cents at the local bakery. Once she told me she used to like going dancing in the Detroit area public parks on Friday nights with friends to see "the boys" play. I asked her what boys. "Oh, those boys. Lawrence Welk. Glenn Miller and those brothers . . . Jimmy and his brother. The Dorsey brothers. They were all just getting started, but I liked their music."

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At breakfast one morning, Grandma mentioned wanting to revisit video tapes of family movies. In 1954, Grandpa received a hand-held eight-millimeter camera for Christmas. The next thirty years worth of Christmases, first communions, family vacations, high-school graduations, and a few birthdays made it to film. As a gift for my grandparents' fiftieth anniversary, my uncle had the movies compiled on three video tapes. Grandma told me she wanted to remember the neighborhood kids her children knew and the vacations the family took together. So for six hours we sat together in the den watching years pass in minutes (we did take two breaks for naps and one for food).

Grandma's memory of the past is very good. She pointed out family members and remembered the names of each of my mother's boyfriends and all the girls on the Homecoming court in 1967, the year my mom made Homecoming Queen. She recalled details of the family's travels, like the time a motel in Grand Haven turned Grandpa and her away for having too many kids. She couldn't, however, hear the narration she and Grandpa had originally recorded on the tapes that was giving me all the same information.

Even though Grandma could recall the exact amount their home on Lincoln Street in Royal Oak, Michigan, had sold for when she and Grandpa chose to move into the condo after all six children had moved out, she had trouble with the more recent data. I asked how long my uncle had been married before his first divorce. Her blue eyes were wide and her lips pursed as she looked at me. "I don't remember," she said. Her voice was almost whisper, but I could hear the regret and the shame.

I wondered, during those six hours, what it felt like for Grandma to watch herself. She frittered about on camera, setting up Bridge parties, helping children open presents, pumping her legs high and fast on a swing set in a bathing suit. I wondered if she felt cheated and trapped. I wondered if, when she was on that swing set, she ever thought she'd one day be watching herself from a recliner, alternately paralyzed and set in perpetual motion from the same disease.

I do what I can during my stays at home, but sometimes . . . sometimes I just can't watch her struggle to open a letter, butter knife in hand to slit the side, lips rolled inward, her body writhing in concentration. Sometimes I have to look away when she is bent over her puzzle table, one palsied hand placing a piece while the other shakes the loose pieces to

the floor. Sometimes I simply have no explanation for how she manages to make it through each day mentally living in her past while her body demands that she lives in the present, how she survives every potential accident. Witnessing day after day of struggle is infuriating, and infuriation leads to exhaustion. Exhaustion makes me want to give up, and my tours of duty with Grandma are a few weeks or months at a time. Mom lives the battle every day.

So under and around the aggravation – the edging despair, the approaching end – we make each other laugh. We stand in the kitchen and discuss Grandma's falls and ear infections and pace maker issues, weighing consequences and hoping for best-case scenarios. Sometimes I recognize that Mom and I are standing in the position: one hand stationed on a hip, the other planted on the counter top and holding our weight, one foot linked over the other at the ankle. Once I recognize the pose as my mother's I drop it, but my mind always rattles through a string of questions. Maybe Parkinson's disease isn't genetically inherited, but what about our behavior? Did Grandma ever stand like this? Did she ever know exasperation like this? Did she laugh at it, too? Are we both our mothers' daughters? Will my mom be living with me some day?

There are no easy answers about Parkinson's disease. It is incurable, but not fatal. People with Parkinson's undergo years of degeneration until some other health problem causes death. Considering her age and tendency to ignore well-meant advice, Grandma's doing great. At this point, it's about keeping her upright, maintaining her quality of life, and trying to laugh our way through the rest.

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✧ MAP OF THE WORLD ✧

I craned my neck to see the pastel purple speck my mom pointed to with her index finger. "That's Kuwait," she informed me, her voice steady. "And the green one is Iraq." I was able to connect key words from the nightly news like *oil* and *Saddam Hussein* to the spots of color, but *Desert Storm* conjured confusing visions of both funnel clouds of sand and soldiers in khaki fatigues.

I took a step back from the wall to better scrutinize the map of the world with its Easter egg tinted countries and pale blue oceans. My eyes scanned the map in search of Michigan's mitten shape. "And we're here." I jabbed a finger at the United States, not quite tall enough to reach my home state.

Mom nodded but kept her finger on Kuwait. She knew I was sizing up the distance.

"So no bombs can hit us?" Images of the glowing green orbs I'd watched streaking through the skies on the news flickered through my eight-year-old mind – infrared footage from the nighttime bombings of Baghdad.

