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## RELATIONS

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RELATIONS

By

April E. Lindala

THESIS

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

“Graduate Studies Office”

2006

UMI Number: 1439815



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## ABSTRACT

## RELATIONS

By

April E. Lindala

Living in multiple worlds has forced me to view the world using multiple lenses. From my adoptive parents, I am from three distinct communities: Native America, Arab America and America. From my birth parents, a world of the unknown, the unspoken. The title, RELATIONS, becomes then a statement and even a question.

For inspiration, I turned to authors such as Diana Abu Jaber, and Amy Tan. Each has addressed issues of identity in their memoirs. They admit, however, that they live in two worlds. For example, Tan lives in the Chinese and American worlds and Abu-Jaber the Arab and American worlds.

RELATIONS is a photo album with many missing pages, many missing photographs. Divided into two parts -- *Below the Bridge* and *Above the Bridge* -- these essays and poems represent pockets of time and distinct experiences. RELATIONS documents my own challenge in searching for my true identity while also sharing with my audience intimate struggles. It is not by any means a complete autobiography. Poems were important and they should be viewed as creative nonfiction in nature.

This thesis is for those RELATIONS who have walked before me, those who walk beside me, those who will follow me, and those who have yet to step foot in this world.

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2006

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Dorothy and my father, Sam  
who made the choice to raise a child not born of their blood or flesh,  
but one of their hearts.

This thesis is also dedicated to my husband, Walt.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our journey in life is never truly solo, no matter how alone you might feel. It is difficult to think that I would have completed this journey alone. I have been blessed with a tremendous amount of constant support from family and friends that I would like to acknowledge here.

Sarah, you are filled with contagious exuberance. Thank you for the constant cheerleading and reassurance. Grace, you have an impressive attention to detail, but it is your love of laughter that has helped me through many long days. Susan, you dare to camp in a three-day thunderstorm just to get away from it all. I will never forget that. Thank you for being there until the bitter end. I hope to return the gift very soon.

To all of the students with whom I have worked with over the years at Northern Michigan University, you have provided me with an unspoken vitality and vigor. You have seen me during the challenging and the rewarding days. Your belief in me has made this educational expedition an extraordinary experience.

With the deepest respect and gratitude, I would like to thank my thesis committee. Dr. Jaspal Singh, you are one powerful force! Your artful sophistication and grace inspires me more than you know. We need more of you in this world. Dr. Paul Lehmborg, the periodic sentence of my life has yet to be born. When it is, you'll be the first to receive the birth announcement. To my thesis director, Dr. Ron Johnson, you lead by example and teach with serenity. Thank you for opening my eyes to the many pages of literature that I wouldn't have opened on my own. It has made me a stronger writer. Not

only do I admire your guidance in the classroom -- but you sure know how to dance to the blues!

Chi miigwech (great thanks) to the family of my heart -- all of my sisters in dance, song and spirit. There are so many, too many to mention here -- *you know who you are!* I am grateful for your constant love, support, hugs, tears, laughter, compassion, motivation and encouragement. All of our experiences together have guided me through many years of *growing up Anishinaabe*.

Chi miigwech to “Big Jim,” the man who gave me so much more than a name. Tiffany, chi miigwech for the late night chats and constant reminders that we’re still only one cell phone number away from each other. And to Lisa Marie, chi miigwech for the countless hours of hair braiding, dreaming big, talking, walking, and talking some more. Thank you for laughing until tears appeared. We were sisters before this lifetime, during and will be after.

To Sam and Dorothy Kelly, my parents who taught me that nothing worth it comes easy.

To my husband of sixteen years, Walt, you haven’t had it easy during this process. It is the time when we whisper our affections between pillow cases, cat hairs and unseen kisses that I cherish most.

This thesis was made possible in part by a King\*Chavez\*Parks Future Faculty Fellowship. This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis has forced me to re-examine various periods in my life, re-examine instances in my life that I would rather forget. RELATIONS has forced me to face questions of my identity, background and self-image. It has been a struggle to search for the answers to questions that have arisen depending on the stage in my life. Who do I belong to? Where do I fit in? And in later years, What is my purpose within all Creation?

Divided into two parts, “Below the Bridge” and “Above the Bridge,” these titles are attributed to the fact that much of my life has been spent in Michigan. As a child, I lived in the outskirts of the Detroit area. When I was eighteen, I made the choice to move over four hundred miles from my parents to attend college in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Within the first section, “Below the Bridge,” readers will learn about my childhood living in the Lower Peninsula, below the Mackinac Bridge. “Coming Home” provides some background on both my mother and father and questions their resistance to communicate with their own families. It will also give readers a hint of what the future brings as I begin my journey on an Anishinaabe path. “A Family Affair” is an exploration of my world of make believe: my need to create companions to fill a growing void for having none. “The Ice Between Us” gives readers insight on the tension between my mother and I. “Handful of Olives” explores a connection to my father’s heritage. “Baptism by Immersion” is an essay about how the Mormon Church influenced me in my young life (or perhaps better yet, how it didn’t).

Part II – “Above the Bridge,” concentrates on my time becoming acclimated in Marquette, Michigan. Living on the wild south shores of Lake Superior was indeed a transition for me on many levels. “For the Healing of All Women” is an essay close to my heart about my relationship with my jingle dress, again an indication that “relations” does not necessarily mean with another person. “Grandmother Turtles and the Naming Ceremony” poured out of me recently about the challenges I have faced while walking an Anishinaabe path and how do I address those challenges. “To Dance Is to Pray,” a poem that grew from a weekend experience at a pow wow, addresses my respect and love for these gatherings, but it also looks at how my husband is not a part of that community.

One thing I have learned from composing these essays and poems is that addressing identity is complicated: it has become a multifaceted journey that must come from within me, for me. Not for anyone else, not from anyone or anything else. It has not been easy.

It is important to note that this memoir is like a photo album with many missing pages, many missing photographs. The following essays represent pockets of time and certain experiences that seem to have stuck to my brain more than others. It is not by any means a complete autobiography.

As a child, I was alone most of the time. My parents were considerably older than the parents of other children my age. I was raised in a quiet house without siblings. I had my own room with an antique bed and marble top dresser. In the basement, my toys were stored in my own antique trunk. And there was the baby grand piano.

Hours of my childhood were spent practicing the piano: time I will never get back, time that was spent alone on the bench with its velvet cover. Today I detest myself for not touching a keyboard in several years. Guilt weighs on me.

One of my favorite gifts as a child was a fat softball mitt: a catcher's glove. This meant interaction with my father, interaction with anyone who would play catch. And it took me away from the piano bench. By seventh grade, I was an all-star softball player winning a total of four trophies. The trophies didn't replace my time practicing my scales. By eighth grade, I started my first job as a church organist.

Before my time behind home plate and the organ bench, I juggled stories in my imagination. There were hours, days at a time when I played down in our basement alone. I created stage plays full of drama but with no *real* characters; only characters in my head. There were times when I talked to myself or simply sat quietly with myself breathing seconds into minutes, breathing loneliness into hopelessness.

When I was very small, the people with me were celebrities from television. As I grew older I surrounded myself with beautiful people from magazines, people who lived in my own private world of make-believe friends, relatives and confidants.

Had I kept a journal on a regular basis as a child, I probably would have recorded an abundant number of falsehoods. I needed to build these fantasies to keep me awake, to keep me alive.

As a young adult in college, I surrounded myself with people and friends. It became my mission when I started at Northern Michigan University to interact with as many people as I could. I was active in several student organizations: Public Eye News, WBKX (now

known as WUPX). When the sororities didn't accept me, I organized a new one. During my freshman year of college I worked four different jobs, a good variety that allowed me to interact with all types of people. In 1992, I founded the Anishinaabe Club (which has since evolved into the Native American Student Association). My motivation for much of this activity is purely to be around people.

There are plenty of lonely people in the world. There are moments when I fear that I will become one again. Even when I am alone for extended periods of time, I begin to feel uncomfortable. So how does my story differ from others?

Following an Anishinaabe way of life has required me to ask myself how I fit in this universe. Who am I? Where do I come from?

Walking, searching the Anishinaabe path is not something that happens overnight -- like this thesis, it is a process taking place every day. Suffering from solitude has made for interesting times fasting unaccompanied in the woods. And I have traveled alone up to two hours one way just to attend a sweat lodge. At the heart of this *red road* is your own personal relationship with the Creator. I have learned that even when I am alone, I am never alone. It is not so much that I am a religious person; I am a spiritual one. Setting foot on this journey has been fulfilling for I have found another family.

My classmates in elementary school were eager to point out that I was different: literally they would point their nubby little fingers at me. I was quite tiny for my age. My mother braided my long black hair every day. Even in first grade my braids hung to my hips. Easily, my hair was the longest of anyone's in all my elementary school years. My



mother also made my clothes to save money: jumpers, pants, tops and overalls. Just about everything except socks, tights and of course shoes.

At first I responded awkwardly to this attention from my classmates. Then I decided to take matters into my own hands. I created elaborate tales: stories that would enhance my being an American Indian, stories that would introduce people to cousins who didn't exist, stories that my parents would eventually find out about and set straight if they could.

I found solace in the words in the essay, "Immersed in Words" by Oneida poet Roberta Hill. "All human beings need to feel the integrity of their own imaginations. Our imaginative life is another expression of the earth." (Hill, 78)

Perhaps I should have studied to be a fiction writer.

Even though it is my mother's heritage that I identify with most, I have always resembled my father. I never looked anything like my mother. Several people believe that he is my birth father. We're both short, we both have distinctive noses and both of us are dark. My parents swore that I was adopted. I don't doubt them. My college sweetheart, the man who eventually became my husband, still believes that someone somewhere isn't telling the whole truth.

After I had dished out dishonesty like dealing cards, I wondered if it was possible that my parents were capable of the same thing. My quest to figure out where I came from amplified. Being alone after school as a child gave me hours to contemplate these questions.

Doubt crept into my mind as I prepared my prospectus. What is it I have to say anyway? I'm only thirty-seven years old. What do I know? Am I too young to compose a memoir? My thesis director assured me that an author might compose several memoirs and that this could be the first of many.

Being in the Creative Nonfiction program at Northern Michigan University for both my Masters Degree and my Master of Fine Arts Degree, I had the opportunity to read several amazing essays by talented and renowned authors. Some famous. Some not so famous. Along with assigned readings, I was required to do readings on my own. This was what I enjoyed most, because I could choose my author and book. It was also required that I report on it. I purposely sought out "lesser known" authors. Even more precisely: women of color.

When still working towards my M.A., I came across Maxine Hong Kingston's book, The Woman Warrior. How cliché to say it was an eye-opening experience. But it was. Before this book, I was uncertain whether I had read a memoir from a woman of color.

After further thought, I realized that I certainly had: Maya Angelou's Why the Caged Bird Sings. However, there was something spiritual about The Woman Warrior that made it stand out in a different way: stories of culture and community, stories of myth and legend. It reminded me of the oral traditions of the Anishinaabe. This is not to say that Angelou's biography is not worth the read -- of course it is. It, however, has a different kind of focus.

Genuine experience combined with mythical tales drew me in further. Kingston believes that "storytelling is educational" and that community played a "critical role" in

her book. “Comparing herself to Toni Morrison and Leslie Silko, Kingston argues that what makes their writings vivid and alive is their connection with community. Yet Kingston refuses to be ‘representative’ of Chinese Americans.” (Feng)

Representing an entire race or culture is something that I have been aware of in my writing and my professional work in the Native community. I find that I need to reiterate that I am only one voice of a greater whole. There is no one ambassador to Native peoples. I do not represent the entire race of American Indians, an even more diverse group than Chinese Americans.

In recent years, I have found myself reading the poems of Naomi Shihab Nye. The reason is two-fold: because of my father’s heritage and because a dear friend of mine has repeatedly pronounced Nye as her favorite poet and author.

Kingston opened my eyes in the cultural sense: introducing me to her home life with “her storytelling mother and her silent father.” (Feng) If Kingston opened up my eyes, Nye opened up a familiar and slightly awkward core within me.

For most of my life I have been exposed to Native America. I have a better sense of what it means to me. In my childhood, I danced at pow wows. I attended beading classes through Title IV, a federal program promoting Indian Education in the public schools. In my adult life, I have learned about what it means to walk “the red road,” a common term for walking a traditional life in Indian Country. I have walked that road for several years now.

Naomi Shihab Nye’s Never in a Hurry, brought me back to my childhood, as if I needed to start over again. It was a compass leading me towards my father’s heritage,

centering myself by not only celebrating who he is, but learning about where he comes from.

Author Diana Abu-Jaber complements that response. In The Language of Baklava, Abu-Jaber candidly portrays her father and her father's family. It is a tribute to her father's heritage. Like Nye, Abu-Jaber is half Jordanian American. The Language of Baklava is a delicious introduction to the Abu-Jaber family and the food that defines Diana's life. Included in the book are nearly 60 recipes that are connected to the pages, chapters and themes carried throughout.

Abu-Jaber is honest, funny and open about her family. Her father is a primary character who is larger than life. She beautifully paints Jordan as a world untouchable compared to America. She captured the language and thoughts of her young self while allowing her adult self to naturally grow into the book as time passes with each chapter.

She uses language to carefully braid together her message, feelings and musings, each sentence light and crisp as a layer of phyllo dough. Take a tiny bite and it disappears with a sweet evaporation, causing your tongue to yearn for more.

Abu-Jaber is remarkably talented, but I find that reading sentences out loud will sometimes leave me tongue-tied. The language, while striking, is like too much frosting on an already luscious cake. Some will love the sweetness...some readers may prefer to keep a tiny bit less on their palette. Whatever your taste, you will devour the stories and images while feasting on her honesty. And you will be making a reservation at the nearest Middle Eastern restaurant two-thirds of the way through.

In further retrospect, I wonder if Abu-Jaber feels compelled to compose essays that revolve around Arabic or Middle Eastern food to appease or appeal to the majority

audience. While I believe that she truly learned lessons around the dinner table and in the kitchen, does food in this case allow for more non-Arab readers to feel comfortable and secure? Does Abu-Jaber feel pressure or obligation to change the mindset of mainstream society? Or does Abu-Jaber capture enough of her own spirit in the pages of her book to erase (or at least begin to erase) harmful stereotypes of Arab Americans?

When I write on subjects surrounding my father's heritage, I find that I tend to rely on my own experience with Arabic food. Coincidence? Perhaps. Am I caught under a sort of cultural umbrella that won't allow me to go beyond that? Possibly.

Society has placed negative stereotypes on Native peoples as well. Within my own writings, I have been empowered to write about subjects revolving around and existing within Native America: it is the heritage I identify with most. However, I do not feel obligated to educate my readers (something that my fellow writers and faculty have encouraged me to do in workshop). I have no need to change the minds of anyone. Getting through each essay, each experience grueling or humorous, was challenge enough. But I do feel obligated to write.

Gloria Bird wrote this passage in her essay, "Breaking the Silence: Writing as "Witness" in the anthology, Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers On Writing: "Through writing we can undo the damaging stereotypes that are continually perpetuated about Native peoples. We can rewrite our history, and we can mobilize our future." (Bird, 30)

While my purpose is not to dispel myths of Native America, or to rewrite history, I find that writing about being Indian is the most satisfying. Writing about heritage is fulfilling. Perhaps my writing will only affect my future. That's okay too.

Writing is not something that comes easily. Stories have to emerge -- they cannot be forced. But just like playing the piano, it takes regular practice, daily practice to strengthen your fingers, reinforce those scales and strike every octave chord perfectly. Best selling author Stephen King, in his memoir, On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft, reveals,

There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, no Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up. (King, 25)

If you would have told me a few years ago that I would be writing a memoir, I'm not sure how I would have reacted. It's true: I have mixed feelings about sharing intimate details of my life, details even some of my closest friends are not aware of.

It has been difficult, but it has been driven by something that was shared with me in a writing workshop a few summers ago. Patricia Foster, a professor of writing at the University of Iowa, was a visiting author at Northern Michigan University during a recent summer session. Patricia shared something with our class that has stuck with me ever since. Her words almost punctured me upon delivery: "When you feel and experience great emotion writing, your audience will feel and experience that same emotion reading."

*Have I ever felt such emotion while writing?*

There is a writing exercise that I have heard of -- professors will invite students to compose a list of five topics that they would not write about: topics too embarrassing, too personal or too tragic. Patricia Foster's advice about emotional writing pushed me to

compile that list. Eventually I wrote on three of my five topics. They are within the pages that follow.

Composing this memoir has been painful because of what I have decided to share with readers and the process itself. Having to remember, having to place myself in awkward and uncomfortable situations again just to re-create the experience on the page: all of this amidst wrestling with doubt, grappling with different story ideas, struggling for concise memories. Writer's block. Internal struggles that many writers face.

Author Sherman Alexie visited Northern Michigan University in the early 1990s to do a reading and facilitate small writing workshops. He shared with those of us in an intimate setting, something I'll never forget. His voice was flip, almost arrogant. "There's no such thing as writer's block...only lazy writers."

His words have replayed in my head and kicked my own behind several times. But I confess I suffer from something that keeps me from writing. If not writer's block, a writer's wall: a wall that keeps me from words, sentences, lyrics and paragraphs. Is it just a matter of learning how to climb and conquer the wall? Is that wall my obligation to you, the reader?

These pages you hold serve as contract between me, the writer, and you, my generous reader. You are giving up time to go on this journey. And I *value* time. Time is the gift that the Creator only gives once, each minute floats past us like a twirling snowflake and then...it evaporates into the next and the next. This is why it is important for me to convey my experiences to you to the best of my knowledge and memory.

But like any human being, I am not perfect: I am flawed and my memories may be different from the recollections of others. Although there may be flaws, they are not

on purpose. You are diving into the pores of my soul that make me human from the inside out.

Abu-Jaber states, “To me, the truth of stories lies not in their factual precision, but in their emotional core. Lives don’t usually correspond to narrative arcs, but all of these stories spring out of real people, memories, and joyously gathered and prepared meals.”  
(Abu-Jaber, *foreword*)

So here I am world. I announce to you, the universe that I am *not* a writer. I am a mere crumb of flesh attempting to seize memories, wisps of dreams and flashbacks that soar across my mind like shooting stars or that live buried in the walls of my brain. Once these memories are caught, I then endeavor to re-construct and sew these experiences into coherent thoughts: usually one sentence at a time.

What I *am* is a *re*-writer. Many of us are. I gag at the site of a white, blank document on the screen of my laptop. But, as my father has always told me, “Nothing worthwhile comes easy.”

\* \* \*

The phrase “all my relations” is a widely accepted acknowledgment in Indian Country. Said at the beginning and end of prayers, it is understood that “all my relations” represents family, friends, neighbors, and enemies. The elderly, the young, the sick, weak, and incarcerated. It represents the winged-beings, the four-leggeds, those who crawl and those who swim: all living things upon the earth, even plants and rocks.

But is it realistic to think that we live in this peaceful world of prayer and acceptance within Native America? No. Oftentimes, it comes down to identity and proving it. How do we identify ourselves? How do we represent ourselves? And how do



others then perceive us? Native journalist Patty Talahongva comments, “There is no issue of greater complexity and importance before Native peoples today than the question of who is any Indian and how that is determined.” (Talahongva, 59)

Do we put degrees of Native-ness upon each other? Yes. I think we do. I married my college sweetheart, a full-blood Finnish-American (who happens to be fluent in his language). His light brown hair and blue eyes will certainly cause an interesting genetic tug-o-war with my dark hair and black eyes.

One of my friends, known for her larger-than-life antics, challenges my genetics, “I’m gonna’ sit in that delivery room,” her raw booming voice echoing through the campground. “And if that baby doesn’t come out brown enough, I’m gonna’ *shove* it back in for more cookin’ until it *is* brown enough.”