Mom shook her head and dropped her hand. "Nope, I'd say we're pretty safe."

Glancing back and forth between the tiny purple splotch representing Kuwait and the big yellow smear of the U.S., I pursed my lips and crossed my arms, trying to decide if I should believe her or not. Eventually I nodded. "Okay." Satisfied, I turned away from the map and plunked myself on the couch to watch Nick-at-Nite.

I don't remember why we hung the map, although I found it particularly useful during the first Gulf War in 1991. In second grade I developed an interest in geography, so when countries I recognized were mentioned on the six o'clock news, I would either eye their location from the couch or stand directly in front of the map, twisting my body in order to see the screen and simultaneously keep my finger stuck in place. When the news ended and my prime-time television routine was about to begin, I'd plop myself back on the sofa, ignoring the map for the rest of the evening.

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At the age of eight, I doubt I knew or was told about the media scandal that followed the Gulf War, but later in life I learned that the majority of the newscasts I watched during those days were composed of falsified information. For example, reportage on the use of "smart bombs" led the public to believe these guided missiles were used most frequently by our government during the bombing of Baghdad, when in fact 90 percent of the bombs dropped were not "smart" and a majority of them completely missed their intended military targets. The government also purposefully misled the press by feeding it false attack plans to elude Iraqi military leaders. The Pentagon held press briefings filled with complex tactical data. They proposed an amphibious attack on invading Iraqi forces from Kuwait's Persian Gulf coast, while coalition troops actually lined up along the border of Saudi Arabia, effectively outflanking their enemies and the American people they were sworn to protect.

These events deepened the media's mistrust of the government and the American people's mistrust of the media. In the 1980s, the media were still riding the victory wave

following Watergate. Polls showed that Americans were enthusiastic about the news media and its role as government watchdog, but after the Gulf War it was clear the media had not only failed, but had been actively prevented from performing their function.

In this case, the government was guilty of what media analysts call gatekeeping. Gatekeepers are people in positions of influence who control the flow of information. An editor-in-chief is the ultimate gatekeeper for a newspaper and a company's board of directors might be the gatekeepers for a multi-billion dollar network, as General Electric is for NBC and its cable affiliates. These people choose which stories to print and what shows to air. Gatekeepers are oftentimes synonymous with agenda-setters, and this is why things get ethically sticky. Deciding how much airtime a story deserves, whether to place it "above the fold," and how big to make the headline are matters of agenda setting. The amount of attention the media grant to particular issues dictate the perceived importance of those issues in the minds of viewers. If all news networks cover the same event, and all late-night comedians make jokes about the same topics, the audience's conclusion is that *this is news, this is important*. But sometimes the owner of a media outlet will squelch a story that has wide-reaching repercussions because it may do damage to the parent company's own reputation, or the government will feed the press information while denying reporters access to the real news.

That the media select or perhaps are provided with particular issues to cover hasn't been a secret since the Sixties: the manipulation of the media is the manipulation of the public consciousness. One of the first hypotheses developed concerning the influence of the media on the society was called the Magic Bullet theory. Also known as the "hypodermic

needle theory," this model asserted that the effects of "shooting" or "injecting" large segments of the population with a message designed for a specific response were both direct and uniform. Although researchers have concluded that the Magic Bullet concept overlooks important variables, there is one audience for whom the theory may still be applicable: children. Most young minds are less sophisticated at processing information, and tend to accept all messages as one big truth. Introducing youngsters to norms, values, and rules of society through, for example, television constitutes the teaching function of the media, known as cultural transmission. In some cases, cultural transmission has a positive effect, especially for children. Shows like Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers tell kids that politeness is important, that it is okay to be scared sometimes, and that loving our neighbors makes the world a better place. But cultural transmission can have a dark side. Sometimes the media teach us which to be scared of or what neighbors we should hate.

When I was seven or eight years old, I drew a picture for my father featuring three faces; two were smiling, while one wore a mean and angry expression. The first face was mine, the second was my dad's – as identified by his mass of curly hair – and the third was Saddam Hussein's. The crayon rendering featured rainbows and sunshine above Dad and me, while storm clouds balanced above Saddam's turban. Below the respective heads, print from a young and unwieldy hand read, "Daddy loves me. I love Daddy. But I hate Saddam Hussein." (Spelled incorrectly, I'm sure.)