That scared the shit out of me. I still don’t have any kids.

Skin and hair color aside, we seem to do this to each other as Indians all the time. Where are you enrolled? Did you grow up on a reservation? Are you a full blood? Who is your family? What is your clan? Are you traditional? Do you go to church? Do you dance or sing at pow wows?

Charlene Teeters, in a 1998 article, “Indian Identity: Pulled by Different Worlds” states:

To identify as an Indian has many different meanings. For some people, it is a political statement, affirming citizenship in a sovereign First Nation. For others, it is genealogical, a matter of blood. For others still, it is a statement of fact. And for more than a few who can choose to be invisible or not, it is the latest fad. (Teeters, 12)

I've never heard anyone come out and ask, "Are you self-identified?" But there are a lot of self-identified Indians who receive a fair amount of grief because they don't carry the card that proves citizenship. All of these questions divide our community -- what is it we doing to ourselves?

*How does it feel* to be Indian? I've been asked this many times: most days I do know how it feels. Other days, I sit in a puddle of uncertainty, hesitation -- not knowing who I am or where I came from. Then there are days I write. Gloria Bird comments, "Some of us create art, some of us write, and some of us talk. In doing so, we foment the testimony of Native people as witnesses, manifesting our perceptions of the world in useful, creative ways." (Bird, 46)

My motivation to finish school is driven by the thought that I do this for *my* people. What does that mean: my people? For those RELATIONS that have walked before me, those who walk aside me, those who follow me, and those who have yet to set foot in this world.

My husband believes this is too much for me to concern myself with. He says, "You're going to hurt yourself putting that much responsibility on your shoulders." Days and nights I fret over this: so much so I become overwhelmed. I yearn to hear the small voice inside of me whisper, "You know what? It's okay to be just who you are."

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PART I

*Below the Bridge*

## A BOX OF CHOCOLATES AND LONG SILK GLOVES

Dad,  
tell me  
the story again  
of how you and mom met  
Please share the silly secrets that  
only the two of you kept. He smiled and said,  
“On that first date I presented your mom with a box of chocolates and long silk gloves.  
I opened the doors and remembered my manners  
in case this was true love.” He winked  
and said, “It was hard to  
tell since to  
sleep she  
fell.”

## COMING HOME

My parents, Sam and Dorothy Kelly, brought me home a couple of weeks later than expected. There were a couple of reasons. Not enough oxygen was finding its way into my blood, giving my skin a blue tint. Second, I was a ward of the State. My parents adopted me when I was only two months old, but they couldn't take me home right away.

\* \* \*

"You looked funny." Mom chuckles at the memory of bringing me home for the first time. She waves her hand up over her breakfast plate. "...your hair was standing straight up to one side." My mother, who rarely laughs out loud at the meal table, holds her hand flat and at the base of her scalp as if to make a fan with it. She demonstrates what my hair looked like as an infant. "Standing straight up. We couldn't do anything with it...so...we put a little *bow* in it." She whispers "little" and "bow."

She is in a good mood this morning. Her hair is a bushy cloud of brown cotton, not one gray strand to be found. Her eighty-one-year-old face is deceptive. She could be only sixty-five. Her eyes are tired, a bit puffy. Skin under her chin is sagging more than usual and a bruise the color of eggplant is beginning to form halfway around her neck. She was just released from the hospital. Her third visit in less than a year. It is 2006.

My dad has a theory about the mark on her neck. "I think they had to strap your mother down to do the surgery." He pauses between bites of sausage patties. "I don't think she wants to admit that." He folds his hands above his plate. His attention is turned to the outside bird feeder.

She is hopeful that this ear surgery is successful. We all are. She has been deaf most of her life and she lost her hearing in her good ear due to a stroke this past winter. Communication between my mom and dad has been rugged ever since.

Communication between my mom and me has always been rugged.

My birth certificate says April Elizabeth Kelly. This is what it says on my birth certificate along with Dorothy's name and Sam's name. The records regarding my birth parents are sealed. I'm not sure I could get the information if I tried. Today I don't want to. If there is a right time, it will present itself. But not now, not at this time.

When I was in my late twenties my parents gave me a cardboard box with some baby items in it. The box itself looks to be a gift box, silver in color. I opened the lid. My hands immediately reached for a necklace of soft beads the size of cherries, pastel in color, paled by the years.

"Your mother, your birth mother...." Dad takes a moment to clear his throat and think about what he just said out loud. "...she told me that you liked that one; that was your favorite." He nods in the direction of my occupied hands. My fingers feel each bead: they swirl each one back and forth against the string. I inspect the contents of the box further. Yet my hand refuses to let go of this necklace.

They are staying in Marquette for a few days and they wanted to speak to me. As I sit on the edge of their hotel bed and examine, touch each of my gifts, I wonder how my parents came about my name. April is the month that I was born. This is not very exciting and the cause of much teasing in grade school (*April showers bring May...*). I share the middle name of Elizabeth with my mother. It is her middle name as well. And

Kelly...Kelly? The truth be known, someone at Ellis Island changed my grandfather's name from *Khalil* to *Kelly*. Trust me, my father doesn't look Irish. I'm pretty sure his father didn't either.

My father's father came to America from Syria in the early 1900s. Unfortunately, I don't know much about him since he died when my dad was only six years old. I've never even seen a photo of him. But I imagine him with thick black hair. His stocky build working at something -- industrious perhaps, even remarkable. My father's mother died before I was born. I have seen photos. She raised six boys and one girl. My father was her baby.

When I introduce my mother, I always remember to state where she was raised. It is the respectful thing to do. My mother is from the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. She is also part English. A genealogy buff, she boasts being a direct descendant of the Mohawk War Chief, Joseph Brant or Thayendanegea, which translates to "He places two bets."

"There are lots of Brants, but not everyone can say they are a direct descendant of Joseph Brant." Mom reminds me often.

I wasn't the first child my parents took care of. They had foster children before me. What was it that drew them to me? Perhaps that I was an Indian baby? Perhaps the jet black hair that stood straight up? The dark eyes? The chubby cheeks? Perhaps it was simply that I was innocent to the world.

Or perhaps my mother placed a couple of bets on me.

\* \* \*



At thirty-seven years old, I should probably forgive my birth parents for giving me up. Adoption happens. I will most likely never know why. I'm just not sure when or how I will ever forgive them. But what would I be forgiving them for anyway? A better life?

None of this is Sam and Dorothy's fault. The two of them are in the sunset of their lives, old birds tired of hunting for adventure and simply preening themselves for the next day knowing that their journey to the next world is coming sooner rather than later. They did the best that they could in raising me. And I was a handful to deal with.

You can't blame me for wondering about my birth parents though. After all, who do I blame for this nose? Once in a while I think about them and my grandparents. Do I have siblings? Do I have cousins? Did my mother know how to cook? Do I have a famous auntie?

When I have imagined my family they seem to be in despair. Ill. Lonely. Perhaps I convince myself of this so that I will believe they are worse off than I am. I won't want to think about them.

This isn't to say that Sam and Dorothy don't have family; they do. They just choose not to speak to them. My mother doesn't talk much about her family, her two sisters. My aunt Isabel passed away a couple of years ago. I believe I was 8 or 9 the last time I saw her at her second wedding. We were late for the ceremony, something unusual for my parents who were consciously punctual, especially for anything church related.

My mother stood straight, holding her purse. She wore short heels that matched her dress. Either peach or pink, I can't remember. My father wore his shiny black shoes and sharp gray suit. And me, I was in my hard shoes that clicked if I snapped them together at the toes and a dress I generally wore to Sunday school.

The three of us stood in the back of the congregation as my cousin Frederica sprinkled flower petals as she strolled down the aisle, her hair in big fat curls that bounced to her steps. Organ music filled the chapel. Someone spotted us, the three of us standing in the back. It might have been my aunt Joyce, I can't say for sure. What I do remember is being scooted, almost pushed, up to the front of the church, causing a bit of a scene. I've often wondered if my mother was late on purpose.

My aunt Isabel wasn't a stranger to me at that time. Only a couple of years earlier, her first husband, my uncle Mike, had passed away. My mother, father and I attended his funeral and a gathering at Isabel's house afterwards. This was the first time I had entered her home.

Her dining room wall was a painted mural of a wood scene with a noticeable trail, a waterfall and plenty of foliage. It was fascinating. I had never seen an entire wall painted before and I wanted to touch it. My hands spread out over the wall to feel the authentic scene, to check to see if it had a pulse or sign of life. Not only was that the first time in my aunt's home, but that was the first time I remember meeting her.

We visited my aunt Joyce more often. I think it was because she also had a little girl. Frederica is a couple of years older than me. She rode horses, like her father, my uncle Howard. He was at one time a jockey at the Hazel Park raceway in Detroit. He was short, dark and skinny. His hair was always oily and slicked back. He spoke with a piercing tone. It was the tone and the volume. He was always loud.

My aunt Joyce is still alive as I write this today. At least I think she is. I can't say the same for my Uncle Howard. I have 'googled' my Aunt Joyce and my cousin

Frederica a few times. I believe my aunt is living in Ohio. I tried to email Freddie using a hotmail address listed on a site that mentioned her business. She never wrote me back.

Unlike my mother who is the oldest sibling, my father was the youngest. He was extremely close to his mother and has said more than once that his brothers didn't take care of their mother. He has shared with me that the only thing his brothers liked to do was drink. I have never known my father to take a drink of alcohol.

Equally disturbing, my father doesn't talk to his brothers. I believe that one is still alive: my uncle Joe. I couldn't even tell you what Uncle Joe looks like. I suppose he is short and stocky with black hair like the rest of them.

Then there is my aunt Helen. My father doesn't know if she is alive or not.

When I was eleven or twelve, I do remember attending a family wedding on my dad's side of the family. My uncle Fred was father of the bride (or groom?). Today the memory is a blur of dark skin, dark eyes and black hair. I was introduced to cousins upon cousins I had never met before and have never seen since.

Today, decades later, my mind has lost the visual details; nor can I remember any names of these first cousins, but I recall the impact. Not one of these aunts, uncles or cousins attended my wedding.

Families shouldn't be like that. It was lonely. It still is.

Once I had left my home and moved above the Mackinac Bridge, I searched for who I was: or at least searched for some remnant of truth that would put my inner being at peace. What I found? Family.

When I was 22 years old, I was *gifted* an Anishinaabe name (a colloquialism in Indian Country). Receiving this name was like coming home to a place I'd never experienced. It was the most certain I ever felt in my life, certain as the next sunrise, and certain as my next breath.

As I sat near the western doorway inside the sweat lodge, the air hissing with steam, hollow pieces of my being were filled. Bits of me gracefully dropped into place, creating a new person. Walt, my husband of Finnish-American descent, sat next to me in that Anishinaabe lodge. He felt for my arm and when he found it took my clammy open right hand in his left. We sat in damp darkness on the pregnant earth listening to the story that accompanies my name.

As the person running the lodge spoke, I felt as though I was budding from the land and ascending into the ripe atmosphere. The weighted air was seasoned with cedar and burning stones. Strands of black hair stuck to my face, heavy drops of healing sweat added squishy moisture to my lodge robe. These sweat beads came not only from me, but from my relations – those seated around me in that circle, those at home on their plush blue couch in front of the blurry glare of the television and those who remain unnamed to this day.

As I crawled out the open door, my knees tingled and throbbed. I entered the indigo blanket of night air. I raised my head and hollered to the tall pines, maples and oaks. I hollered to each direction of the universe. I hollered my youth into the past. I hollered so loud nerves at my temples pumped iron blood.

After the sweat lodge, we feasted on wild rice and venison stew. It was the middle of the night: almost 1 a.m. I ate furiously. My body pulsed: still balmy from the sweat.

There was comfort in the food and company around me. These were people who would become my relations simply by being present that night.

My eyes void of what was happening around me, I repeated my name over and over softly with a mouth full of steaming carrots and potatoes. It was awkward on my lips and tongue. No matter: everything tasted that much better.

Following the feast, my husband Walt and I crawled onto an open mattress in the living room of a tiny shack, a reservation house that has since been torn down. Blankets covered us except for our heads. People walked all around my head as if I were driftwood. I whispered my name into the furrows of my pillow. It echoed back into the tunnels of my ears.

“Get some sleep now,” Walt whispered. “It’s been a long day.”

We kissed into the air, our good night signal.

I was well rested the next morning when brewing coffee sparked my senses awake. I was born again.

## AN ETHNIC LOOK ABOUT ME

Several people, friends and strangers, have told me that I have an “ethnic look” about me. I’ve heard this all of my life. But when my curious first grade classmates found out I was an “American Indian” they had questions, serious questions.

The iced-over cement playground became a stage. Tiny bodies in colorful snowsuits, mittens, boots and hats circled around me. An audience.

*“Do you live in a teepee?”*

“No.”

*“Can you do a rain dance?”*

“Uh...no.”

*“Can you make it start snowing?”*

“I don’t think so.” Meek answers. My authority was fading. Can’t lose this attention. I needed to say something quick. *“But...I am warm blooded.”*

Several sets of first-grade eyes grew in anticipation as I took off my mittens, my knitted hat and my wool winter coat and threw them carelessly on the plowed snow drifts. I stood with my arms out and spun around. “See, I don’t need mittens. I don’t need a coat.”

One classmate, with a striped knitted hat, her dirty blonde hair sticking out of the bottom of it, crossed her arms and challenged, “Then take off your boots.”

“Um...” A swift lie blew into my mind, “...my mom will get mad if I get my tights dirty.” Luckily, I was wearing ivory tights that day underneath my homemade wool jumper.

Not satisfied, she pouted and kicked at the snow and mud below us. Her rubber boot made contact with a softball size mixture and it missed my tiny legs by inches. The other kids disbanded one by one. Play time was wasting.

To prove some sort of point, I left my coat and hat on the short hill of ice and snow. I slipped my mittens back on so I could swing from the metal monkey bars.

What was my need for first grade fulfillment such as this? I knew I was “different.” But what did that mean in first grade?

My mother did not grow up with traditional teachings of the Haudenosaunee -- better known as the Iroquois Confederacy. I wasn't taught about the Great Law of Peace, Longhouse teachings, or lessons that my ancestors grew up with. Instead, Mom and Dad raised me in the Mormon church. I've heard my mother call the old way of life “pagan.” I think that she is afraid of it.

My family would visit the reservation when I was younger, but I didn't know it as that. I just knew we were going to visit Grandma. Her house smelled funny.

For all of my years in grade school, my hair hung longer than anyone else in my classes. Morning after morning she braided it before school. My mother didn't only make my clothes for school she also made outfits for me to dance in at pow wows.

On the weekends my parents took me to pow wows, various gatherings in Chicago, Detroit, Ann Arbor and Brantford, Ontario. Repeatedly, Sam and Dorothy talked around the kitchen table about how important it was for me to know about *my* heritage.

Brantford, Ontario, was my mother's home. She grew up there before moving to the States. Six Nations was home to the "Champion of Champions Grand River Pow Wow," held the last full weekend in July.

My mother worked on my long, thick hair as I stood next to the black Ford truck. Her fingers went through a repeated process -- pull, twist, turn and wrap.

"Ouch," I stomped in reaction to Mom's pulling and twisting.

"Hold still," she said.

Dad stood nearby and tried to get me to laugh. His smile showed all of his teeth. "C'mon, you know...it hurts to be beautiful."

Mom finished the second braid and dropped both of them down the front of my chest. She tied a feather in my hair. She wove beaded red and beige hair ties to the bottom of each braid.

My tan leather dress draped heavy over my shoulders. It had its own aroma, a thick natural full smell. Fringe dropped just below my knees. Red, blue, and yellow pony beads were placed on perfectly cut leather strands.

My hide boots were soft and went up to my knees. My father made them and assured me that I would eventually grow into them (I never did). He was proud to contribute something.

My orange shawl hung over my right arm. A large white button with red letters "Proud to be Six Nations," was prominently tacked on. A profile of an Indian man was in the center of the button.



Mom walked with me to the dancer registration table. Two women with dark glasses and curly brown hair were holding clipboards. My mom spoke to them as I waited nearby.

She turned to me, “There are only four girls signed up for traditional.”

“But I want to be a fancy dancer,” I sulked.

*Traditional dancing is for old women.*

Mom insisted, “You have a beautiful traditional dress.” She leaned in and whispered even though the women at the registration table could clearly hear her. “And you have a better chance to win. Don’t you want to win?” I nodded.

As we returned to the truck my thoughts traveled. *Why doesn’t she enter me in the long hair contest? I can win that. I knew the truth; No one wants to dance traditional... it’s boring.*

Young girls wanted to be fancy dancers with their arms out, brightly colored fringe and feathers flying, spinning. They enjoyed the athletic steps of celebration, and so did I. Evenings after dinner, I had prepared for this weekend. I played the Indian records that Mom had purchased for me and practiced fancy dance steps on the hard floors of the basement.

Four petite bodies stood stationary waiting for the first drum beat to strike. Stepping to each beat I moved slowly around the dance circle. Audience members were watching closely, taking photos and leaning in to the person next to them: probably whispering who should win. After the traditional dance was over, the judges asked us to line up. The four of us stood shoulder to shoulders; our shawls on display with its contest number. These judges, strangers to me, with their clipboards and pens hemmed and

hewed for a few moments. The audience waited silently so the judges could concentrate. Once the scoring was complete, the emcee encouraged everyone to applause as we were excused from the dance arena. Winners would be announced the next day.

Mom never said so, but I know she was disappointed when I didn't even place.

After all, this was her reserve. I still think I could have won the long hair contest.

At least I *looked* Indian.

## FINNEGAN'S CHIEF LONGHAIR

It was an exceptional Saturday morning. Springtime was here and the sun was showering heated beams upon my mother and father and me as we climbed into the cab of my dad's Ford truck. We were headed out to a farm in St. Clair, Michigan. It was a good half hour trip to the country from Utica, a growing suburb of Detroit. I was going to pick out a puppy. But not just any sort of puppy: a Newfoundland. Going to the country meant going to John Cornwall's house.

John was an electrician like my dad. The two of them had been friends on the job for some time. My dad told stories about John at the dinner table and my mind would wander imagining what it would be like to ride horses like his daughter did. John had all sorts of animals, horses mainly and a couple of ponies. A black one named Pepsi Cola caught my attention but in the end, I was more interested in having a Newfie pup.

My legs bounced as we rode down the highway. "Stop wiggling!" Mom held my knee still. The fit was tight and uncomfortable in the cab of my dad's new black Ford truck.

We approached the exit and zoomed onto the off ramp turning into a full three-hundred-sixty-degree circle. John's house was right off the highway. It was a large, two-story grey farm house. While the house had a front door, family and friends used the back door into the kitchen. We pulled into the driveway and under a huge oak tree which shaded our exit from the truck.

The screen door swung open with a whine and snapped shut. John and his wife Mary Ellen, stepped out and onto their wooden porch. Everything felt country here. The

air didn't hang heavy with cement and tar smell, the trees had more room to stretch out. And with tails swishing, several horses chomped and stomped their hooves yards away.

In front of us rested a mammoth red wooden barn. Ahead and to the right were smaller wooden structures, pens for animals from which emerged an enormous black dog.

"That's Bummer," yelled John. "Keep some distance, April, okay? Looks like he just woke."

I nodded. My eyes locked in on this immense creature. He sat and inspected me, his four paws round as pot pies.

Bummer barked at us. His deep and thunderous *woof* seemed to rattle the earth. It seemed to rattle him. His head was oval, his face long. His sagging eyes watched us. He shook his head; white drool flew about his black nose and face. Bummer barked once more.

"Cut it out now!" John swiped at the air to signal the handsome beast to quiet down. John was tall and commanding in his worn cowboy boots and faded blue jeans. His denim shirt seemed to be as crisp as the sharp breeze that bent the tall grass in the corrals where the horses ate. A modern day country Moses coming off of the mountain, or at least the porch of his farmhouse.

After politely sitting through some casual small talk that adults must adhere to I piped up.

"Can I go to the barn?" Exploring the gigantic red structure seemed as if it would be fascinating. I sensed a larger freedom there that I couldn't even find in my own room.

"Sure, just remember to stay away from Bummer. He's watchful over those puppies."

This was the real reason I wanted to leave -- to see the puppies. There were eight, maybe nine of them. They were two months old. The same age I was when my parents brought me home. I excused myself and jetted out of the house and into the spring air. The door crashed behind me.

“April, slow down!” Mom called after me. The vast air of the farm swallowed her voice.

My legs skipped towards the double doors of the barn. I was careful to run wide to avoid Bummer. As I did this, he leaped up and ran towards me.

My heart flew upward into my throat and I froze. His chain lifted off of the dusty earth and swung behind him with a giant jangle. He came at me until the chain snapped straight and held him in place. His patch of earth was worn to dirt where the grass and dirt met. His chain went only so far.

Bummer sat in disgust. *Woof.*

We stared at each other, both sensing a nervous energy. He picked himself back up and galloped in a half moon, pacing as any nervous father would.

Smells of the barn attacked my nose in layers: horse manure, thick and damp on the cement floor, a thin yet potent aroma of hay and straw, and above that was a fresh fragrance that lingered. Puppy smell. My eyes needed to adjust to the shadowy sense of the wooden structure.

I found Finnegan lying in a hill of straw inside one of the horse stalls. She lifted her head to see me peering in over the door. She was large, but not nearly as commanding a presence as Bummer. Did she sense I was female too? This wasn't her first litter. Dust

and dirt throughout her black hair, she looked tired as a new mother does. Black fuzzy puppies scattered over and around her. Once they saw me, their high pitched puppy whines echoed. Each one of the black furry excited bodies with their short legs, nubby noses and plump bellies shook. Short barks, puppy chirps indicated they were ready to play.

Their thick toenails scratched the cement floor. Finnegan didn't move too much; she organized herself in a comfortable position as the pups ran themselves dizzy in little black circles. She didn't seem affected that her pups were up and scurrying about her.

Warily, I unhitched the door and pushed gently. Their bodies wiggled furiously. I tiptoed sideways into the ocean of black fur and ripe straw knowing that the pups should probably stay put in the stall. But the pups were smarter and stronger than I thought. They clustered together. Chubby puppy paws ran over my feet and through my exposed thin legs. They were so soft!

The opened the stall door was enough motivation. They flooded out into the central part of the barn. Finnegan lifted her head to see what was happening.

I reassured her. "They'll be okay in the barn." Finnegan dropped her head on her pillow of straw. I turned around and discovered that I had left the double doors to the outside world.

As fast as flies, those pups dashed out in the green grandeur of the Cornwall farm within a few heartbeats. They barked, bounced and howled with playful hilarity. Many of them headed right for the two adjoining horse corrals. They darted between the legs of some of the quarter horses eating peacefully. Some of them ran around the edge of the

barn barking and heading towards the horse trails leading into the woods. All I could see was black, melon-size fur balls scrambling about in tall green grass.

Bummer was up at military speed and attention. His barking alerted John and Mary Ellen that something was terribly wrong. John came down the steps from his porch holding his head with both of his hands. His hands were so immense they could wrap around a giant red dodge ball.

“April, what have you done?” My father gasped. His jaw dropped.

My stomach delicate with fright spun like a hamster wheel. What had I done? I was too young to understand the potential consequences of my actions. Years later that John was mainly concerned about the horses stomping on the pups.

John was much younger than my father, Mary Ellen was younger than my mother. Along with their daughter who was much older than me, they eventually rounded up all of the black Newfie pups and placed them back in the stall with Finnegan. On the ride home, I wondered if she was happy to have had the rest time.

A few weeks later, the pick of Finnegan’s litter, Brutus, joined us at our one story brick home on the end of Ladd Street. I was unfamiliar with the term *pick of the litter*, but I understood that he was the biggest and the best.

Soft, fuzzy and always warm, he had grown into his belly. Picking him up was a real test for my young arms. His legs were beginning to lengthen and so were his toenails. He would stand on his hind legs and scratch at the bottom metal of our screen door; the harsh scraping was a ferocious unruly sound. He quickly learned that this would gain him attention.

We nicknamed him Boo Boo, but only after choosing his official name. Mom, Dad and I talked about this subject around the kitchen table. I felt like a grown up since my input was called for in this situation.

“We could name him St. John’s Pride,” my dad suggested. “But I bet a lot of Newfs have that name?”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“St. John’s is a famous city in Newfoundland,” he answered. “I bet there are a lot of Newfies that come from Newfoundland.”

“Newfoundlands were the doggies on ships. They would rescue people,” my mother added. “But, I believe the Indians there used them too.”

I would learn much later in life that my mother was right. Vikings and Basque fishermen visited the region -- now known as Newfoundland. Their arrival was reported as early as 1000 A.D. These fishermen wrote accounts of the “Natives working side by side with these retrieving dogs.”

Around the dining room table, my mother came up with the name Finnegan’s Chief Longhair. I liked it. My parents liked it. It fit. He was our Indian dog with long black hair, just like mine.

My mother with her steady hand cautiously penned the formal name of our newest family member on an official looking sheet of paper with fancy print.

Boo Boo was home.

Even as a puppy, he was magnificent. He was eager to please and loved his treats. I was allowed to walk him around the driveway and up the road just a bit. His thick black coat



of hair bounced in waves as he jogged. When he pulled on his leash it took all of my seven-year-old weight to keep him in line.

Show and tell was everyone's favorite day of the week in second grade. Thoughts bubbled around in my head. I should show off my new puppy. What a brilliant idea. It was fall and the weather was warm enough for me to walk to and from school even though my parents expected me to take the bus. I knew safety wasn't an issue with Boo Boo at my side. However, I sensed that my mom would not agree with this idea, so I decided that I would steal Boo Boo from the back yard and sneak him to school.

His large ears flopped as we marched down the sidewalk to school. He panted with excitement. We had never walked this far before. I held his leash with fervor; we were escaped convicts on the loose. Each step farther from home meant more severe punishment. I was panting just as hard as he was. We started to have spectators, other children on their way to school wanted to meet Boo Boo.

“Is that your dog?”

“Wow...cool puppy!”

“What's his name?”

“Can I pet him?”

I went from escaped convict to celebrity stardom. “Oh yes,” I boasted. “He's the pick of the litter,” repeating the phrase I heard my dad use so often.

As we rounded the corner into the parking lot of Auburnshire elementary school, I was stopped at the sidewalk entrance to the school by a teacher -- our gym teacher. She was a mountainous woman with blazing auburn hair that seemed to me to resemble the stiff, bright mane of Bozo the Clown. Her hair flowed straight out at each side of her

head. Her lipstick color always matched her hair color. She carried an unusually hefty backside that jiggled in her blue polyester gym pants. Because we were all quite short and she was so tall, this bubbly behind wiggled right at our eye level. My classmates and I called her “Ms. Jello-butt.” We called her that so often, I forgot her real name.

“April, you cannot bring your puppy in the school.” Ms. Jello-butt bent down so her face was closer to mine.

“But he’s my show and tell,” I replied.

“Does your mommy know you brought your puppy to school?” she asked. Her voice held a sly, all-knowing tenor.

“Yes,” I murmured. I was now an escaped convict and a fibber.

“Well,” she rose back up to full height, “I’m going to the principal’s office to call her. She needs to pick up your dog. You wait here with him by the flagpole.”

I leaned against the cement base of the flagpole that seemed to reach to the sky. The flag whipped and clapped above me. Children that had only moments earlier been petting my dog and running along side of him, sunk into a deep suspicion of me. Their eyes thin, their lips off to one side. They turned to enter the school and didn’t look back. I was left alone except for Boo Boo, who plopped down at my feet.

My mom’s maroon Ford Granada with its black roof arrived some time later.

“What were you thinking bringing Brutus this far from home?”

My argument remained the same although the tone of my voice dissolved into a whine. “He’s my show and tell.”

My mother took the leash from my hand and pushed his furry body into the back seat. In one quick breath she buzzed with anger, “He could have been seriously hurt or worse, hit by a car.”

Her lips were tight. I was right. She was against this grand idea. I was angry at her because she did not trust me to walk the dog carefully on the sidewalk as I had been instructed. I was angry at the gym teacher for not letting me take my dog into school. I was angry because now I had nothing to show or tell. I was angry and all alone on the school sidewalk.

Mother drove away.

Ascending heat of embarrassment crawled up my spine and neck as I walked into the school. I felt hollow, mortified. My insides were bare cabinets. Empty handed, I entered the classroom late, slipped into my seat and put my head on my desk. My arms wrapped around my face, I cried quietly into my fall jacket.

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

### Part I - *Basement Tales*

Children have the ability to embarrass their parents with particular flair. It happens to all parents at some point I presume -- said children simply needs to open their mouth and spill out sentences of mistruth or worse yet, parental secrets spoken over the dinner table. One such mortifying instance took place when I was around eight years old.

We were living in a small brick two-bedroom home at the end of a dead-end street in Utica, Michigan. Being an only child, I was forced to play alone at the end of my forlorn lane. The very few children that did exist on this street lived on the next block -- too far for my little self to travel solo.

To make up for the absence of friends, I created invisible ones, an attempt to fill the plastic void of silence hanging over me like a shower curtain tainted with mildew. I created an entire line up of family and friends: playmates in my mind.

On this particular occasion, my mother was entertaining company -- a single guest. Not anyone who struck my curiosity; certainly no one my age to play with. It was a lady from our church. She had stopped by to see how my mother's broken ankle was healing. And if I remember correctly, she brought with her some stale desserts that didn't hold my interest either.

As usual I found myself playing in the basement with a set of dominos or my treasured box of Lego building blocks: a giant assortment of red, white and blue plastic. It wasn't uncommon for me to sit by myself building the tallest plastic blue building ever, talking and chatting away with Peter and Paul.

Not the disciples, nor the musicians minus Mary; it was the lively duo from the prime time version of the NBC game show *The Hollywood Squares*. Paul Lynde, famous for holding court from the center square, along with host Peter Marshall. These two became my bosom brothers of the basement. Even in the dingy air of the basement, these two wore their suit coats and ties while keeping me company in conversation. Paul was always cracking cheesy jokes and Peter would be annoyed.

When I emerged from the basement a short while later, my mother's guest was seated at the dining room table. Her features now escape me but I remember that she asked me the one question I never saw coming. "April, who were you speaking with downstairs?"

Slightly scared, slightly excited, I revealed, "My two brothers."

My mother turned her head twice as if to loosen her neck like a twist-off cap. Her face dropped in shock. "What?" she bellowed.

Wasn't honesty the best policy? I thought I should continue: after all I was now in front of company. "Peter and Paul..." I enunciated for my deaf Mother. Even at seven I knew her hearing my every syllable was important. "From *Hol-ly-wood Squares*." I turned back to our guest and picked up speed for her able ears. "They play with me in the basement when they're not on the show."

My mother's guest muffled a giggle behind her ivory hand with its long, unpainted nails. I turned to look at my mom who was now just shaking her head. I remember smiling at our guest. She lowered her hand and smiled back. This was my cue that it was okay to go back downstairs where it was much cooler and much less confusing.

It would be a few years later when I would realize that my mother's deafness interfered with her opportunity to hear my conversations. But I confess that the conversations did disappear in her presence. A deep feeling within the channels of my mind told me that little girls who talk to thin air might not be able to stay with their parents. So when mom descended the stairs to work nearby on laundry, or to pick out a jar of vegetables from food storage, my friends would simply vanish.

## Part II -- *Unseen family*

Meals consisted of my own chewing sounds inside my head. The parental dialogue was uncomfortable compared to my dramatic bantering in the basement. To make things worse at dinner, I became a picky eater. Nothing tasted exciting. Most things tasted like beets even when we weren't having beets.

Don't get me wrong, my mother was (and still is) an excellent cook. It wasn't the taste of the food; it was the insipid flavors of segregation -- me from the rest of the world. Segregated from other children, cousins and other people in general. Those flavors were loneliness that haunted me with each bite. I would sit at the table and simply zone out into a mindless daydream.

Frederica is my one cousin on my mother's side. There are dozens of first cousins on my father's side. They all have disappeared into the earth or the chaos of civilization.

To this day, I am leery of most holidays: Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. We never visited extended family members. And they never came to visit us. Our tiny trio at the end of the road: me and my parents. Christmas was a dismal reminder

of my emptiness for Christmas was full of amplified hours of silence. I was not allowed to watch television. "There's nothing on for you today." I was not allowed to call anyone on the phone. "This is a time for family."

Our family did not sing carols. We did not drive around to look at Christmas lights. We did not play in the snow. Mother cooked, baked and cleaned. Father read the paper. Designs on the wallpaper began to murmur and flow into each other in a fluid motion. Pictures became animate and fuzzy. Furniture began to suffocate me -- for we were a house of sitting up straight, no slouching.

Did I even have aunts and uncles? Who were these people?

Eventually, I would wander around the house dizzy from the lack of motion, my eyelids weighted with monotony. I would find myself in the basement again speaking to someone, to anyone just to clear my head.

### *Part III -- Beautiful Brown-Haired Triplets & Wonder Woman*

My circle of imaginary friends and family continued to grow as my loneliness grew; they became my ripples of sanity or insanity or a touch of both. The isolation was like a remote vulture that lay pregnant upon my brain.

During the winter break of fourth grade, my parents moved to Richmond, Michigan. I was never sure if it was because our family outgrew the small house, or if Boo Boo needed a bigger space to run. Perhaps my dad simply wanted a massive barn like John Cornwall's barn for all of his antiques.

It was snowing the day we moved. We sipped hot cocoa out of my mother's good cups because she didn't know where the daily dishes were. Boo Boo seemed to enjoy his

new surroundings. He reminded me of Bummer as I remembered how he ran back and forth in his half moon area adjacent to the red barn.

Richmond was a farming community. It was difficult to believe we were only thirty miles from Detroit. Literally, we lived between 30- & 31-mile roads on a quiet one-mile dirt road. Our house was set on several acres. Not too many, but still enough where cutting the lawn on a riding mower was an all-day affair.

Unlike the streets that I had lived on before, we didn't have next door neighbors right next door. There was a two-story farmhouse set way back on the land next to us. On the other side of us was a cemetery. My mother, genealogist that she was, loved this idea.

Even though there were other kids near my age that lived close by, it was a challenge to go over to their houses and even more of a challenge to convince them to come over to mine. (We had to stay outside.) There were days that I rode my bicycle around the long and circular driveway: around and around and around.

My father was an electrician and worked long days. For many of his jobs, he had at least a ninety-minute commute to and from work. It was just mom and me at home. She worked hard. She would cook, clean and spend time in *her domain*, in the kitchen or at her sewing machine.

When I was not in school, summer mornings were spent doing chores. Monday and Wednesday I would vacuum and dust in every room: not my parents' bedroom. And Tuesday and Thursday were spent cleaning the bathroom. I would sweep and mop the floor. It was the next chore that got me: cleaning toilets.

Comet, in its shiny green canister, poured out like salt when I shook it over the bowl. I attacked the water with the scrub brush, rapidly pushing in and out causing lime



green foam to swell. In wild circles I spun the brush to watch the frothy substance rise up the walls of the bowl just close enough to the rim to almost overflow. What a lonely kid would do for a laugh.

By the time I was ten years old I had created a whole range of cousins and friends that I interacted with. Not so much actual conversations, more like plays that I would script and we would all perform together. And once I had a boom box at age 11, I would record songs off the radio to provide musical cues, interludes and even stage direction.

My new family began with a brown-haired model on the cover of some tweenie magazine. She wore a teal one-piece bathing suit with a matching beach jacket. Her brown hair flew out everywhere and her jacket was open as if she were lying down or falling from a long jump. Her make up was light and obviously pink, her lashes black with mascara, like too much frosting on a cake.

She became the first in a tangled pyramid of make-believe cousins. Her name was Terri and she was one of triplets: Terri, Kerri, and Jeri.

The triplets were older and wiser than I. They instructed me on being a young woman with growing breasts. I began wearing a bra before most everyone in my fifth grade class and didn't know how to handle the snapping attention it garnered. They shared with me secrets on how to manage on days of my menstrual period -- which showed up completely unexpectedly the summer between fifth and sixth grade. The triplets also indulged me with tips on how to behave around cute boys. Kissing pillows for practice, how to comb my hair into a feather. My hair was way too long and heavy for such styling.

Since most of this schooling was actually from teen magazines, I have no idea if I caused myself more harm than good in this area of self-education. Still, the three of them were pretty confident mentors.

Day after day I positioned myself on the dark brown rug in the basement. It was harsh and itchy. The floor underneath was always ice cold. It was here that I would build houses. More like a blueprint of an actual house using real ivory dominos, colorful plastic Legos and a few Lincoln logs. These sprawling open plans were a couple of inches off the rug and never seemed to include a laundry room. Laundry was only done on Mondays; why bother building a room for it?

Along with my Cher doll and her long dark hair, my Barbie doll with her blonde locks and my Ken doll with his plastic hair, the triplets and I scripted out conversations of young adulthood, puppy love, impending betrayal and extreme loneliness. I performed these one-act plays over and over until it was time to put everything away in the antique trunk that stored all of my childhood toys.

5:00 pm. Time to watch *Wonder Woman*, another brown-haired heroine! Music soared from the minuscule speakers of our television. Bump-bump-bump-bump-bump-bump-bump-bump-bump. Doo-doo-Doo-doo-Doo-doo (swish) Cue the gospel choir...“Wonder Woman!”

Mom never noticed that serving dinner interfered with the climax of the show, as Diana Prince (a.k.a. *Wonder Woman*) and handsome Steve Trevor moved in to get the bad guys.

“Turn off the television.” Mother’s timing irritated me greatly.

I pleaded. “It’s almost over.” My eyes did not leave the screen.

“Now.” She commanded. “It’s time to eat now.”

“Just another five minutes?”

“Come and sit down. It’s getting cold.”

Dad would pipe up by this point. “C’mon April. Mom has worked hard to make dinner for us.” His voice always held a calm demeanor.

Guilt would seep in. “Okay.”

I shut it closed with a snap and a tiny thread of light. The screen kissed itself off. The old black and white television with its humble 10-inch screen sat lifeless. I knew that *Wonder Woman* would win in the end -- but I wondered: when you can’t see her beat the crap out of the bad guys, does it really happen?

My infatuation with this 70s hit show brought unexpected conflict one evening. My dad has arrived home from work late. There was no phone call; portable communication devices were only seen on *Star Trek* at the time. Mom was seated, waiting in the kitchen. I was glued to the set.

It was the 1970s. Carpooling was popular because of high gas prices. A few of the fellas in my dad’s union carpooled with a certain democratic and brotherhood pride. It was my dad’s week off from driving. He had parked his truck in the carpool lot and rode with his union brothers to work. On what should have been an average Friday afternoon my dad had to be driven all the way home. His black Ford truck had been stolen.

“I suspect they’ve been watching my truck all week,” he said.

Here was the truck that my dad adored. It had orange and yellow stripes: cool and sleek along the sides. Against the black finish, they were beautiful. This was the truck that we carefully loaded Brutus in the cab for a trip to the vet. This truck was always

parked at the softball diamonds during summer evenings when I had practice or games. The famous black Ford truck carried members of my winning softball team to Dairy Queen numerous times.

I was sitting attentively in front of the little black and white television, my mind so engrossed in the action of Princess Diana and Major Steve. I didn't really care what the conversation was about in the other room.