Dad always accepted my pictures with ceremony and gratitude. He often got out the Scotch tape and stuck them to the kitchen cupboards right then. This time I was proud to have included in my picture an opinion I thought all adults shared, and I hoped Dad

would be proud too. He smiled as I approached him with my drawing in hand, but as he examined my handiwork, I saw his eyebrows crowd together and his smile fall away. "Hate's a pretty strong word," Dad remarked, peering at me over the frames of his glasses. "Why do you hate him?"

"Because he's bad," I said, but I was unable to meet his gaze.

Dad considered for a moment, then asked, "How do you know he's bad?"

I didn't have an answer for him. And that picture never made the cupboard doors.

In 1991, my opinions and impressions were coming from the nightly news, but other sources of media I wasn't exposed to were carrying the same messages. Arguably more influential than the news media is the mass entertainment industry, including televised sporting events. At the time of the Gulf War, professional wrestling adapted the current political rhetoric to create an allegorical battle between good and evil, thereby profiting from and perpetuating the idea of American cultural dominance.

The key figure in this battle was a prominent wrestler called Sgt. Slaughter. Initially he had been a patriotic "good guy" in the World Wrestling Federation during the 1980s. He came to represent America's prowess by wrestling foreign "bad guys" such as the Iron Sheik, who was ostensibly from Iran. After a long absence Sgt. Slaughter returned in 1990, but this time he was presented as a "turncoat." He spouted anti-American sentiments from the ring, and in promos his image was superimposed on a photograph with Saddam, showing his supposed chummy relationship with the dictator. In January 1991, Slaughter won the World Heavyweight Championship Title. Shortly thereafter, wrestling's creative

team concocted a feud between Sgt. Slaughter and the wrestling world's All-American hero of the day, Hulk Hogan. To maximize his patriotic image, Hogan visited hospitals for American troops who had been wounded during the Gulf War conflict.

Hogan and Slaughter's match-up was scheduled for Wrestlemania VII, which was originally planned to take place in an outdoor arena, but due to the number of death threats against Sgt. Slaughter, the event was staged indoors. The match, held on March 24, 1991, garnered the largest pay-per-view audience at that time, and thousands of fans, including children, crowded the stadium. At the start of the match, Sgt. Slaughter, wearing an Iraqi military dress uniform and title belt, was led in by his "manager," General Adnan. In addition to wearing an Iraqi uniform, Adnan also waved the Iraqi flag. Slaughter was announced to the viewing audience as the "turncoat," and as having "insulted this great nation of ours." The energy level of the wrestling fans barely increased as Sgt. Slaughter marched toward center stage, but as Hulk Hogan bounded toward the ring carrying an American flag, cheering and clapping filled the arena. Commentators called Hogan "a national hero," and the cameras focused on middle-aged women and boys under ten waving banners. As the match got underway, the fans cheered for Hogan, but not by calling his name. Instead they chanted, "U-S-A, U-S-A."

For a while it seemed that Sgt. Slaughter would get the best of Hulk Hogan, and in a premature act of victory, he grabbed the Iraqi flag from General Adnan and covered the suffering and bleeding Hogan with it. An enraged Hogan clambered to his knees and tore the Iraqi flag in strips, beginning to "hulk up." Before he fought back, he shook his head and finger at Slaughter in warning. Commentator and former wrestler "Gorilla" Monsoon

narrated for Hulk Hogan saying, "You're not going to do that to me. You're not going to do that to the United States of America, and the thousands of Hulkamaniacs." Within a few seconds, Hulk Hogan pinned Sgt. Slaughter, claiming victory for America and winning the World Heavyweight Championship Title for himself.

Even though I wasn't (and still am not) a wrestling fan when these events took place, there are people for whom the Slaughter vs. Hogan feud defines the Gulf War in the way the world map on the wall and the nightly news defines it for me. And despite the difference in our media of choice, we both learned to boo the bad guys.

It isn't news that the media are capable of weaving negative stereotypes into our minds, but occasionally I am surprised by how willingly we blanket ourselves in them and how difficult it is to unravel them, even today. As an instructor for a college composition course, I have my students read Naomi Shihab Nye's piece "To Any Would-Be Terrorist," which was written in 2001 shortly after the September 11th tragedy. During my third semester teaching the class, I had a smart group of kids, but they seemed to have trouble voicing their opinions, which made leading discussion on hot-button topics like Nye's essay more challenging than usual.

With the help of some very leading questions, the students decoded the essay's many cultural metaphors, and when I asked whom the essay is meant to persuade, most of the class agreed that the title summed it up: Nye was addressing Middle Easterners with a grudge against America, giving them reasons not to blow us up. When I asked what other group of people Nye might be targeting with her argument, one or two blessed students

argued that the essay was also meant to familiarize Westerners with Arab culture and people, to persuade us that they are not all terrorists.