“Get in here!” Mom bellowed.

I knew better than to ignore her.

“Your father's truck has been stolen. You can hear what we're saying. You're just sitting in there glued to that boob-tube. What's wrong with you?”

“I dunno.”

My father sat motionless, confused. His green John Deer baseball cap in his hands. My mother tossed her arms in the air and waved me off into the land of the hopeless.

The triplets offered me no advice in this situation.

Time went on. The basement began to get crowded. More siblings were introduced -- Mary, Sherrie, and Courtney. Mary and Sherrie were twins, one year older than me. They ended up being useless really -- they just kept each other company elsewhere but were fun as the holidays approached. And Courtney, the baby was my age. She became a focal point as everyone else was growing older.

I decided to introduce these beautiful dark-haired cousins to my friends at school. Why should I be lonely during the day? The tattered magazine cover was proof. I showed

people who didn't believe me when I told them that Terri was my cousin. One of my classmates, Steve, paid me a lot of attention once he saw how gorgeous she was.

At this point of manipulation and deceit, I could not confess that I was adopted. That would make me different from everyone else. But really...who wouldn't be impressed by teenage cover-model Terri and her stunning genetics?

#### *Part IV -- Charlie Brown Doesn't Have Any Hair*

So someone played a trick on me in the delivery room! How could I be related to someone so pretty? Me, with my long black braids: thin strands afloat after recess. Me, with my skinny, unsure body and bumpy chest with its growing lumps. Me, with my big black eyes that inspected everything. Me, with my nose that stuck out from my face like a hook in a pointed wicked way. AND MY TEETH? Crooked rows of tiny bones that popped out of my gums wherever they wanted. My top two front teeth: they pointed the way for the others to follow. They could have been molded with a real Indian arrow head.

Trips to the dentist were frequent. My parents learned early on that I was going to need braces or retainers or both. I didn't care for the dentist. He was someone who looked to be tanning all of the time. He had dark chocolate brown hair and thick glasses. He always felt the need to call me Charlie Brown. With several sharp instruments and his fingers in my mouth, I wasn't in the position to correct him.

“How's it going for you today, Charlie Brown?”

“Ho-hkay.” Sounds of air slipped out of my gaping mouth.

He moved a tiny round mirror around the highways of my teeth. His fingers softly pressed again my gums. He wore no gloves during his inspection. His fingers traveled

over and around the inside of my mouth like a garter snake in grass. With a sharp poker, he would then press and jab certain points in my teeth.

“Looks like we have a cavity starting, Charlie Brown.”

“Unnnnn.” *Mom’s gonna’ be mad.*

As I watched him at work -- his face so close to mine -- I wondered why he called me Charlie Brown. Did he not remember my name? Did he address every kid as Charlie Brown? Really, why would he name me after a kid who has no hair when I had long dark hair that fell way below my bottom.

With his index finger and thumb he held my two front teeth; the two that stick out on the top row. He held and wiggled. He moved in even closer to inspect.

He would later report to my mom that I had done that to my teeth; that I had pushed them forward with my tongue. He would demonstrate this to her by pointing his tongue and poking his own top front teeth. “This is the reason why they stick out so far. She needs to stop doing this.”

“Alrighty, Charlie Brown. All done.” And with that I was up and out of the chair.

Upon hearing this news I trained my tongue to push these two stubborn teeth back in to place. Braces didn’t work, retainers didn’t work and my trained tongue didn’t either.

To this day, I swipe my tongue in front of these two teeth. These two stubborn bones moved right back in to the same pointed place that they occupied nearly thirty years ago when they first arrived on stage.

In retrospect, the triplets with their perfect smiles agree that I always resembled Lucy Van Pelt, thank you very much.

## BAPTISM BY IMMERSION

My parents were members of the Latter Day Saints, better known as Mormons. The city of Detroit had several “wards.” (Individual congregations.) A large branch composed of several wards in Bloomfield Hills. Trips to Mormon temples were few and far between as the closest one was in Washington D.C. at the time. I understand that one has been constructed in Chicago.

My parents were not always Mormon.

My father grew up as a Missouri Synod Lutheran in Detroit. His mother, who passed on before I was born, made her famous communion bread for weekly services. Eventually, I attend a Lutheran high school -- something I never thought I would do. My parents were very much against my attending a parochial school when I was very young.

My mother grew up Episcopalian on the reserve in Ontario. Though the Longhouse religion was active on the Six Nations reserve, her family chose to steer clear of the “pagan Indians.”

I’m not sure when Mormonism entered their picture. What I did know, even at a very young age -- our family was different somehow because of it. We attended church for three hours at a time. Each hour was a different service. First, Sunday school, for a child this meant until you were in sixth grade.

Rows of children seated. Several wiggling, bobbing impatient children. Their feet clanging hard shoes against metal-folding chairs. The fragrance of used diaper keenly ripened the room. Each row was arranged by age with the youngest closest to the front. What did we do in Sunday School? We sang and sang and sang and sang.

It is not right for me to speak for everyone in the room from years ago, but I believe our favorite song was “Popcorn Popping on the Apricot Tree.” Hands down it received the loudest, wildest response. No one could stay in those ungodly metal chairs for this one (unless you were an older kid in the back row playin’ it cool). Thirty or forty children squealed with all their might; led by an enthusiastic choir director at the front of the room.

*I looked out the window and what did I see,  
popcorn popping on the apricot tree.*

Our choir director became an octopus, arms wild with movement and direction, her hands opened and closed with each popping syllable.

*Spring has brought me such a nice surprise,  
Blossoms popping right before my eyes.*

Dozens of thin arms waved in the air, fingers spouted in the air.

*I could take an armful and make a treat,  
A popcorn ball that would smell so sweet.  
It wasn't really so, but it seemed to be,  
Popcorn popping on the apricot tree.*

Our voices traveled through the halls, normally tunnels of morbid silence. No way the adults were having this much fun! Something my mother confirmed on the car ride home as she griped about her session with the other women.



After the Sunday school sing-along, we attended a Sunday School class based on our ages. Most of the time, it seemed as though we were like gummy worms wiggling our way through this tedious hour. We sat in a circle. Sometimes there were five of us, sometimes ten -- depending on how diligent the parents were at being Mormon.

Our Sunday school teacher often interrupted her own lessons because of classroom antics. Since there were no desks to strum on or sleep at we only had ourselves and each other to occupy the time.

“No picking your nose, Emily.”

“Matthew, please sit still.”

“Stop swinging your legs Marcus.”

“Angie, stop poking Amanda.”

And most famously in my recollection, “April, stop talking.”

The third hour and longest hour was with the entire congregation. Families and adults: each at their own pew every Sunday, just like assigned seating. I could predict where everyone would sit. Like robots, the congregation sat up straight against the unforgiving church pews. Gentlemen at the head of the chapel, who did most of the talking, were seated in plush folding seats.

These sixty minutes were the longest, mind-wrecking moments of my week.

My family of three usually sat one or two pews in from the back row. Adults, usually men, talked at the podium into the microphone. Hymns were sung. Sacrament was passed around. Children squirmed about. Parents finagled them back in place. I knew better than to move. My mother wouldn't tolerate fidgeting.

It would be after my thirteenth birthday that I learned that most Christian services rarely lasted over an hour.

We are all familiar with the terrible twos, fidgety fours...however, it is apparently at eight when Mormons believe we are capable of sin. Children in the Mormon Church are not baptized until they are eight years old because as infants we are born without “Adam’s transgression.” Mormons are baptized by immersion instead of the cross on the forehead. Our entire bodies are capable of sin.

I’m quite sure my mother thought I was my own little devil well before then.

\* \* \*

My white gown drops all the way down to my brown little feet with toenails that need to be cut. The thick, long sleeves reach all the way to my tiny wrists. The gown envelopes my body from the neck down to the ankles. I analyze this gown. It is uncomfortable, but it would make an excellent ghost costume for Halloween.

Standing near the baptismal, I sense that the water is very warm. Noticeable lines of whispering steam rise into the air like a dainty signature. My long black hair is pulled into two braids yet I feel tiny loose strands sticking to my neck like overcooked angel hair pasta.

I am nervous. I’m not much of a swimmer. I bombed swimming class. At least my mother never took me back after that crying fit. It must have been the swinging fists.

Lines of chairs are filled with people. Chad, exactly one day younger than me, is also here in his baptismal outfit. He wears a white shirt with short sleeves and matching white pants. He looks like he is wearing a pair of my homemade pajamas.

Anxiety races up my chilled bones. I descend sideways down the frigid steps of the tiled baptismal. One foot follows the other with care. My fingers, too small to wrap themselves all the way around the metal rail, grip the bar that is slippery with condensation. My feet shyly enters the tepid water, I become engulfed, my dress starts to float and expose my thin knees. How embarrassing! I let go of the rail and push the gown down into the water. A gentleman holds out his arm for me. He stands firmly planted in the water, a Navy seal in the Mormon military. He is also in white with short sleeves.

The water is at my stomach just over my belly button but below my undeveloped chest. My sleeves became a heavy wetness. I look around. The man's pink forehead is shiny underneath the bright lights of the room. He whispers instructions to me. I grip on to him. It is a firm grip. Neither one of us will let go.

The hairs on his arms are not as thick as my father's black strands. His arm is shades lighter than the Arabic tones I'm used to. I do not really know this man. I do not trust him. Members of the audience hold collective sigh of reverence. I want to pee. I look up at my parents. My father's brown eyes have circles under them the color of grape juice. I better stay where I am.

The man raises his right arm to form a square at his side, palm open. He starts to speak, "Having been commissioned of..." His words are familiar but I'm spinning. It's as if he is humming his words. Each syllable is a ribbon wrapping itself around my head. The warm bathwater swishes around my mid-section. A small wave spans my bottom. I can't slip. Is this tub going to swallow me? I close one eye and peek with the other. He is almost done. I take a deep breath in and shut my mouth tight.

"...and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

He places his right hand on my back and gently pushes against my sternum with his left, plunging me into the warm bath.

In a second, I swoosh back upward. My hair soaks up the heavy sogginess and sticks to my face and neck. I emerge from the water. My braids hang at either side of my head weighted with moisture. I am sin free.

Being Mormon meant no Pepsi or Coke, ever. The “Words of Wisdom” forbade caffeine products. No smoking cigarettes, no drinking alcohol. Strong drinks are not for the belly, but for the washing of your bodies. (Illegal drugs -- right out of the picture.) No sex before marriage and the elders meant it. No dating until you reached the age of sixteen, (although I suspect this was solely Dorothy and Sam’s rule).

There were several other rules such as no hot drinks. ‘Flesh of beasts’ or ‘fowls’ are only appropriate during times of thanksgiving. All Mormons who follow these words will “find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge.”

Most Mormon kids hated being Mormon. I don’t know anyone who found it exciting or engaging. We dreaded Sunday school as pre-teens, we dreaded anything Mormon. Granted, our young Mormon hands and backsides were free from the ruler-toting nuns of the Catholic schools, but we lived with a certain stigma that unexpectedly smacked against our self-esteem instead.

It was on the quiet dirt road in the farming town of Richmond that one of the neighbor kids announced that Mormons were not allowed to have ice cream.

This was news to me.

One of the neighbor kids, Kim, a tomboy who lived across the street, was making homemade vanilla ice cream. She stood with her two-gallon wooden bucket right in her front yard. Kids were showing up from all over the neighborhood. The bucket was like a trophy propped up on its step stool. How ridiculously exciting. Nothing that exciting ever happened in my front yard.

Kim wore her blue denim jacket as usual. Her black hair and dark eyes were striking against her light complexion. Kim was even shorter than me and had distinct dimples that you could lose a peanut M&M in. Her bright smile exposed one tooth situated higher up on her gums than the rest. It stuck out, but wasn't unattractive. She usually wore a cotton t-shirt under her jacket which made her look like one of the boys from the film, *The Outsiders*.

Kim swung the handle of the ice cream maker round and round. It knocked in a circular rhythm that went unnoticed by most of us. I was used to the sound of a clicking pulse from practicing piano with a metronome. We all peered into the open bucket and watched the milky cream-colored substance become thicker and thicker. One of the kids visiting from down the road blurted out, "Did you know that Mormons can't have ice cream? That sucks."

It was as if he spit a wet, booger-filled paper wad in my open mouth.

I thought about this comment for a stretched-out-taffy-length moment. My mind (and tongue) reminisced on all the chocolate fudge flavors of my past. Was I a sinner? Was this kid telling the truth? *No way*. My parents wouldn't break such a rule. They were diligent, adamant about the rules.

I replied tentatively to the group standing around. "We can have ice cream."

The air around me was gulped up in unison. The knocking from bucket came to a halt. Eyes popped and jaws dropped. Even the breeze held itself agape.

“You’re Mormon?” One of the kids pointed his white finger with its filthy fingernail at me as if a bloody chicken pox had exploded on my eyelid. His voice hung in the wind, each syllable a slow-motion gallop into the current of air.

“Yes.” The truth was out.

A couple of kids ran away from the circle to tell their parents.

What did I care? I suppose I did care. But moments later, I was lapping up the creamy vanilla ice cream that Kim concocted. Its velvet thickness melted quickly, but the taste, like the finger pointing, was haunting and unforgettable.

Several Mormon kids I knew drank Pepsi at school when their parents weren’t looking. Truly, I never did. I remember the first time I had Pepsi and Coke. One of the two brands was hosting a nationwide taste test to discover what America liked better.

I stood before a college-aged stranger holding the two small waxy cups as if I had just stolen the “National Bank of Cola” thirst. The dark liquid substance spun deep in color and fizzed angrily at me, almost impatient with my decision. I tossed the first one back and then the second as if on a wooden stool at the local pub, smacking the bar with raucous pleasure. *I’ll have another please.*

“Well, which is your favorite? Coke or Pepsi?” the college student held his clipboard and pencil.

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. For my twelve-year-old-self that was something. I smacked my lips a couple of times to make sure I shook awake all of my taste buds. “They taste exactly the same.”

To my inexperienced palette they truly did taste the same. Absent was the zippy zing of *Vernors* ginger ale stinging the roof of my mouth and causing me to sputter equally tasty belches. Neither one had the smooth glide of A& W root beer with its famous foaminess.

“No, sorry. They taste exactly the same.”

This was not the right answer, but it’s all I had to offer.

I was no longer sin free.

## THE ICE BETWEEN US

I've never actually seen my mother cry. Not once. To this day, only a handful of days after my 37<sup>th</sup> birthday, she remains solid through her stoic silence or stinging sarcasm. Why do these wet drops of weakness even matter? Isn't it true they do nothing for us but expose the vulnerable infant behind our indifferent eyes?

My big brown eyes, exposed, peered out from the scarf. My lips brushed against the scratchy knitted wool yarn. "Mom... I can't breathe..." My nose wiggled furiously. The scarf was tight as shrink wrap against my cheeks.

"*Hold still,*" Mom insisted. She watched her own fingers as they quickly stretched the scarf and then immediately tightened it back up. "By the time you get on the bus you will be thankful you're this bundled. It's *very* cold out there." She moved slowly on this morning. She had broken her ankle not two weeks earlier. The extra weight of her cast made her movements bulky and unsure.

"Okay, that's enough. You'll be late for the bus." She handed me my metal lunch box with its friendly postman waving on the side and nudged me towards the door.

My whole body moved side to side in an awkward march. I entered the attached garage from the kitchen. The space was full of morning shadows eager to escape to the bright glacial landscape beyond the door. As soon as the door was cracked, the wind bit at any exposed skin. My eyes winced. Complete whiteness.

"Hurry up. Close the door now," Mom commanded. She watched my every move. I knew that she wouldn't be able to see me from the front living room window.



Her ankle had broken in three places and she wasn't able to move across the house quickly -- her hulking cast made sure of that. The usual good-bye wave took place as I exited the garage and shut the door. Light dripped out of the kitchen. A silhouette of her body formed, I moved into the chilled morning.

My parents' home in Utica, Michigan was a humble brick house at the end of Ladd Avenue: a quiet, removed lane just out of reach of the impending suburbs of Detroit. Next to our house was a wooded area with a forgotten baseball diamond adjacent to it.

I hated being at the very end of the street, isolated.

During these early school years my mother was a homemaker. She spent the hours of her day sewing clothes, making home cooked meals and keeping the house spotless. Growing up, I saw more of her back than I ever did her front. Her figure at the sewing machine was not only expected -- it was part of the every day routine. Her head would be lowered examining the needle of her sewing machine, slight imperfections on the back of her neck exposed. Her brown hair, just a shade shy of milk chocolate, a bit frizzy and a bit curly. It was as light and thin as cotton -- hair so different from my thick braids.

Every morning she brushed and braided my hair with distinct precision. Each pull, tug and weave was accompanied by rules, her rules -- some of them important and some of them nonsensical -- rules that imposed an unrecognizable pressure that I would later face when I was on my own.

"You have to work three times harder than everyone else -- because you are Indian, a woman and poor." As if each of the three strands of my braid represented each one of these disadvantages, she pulled and twisted them tightly together. Her fingers

wound the elastic tie at the end of my braid and with a *snap!* She would then drop the braid against my back. “*Three times harder* than everyone else.”

Snow drifts had formed on either side of the street. On a clear day, the walk to the bus stop would only take a few minutes. However, impressive drifts formed, creating mountains of snow. One couldn’t tell the street from the lawns. Mom’s voice rang in my head: “No walking in the street.”

My feet felt wet. My padded snowsuit legs blew up with chilled air. My lungs were heavy and my breathing forced. My free hand pressed my scarf against my nose to catch the dripping warm mucus. As I marched, I heard a young familiar voice.

“C’mon, April!” LaShelle yelled into the wind. “It’s coming, it’s coming.”

My friend, LaShelle, was the same age as me and we were in the same class with Mrs. Ross. LaShelle’s arms were waving frantically. Panicked, my heart grew and thumped inside my chest like a fist knocking on cardboard. *Mom would be so mad.* She couldn’t drive me to school with her broken ankle. I couldn’t stay home all day. As I pressed forward, the wind shoved back.

*What am I going to do?* I had to run.

My tiny legs lifted in and out of snowdrifts. The air swiped at my pupils. I tugged at my scarf, rendering my dry mouth helpless against the cutting breeze. Icy twists of air stung the edges of my lips.

“Hurry!” the high pitched chorus of urgent voices increased. I looked up. A few more of the neighbor kids joined in the bellowing. *Only three more houses to go.* I

spotted the front end of the yellow bus. It had just turned from the next street over and was now heading towards the stop.

“*Hurry up April!*” the voices squealed. *Or was that the wind howling?*

The brakes of the yellow monster squawked. A powerful snort and puff exhaled from the bus. With its usual whine, the bus door swung open. One by one the neighborhood kids began to climb inside: their colorful snowsuits, wet galoshes and pairs of mittens gripping multi-colored lunch boxes. Finally, the last one ascended.

My stomach dropped. My eyes watered as they met the driver’s eyes. He closed the door. *He closed the door.* Terrified, I galloped even harder. The thick snowsuit didn’t cushion my metal lunch box as it banged against my bony knees.

Two more houses to go. *I can’t miss the bus. I can’t miss the bus.*

The yellow monster wasn’t grunting back to life. The hum of the engine simply growled steadily. I looked to the driver. He was waving me on. My heart dropped back into a secure place. I caught my breath and continued to run but without the same forceful momentum. *He’s not going to leave me. One house and I’m there.*

Moving forward.

Forward. Then...slip...

WHAM!

Face first, my head hammered against the icy ground. My forehead and nose pierced by an excruciating sting of arctic voltage... as if the earth spit ice lightning *in* my face.

My snowsuit with me in it - slid over the frozen ground.

\* \* \*

One of my mother's principal goals was to keep her only daughter healthy. I took vitamins with my juice every morning. Of course the rule of thumb to staying healthy was to drink plenty of fluids every day. Once my orange (or grape or tomato juice) was gone and the vitamin was down, I would also have to complete a glass of (often warm) water with my breakfast. We lived a morning regimen.

Monday and Wednesday were 'hot cereal days' followed by toast (never white! I had a choice of pumpernickel, rye or wheat). Tuesday and Thursday were 'scrambled eggs days' followed by toast. Friday was 'cold cereal day.' My choices: Cheerios, Wheaties or Shredded Wheat. And sometimes Special K.

Naturally, during the winter months dressing appropriately for the weather was a must. On a snowy day I would don a bright snowsuit. It was deep blue with bright yellow on the inside and had red buttons. The full body suit had a hood that snapped into place around my cheeks. I would step into the suit, zip it up making sure my long, thick, black braid made it inside. Otherwise, I would have to unzip and start over. One foot after the other, I would step into my red rubber boots, after which I would pull each snowsuit leg down to each ankle.

Since the mittens grouped my tiny fingers together like pigs in a blanket, Mom's job was to administer the long scarf and hat. Mom wrapped the purple knitted scarf around and around my neck and face. Then, in the crowning moment, she would place my purple hat on my head securing the edges just below my temples and eyebrows -- her arthritic fingers pulling the hat down on either side of my skull. My eyes, covered for just a moment, viewed grape darkness. With a whisper, mom flipped the edges upward, my

forehead then doubly thick. This purple hat, with its white snowflakes woven in, one of the world's largest purple pom poms on top, would become my savior.

Lying on my chest, my lungs yearned for air. My mouth hung open. I looked at the large black tire inches from my body. Pain seeped out across my forehead. The heavy scent of fuel invaded my nostrils. Wool, hair and gas vapors were ripe on my lips. I rolled over. My hand went immediately to my forehead.

The door of the bus swung open with a loud howl. The bus driver in his blue suit stomped to the ground and stood over me. He didn't have any gloves on. His hefty, nearly maroon, fingers reached out.

"You okay?" He pulled my arm, and the rest of my body followed. I hung from him like a cooked noodle. He swiped up my lunch box with his free hand, "C'mon, let's get you on the bus."

He pushed my limp little body down into the empty, dark, green seat directly behind him. He placed my lunch box next to me. It rattled.

"Are you okay?" he asked again.

This time I nodded.

No one ever sat right behind the bus driver unless they were in trouble. My eyes began to tear up. My heart centered itself in my throat and pounded. The bus driver plopped down in his seat, shut the door and grabbed the large steering wheel. I sniffed in gobs of mucus as the bus revved back to life.

The throbbing of my forehead frightened me. A taste of fumes and vomit lingered within my spit. Silly dizziness. I pulled off my mittens. My bare hands gripped the cold

bar in front of me. As he drove, his eyes floated up to the mirror over him: his “bus inspection” device. He was inspecting me. My eyes looked away. Voices of students behind me that had been momentarily silenced with curiosity now rose once again in the usual school bus commotion.

A fog took over my eyes. I removed my scarf. A taste of cold air caught my breath. I swallowed over and over again. The edges of my lips were sliced and cracked like salty paper cuts. I slid to the window and placed my cheek against the frosty pane. My right hand found its way to the glorious glass, a crystallized portrait of ice jetted out across the small window into a magnificent kaleidoscope design. My palm and fingers, like a starfish sponge, soaked in the coolness and left a stamp. I slipped my hand under my purple wool hat. The ice-like condensation eased the biting tingle of my tender forehead.

I was too scared to take my hat off. Why? For fear of what was under it. Blood? No, I didn’t feel any blood -- just softness. I was tempted to poke at my forehead. But I was scared to do that too.

Forced to concentrate on my weak stomach, I was overly aware of the each stop and start of the bus. No one wants to be known as the little kid who puked on the bus. It didn’t matter that I had just wiped out. It didn’t matter that I practically slid under the school bus. *No one* wants to be pointed at as the kid who puked on the bus.

When we reached the school parking lot the driver looked up in the mirror at me. He asked me to wait until everyone else exited. I nodded. He shut off the monster and swung open the door. A lineup of young bodies drained out of the bus and headed towards the double doors of the school. The gas smell hit my nose with a vengeance.

*Gag!!* I was tempted to pull my scarf back over my mouth and cheeks but once the gas smell disappeared the winter air was refreshing.

The bus driver turned to me. “Can you make it?”

“I guess so.” My voice was little. I put my mittens back on and picked up my lunch box and stood up. My head needed a kickstand to hold it up on my shoulders. The bus driver noticed my trembling. He put his hand on one shoulder.

“Let’s go then,” he said. “I’m going to take you inside.” His voice was rugged, but comforting.

Once off of the bus, I waddled by his side. *Whish, whoosh. Whish, whoosh. Whish, whoosh.* His suit didn’t make any noise. Once inside the building, the bus driver pointed, “Sit down over there on the bench while I get Mr. Maynard.”

*The bench?*

He left me. Students raced around each side of me. Teachers were directing traffic. I headed to the bench. The long bench was made of dark wood and cast iron. As I sat down I put my lunch box to my side. I unwound my scarf from my face and began to snivel. *Why is he going to get the principal?*

“The Bench” was for troublemakers, the bad kids who picked on us little kids. During hair checks “the Bench” was for students who had a case of nits or even worse, lice. Finally, “the Bench” was for kids who had to wait for a change of clothes because they messed their pants or puked.

What had I done to deserve this sentence on “the Bench?” My nose ran, my tears ran. I had done nothing wrong. Was it because the bus driver had to wait for me? Was it

because he had to lift me off the ground? My head pounded under my purple hat. I leaned back, closed my eyes and sobbed.

The piano bench that accompanied our baby grand had a cushion made of green, almost olive colored, velvet. Mother had played piano. Her fingers were slender -- but now her arthritis did not allow her to play on a regular basis. I had a spotty relationship with the piano bench and its velvety cushion. Every afternoon I was to practice the piano for a pre-determined amount of time. When I was in elementary school it was a half hour, but by fourth grade it was up to an hour. In the sixth grade, two hours, and there were stretches during the eighth grade where I practiced for more than four hours a day. Some days being on the piano bench felt like time served.

“Mom,” I called out from the living room. “I’m done.” My tiny muscular fingers squished at the velvet seat underneath me.

“Did the timer go off?” Her tone rose with her question. She and I both knew I couldn’t lie about this, even though there might be a slim chance she hadn’t actually heard the buzzer.

“No,” I answered, defeated. “Not yet.”

“You know the rules.” Mom’s syllables were precise.

While perched on the bench I could see out the large window in the living room. Sometimes I’d see kids from the neighborhood playing outside. Depending on the season they might be flying kites or playing kickball in the open baseball diamond. Worse yet they might be riding their bikes, U-turning right at our driveway. During the snowy



months, the neighborhood kids didn't really make the trip to the end of the street. The white barren street stabbed at my eyes when I stared outside from the piano bench.

Practicing was terribly lonely. I slouched in protest. The rules were the rules. They dictated that I was to remain on the piano bench until the buzzer went off. My fingers lazily repeated major and minor scales over and over again. I poked and flipped about the pages of my assigned music from The John Thompson "Teaching Little Fingers to Play" piano lesson book. I was tired. She was at her sewing machine. *Didn't she get mad being alone all the time? Does she like being alone?*

I heard Mom clean up at her sewing machine. She moved from her work room to the kitchen. She avoided the living room where I sat. Her figure moved about with minimal clatter on the other side of the wall.

The wall wasn't the only thing between us.

Mr. Maynard was a plump man with noticeable cheeks. His eyes were either mean or playful -- depending on his mood. They were hidden deep in his skull and had an aged squint. They all but disappeared when he laughed. His salt and pepper hair was naturally greasy and he wore it like my dad, off to one side and trimmed neatly around the edges and over the ears. He always wore a suit and tie. It made me wonder why my dad wore jeans and a flannel shirt to work every day.

The bus driver had indeed gone to get Mr. Maynard *and* the nurse. The three adults came towards the bench. I looked towards my classroom door. *Should I run?* I wasn't feeling sharp enough for such an escape.

“What have we here?” Mr. Maynard’s cheeks were so round and large, they were like pancakes. He crouched down to make direct eye contact. I was uncertain and moved away from him. He stood back up.

“She took quite a tumble,” the bus driver explained. “She landed like this...” his hands motioned and clapped suddenly. “Then the rest of the route, she favored her head.”

My eyes blinked from one adult face to the next.

“Well...let’s take a look-see,” Mr. Maynard reached for my hat. He grabbed hold of the bouncy purple pom pom and pulled. *Whoop!* up and off my head it went. Tiny hairs around my face, static from the winter dryness, went upright off my face.

All of the eyes in front of me opened a bit wider.

Mr. Maynard chuckled, “That’s quite a goose egg, little lady! This hat...” he waved it around in the air over me, “very well may have saved your life.”

“Can I have it back?” This was the first full sentence I had spoken since the incident.

“Of course.” His face was gigantic in smile. “I would want to keep it too.”

I grabbed at my purple hat and held it securely in my lap. *Saved my life? Really?* The nurse leaned over. Her warm fingers gently poking at my forehead, specifically the “goose egg.”

“She should probably get x-rayed.” She then called my principal by a name I didn’t recognize. “Arthur, we’ll need to call her parents right away.”

“It’s okay,” I offered. *Don’t call Mom. She’ll be mad.*

“I feel okay,” I garbled. The three adults seemed to grow taller in that instant.

Mr. Maynard addressed me formally. “Young lady, the nurse knows what’s best. Sit tight. Someone will be here shortly.” He then thanked the bus driver and shook his hand.

“Do your mommy and daddy both work?” the nurse asked.

“Mom broke her ankle,” I offered, “On the kitchen step, coming in from the garage. She can’t drive.”

“Okay then,” she replied. “You have a very big bump on your head and you might have a concussion. Do you know what a concussion is?” The nurse’s voice crept into a whisper.

I lied.

Mr. Maynard’s voice boomed in comparison to the nurse. “Then you know how important it is to go and have a doctor look at your head and for you to have an X-ray,”

“Can I just go to my room?” I didn’t care that I was crying. “Mrs. Ross is probably waiting for me,” I pleaded. I didn’t want any X-ray. I didn’t want to go to the doctor. And I didn’t know what a concussion was.

“It’s okay April, Mrs. Ross knows where you are,” Mr. Maynard assured me.

*She knows I’m on the Bench! But I didn’t do anything wrong.*

The adults left me alone to sit and think. I was still wearing my snowsuit and various layers. Uncomfortable warmth crept up the skin on my back. I turned my head to the left and looked down the hall. Doors leading to classrooms were closed. Mrs. Ross’s door was way down on the right-hand side. I was too tired to get up and move around so I leaned back against the bench and looked ahead. The front double doors showcased white wisps of air snakes flying up in circles at the edges of the school roof. I glanced at the

open closet. Numerous winter coats, knitted hats, pairs of rubber boots and separated mittens were wildly scattered over the wet floor.

Our modest house resembled a historical museum. It was a hushed dwelling of miniatures, handmade wooden furniture and glassware (no running allowed!). Amidst the small organ and a baby grand piano in the living room sat cranberry dishes, cut glass and other valuable, breakable, items. Mom kept the entire house spotless, free from dust, dirt and clutter.

My room was no different. I had an antique wooden-framed raised bed (no jumping allowed!). My dresser was a marble-top piece with three primary drawers and a hidden drawer. Nothing was out of place on or in that dresser -- except my personal, secret items in the hidden drawer.

My mother and I shared the closet in my bedroom. The top row was full of her shoes -- each pair in its original box with one shoe elegantly resting over the edge to display which pair was in which box. My clothes, many of them homemade, had been washed, ironed and placed carefully on each metal hanger in the closet. My tiny shoes sat snug in pairs on the floor. None of them overturned or on its side.

Our house was magazine-picture perfect at all times. My bed was to be made as soon as I leaped out of it. Nothing was to be left on the dark carpet; even white threads that fell from aged panties were to be discarded. Dirty garments went in the laundry basket. Garbage in the garbage can. If it was a toy, well...“Toys don’t belong in your room. They belong downstairs in your toy trunk.”

I’m not sure why our house had to remain spotless. No one ever came to visit.

\* \* \*

It was a second grader's lifetime before someone showed up at the school for me. I was still on the bench, but by now I had unzipped my snowsuit and let it hang off of the top of me. My legs swung back and forth. May, an elderly friend of my mother's who lived four houses down from us, and two from the bus stop, entered the school. Her thin eyes were perky and bright. Her salt and pepper hair peeked out of her winter hat. She waved and smiled as she approached me. "Your mother's in the car. Where is your teacher?"

"In class," I replied.

"I think I am supposed to talk with someone. Let me check." She took off her gloves and looked around as she spoke. May knocked and entered the school office. After a few words with the secretary, Mr. Maynard appeared from within his office to greet our neighbor friend. He waved at me through the office windows. I didn't wave back.

May came back out to me on the bench. "C'mon, we have to get you to the hospital."

Mr. Maynard stuck his head out of the office door. His voice boomed, "Go get 'em, kiddo." He smiled so big this time his teeth showed. I tried to smile back at him but I had never seen him act so silly. I put my purple hat on to cover my forehead. May wound my scarf around my neck a couple of times and I slipped my mittens on. I grabbed my lunch box. She took my open hand in hers and we exited the building before too many students saw us.

Mom used to complain about being hot. Her high blood pressure was one factor and her "hot flashes" were another. But -- her hands were always cold. Her fingers were slightly

wrinkled and her knuckles were swollen from her arthritis. Blue veins popped out from the top of her hands and gave away her age. The antique rings would sometimes get stuck and she would have to apply lotion just to slip them off. Her wrists appeared delicate but were quite strong.

My mother's hands rarely held one of mine. Her hands rarely caressed my head. She would hold my chin in place -- so she could rub clean my "filthy neck" with a scalding hot wash cloth.

Her lotion-filled palms rarely stroked my cheeks. The first time I kissed a boy in public she grabbed me from the sidewalk, pulled me in the car and slapped me (right in front of the boy). Her large gold engagement ring, with the amethyst stone, cut the skin at my temple.

Her graceful, meticulous fingers with their long painted nails rarely held my face. Just once, both of her hands gripped either side of my skull, like a person grasping for the juicy flesh of a newly sliced watermelon. She held me still and pierced my eyes with her own -- "You think I'm a bitch, don't you? Don't you? Just say it!"

Mom sat in the passenger seat watching, waiting. I leaned forward, dipped down, dropped my lunch box on the floor of the car and slipped in the back seat. There were still slivers of nausea so I was happy to be seated in a comfortable car.

Mom, of course, had a number of questions for me. "Now what happened to you?" "Why did you fall?" "What if I wasn't able to come and get you?" I didn't need to respond to any of these questions. I was silent. I pressed my face against the window and

looked out at the whiteness of winter. Later in life I would learn that these interrogations were her way of showing she cared.

Luckily, the drive to the hospital wasn't very far. Actually, it was right around the corner on Dequindre Road. The large off-white building made my small brick school look tiny. May pulled right up next to the building and went to fetch a wheelchair for my mother. I attempted to climb out of the back seat.

"Don't you go anywhere," my mother said. I stood outside of the car and watched people exiting the building in wheelchairs. *Everyone must get a wheelchair at the hospital.* Soon May came rolling up with a blue wheelchair. She carefully helped my mother get out of the car and into the chair.

The three of us passed through the automatic doors of the large hospital. Off-white walls went up and up forever on either side of us. There seemed to be no ceilings. I raised my head and looked all the way up. This caused pain in my forehead and I immediately looked back down. My head wavered with a heaviness that was unfamiliar. People were coming and going. Sick people. Doctor people. Nurse people. I gulped.

"Come on now, stomp your boots or you'll track snow in," mom ordered. "Let's find someone to speak to." She pointed forward and May continued to push the wheelchair.

We wandered through a maze of hallways before finding a nurse to check me in. May situated mom right in front the nurse's desk. I took a seat to the side. May, with a start, turned and said, "I'm going to park the car."

Mom didn't pay attention. May patted me on the shoulder and left. Mom, who had her purse on her lap, began to pull out all kinds of important looking papers. She and

the nurse were talking grown up. I sat and looked around. After a question from the nurse, my mother replied, “Well...she was a blue baby when born.” Mom’s voice seemed to disappear in the air ahead of her. I looked over; her eyes were watering. She stopped and held her forehead with her hands. *Is she feeling the same pain that I am?*

During the summer of 1985, I was sixteen and working two jobs in Richmond. I was fired from my job as a cashier at K-mart. Thoroughly ashamed of myself, I left a note on my pillow, packed a few clothes and hid out at a boy’s house whose parents were nowhere to be found. After two days my best friend, Stacey, came to talk with me.

“You need to go home April.” Stacey’s usual smile was nowhere to be seen.

I attempted to prod a smile. “Dorothy’s placing demands on you too?”

“I’m not kidding,” Stacey’s tone remained flat. Her blue eyes stared into mine.

Her makeup, smudged and wearing off from the day, made her look drained. “She’s really upset. Your mom is really fuckin’ upset.”

I didn’t reply. Instead I took another sip of Yukon Jack from a shot glass.

“April, you have to go home! You didn’t hear her on the phone. I did!” Stacey swiped the pint from the coffee table and took a swig. “Damn it!” Stacey gasped. “She sounded like she was crying her head off.”

Shock was my catalyst for returning home. I was dumbfounded by Stacey’s plea. When I arrived home my bed was still in perfect condition. Everything was silent. Walls felt closer together. The stillness in the house was eerie: a home for skeletons. Everything was in its place. Everything was just right. And like one of her polished antique lamp carefully positioned on the marble top table, I too was back in my place.



My mother and father never addressed my being fired, nor my urge to run away. Immediately a routine fell back into place.

Bright lights lit up the examination room. I finally took off my boots and snowsuit, letting everything fall to the floor. I shed all of my winter layers except my hat. My body felt a light breath of freedom that seemed to match the cheerful hint of lime green walls.

My mom now seated on a chair, her ankle straight out, tugged at me. I knew she wanted to take off my hat. I leaned forward and let her. Her cold fingers lifted off the hat slowly. Her eyes didn't change expression as she stared at my forehead. She touched it. She pointed at the small black step stool at the side of a bed with wheels.

“Go on, you need to get up there.” Her whisper worried me, but I followed orders.

My cold feet climbed the steps and I situated myself on the mattress. Lying down was a treat after the morning's events. One foot nudged the other for warmth. I wrapped my arms around myself and curled into a fetal position.

My fingers found their way up to touch my injured forehead. The egg had grown. It protruded from my forehead like a rubbery piece of soft uncooked meat. It really felt like the shape of an egg, sort of in the center, sort of above my left eye. The more I touched it, the more I started to get scared. There was something about my mom coming to get me from school that had both frightened and comforted me. But here I was in the hospital, lying on a hospital bed. I looked at the clock. My class was at lunch and then they would be at recess. I wanted to be at recess.

My fingertips pressed this grotesque thing on my head. I started to squirm and sit up.

“Stop touching it,” my mother’s voice was back. “Lie back down. Someone will be coming soon.” And they did.

“Lie flat and still,” instructed a man with dark hair who wore a top that matched the color of the walls in the room. He had white pants on and white shoes. The man lifted up brackets on either side of the mattress to keep me safe. My mother stayed in the chair and watched me. Every once in a while I would try to make eye contact. She didn’t say anything to me or the man. He asked her a few questions to which she either nodded or shook her head.