"So, did it work?" I asked, not holding out much hope for any response. "Are you persuaded by Nye's piece?"

My eyes scanned the horseshoe of twenty-five college freshman, measuring brain activity levels. Near the end of my second sweep I heard a faint, "No."

I swung my head toward the center of the horseshoe. "No? It didn't work?" I parroted, trying to expose the speaker so I could ask one of those favorite teacher questions – *why?* and *why not?*

When I caught Lindsay's gaze, I knew it was her before she spoke again. Her usual stoicism had been replaced with wide-eyed discomfort. She shifted in her seat and glanced at her classmates, then leveled her brown eyes at me. "I know it's not 'right' or anything," she said, pleading for understanding, "but I grew up in the U.P., and the fact is we don't have a lot of people from different places. So when I see Arab people on the news with guns and hating America, that's what I know about them. I mean, this essay has nice stuff in it," she nudged the unopened copy of her anthology, "but, still, if I see a guy with a turban or somebody with darker skin in an airport or something, I know I'd be kind of afraid of them. It didn't change that. I know it's not, like, what we're supposed to think, but it's still how I feel."

Lindsay's eyes were still locked on me, her teacher, as though she were afraid that if she lessened or lowered her gaze she might crumble. She knew she hadn't given the answer I wanted, but I knew she wanted me to understand and to tell her she wasn't a bad person.

I took a quick inventory of everyone else's reaction before I spoke – all twenty-four students stared at the table tops or the floor. "There are a lot of people that feel exactly how you do, Lindsay," I conceded, "and that's a hard thing to admit to ourselves, let alone to a room full of people." I went on to make the point that persuasion isn't always successful, and that is why it is important to know your intended audience, but now I wish I had made more of that moment. I wish I had put down my book, asked how many people agreed with Lindsay, and then asked them to explain *why* or *why not*.

These days I am forced to admit hypocrisy. Although I claim two college degrees, including a B.S. in Media Studies, I am a largely uninformed American, guilty of couch-potato politicking. I'm one of those people who actually watch *The Daily Show* for the news, not just John Stewart's specialized spin. At best, I scan headlines on my Google homepage every day, but I only click on the ones that seem like they might come up in conversation later. I doubt I could identify which resolution the Senate is working to pass or name the current White House chief of staff, but even without specifics I understand the general landscape. After a few minutes of listening to Fox News in the campus cafeteria, I understand why Lindsay is scared of men in turbans. Flipping by CNN or MSNBC during the rare hour of television, I know what's on the day's agenda, but I have to wonder what's been left off.

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In March of 2002, when the U.S. entered its second war with Iraq, I was a sophomore in college and ready to fight every injustice I perceived. For months I'd been signing online petitions to congressmen and posting political cartoons on my wall outside

my dorm room. Once the previous fall I erupted in front of an awe-stuck collection of coworkers when my student supervisor asked if the U.S. had "bombed those towel heads yet." By that March, debates about the ethics and justification of the U.S.'s recent intervention in Iraq had intensified, especially over the past several days. I had held conversation after conversation with friends, distant acquaintances, family, coworkers, and classmates, and I swam through each, more often sinking with doubt than feeling buoyed with confidence in my country and wading into more questions than answers. The morning after the official announcement of war, I went down to breakfast alone and felt relief as I claimed a small table by the window for myself.

A dozen years older and much more geographically savvy, I could picture the position of the countries on the globe, still tinted purple and green and yellow in my mind. I could visualize the distance between where I sat spreading cream cheese on a bagel and where a wide-eyed man cowered in the remains of a broken building and perhaps another man cheered the approaching U.S. soldiers roaring through the streets in armored tanks. And I knew that though we were on the same planet, we were worlds away, and the bombs couldn't get me. But as I slowly crunched down cereal and stared at the students trekking to class through the misty morning, I felt much less safe than I did when I was eight.

Maybe it was because a little less than ten years ago Marquette, Michigan had been fourth on the list of major targets to hit should another country decide to launch missiles at the United States. Maybe it was because I had been raised to believe that violence creates, not solves, conflict. Maybe it was because during the intervening twelve years between Gulf Wars I had learned about the effects of globalization, and I could then comprehend the

interconnectedness of humanity and the frailty of our institutions. Or maybe it was because I knew this time around I would no longer be capable of plopping myself down and flicking on the television with a clear conscience.