“We’ll be right back, Mrs. Kelly. We’re off to take a few X-rays,” The man said with a clear confidence. “Won’t we April?” I watched his upside-down face over me. He pushed the bed. It was a sensation I had never experienced. I felt like I was flying out of the room...or at least roller-skating out as we had to turn one way then stop, and then turn another way just so we could fit through the door.

As the bed rolled out into the hallway, I turned to face my mom. Just as I was leaving I was going to say something. But I didn’t say a word.

*Had she just wiped her eyes with my hat?*

## HANDFULS OF OLIVES

Frostiness from the door handle stings my tender fingertips as I step inside the International Food Store while my nostrils flare with an incoming gulp of air, a heavy wetness of foreign fruit oils intertwined with the fresh perfume of flatbread dust. I draw in another heaven breath, imprinting upon my spirit an aromatic tonic that simultaneously tugs at wandering childhood memories from beyond the deep belly of my brain, beyond the soils of my ancestors who bore these scents in the ripened creases of their aged faces.

\* \* \*

Women head to toe in black draped cloth, showing only astute eyes: wide, dark and inquisitive. They walk through the narrow aisles in pairs and trios.

Behind the meat counter, men with thick black mustaches bellow out orders in Arabic. They sound as though they have something caught in their throats. This does not slow their speech. Rhythm and sounds of the language tickle my inner ears; the translation circles above my head among the scents and shelves.

White containers hold pounds and pounds of chopped ground meat under glass. My hands are magnets to that glass. A bloody rawness seizes the cherry-colored meat: it is lamb mainly. Stacks of round fat cheese wedges and bowls with feta cheese and thick yogurts sit in the next cooler. Tall shelves, crowded and dim, hold jars of tahini, seasonings for chicken kabobs and extra virgin olive oil. Refrigerators hold goat's milk, more cheeses and brand name hummus.

The desserts sit near the front of the store. Near the cash register. Sweet bites of splendor. These desserts are made with phyllo dough, butter and nuts. It takes a long time to make the dough just right. I imagine delicate flakes on my tongue.

As I hold one of these boxes, my father's voice appears. When he says *baklava*, he almost spits. He doesn't mean to. It's the verve of the language...and his dentures. Baklava is the Arabic name as opposed to popular Greek name, *baklava*. My father has also told me that the Greek use honey instead of butter. He assures me it tastes better with butter.

It is a different angle of the world within these white walls. I feel sheltered. More so than in a classroom, or Sunday school...or even home. There is something that breathes this store alive. Amidst crowded shelves I stand sideways and stare at the cans, jars, bags and bottles with Arabic writing. People move around me to search for delights of their own. For as long as I can, I stand still to inhale aromas rich with ancestry and earth. I stand still to inhale the future.

Before I moved above the Bridge, Arabic food was always within reach. My father might make kibbeh for dinner; my mother, a bowl of tabouleh. Middle Eastern restaurants were also nearby.

One of my favorite treats after dinner was a handful of olives. Long after the meal, I would sneak into the unlit kitchen, tiptoeing across the linoleum floors, holding my hands out to feel for the counter and the dishwasher. There it was -- the refrigerator. Upon opening the door I had to quickly push the button that cues the inside light. My mom had sharp eyes for that tiny light once the kitchen was "closed."

The olives were kept in glass jars on the top shelf of the refrigerator: large mayonnaise jars with the labels peeled off. After a certain amount of time, the dark, clear olive juice would turn into a cream-colored, paste-like substance. The brown and purple olives were stark dots against the glass, like the random holes in cheese. I didn't like the taste of this substance, but it kept the taste of the olives fresh and sealed inside the fruit skin, like insulation keeps heat in a house.

This glass jar had to be carefully removed with one hand (my other was still holding the light switch inside the doorway). Cool appliance air would relieve my stress. I would place the jar on the counter and stare at the olives. They sat still in their hardened oil. I could never eat just one.

\* \* \*

In my mind, olives never travel alone. It is funny to me to see one olive sitting solo on a bed of lettuce or spinach at a restaurant. What is that about? I believe olives travel in families and communities: olives from the same branch, the same tree, the same community of trees, each a sibling in the universe of olives.

Think about it, thousands of olives traveled from the Mediterranean: floating and bobbing together in their oily juices to end up for sale at an International Food Stores in greater Detroit area.

\* \* \*

I was still at the age where my tiny hand fit tightly my father's grip while walking down the sidewalk. The two of us entered one of those stores with those similar aromas, similar groceries. Even at a young age I understood that this place was safe.

On my tiptoes at the edge of a plastic maroon-colored container, my eager little hands clawed at the unseen dark fruits swimming in a slippery ocean of oil. The liquid was cool and silky between my fingertips. The scent rose up from the depths of the container and excited my nose. Even the floor underneath my tennis shoes smelled like olive footprints.

“April, get your hands out of there.” My dad whispered commands at me in public, followed by his slight nervous chuckle. “Oh my goodness. What are we going to do with you?”

“It’s okay. It’s okay.” The Arab man behind the counter could have been my uncle or cousin. He waved his large hand like a conductor waving everything into truth, his voice ripe with accent. “What’s one...two olive?”

My father thanked him, nodded and whispered back at me, “With you it’s never one or two olives, is it?”

Like a chipmunk holding prize cashews, I sucked on my dark velvety trophies: their skin smooth against the inside of my cheeks. When my tongue couldn’t stand it any longer I spit the olives back into my hand. I nibbled at the mushy fruits until there was nothing but the musky scented pits.

As we left the market my hand once again rested in his. Behind us the cologne of the old world vanished as the glass door shut. We walked into the wet cool air and snowy Detroit streets.

My father’s Syrian-American background is like a colorful kite that someone else is holding. It doesn’t truly belong to me and yet I cannot take my mind or eyes off of it.

There are days it swoops down in front of me fluttering its ribbons in the wind, shaking and dancing, making noises of both sky and earth to remind me of where my father's ancestors came from. There are days when the clouds capture the fragile paper kite and take it up so high that I can barely sense its presence.

I am neither the kite, nor the kite holder. Nor am I the wind that rattles the stories loose. I am not even the land underneath that waits for the eventual drop that the kite must make from the heights, punctuating its finality of flight. As I have grown up, I have been only an observer in another space and time who attempts to enjoy the beauty the kite has to offer.

It feels one dimensional, this relationship I have with my father's heritage -- one dimensional and often confusing.

My connection to my father's heritage is the food. Not the language, the culture, or even relatives. I don't know many Arabs other than my father and some of my distant cousins whom I haven't seen in a few years: cousins who promised me they would call my father when he was sick. They never did.

My father played a very central role in my life, often standing between my mother and me as the two of us argued. He would side with me on what to do for what Mormons call 'family home evening.' This Monday night tradition was to encourage good Mormon parents and good Mormon children to spend quality time together.

My father didn't need family home evening to spend time with me. He dedicated hours to me: he loved to practice softball with me -- to toss, catch, hit and throw. Even after a long day on the job, even if his knees burned from his injury (a fall that almost

killed him), he would take my wooden bat and hit a few softballs for me to field. He made sure I knew what a catcher was supposed to do. He made sure I watched what other catchers were doing -- Lance Parrish from the Detroit Tigers for example.

My father attended all of my softball games. He would stand behind the team's bench, near the coaches watching every play of every game, not just when I was at the center of attention. Wearing his John Deer baseball cap, a flannel shirt and blues jeans, his eyes would search the diamond -- he looked as though he wanted to be in the game, on the field, in the action. Considerably more involved than other parents sitting on the cold bleaches, he offered advice to my friend Allison, on how to hold the bat. He shared his wisdom with Kristin on how to catch the ball using both hands. And he was the 'cool dad' who drove half of the team in the back of his black pick up truck for Dairy Queen ice cream when we were victorious, the coach usually picking up the other half. Sometimes the coach ran low on cash -- my dad would chip in and cover the rest of the DQ bill.

When I asked my mother why she didn't attend my softball games she looked at me with a dish towel in one hand and her other fist on her hip. She squarely announced, "Someone around here has to wash the dishes." Her voice was an angry wasp caught inside my ears and inside my heart.

My father never heard this and I never told him. Even if I had, my father's tender touch to my face with his rugged electrician's hands could not heal such a wound.

\* \* \*

Being Latter-Day-Saints, my parents believed in food storage. The storage room and its contents were a necessity: in case of an emergency or an unspeakable force of nature or



worse yet, war. When we moved to Richmond, my parents set aside one tiny, cold room in the basement. They dedicated this space to our food storage. The room with its gray cement walls and heavy door contained a wet smell.

On the floor were large, sealed plastic containers of rice and other dry foods; smaller versions of the containers in the Arabic food stores. Mom would store loads of canned fruit and vegetables in this often dark space. There were several shelves of Del Monte canned products and glass jars of homemade jellies and jams. Blackberry jam, strawberry jelly, blueberry jelly, wild raspberry jam. My mom made it all back then. She doesn't do this now, probably because I'm older and don't live at home any longer.

Mom would often send me to the storage room for a cup of brown rice or a cup of flour. This room was her territory -- again, her domain. I didn't understand it -- though sometimes I would stick my hands in the rice, just to feel it rain off of my hands and back into the container. There was something so tangible about stirring my fingers in the uncooked rice. My hands would dive back in for more, and I would repeat the action over and over again just to feel the rice run over my palms and between my fingers.

Cocoa Puffs was a cereal that never made mom's grocery list. She made sure that I didn't have too much sugar or junk food. Most cold cereals were both. But I was intrigued. I remember neighbor kids and classmates telling me that the cereal milk turned into chocolate milk. *Chocolate milk? How excellent is that?*

When I spent the night at a friend's house, I would sneak a taste of such decadent cereals.

However, my real introduction to Cocoa Puffs was in college. Living in the residence halls, we had a buffet of cereals to choose from. If lunch or dinner didn't look or smell appetizing, my boyfriend Walt and I would grab the ceramic bowls and head for the clear, large plastic dispensers that held Fruit Loops, Captain Crunch and Cocoa Puffs against the wall. We placed our bowls under the container of our choice and turned the plastic knob to release the sugary delights.

Walt also grew up an only child in Chassell, Michigan. The small village is seven miles south of Houghton in what is known as the Copper Country due to the copping mining years ago. Walt's Finnish parents didn't seem to have a problem with Cocoa Puffs or many other sugary cereals.

"Sometimes I would have Count Chocula, Booberry, Lucky Charms every now and then. And Frosted Flakes..." Walt stops, looks away from the television to look me directly in the eye. "Why do you ask?"

"I never had any of those kinds of cereals growing up."

"Oh yeah." He pauses to reflect on these breakfast treats. "My favorite was Cookie Crisp? They hurt the inside of my mouth." He smiles big, like he is getting away with something as he tells me this.

"Cookie Crisp?"

Walt wipes his hands in the air. "Don't you remember? They were so crunchy, they felt like they were going to tear up my mouth."

His voice quickens. "They were just a bit bigger than a dime, but they were thick. They were shaped like tiny little cookies. If they didn't soften up right away in the milk you would chew on them...the inside of your mouth would get...not raw...but

aggravated.” He stops and looks satisfied. We’ve been married almost sixteen years now and I refuse to purchase these types of cereals.

“And you liked this?” I ask.

“I loved it.”

Eventually, I learned while in college that indeed the brown dusty substance from Cocoa Puffs turned 2% milk into a poor representation of chocolate milk. As if my milk were stirred with a brown crayon. It wasn’t anything special. It wasn’t as big of a deal as I had remembered my friends in second grade proclaiming it would be.

Meals at Northern Michigan University ranged from pizza to spaghetti to hamburgers to Cocoa Puffs. This was by choice. For as hard as my mother made sure I didn’t eat junk or drink soda as a child, it was as if I worked twice as hard to catch up to my nineteen-year-old counterparts who had feasted on junk and soda all of their lives.

Eventually, my tongue grew numb, an unseen film covering it, a wet layer of food debris and disappointment. Nothing I ate seemed to brighten my taste buds. There was a bland residue of a microwave attached or thick deposits of grease. A void grew within my stomach, within my soul.

Like many college students, visiting my parents became about more home-cooked meals and laundry rather than spending quality time with the folks. However, I would usually request a special meal. I would request what my dad refers to as “Syrian soul food.”

Kibbeh, taboule, hummus and Syrian bread (pita bread). There were times I even stood next to him in the kitchen, watching him carefully so I would learn how to make these meals for myself. I have been unsuccessful so far.

My father's hands appeared to be huge in the green bowl. His fingers with hints of wrinkles, covered in raw, ground lamb and cracked wheat. He scooped up the round pound of meat: it was the size of a softball. He moved it confidently about the walls of the bowl.

"Your grandmother taught your mom how to cook Syrian food," he explained. "Your mother learned how to make these things very quickly. She surprised some people being Indian and all."

He took smaller bits of the meat and began making patties, slipping into each of them three or four pine nuts.

Mom's countertop fryer worked magic. A substantial scent filled the kitchen. Familiar aromas burst open memories like popcorn; these pictures against the windows of my mind made me smile. Sizzling sounds of cooked meat rose up into the air from what otherwise appeared to be a sterile-looking and silent appliance.

I would never have, or want to have, Cocoa Puffs again.

Recently I have had an urge to learn the Arabic language. My father never learned Arabic in a formal setting. He grew up with it, but never shared it with me.

I have a desire to learn Arabic to better understand what is happening in the Arab world. I am frustrated by the twenty second sound bytes of today's media. People talking over other people while translating Arabic. When the media does this it is as if to climb on top of them and decide what it is they really should say, instead of what they really did say.

If I learn Arabic, I believe I will connect to something I have lost: something from my past, my father's past. I will unite unknown selves, identities of my father's family, his people. Some of this interest stems from my own education, reading Naomi Shihab Nye and Diana Abu Jaber. Then there is a part of me that believes it is important to learn Arabic so when I hear it ringing against the walls of the International Food stores I will know something that other customers won't -- like what cheese is the freshest.

And yet, perhaps it truly stems from the unyielding fact that my father is getting older. His jet black hair has left his skull, what few strands remain have turned silver. The color of his face has lightened and is filled with wrinkles sliding up and down his cheeks, spouting up in his forehead and around his eyes. While the energy behind his eyes is still bright, his eyes are serious. They appear lonely.

He knows he is aging rapidly and he is angry about it.

He will soon lose life and I will soon lose him.

It won't bring him back when he is gone, but if I learn Arabic, it will be as if something spiritual will allow us to stay connected. Something much more rewarding than a plate of his Syrian soul food.

## LOVE LETTER TO SITTI

A framed black and white photograph sits upon my father's dresser.

This whispering image of you is embedded in my mind.

You are seated.

Wavy black hair wraps around your head.

A gentle breeze of grey streaks --

strands all meet at the unseen bun at the nape of your neck.

Unwavering eyes deep -- black moon drops.

Cheekbones unyielding, unwilling to lift for a smile.

A widow for a generation – a single mother to six brothers and one sister.

Your hands, frequently enfolded in dough,

clutch together in unspoken reverence.

Your legs still, your feet crossed in stillness.

You don't sit often I suspect.

Your *khubuz* is so beloved it is broken for communion at the church

on the end of the street. Detroit was different then.

Arabic flows from your lips, instructions to your youngest son,

“Knead the ground lamb and cracked wheat with care.”

Raw perfume of ruby red meat encircles the tip of your nose, his nose

crimson spices of the earth, oils of an ancient land and the bite of a white onion.

Immigrant aromas season your kitchen alive.

Sounds from your stovetop sizzle and steam with impatient expectation.

You wipe your sweat filled hands on your tired apron.

Your tired apron which bears the distinct marks

of love, despair, hunger and even hope.

My father's brown hands cup, turn and cup again,

his mindful fingers continue to knead the lamb for Easter dinner.

He was alone,

his daughter yet to be born, his mother yet to pass on.

In this recurring dream the woman with black hair and black eyes

lies under white sheets, under white lights

under the teardrops of her youngest son, the only son with her

when her heart attacks her.

Dad, you know

*kibbee nayee*

has always been my favorite.

## MUSIC AT MIDNIGHT

Puppy love at thirteen was all-consuming. Chris was one grade ahead of me. He was a boy with sandy blonde hair and perfect teeth. It began as a simple feeling about someone and led to a convoluted sensation I was unfamiliar with. A slow stir started within me; it warmed my blood, overtook my mind. I felt dangerous and joyous at the same time.

We first met when I was in seventh grade. It was my friend, Lori, who noticed him first. She thought Chris was *so* cute. I had never paid attention to him before this, but when I did start to take notice the layers of my skin seemed to have a heightened sense of touch, my eyes fell upon him over and over as if he had a magnet drawing them to him.

“He’s in intermediate band first hour,” she squealed. Lori’s blue eyes were bright behind her glasses. “He plays clarinet and you know what?” Lori looked to me for an answer. I shrugged. “In the morning he hangs out behind *the hill*.” Her gleeful smile of metal exposed braces and her objective. She was going to let Chris know that she was available *and* willing.

“The hill” was just that, a giant hill that had no purpose except during winter when it became a very dangerous sledding hangout. On weekends, children would cautiously climb up either side, hop on their plastic red snow dishes and zoom down the hill at breakneck speeds towards the baseball fields. If they went down the other side, they would land right in the parking lot of the middle school with a crashing roar from the pavement underneath, while their parents watched from the warmth of their cars.

This was the more exciting side.



When not being occupied as suicide central for snow lovers, the hill served as a blocking device for those cool middle school kids who wanted to catch a drag or hit a joint before the bell rang. Even in the coldest of temperatures, when everyone's fingers were crimson from the chill, the hill was still the cool place to be.

Within a few weeks of her announcement, Lori did go out behind the hill and hang out with Chris. In the hallways he would walk with his arm tight around her. They would suck each other's face before she climbed on the afternoon bus home, a common ritual at the bus lines with couples. Eventually, she introduced me to him.

It was during this time he was with Lori that I became susceptible to this thing called love. His playful eyes, bright blue, were shameless. His smile showcased his teeth: distinguished perfection, so different from mine. His whole face lit up when he laughed. A hint of dimples appeared on each cheek.

In eighth grade I was a member of the Richmond Intermediate Band. The director, Mr. Boulton, had convinced me to switch to the oboe from the flute. I agreed, largely because I knew I would be the only oboist. There were several flutists. Several ninth graders walked across the trimmed lawn from the high school to join us for intermediate band. First hour every morning, the middle school was overrun by these pushy ninth-graders. Once the hour was complete, most of them took their time getting back to the high school.

Chris was now in ninth grade and he had been convinced to change his instrument also. He went from clarinet to bass clarinet. This change led to a new seating assignment. Chris now sat directly behind me.

Although they had broken up by this time, Lori would turn around from the front row to watch him. She would place her flute on her lap and turn to tell me something insignificant. I knew she was doing this only because I was almost directly in between them.

It was proper for musicians to sit on the edge of their seats with their backs straight. We held our instruments on our lap or at attention depending on whether the director was to the side of the podium, ascending upon his podium or on the podium completely.

Band was fulfilling not only because Chris was in the class, nor because I excelled in music. I admired our band director. My parents loved that I was studying oboe.

“The oboe is a very difficult instrument to master,” they would tell their friends. “She is the only oboe player in the orchestra.” (Clearly we were a band, not an orchestra - - no strings.) I suspected my parents had more insurance out on my oboe than me.

Fact is, they should have had insurance out on the oboe reeds. These double reeds were very expensive. It was imperative that I be careful when I was seated in class.

One morning I was sitting with my back straight, waiting, ready to start when something cold and metal jabbed at my butt cheeks. I whipped around so fast my delicate double reed crashed into my black metal music stand.

“What the fuck?” I hissed. I didn’t want the band director to hear me.