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✧ PLAYING HOUSE ✧

It started with the rug. The rug had to be *perfect*. I had all the other household accoutrements; I just needed an area rug to bring them together. I had the sage-green slip-covered loveseat. I had Andy's off-white futon and oaken coffee table. I had two red throw pillows. I had the living room's crème brûlée walls and bleached blond floors. I had visions of blue as an accent color. The rug was the planned centerpiece, the unifying element. It would be the living room's *coup de grâce*. But it couldn't be too girly. At age twenty-two, I was moving in with a boyfriend, and we were going to share this space as a couple. Though I'd never had a preference for frills or flowers, I still didn't want my taste to dominate, but Andy just said, "Whatever you think. You're the decorator," so I knew any rug I chose would work out fine. But fine wasn't good enough. It had to be *perfect*. I was thinking of something with a pattern, perhaps geometric. Something grown-up but not boring. Something 11 x 7 or 7 x 5. But I was having a little trouble finding a rug to meet my high expectations.

And maybe that should have been a warning sign.

After a two-week search, I found the rug in the local Menards. The border color was off-white while the body was checkered with taupe and cream. In each square was another circle or square of solid, muted greens, browns, blues and the occasional rust. Inside each circle or square was another in a complementary color. Decidedly gender-neutral, geometric, grown-up, 7 x 5, and on sale. *Perfect*.

Andy and I had met at a mutual friend's Halloween party during my final year of college. We had a fun night chatting, but our differences were clear from the start. I came to the party dressed as a 1920s flapper. Andy, whose sole piece of costume was a wizard hat, had to ask what I was. I never drink alcohol. Andy brought his own six pack of beer. I detested the military and the President's war in Iraq. Andy told me he signed up for the National Guard shortly after the war was announced. At one point he asked what I planned on doing after graduation. "I want to live in Boston," I said. "I'm applying to grad schools out east because I want to get out of Michigan for a while." Andy took a swig of beer and shook his head. "I never wanna live anywhere but the U.P."

Those differences should have been big flashing warning signals, but I was smitten with Andy's attention and liked the idea of a boyfriend, though I didn't expect (or want) the relationship to extend beyond my graduation in May. Over the next few weeks, I teased him every time he mentioned the future. I dodged his questions with answers like, "We'll see," or "You have until May," but he laughed away my claims for independence. During those weeks, we also slid into a routine: I studied at my apartment while waiting for him to get off work from his side job as a mechanic; he came over late and slept until I pushed him out of bed so he wouldn't be late for his nursing courses. Before I knew it, the deadlines for graduate school applications were too close for me to be well prepared, and eventually the choice was made for me. I wouldn't be going to Boston.

The decision to live together was a little less clear. I'm not sure it was even a decision – just an assumption. It seemed the next logical step after all those nights spent together. Why not save money by splitting the rent on our own place? I never said, "Yes,

let's live together," but I also never said, "No." In April, Andy said he knew a man with a house to rent in Ishpeming – his hometown, twenty minutes outside of Marquette – and we went to check it out. It needed some repairs and finishing touches, but Andy said he used to work for the guy and figured he could trust him. I let him negotiate the details while I started mentally decorating the space.

In two years of off-campus apartment life, I'd collected bits and pieces of what makes a house look like a home: some throw rugs, decorative candle holders, bath towels, a small assortment of coffee mugs – none of which I wanted to use once I moved into the house with Andy. The allure of a new space almost demanded it be filled with new things. We moved in during the early weeks of May in 2005. Andy had to finish his exams, and he'd picked up a job at an auto parts store, so I spent most of my days alone, sorting my possessions and digging through Andy's for what we could incorporate in our new home and what we could store in closets or boxes. I shopped, cleaned, decorated, planned dinner, cooked dinner, and woke the next day to repeat it all. In the mornings I drove to Target or ShopKo, returned home to dust base boards and hang curtains, and then started defrosting chicken or pork chops. By the end of the second week, I was bored and spending more time splayed on the futon with a book than performing the role of happy homemaker. But I was due back downstate in my hometown for summer employment and so escaped full immersion into prolonged domesticity. The house was in enough working order for Andy to use throughout the summer, and I would return in the fall to start a graduate program and tweak small details while he completed his nursing degree.

Andy and I spent the summer over the phone. He called every other night or so and, for lack of other common subjects to chat about, we planned our future time together. We decided we would always eat dinner together, and discussed favorite foods. We promised to take walks every evening, hand-in-hand, through our neighborhood, and thought about owning a dog. We talked about hosting guests for dinner and movies.

I was willing to make these plans for the immediate future, but in every conversation I felt a bigger assumption being made: Andy would say he liked log cabins, I would say I liked log cabins too, and just after the words left my lips I knew that in his mind, I had just agreed to spend the rest of my life in a log cabin with him. By fall, it seemed that Andy had decided we were getting married within the next two years, building a log cabin home and a pole barn for his auto shop, having a daughter, and renting a storefront so I could open a bookstore. I was baffled by all these potential plans – I just wanted home-cooked meals and neighborhood strolls.

Ostensibly, our landlord was to make a few improvements to the house over the summer. For one thing, he was supposed to install a kitchen floor. The kitchen had a floor, of course, but it was really a sub-floor made of plywood that had been painted an unappealing slate gray. Actually, just the parts of the floor the painter (read: our landlord) could reach without moving anything were painted. Little squares of naked wood poked out from under the legs of the kitchen table whenever we shifted its position, and the paint line visibly stopped short of the oven and refrigerator. I was hoping for a quick fix-up – those do-it-yourself stick-'em-down vinyl tiles or even a better layer of paint – but when I returned to the house in August, the floor was unchanged.

We had been promised full countertops and adjacent lower cupboards, too, though they never materialized. The kitchen layout was something like a smile with a few missing teeth. Our sole piece countertop was a reused square of Formica balanced on top of the dishwasher to the right of the sink. On the left-hand side was a set of cupboards topped with a sheet of (unpainted) plywood. The refrigerator and stove were freestanding on opposing walls, leaving the (unpainted) corners to collect dust, crumbs, and recyclables.

There was also an assurance made about hanging the varnished cedar trim that was supposed to frame the living room's picture window, but when I returned in the fall that hadn't materialized either. Instead, I tried to cover the gaps between the plaster and widow frame with curtains and blinds and to convince myself that a measly $200 share in rent was worth a few unfulfilled promises.

The house had another, unfixable oddity. Since our landlord had purchased the house over ten years earlier, he had been steadily making improvements and adjustments. One such adjustment was to expand the itty bitty limestone basement of the 100-year-old house by digging around the house's foundation and propping up the western half of the structure with weight-bearing poles that were (in my mind) unsettlingly skinny. It wasn't a perfect system, and by the time Andy and I signed a lease, the added foundation had settled a few inches lower than projected. This gave the floors upstairs a nice slope. Every dropped popcorn kernel and spaghetti noodle rolled west across the gray plywood and nestled in the gap between the wall and the floor under the kitchen table.

So, the place had its quirks, but in the beginning the quirks were an inside joke, a shared point of dissatisfaction Andy and I could turn into humor. I decorated around the

problems – adding some homey maroon curtains to the kitchen window, tacking a piece of cloth over the gaping hole left by a missing cupboard door – and Andy essentially ignored them. His theory seemed to be yeah, maybe the set-up wasn't quite right, but it was good enough. For him, this place was one step in our journey toward his log cabin and wedded bliss. And because I continued to buy home accessories and tweak details, he believed I felt the same way. To all appearances I was that happy homemaker, delighting in fabric finds and domestic duties. But while I wandered the house adjusting picture frames and smoothing wrinkles, I was actually trying to convince myself that I was happy with these things, this place, this person. It bothered me that none of the things Andy and I talked about all summer had yet come true. In lieu of dinners and pets and other people, I had to find something to fill the space and occupy my attention; if I sat idle too long, thoughts about the life I wasn't leading, and my growing discontent with the one I was, crept into my awareness. An unreasonable logic scrolled through my mind: *if I can make it pretty, I will want to stay*.

Ever since my Barbie doll days, I have had an unaccountable fascination with fabrics and color coordination that sometimes resembles obsessive-compulsive behavior. Once I had a house to dress and no one willing to tell me "no," I indulged my perfectionism. Each room had a color palette. For the kitchen I chose the muted jewel tones of the ceramic dishes my mom and I had picked out the previous Christmas. They were from a make-your-own-set selection, and I chose one mug, bowl, dessert and dinner plate of every color. From my rainbow array of dishes, I selected purple, green, and orange for oven mitts, which I hung on the wall above the stove, and then repeated those three colors in the

dishtowels. Luckily, I found towels with maroon accents, which allowed me to use a floor runner I'd had in my previous living spaces in front of the sink and the maroon curtains.