The stab was from the bottom post of Chris’ bass clarinet. His head tilted back into laughter. Deep claps of sound from his diaphragm that smacked me across the face. Scott, a tenor sax player with thick, red hair behind him laughed too, “Damn Chris.” A

few clarinet players next to Chris looked away and tried to hide their smiles behind their music stands. I gave him and the rest of them the finger.

As I turned back around to face the director who was now stepping up to his podium, I raised my hand.

“Yes, April?”

“No way,” Chris whispered in disgust. “Fuck.”

“Mr. Boulton, may I get another reed out of my locker?” The band director wiped his eyes, looked at me with pursed lips and nodded. “Quickly.”

Carefully, I placed my oboe on my music stand. I scooted sideways in front everyone, my shoes squeaking against the floor. *I should have kept extra reeds with me.* As I walked to the back of the band room I turned to stare at Chris. He timidly shot a quick look at me. He knew I was pissed. I opened my locker, found another reed, loudly ripped open the package for everyone in the back to hear and started to suck furiously on the wood tip.

Mr. Boulton worked with the percussion for a few moments as I scooted sideways again, this time to my seat. After I sat down, I placed the reed in the oboe, blew in and out to make sure it was good and moist. I began to key my part of the score.

Chris leaned forward, “Damn, I thought you were gonna’ fuckin’ nark.” I ignored him. “C’mon, I’m just kidding.” I still ignored him. I took a breath of relief when Mr. Boulton turned everyone’s attention back to the music.

After the fifty-five minutes were up, I set my oboe case in my band locker and grabbed my second hour books. A hand landed on my shoulder. It was Chris.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I’m sorry your reed is all busted. I know they aren’t cheap.” His eyes were sincere. No mischief there. “The reeds I use aren’t cheap either, but at least they aren’t double reeds.”

He didn’t say anything else. He threw his jacket on and left for the high school.

It wasn’t the best pick-up line, but what did I know? I was in eighth grade,

Soon after that Chris and I were a couple. He wasn’t the first boy to kiss me, but he was the first to *make out* with me. In fact, I didn’t even know it was happening when he started. I felt his warm tongue inside my mouth. The moist outline of his lips stuck to mine. My tongue swiped back at his. Before I knew it I was seriously making out by the bus line like the cool girls.

There was only one problem: I didn’t take the school bus home that day.

My mother’s green Ford Thunderbird was parked in front of the middle school. As I leaned in and sat down in the passenger seat, she slapped at me. She was wearing her amethyst ring. It struck my nose and eyes. The edge of my left eye stung. Heat filled my cheeks. I turned away from her, slammed the door shut and huddled against the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” my mother questioned like a military sergeant. My silent gaze poured out the car window. A scratch on my nose started to tingle. I wanted to be anywhere else on the planet than next to her. She didn’t say another word. She was used to my silence by now. I used to hers.

Chris and I went together on again off again for the next couple of years. Two months here. Four months there. During this time, my early teen years, I lived with both turbulence and boredom simultaneously. Being on an eight-acre farm miles from the town of Richmond kept me out of trouble, but during the school hours I tried to find the

most trouble I could. Smoking in the morning. Skipping classes during the middle of the day.

Most of the time skipping meant a trip to the high school across the field to visit Chris during his lunch hour. I would sit on his lap while he ate his lunch. A throne of pride that I had a boyfriend *and* he was in high school.

Since I only excelled in band and choir those were the only classes that I paid any attention to. Science, math, social studies: they could all suck my left tit for all I cared. School became nothing more than an arranged date with whatever boy I was going out with. And if I wasn't going out with anyone, it was monotonous.

When asked years later why I didn't end up down a path of true self-destruction, my standard answer became, "My music." My first job as a church organist kept me close to my piano teacher, Bennie Malayang, who had an amazing singing voice. Her influence over me was immense. I saw her at least three or four times a week. She became my surrogate mother. She gave me direction. She gave me hugs.

I first began playing the organ when I was thirteen. It was at the United Church of Christ in Richmond. Because my parents were strict Mormons, I was surprised when they let me take on this opportunity. It was eye-opening to see people in choir robes, something I had never seen in our church. It was weird that wine was served during the sacrament of what they called Communion. I had never tasted wine and found it to bite at the inside of my mouth with bitterness.

Every Sunday morning and every Thursday night I was in church for service and choir practice. \$200.00 a month when there were four Sundays and \$250.00 when there

were five. Couples hired me to play their weddings. Families hired me to play for funerals. On top of being paid, I was usually pulled out of school for funerals.

Christmas Eve service began at 11:15 p.m. The chapel was adorned with poinsettias and garland on each wooden pew. A large Christmas tree was decorated in the corner with lights and ornaments handmade by the Sunday school kids. The service lasted until just about midnight at which time I would play “O Come All Ye Faithful.” Candles would be passed out to each member of the congregation. No one ever dropped a candle. One by one on each side of the church, a single flame was passed. The glowing fire kissed the next candle and the next and so on until every candle was lit.

Because Bennie was usually sitting in the pew closest to me she would hold two candles -- one for herself and one for me to take when the carol was over. I would slide off the organ bench and take my candle. Bennie would move to her position as choir director, only she would turn and face the entire congregation instead. The lights would then be turned off.

This visual was something I had only seen on television, a midnight service by candle light! Mormons certainly never seemed to be this dramatic, or this beautiful with their holiday services.

Bennie would end the night *a cappella*. Her vibrato voice rose to all glory on “O Holy Night.” Glowing faces observed in awe, flames danced in the reflection of tearfully glistening eyes. Everyone seemed to sparkle like the brightest star atop the tree.

When Bennie was not serving as a surrogate mother outside the school, my band director, Mr. Bolton, kept me under his close watch by keeping me busy, maybe because he knew I was headed down a grave path or maybe it was simply my talent. Or perhaps both.

He assigned me challenging oboe solos and he invited me to help him with projects around the music room: organizing folders and sheet music. And he encouraged other students to ask me to accompany them on piano during their solo and ensemble competitions. I made some good change doing that kind of work.

When he found out I was failing math, he bellowed, “Why didn’t you tell me? My second major was math in college!” Mr. Boulton was over six feet tall. I only imagined him on a podium or holding a trumpet. I never imagined his overbearing frame behind a desk with a pencil and calculator.

Unfortunately, Richmond’s band program was victim to a failed millage. Mr. Boulton exited my life unceremoniously after the ninth grade.

I turned to my piano. There were days I fell so far into my music I didn’t know how to climb back out. I would practice for five, maybe six hours. My hands were machines against the baby grand, pounding angry Russian chords three times the length of Rachmaninoff’s full name. “Prelude in C# minor” or “Prelude in G minor.” Brahms flowed and pushed from my capable hands with the smoothness of a professional hockey player gliding over fresh ice. Bach’s sixteenth note runs snapped with precision from my ten fingertips as sharply and quickly as a woodpecker’s knock.

Back straight, feet on the pedals, fingers against the ivories. The force with which I played the piano was confident, furious like a brewing blizzard beckoning pregnant

winds to be born. Unabashed, I would play myself into a trance if I had mastered a piece. It was between key signatures and crescendos that I was complete at the age of fourteen.

At sixteen, my days started to take a turn. My second job at K-mart wasn't as personal as my first job as Bennie's organist. I didn't know my boss very well; I can't even remember her name. I stood at a cash register for hours at a time serving crabby customers. After a few months, I was fired from K-mart when I was caught selling items at my register at discounted prices to make and keep friends.

I ran away from home. I left a note on my pillow. I spent a lot of time making my bed that morning.

On such short notice there were not many places I could crash without my parents finding out. The first night I stayed at the church on a pew. I had a key to the building and I knew that no one was going to be around.

It wasn't long before I found myself at Curt's house. Curt was one of the guys who hung out at the K-mart parking lot on the weekends (similar to the hill but for older kids with cars). Curt was nineteen and out of school. Curt's brother, Mike, was in my grade.

Their parents were out of town. Curt and I had the apartment for at least another week. Mike crashed everywhere else even though parties were held at the apartment every night. My parents would never find me here. They didn't even know Curt or Mike.

Away from the velvety olive green cover of my baby grand piano bench, I shuddered on a closet floor, my temporary makeshift bedroom. It was narrow, a walk-in closet with a



blue Christmas light for a bulb. I lay naked, aware of every crumb, pebble or unidentifiable nugget beneath me.

The closet was filled with clothes...and shadows. A musty stench encircled the tiny compartment. Long sleeves from a man's shirt draped over my forehead and I swatted them away. Metal hangers sang a grave melody. The shirts swung, a hushed shrill.

My hands wrapped together in fear and prayer, my fingers intertwined and twitching. My body curled up in the fetal position: I was a mixed drink of panic, fury, loneliness and alcohol.

Chris had warned me to leave this place.

*Why didn't I listen?*

\* \* \*

George had black hair, wavy web-like black hair that didn't hang. Instead, the coarse strands puffed out from his scalp and sat silently still. He could shake his head and the entire hairdo would shake with him. It was cut quite close to his skull right over his ears but then dropped down in the back just barely touching the skin at the base of his neck. His hair looked like it could have been a perm, but it wasn't. It was natural.

He was growing a mustache, black whiskers really. His black armpit hair was bushy and carried a slight wet smell. George was not much taller than me and we were the same age. Our tanned noses made contact at an almost equal level. Our dark brown eyes -- almost familial. We had held out our arms next to each other -- parallel limbs. His skin was the same summer chocolate as mine, a sharp contrast to his white cotton tank

top. He pointed out that my arms were hairier than his. My armpits however, were shaven.

George was wearing black shorts. His tanned feet bare and covered in earth's powder, a beige residue. He kicked me playfully as we were doing shots of Yukon Jack.

He asked smiling, fiendish wickedness within his eyes, "Do you like ice cream?"

\* \* \*

George entered the closet. He lay down and put his arms around me. They felt like strips of muscular meat. His dark nipples poked at his white tank top. He lean legs were tough and hairy. His voice entered the lobes of my ear. Searing deceit exhaled from him over my cheeks.

"C'mon, just let me get some sleep. I'll feel better in the morning." I didn't plead with him; my voice was level. I tried to convince him that I wasn't feeling good from the alcohol. He didn't care.

"You'll feel better if you lie still. Simply lie still. You'll be okay."

As I lay stationary, his hand with its foreign fingerprints traveled up and around my back, my neck and my ears. His hand moved up my side and with a flick stopped just below my armpit.

He repeated one line over and over in my ear, "Say 'I like ice cream.' Say it. C'mon. Say it. Say, 'I like ice cream.'"

The slithering sounds of the word *ice* against the clashing of the word *cream* sliced and cut at my eardrums. He turned my body towards him. I pushed but couldn't stop him. His legs worked, his arms worked, all of him worked against me, twisting my

figure under his. My fingers dug into his arms. His top half rose away from me. I released.

In a second of relief, I attempted to rise as well. With both of his hands he took my arms and snapped them in position behind me. He crashed upon me, kissing my face, ears, and collarbone. My breasts depressed into my chest from his weight. Even though he was not heavy in stature, I was unable to breath. “No. Not here. Not right now.” My mouth seized any slight breeze for fresh air. My breath stumbled over itself, gasping over and over, heaving over and over.

“Calm down,” George whispered. He held my arms with one hand and moved hair out of my face with tender deception with the other. “It’s okay, it will be over soon. Can you say it for me? Can you say I like ice cream?”

My face scrunched together, hushed secrets and sneering whispers zoomed around in my head. A dizzying spell of nausea consumed my mouth. I said it.

“I like ice...”

He entered.

And I screamed.

His left hand grabbed and covered my face pinching my cheeks and lips. He squeezed harder pushing my mouth with each thrust inside of me. He positioned himself to buck and ride my wilted, inexperienced figure. His face was immediately next to mine. He continued to whisper in my ear but I heard only murmurs of ghosts.

I shook my head and body attempting to free myself. Any noise I made was muffled by his hands. I wanted to bite at him, growl and tear at his ear, my incisors

ripping, shredding his eyelids. I knocked about thinking that I would penetrate his neck with my teeth and tear out his Adam's apple just as he tore out my innocence.

But he was stronger.

Shaking dissolved into quivering. His quick, burly motions left me limp. Blackness enveloped me. George was there in that darkness, his warm breath draped over my face. My body shattered like a peanut shell.

Once it was over, George got up and left. He shut the closet door behind him. I stayed there naked, soulless. Dripping at my thighs were his dismal fluids and mine. There was no use whimpering, crying or bawling...I was a sack of bones.

The two of us weren't the only ones having Yukon Jack that night. Upon hearing the news of what had just happened in the closet, George's friends and brother-in-law decided to investigate.

The door of the closet opened. Light from the living room shone.

Shattering sounds of electric guitars and double bass drums crashed their way in from the living room. The music stung my ears; it pounded inside my skull as if the kick drum pedal was on the floor next to me.

As I limply lifted my head to see who it was entering the closet, I became alarmed. Four greasy blue-jean-wearing guys were with George. One of them was Chris.

"Smell her," one of them said. "She smells like sex."

The scent of hard alcohol floated above my face in the air and seeped inside my nostrils. The bite of liquor was so fresh in the atmosphere had I the strength, I could have reached out and grabbed at the slithering, lingering staleness.

But I was too wounded. I put my head back down and grabbed at nothing. My head continued to pound. To breathe was a burden. Muscles in my arms, hands and even my fingers ached to the beat of a dull throb. I was an animal who had been shot, but did not die. Death was to steal me away at any moment.

“She wants it. You can tell.”

“Fuck you. Let’s leave her alone. Get outta’ here.” Chris shoved everyone out one by one. He stayed behind.

He shut the closet door. It was dim once again. “Are you okay?”

I didn’t lift my head. I didn’t answer. Maybe I should have thanked him for getting everyone out of the room, but my mind couldn’t concentrate and I didn’t know what was going to happen next.

He slid against the wall down to the floor. He sat looking at me. I refused to meet his eyes. “I told you, you should leave. I knew something like this could happen.”

He found some sort of sheet and covered me up. All the way up from my feet to my neck. “Is that better?”

I nodded and continued to stare into thin air. Between soft sobs I muttered something unusual.

“I wanted you to be the first ya’ know?” I couldn’t think of anything else to say and I had no energy to say it anyway. With each blink I heard a pulse inside my head,

This time he waited a long time before he replied. “April, I want you to leave first thing when you wake up. Leave and never come back. Promise?”

“Promise,” I whispered. He sat up. I don’t know how long he stayed in the closet with me.

Within a week I returned home to my own neatly made bed. Within two weeks I broke my promise to Chris.

Chris and I weren't the same after that. He put his arm around girls just to anger me, girls that I knew he would never be with by choice. He did whatever he could to push me farther and farther away.

An acidic nature crept into my personality. I clutched onto my music. I played with fury. My fingers were hurricane winds over the keys. My hands, strong as a bricks, pounded out chord after chord. Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" kept me busy in those days. When I was tired of that, I retreated to old favorites. The larger the chords, the harder I struck the piano.

Away from the piano bench, I slutted myself out to whores who would have me. My body was dispensable: a brown blow-up doll. If a guy's hands were on me, my breasts, my buttocks...they might as well have been wearing baseball mitts: pawing and striking me with no love, no lust. My mind would drift away while this was going on. I pretended it meant something.

*Had the days of puppy love ever truly existed?*

## STACEY

“Shit!” Frustration forced my lips together. The disapproving glance from the eyes of the umpire behind me didn’t concern me. Peer through that mask all you want -- what exactly did you expect me to say?

The heat of the evening summer sun, the thick catcher’s mitt, this heavy uniform and kneepads, the mask on my face – all of these things caused my entire body to feel weighted with exhaustion. The audience applause in the bleachers didn’t help matters.

It was the ninth inning. The long and intense game was tied at a whopping 24 points each. They were the home team, it was their last time at bat and they only had one out.

Oh, and yes! Their best batter was up to the plate. I crouched down placing my limber 14-year-old body back into my squatting position. I carefully watched the pitcher and her tall elegant body. She released her first pitch, a windmill fastball.

Softball was a release for me on many levels when I was a teen. Not only was I good at it, it got me out of the house. The smell of the dusty ball park was like inhaling the scent of a relaxing candle. My fingers, wrapping themselves around the cold metal fencing that separated the ball park from the fans, was much more inviting than practicing yet another sonata.

Stacey attended a Lutheran school in our town so I did not personally know her. I only knew of her reputation as a strong hitter in our league. She was not a big girl. In fact, she was small with a frame similar to mine and arms that were still growing.

Still Stacey was slightly taller than me. She had deep-set hazel eyes and her brown, naturally frizzy hair poked out the side of her oversized helmet and hung over her shoulders. I only got a quick glance of her face, but it was her giggle I noticed before anything. It was short and very sharp. (It sounded like a cross between a grace note and a puppy whose paw was just stepped on.)

Here came the pitch. It didn't connect with my mitt. Instead it connected with the bat. Stacey's swing was awkward but the ball was flyin' and the outfield was runnin.' I had already bounced up from my catcher's stance and whipped my mask off when I noticed she was still standing, holding the bat and watching the ball fly away into left field.

"You can run anytime, ya' know!" I mumbled.

Quicker than a bee, she turned towards me smiled, dropped her bat and buzzed towards first. With her first step, her obnoxious giggle exited her mouth.

"Airhead!" I yelled. It didn't matter. That ball was gone. As I watched my teammates running and running farther away I stood with my mitt on my hip at home plate. I swore again. My hair felt messed up. Probably because of the many times I had whipped my catcher's helmet off that evening.

Stacey came around the corner of third, ran straight towards home plate and finally a white speck was coming toward me, but not close enough to home plate. I ran inside of the diamond to grab it. As I caught the ball halfway to the pitcher's mound, Stacey stepped from the plate to be congratulated by her team. Someone handed her the oversized helmet. She, like so many of us, had tilted her head up while running so the helmet would naturally fall off.



“They were always so heavy,” Stacey sat across from me at one of the long brown lunch tables at Lutheran High School North.

“What?” I had wandered off into an interlude of memories. I looked at Stacey, her hair now trimmed and layered perfectly, her hazel eyes full of slight mischievous delight. She was almost always smiling.

“You looked so stupid standing there at home plate waiting!” She mimicked my standing with my hand on my hip. Two or three years had passed since that home run. Now I was back in our conversation. I rested my head upon my hands on the cool table thinking of a retort. I perked my head up and smiled.

“Well you certainly didn’t look like some sort of intellect standing watching your ball fly away!”

Stacey giggled out a “fuck you” at me. She made these mornings together at school alone something to remember. Instead of riding the bus on the long trip to school, we rode with one of the school secretaries, a mousey mother of two small children. Stacey sat in the back with them on the way to their daycare. I sat in the back on the way home. Most of the time, we were forced to listen to adult contemporary radio. This made the forty-five minute drive feel more like two hours.

Since the secretary had to arrive about 30 minutes early to prepare for the school day, Stacey and I wandered the halls keeping each other company. Her giggle and outrageous character was now quite familiar to me. She loved to make sounds in the hall because of the echo. There was no carpeting so her racket could bounce off locker doors and hall floors. With her mouth, she loved to make a sort of sound that resembled a fart.

Then she would laugh. It was as if she would pronounce the word, “hah” only rhythmically repeating it several times, liked a run of sixteenth notes.

Her wit struck like lightning. She would spot a teacher and immediately spew off how goony he was. After which, if no one was around, she would imitate his walk down the hall. Each of our teachers had a distinctive walk.

My favorite imitation was of our Theology teacher, Mr. Krupski. He was twenty-five years old, fat and bald with a round smile like Jimmy Carter’s, only his teeth seemed to be as big as a pony’s.

Stacey would flap her arms back and forth walking with a quickened penguin pace. “Now you!” she bellowed in a deep Krupski voice, a slight lisp bubbling from her lips. “Can’t you people *listen* anymore?” Her lips would form a tight triangle, and she’d throw her elbow high in the air and point at me as if I was going to get the paddle. “You! Are you taking notes?” Her voice rose like lava. “You’rrrrre going to be sorry at *tetht* time!”