Because we quickly fell into the Shannon-waits-for-Andy-to-show-up routine, I had plenty of time alone, which allowed for my logic to reign equally pedantic in every room. The spare bedroom was painted a cheery sky blue, and the twin bed sported the lime green comforter and hot pink sheets I'd used in my dorm days. The master bedroom had the same caramel walls of the living room, and I found a bedspread of midnight blue satin that was embroidered with few simple caramel florets. The comforter also had blocks of gold and forest green velvet, and I found green panel curtains to match. Even the raw rock of the carved-out Michigan basement got a perky periwinkle floor mat and small trash can – the color chosen to match the dye on the PVC piping that ran along the ceiling.

My ultimate color-matching achievement, however, was the bathroom. I had good material in that room. The bathroom had looked like a result of a *Trading Spaces* episode even before Andy and I moved in, and it quickly became my favorite room in the house. The walls were painted a sultry red, and a thick black stripe with one thin stripe on either side ran the circumference of the room at shoulder height. The floor tiles were marbled cream and white with black line delineations and red diamonds where the corners met. Most beautiful of all was the claw-footed porcelain bathtub, its underbelly painted the same red of the walls and its feet, an aged gold. The sink and surrounding counter were carved from a single cutting of genuine cream-colored marble. To allow the walls their bold statement, I found a shower curtain, decorative hand towels, and floor mat of cream with black detail. The inky black vine of the gauzy curtain enhanced the romance. In the spirit

of the room, I placed tea-light candles on the small shelves above the toilet, and I had grand notions of private baths by candlelight, but the cold porcelain of the tub refused to hold the bathwater's heat. The sole attempt I made at a romantic bath that fall was foiled by Andy's coming home late – the bubbles had deflated and the water cooled by the time he returned.

As weeks passed, I noticed that Andy returned home late from work more often. I noticed that the hardwood floors of the bedroom and living room began to feel chill underfoot. I noticed that my "how was your day?" was not once reciprocated. I noticed that Andy never verbally acknowledged my updates and changes or tidying. I noticed the lessening light through the kitchen window in the evenings as I made a dinner that would sit cold. I noticed that, despite my dishtowels, pretty bedspread, and living room rug, I was lonely. When I stared out the bedroom window at the endless row of mining houses, with their chipped paint and their windowed porches crammed with junk furniture and old decorations, I knew I had to leave. Just knew it. The evening sun was sinking behind the rows of houses and what I wanted most was to turn my back on it and drive my Subaru far and fast into the settling darkness and never never never go back.

But knowing you have to leave is much different than being ready to leave.

One night in mid October, Andy paced the kitchen for half an hour, deciding whether or not to attend an extra-credit seminar for one of his classes, but I knew the decision was bigger than that. An hour earlier I had answered the phone, and when I told the perky female at the other end of the line that Andy wasn't home she asked me to ask him if he would be attending the seminar. More than once Andy grumbled, "I'm not gonna go," and took a seat at the kitchen table or on the futon, but each time he leaped up and

began pacing again. Ten minutes before the lecture was scheduled to start, he left the house with barely a "be back later."

When he did come back later it was clear he was still conflicted, and I knew why without being told. "So are you going to leave me for her now or later?" I asked, and was surprised that, though my words had bite, my tone was resigned, almost bored – I hardly looked up from my reading. He sobbed into the red throw pillows, but I remained calm as I asked questions about the other girl and told him that whether we stayed together or not was up to him. Part of me felt relieved at this opportunity to give up the pretense of perfection. I only began to cry when I pictured the packing process that I faced – the physical dismantling of the relationship. Once all my belongings were boxed, Andy would be left with nothing but an empty space and I would have every perfect thing and no place to put any of them. While Andy deliberated, I spent nights on friends' couches. In the end, he decided to stay with me, and I decided to stay with the apartment. I had no other home. Later, Andy told me he spent those nights on the living room rug because it was the thing he knew I loved the most.

Over the next months, I was less attentive to home maintenance. The spare bedroom, which was also supposed to be my home office, was gradually overrun by Andy's National Guard uniforms, greasy black boots, hospital scrubs, nursing texts, damp bath towels, and one gigantic and unused TV that Andy had procured from a friend for free. To reach my desk I had to play limbo with the ironing board while trying not to slip on the scattered papers before navigating a hip around the TV and then hoping for safe landing in my desk chair. I took to doing my homework on the futon in the living room, but passive-

aggressively set an example by keeping my piles of books and papers tidy. I stopped doing helpful supplementary loads of Andy's laundry. At best, I kicked his dirty boxers and T-shirts from the bathroom and kitchen floor into the bedroom. Elaborate mountains of dishes grew in the sink. I scowled at them every morning before I left and every evening when I returned, but steadily refused to wash them all myself. I would wait until Andy did at least a few or until there simply weren't any clean alternatives. Whenever I did undertake the task, I was glad for the physicality of it. My ceramic bowls had high sides, and the plates had wide brims. The dishes gave me something to hang on to. I liked to heft their weight as I rinsed them and watch the mix of colors drip-drying in the dish drainer.

Occasionally Andy would execute a grand gesture of cleanliness, sweeping through the house with a sudsy bucket of Pine-Sol and vacuuming every conceivable surface. "Well, I don't wanna live in a pig sty," he'd say when I thanked him. My tongue burned with the temptation to remind him whose mess it was he was cleaning – who left bacon grease in pans on the stove overnight, who couldn't be troubled to put used socks in laundry baskets, who ate Doritos and cudhigi sandwiches dripping with pickled peppers on the futon – but I refrained. Maintaining appearances and suffering silently was easier than angering Andy, than losing a home. *At least it's clean*, I told myself. *At least I didn't have to do it*. My carefully composed home started to turn shabby, but I kept up the veneer by running defense against oil and boot black stains on the rug, strategically placing laundry baskets, asking *if* I should make dinner instead of *when*, and plastering on smiles of welcome and thanks and interest.

I felt fake. He felt safe.

As weeks passed and winter deepened, we discovered the house had other, less-charming quirks. In November our landlord transferred the gas heat bill into Andy's name and took fifty bucks off the rent to compensate. We knew gas was pricey, so we set the automated thermostat system at reasonable temperatures according to times we would be home. Heating the house to a particular temperature wasn't difficult, but maintaining that temperature was impossible. Many of the improvements we'd been promised would have helped insulate against the Ishpeming winter, but without them we were overpowered by the constant bitter wind. We were also promised vigilant snow removal by our landlord, but the reverse warning beep of his front-end loader at five in the morning was not comforting – he routinely plowed us in rather than out. Andy stormed and blustered as much as the weather, decrying our landlord in so many cuss words. I cringed and clung to homey things for warmth. I camped on the futon in layers of scarves and socks, surrounded by fleece and down blankets, and drank gallons of hot chocolate from my multi-colored palm-filling mugs, gripping them as much for heat as for mental stability.

The back door was the breaking point for both of us. By mid-January the doorjamb of our back entrance way had warped in the below-freezing temperatures, and the door could no longer latch. Comparatively small gusts of wind blew the outer door open, and if the inner door weren't shut tight the resulting suction would pull it open, as well. Until we figured out this root cause, however, we blamed each other: he always slammed doors; I was forgetful. Meanwhile, the small entryway filled with snow every day while we were away, and the gas bill continued to climb. Eventually I devised a system of blocking the door with a heavy bag of charcoal once I got home for the night, but even though Andy

complained of tripping over the bag, he hardly ever remembered to replace it after he came in. I hunkered down in my blankets, looked out at the pretty sages and blues and browns of the living room rug, and waited for warmer months.

At that point, there was nothing else to decorate. I knew I should have been content with what I had, but I continued to look for decorating dilemmas to solve. The more I looked, though, the more problems I found. Unevenly sanded drywall. Miscalculations in wood trimming. Lazy electrical wiring. Things I couldn't fix with home accessories. Instead of starting over with new items, I began to mentally reclaim the ones I had offered up into the realm of the shared. That was my loveseat, my table lamp, my candleholder, my framed art. Those were my throw pillows and my bookcases. I started to envision these things in some new, future apartment that was all my own. By March I cringed at the sounds of Andy's homecomings.

In late April, when we decided against living in the house for the following fall, I began packing our things. Separately. In the most black and basal part of my brain I knew that I wouldn't be sharing space with Andy again. Andy, however, had no idea. By making a home with him I had made implicit promises, and at the time I thought I had to keep them. So I entertained conversations about the sort of features "our" next home would have and optimal locations to look. I let Andy think I was doing him a favor by packing our belongings so he would have more time to study for his nursing exams, but in truth I wanted to see the process done right. Just as I had concerned myself with unpacking and placing a year before, now I was working in reverse. I segregated his videos from mine, and I folded the bed sheets and bath towels that had originally been *his* in different boxes

than the ones *mine* were tucked in. I packed all my pretty things and watched as the walls grew sparse and the shoddy drywall, missing woodwork, and unleveled edges reappeared.

Our last days in the apartment, we were rarely present at the same time. In the two days before I left for summer employment again, we made silent trips between the house and the street, piling furniture and boxes into our vehicles to move into storage. We were little pieces of silent perpetual motion tramping the same muddy path, barely talking and never touching. As I shoved the rolled living room rug into the back of my Subaru, I knew I was finally ready to leave.

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