A delicious evil smile emerged. She mirrored my smile and we’d both crack up until a teacher would eye us from their classroom.

All of the teachers at Lutheran High School North knew we were best friends, as close as can be. We dressed similarly, used similar slang and always had to be together in the halls or seated together in chapel.

Crowded halls between bells wouldn’t stop us from communicating in those short minutes. If one of us spotted the other amidst football shoulders and puffy hairstyles, a deep “EHHH” would appear from nowhere. We were short so we didn’t bother to look.

However, if I heard “YO! EHHHH” or “YO! EHH BITCH!” That was my signal that there was good gossip to be shared or our precious ‘notebook’ was ready for exchange.

Our notebook was used openly during classes. Every other hour, or at least as often as we bumped into each other, we would pass our notebook between classes. We would compose notes in outline form so teachers would not realize that we were actually writing a full narrative expose’.

I. Did you know that Mike was seeing Amanda?

A. What a slut. She goes from one guy to the next.

B. And her friend, what’s up with that hair?

II. Mr. K’s shirt is hanging out the back of his pants.

A. His little Pacer wouldn’t start in this cold weather again.

B. That car is about as round as his head.

C. His armpits are soaked again. GROSS!

Stacey had grown on me when I transferred to LHN in the tenth grade. However, since she was already well adapted in this school she was slower to respond to the beginning of our friendship. It helped though that I was the only other girl her age from our mutual hometown of Richmond. It also helped that we had played together on the all-star softball team two years earlier.

“I think that game was the first memory I have of you.” She looked at my seriously.

“Yeah! Me too!”

When I looked at Stacey she was always smiling. Her teeth were straight except for the two front teeth that poked out slightly, yet gave no indication of bucked teeth. Her nose was slim and slightly pointed. Her lips were full, yet when she smiled they were thin and this made her smile more noticeable and attractive.

Her make-up was always blended perfectly except after extra innings. To strangers she had a sweet but mysterious innocence about her. I knew what the mystery was. She wasn't innocent at all. She was loud and outspoken. She had intelligent humor and was fun to be around. She was the human upper. She didn't need caffeine; she was always full of energy....but when she wanted to be lazy, she put all of her energy into being lazy.

When she was depressed or ready to cry, even though I felt bad for her, I wanted her emotions to last longer. I really only witnessed her cry on two occasions. The first time her softball coach had yelled at her in front of everyone on the varsity team. Stacey didn't respect this woman, in fact she hated her.

I never played softball during those high school years. It just happened that I was there hanging out near the bench that afternoon. Stacey's back was to the diamond. She threw her mitt on the bench, turned and sat down. She wasn't looking at me or anyone. I got up to walk away. I felt as though I should give her privacy.

She whimpered, "Don't leave me."

I never knew Stacey to *need* anyone, except a boyfriend. I turned back to face her and hug her for support but she backed away. I never questioned why.

I always let her be her. I admit I was the weaker of the two of us and it didn't matter to me about not showing her emotions since we hardly even had bad times together.

We shared great times. We cruised around Richmond in the dark. We went to parties. We dated a lot of the same guys and compared notes on them after. We pulled horrible pranks on old boyfriends and the secretary who drove us to school. We had ice cream fights at Big Boy, we went shopping, and we played softball. We got drunk, went to concerts, spent over nights, planned parties when our folks were gone. We even had our senior picture taken together: two tough girls standing with arms folded, wearing pink sweaters, denim jackets and blue jeans.

I don't know if it was because of high school graduation or her boyfriend, Tony. Our friendship simply evaporated. For some time, I thought it was more difficult for me to swallow this pill; but maybe not. Like I said Stacey never showed her emotion, which seemed to indicate that she never cared about anything. I felt as though I was the only one who noticed that our friendship was drowning.

Our softball coach from high school once asked me what we'd even do if our other half was cut off. Both of us shrugged our shoulders and said, "It won't ever happen."

\* \* \*

What do you say to someone you haven't spoken to in a while? More precisely what do you say to someone whom you haven't seen in nineteen years? What do you say when you find your best friend from high school on MYSPACE?

I wasn't positive if it was her, but I had my suspicion as I stared at the computer screen. Tonya was easy to find thanks to the MYSPACE search engines. After entering the name of high school and age, I clicked on "alumni" and "update" and there Tonya was with different colored hair and a blue hat.

MYSPACE is an on-line community I joined recently to connect with friends and even find old friends. Tonya had over one hundred friends. One of the attractions (and downfalls) of MYSPACE versus another on-line community/blog I belong to is that you can investigate who other people are friends with. This has led to "MYSPACE stalking." Perhaps that was what I was doing, but I didn't think so.

About noon on July 15, 2006, I pointed my mouse to a photo I had spotted under Tonya's "friends list." It was a brown, hairy dog who looked right into the camera. The dog's face was cocked to one side as if someone taking the picture was talking to it. The name below the photo was Stacey.

*Click.* The profile opened.

Female

36 years old

RICHMOND, MICHIGAN

United States

My stomach leaped with nervousness. My finger pressed on the mouse to scroll down the page to investigate further. The section entitled “about me” was completely blank. However, she filled in the blanks of what MYSPACE calls “basic information.”

Status:	In a Relationship
Here for:	Networking
Orientation:	Straight
Zodiac Sign:	Scorpio
Smoke / Drink:	No / No
Children:	Someday
Education:	College graduate

It was the Zodiac sign that stopped me. Her birthday was November 11 and I was about 95% percent positive she was a Scorpio. I was terrified to start typing, but my fingers went on in a playful sprint just the same. In the subject line I put the following – **“Krupski’s armpits smell like ...” (you fill in the blank)**. Inside the message box I kept it short and sweet:

*Just dropping a line because I think it's you, but not sure if it's you! ;-P*

*The subject line sez all ~ (GAG). Whaaazzup?*

*See you're a writer too. What are you writing about? What are you doing these daze? Me - work, work, work. Finishing up a third degree. Will need to stop now.*

*Am a corpse from it all. wbs ~ April*

For two days I waited. What if she didn’t write me back? We didn’t really leave one another on good terms. We didn’t leave on bad terms...the terms merely dissolved into thin air.

She wrote back on the third day. She never did fill in the blank I proposed (and I was a bit bummed about that), but she did have a lot to share with me with what seemed to be genuine interest.

For a few months we've been writing and getting to know each other again. She has been married and divorced twice. She is going through a rough time right now. Even through email, she remains tough and at arm's length.



PART II

*Above the Bridge*

## LIVING SPACE

Officially, I have now lived above the Bridge, longer than I have lived below. If someone would have told me in high school that I would live the majority of my life above the Mackinac Bridge, I would have gasped and then laughed.

Escaping the suffocating confines of my parents' home was a primary factor in my choice to move nearly four hundred miles north. For one semester after graduation I tested the waters in the workforce. The existence of an overnight gas station attendant was not for me. It was time to move. College was my ticket.

"No good Iroquois would live that far north," my mother said. A bold tone rang in her voice when the three of us discussed the move. "It's too damn cold." She whispered the word *damn*.

"Oh yes," my father said with his nervous chuckle, his arms folded. "It is cold."

Yes! A stamp of guarantee that I wouldn't be followed.

Truthfully, Sam and Dorothy were relieved and satisfied with this decision. They were tickled to share the news with friends. "April is studying in college now. At NMU. In Marquette."

No good Iroquois would dare to ride in a car that far north during the winter either. Mom shoved some fresh towels and bed sheets in my arms in the early morning before my father and I were set to leave. She didn't have her hearing aids in. The volume of her speaking voice louder than usual, she asked. "Do you have any of these items?"

"No," I clearly pronounced and shook my head.

“Well, aren’t you’re going to need them?” she paused knowingly. “Aren’t you?”

“Um...probably? Yeah.”

She wrapped her arms around me and gave me a fierce, swift robotic squeeze. She turned to my dad and kept talking to me, “I don’t know how you’re going to manage. You don’t even know how to do laundry.”

My mother and father kissed with extended pursed lips.

“Okay you two,” she said, still talking loud. “Drive safe. I’m going back to bed.”

My father and I left the house without further ceremony.

Boredom struck on the never-ending I-75, the main highway that links Lower Michigan with the Upper Peninsula. Michigan was quite ordinary, infinite acres of farmlands stretched wide into the vast future.

This was the first time I crossed the five-mile-long Mackinac Bridge. The Upper Peninsula was a world I was unfamiliar with. My father mentioned something about a ‘Yooper’ accent (pronounced you-per) and that ‘Yoopers’ have a culture all their own. I couldn’t wrap my mind around this.

“Yeah, but it’s still Michigan, right?” I looked at my dad for a few seconds and then looked back at the highway. Keeping my eyes off the road meant potential motion sickness.

“You’ll become a Packers fan.” He waved his right hand at me. “Everyone up there is a Packers fan.”

“What? A Packers fan. No way. Why would I do that?”

“Oh yeah.” He stretched out these two words and raised his tone with a convincing and confident crescendo. “Wait and see. They sell Packer stuff everywhere. I couldn’t believe it either. Everyone up there. Packers fan.”

He would know. My parents were in Marquette annually for the fall antique show at the hockey arena. Being dealers, they hosted a booth for there for several years. They were among the favorites at the show.

Truly, I had no idea what I was getting myself in to by moving up north.

Prior to my arrival in Marquette, I had called my roommate on the phone. I noted an unfamiliar accent but was too embarrassed to ask about it. We talked about music we liked to listen to. Whew! At least we had similar interests.

Bon Jovi, Ratt, Pat Benetar, Ozzy, and Skid Row were on both our favorites list. She was thrilled to learn that I had several untouched, unopened posters of these bands. They were not allowed up in my room at my parents’ house. As the conversation progressed, she shared with me that she was from Norway.

*A-ha!* The accent.

“From Norway, really?” I asked. *How cool is that?*

“Yeah, really,” she replied.

When I hung up the phone I told my parents right away that I would be rooming with someone from another country. The joke was on me -- Norway, Michigan, is about ninety minutes south of Marquette in Dickinson County.

Truly, I had no idea what I was getting myself into by moving up north.

Second floor Gant was my new home. It was a residence hall in the middle of “down” campus. Moving during the winter months proved to be difficult simply because of the cold and snow. Because I arrived early for the winter semester to take care of orientation requirements, I found myself sitting by myself in the television room. The Resident Advisor had work to do so I was left alone. Echoes.

The residence halls were a labyrinth of painted cement walls and metal doors, especially when one has too much to drink. The campus itself was a maze of roads, buildings, parking lots. It was an encompassed community of students who walked over the snow covered walkways with confidence.

Four of us gals fit in this suite of two rooms. Our rooms were linked together by a long bathroom. A fifth silent member of the suite was a white shadow of a cat named Cocaine. Cats were not allowed in the residence halls. Cocaine was a quiet roommate slinking around in the middle of the night.

Cement walls everywhere and I couldn’t have felt more liberated. A single crowded little space fulfilled so many dreams. Posters, bumper stickers, concert ticket stubs were tacked on the ceiling, taped on the walls and on my desk.

My suitemate, Janet, who had also graduated from Lutheran High School North, introduced me to everyone up and down the halls. Janet, Michelle and I socialized into the deep hours of dawn. Socializing also took place up and down the hallway or in the television room or in the “study” room.

*People, real live people to talk to.*

\* \* \*

People and parties didn't fill up the entire calendar my freshman year. The second week of school, one of my classmates informed me about Public Eye News and urged me to attend a meeting. This student organization produced and aired a daily news show on WNMU-Public TV 13, the local public television station.

“What? You can run cameras and everything?”

“Oh yeah. The students do everything,” she said. “Here. Come to a meeting this afternoon. You'll get to meet some of the other people involved.” And with that she handed me a flyer that would transform my college experience into an expedition.

As I descended down the stairs to the public broadcasting studios to meet other students interested in this student organization, I couldn't have imagined that I would spend ten years walking those same steps on a near daily basis.

My first volunteer position for the daily news was as the floor director.

I wore headsets. I looked professional. Soon after I ran the studio cameras -- very expensive cameras. The full-time staff at the station was very supportive of what we were doing, but there was a silent concern about students using the equipment every day.

This world of studio life fascinated me. And I was good at it, really good. Once I learned how to use the cameras, the next step was to move from the studio to the control room. I was assigned to type graphics or run the audio board. Neither of these positions held my interest compared to running a camera, but I remained a part of the team.

Unlike many other students who volunteered for the Public Eye News, I was there every weekday afternoon. After several weeks, I went on-the-air. Friday afternoon always meant we would be low on crew and talent. Some days there would be four on-air talent

(two anchors, one weather, one sports), sometimes three and sometimes two. That afternoon it was just another student named Bill and me.

Excitement flowed through my nervous system. The red light turned on and I felt a confidence while reporting the stories of the day. Our staff advisor, a full time producer at the station had given me advice about reading into the camera.

“Take some red lipstick and draw an oval on your bathroom mirror, right at eye level.” Jackie said. “Then find a newspaper and read the lines right into the oval. That’s your camera.”

“Why a newspaper?” I asked.

“There are more words. It forces you to know the story. People can read all they want, but if they don’t know the story, they aren’t reporting anything, they are just reading.”

Bill and the crew congratulated me. Members of the full-time staff entered the control room during playback to shake my hand. There was no credit involved that first semester, but eventually it paid off in different ways. The news became a haven of fellowship and learning.

Staff took note of my work ethic. Soon I was on the payroll for Public Radio 90, but only after an audition. I sat in the sound-proof production room and spoke into a microphone with a fat, black wind screen. Years of piano afforded me correct pronunciations of classical composers. Even though I had a slight lisp, I was hired. My first job on campus was as a weekend morning announcer from 6 a.m. to noon.

When students today tell me they are having it tough working and going to school, my pity faucets don't automatically turn on. During my freshmen year I held down four jobs: Public Radio 90, Public TV 13, church organist at St. Paul's Episcopal and Little Caesar's Pizza. I concede that I didn't make the Dean's list, but at least I could pay my bills. And I did pass all of my classes.

Much of my learning took place outside of classroom. Time spent at Public Eye News and Public Radio 90 was invaluable. Being schooled in the ways of broadcasting was beneficial. WNMU-TV hired me before I obtained my bachelor's degree.

My time in Marquette also taught me the ways of flannel fashion, pasties with rutabagas and Finnish-Yooper accents. Truly I didn't know what I was getting myself into, but I was grateful to be in.



## WHISKERS AND PAWS

Cocaine didn't last long during my first semester in Gant Hall. Too many triggered fire alarms forced my suitemates to get rid of her. We suspected that resident advisors were doing this to catch Cocaine and the handful of other renegade kittens hidden in the dorm.

Cocaine was never caught, but the routine started to wear on us.

Michelle and I slept on homemade lofts. Our faces were about seven or eight inches from the ceiling. My head connected with the ceiling more than a few times when the alarm clock buzzed.

The fire alarm was so earsplitting my body reacted with a similar jolt. One late night the alarm went off after 2 a.m. Michelle and I barreled down the homemade wooden ladder. My bare feet were tingling in the snapping cold winter air.

"Find some socks, find some socks," I mumbled. We were both shivering and chattering. It was best to grab shoes and socks just in case we were asked to wait outside. First, we would wait in the lobby: if there was really a fire, we were led outdoors.

Our metal door to the bathroom slammed open. The door crashed against the wall.

"Cocaine! Where the fuck is Cocaine?" Janet's voice quivered in panic. "Fuck! We don't have time for this, cat...where are you?"

"She wasn't in your room?" Michelle asked.

"No." Janet hauled ass back into the bathroom. Her feet slapped against the tiled floor.

"Just grab the fucking litter box," Amy yelled. Her voice bounced against the cement walls in an elongated echo. All four of us froze. Amy was Janet's roommate and

she herself made the rule to never, ever utter the words *litter box* in case someone heard us. Amy's mouth hung. We stood hushed. Janet, Amy and I were now in the bathroom. Michelle was near the closet next to the door that led to the hallways.

We listened to the muffled noises in the hall. Michelle shook her head. An indication there was too much commotion for anyone to have heard anything. Janet grabbed the baby powder and shook almost all of it over the grey stones of the litter box. She picked up the cardboard box with its trash bag liner and ran into her room. Sounds of cardboard scraped against the floor: she had shoved the litter box under her bed.

We did one last run around to search for the missing white longhaired cat. Cocaine eluded us. We grabbed our coats, headed out the door and spilled into the moving wave of bodies going downstairs.

Cocaine eluded the R.A.s as well.

She wasn't my cat, but Cocaine planted a seed in my own mind. I wanted kitten too. Who cared that it was against dorm rules?

Tiger, my tabby cat, had seven toes on each foot making his paws look like tiny baseball mitts. He was a big cat and stalked around the farm hunting small creatures from June bugs to mice. One Sunday, my father carefully slipped our car into the attached garage of our ranch home. Tiger was curled up in his cardboard box full of straw and an old bath towel on the steps leading into our kitchen. Tiger mah-rooed a solemn little cry when we climbed out of the car.

"Holy mackerel!" My father exclaimed. "What happened to your eye?"

A small grey lump was against Tiger's face. The size of an olive seed, the lump appeared squishy and spongy. The tiny bulge was hanging by a thin strip of muscle or a vein. The piece of exposed flesh was Tiger's left eye.

"He must have gotten into some sort of fight." My father explained to the vet. The next day, Tiger went on his first and only trip to the vet. His eye was removed the socket emptied and cleaned out. The vet sewed up the open space with tiny little black stitches that would eventually have to be pulled out with tweezers, a job for mom's careful hands. The space healed over as if his eye never existed.

The dark loft of the giant red barn was spooky. I spent hours playing alone in the elevated space. One afternoon I heard a low growl of an angry feline. She didn't sound like Tiger or any of the other barn cats in the neighborhood.

Brutus, barn guardian on the lower level, barked and barked at the mysterious growler above him. I reported the growling incident to my parents at the dinner table. After which, my dad climbed up the metal ladder to the loft with a large flashlight.

"Oh yes. There's a mother up there with kittens." My father took off his work gloves and hat. "April, let's leave her alone for a while. Steer clear of the loft until she leaves."

"She will leave."

"I believe so."

She did as my father had predicted, but she left one miniscule squealer behind. His little squeak was barely audible from the lower level. Again I reported what I heard to my dad. Again, my dad climbed the ladder with his flashlight. This time as he

guardedly stepped down the metal ladder a tiny dustball of a kitten filled the breast pocket of his heavy, brown Carhartt jacket.

“This little guy is starving.” My father placed a tiny speck of a cat on the kitchen floor. His claws clicked against the linoleum. His voice was tired of mewling for it came out scratchy. His belly was round, but we knew he hadn’t eaten in at least a day.

My mother let out a long, “Awwwwww...look at him, poor kitten” before turning to her trusty stove to make some hot cereal. I sat on the floor with the kitten allowing him to nibble at my fingers and climb about my folded legs.

“He’s probably only a few days old.” My mother placed the bowl of warm cereal on the floor. I gave him a gentle push to the bowl.

*Thpt, thpt, thpt, thpt.* The sound of his lapping filled the kitchen. Tiger was still with us when Dusty arrived. The coon kitten shared the cardboard box with the older Tabby, who took to the infant easily.

Dusty grew to be the biggest cat we ever took care of. He was an impressive hunter. It didn’t matter if the animal was bigger than he was.

Early one Sunday morning, Boo Boo was barking a furious message. He was tearing around in his run space.

My father peered out the dining room window. “What on earth going on out there?” He headed down the hall to tell my mom, who was in the bedroom, what he saw. I overheard the news from my bedroom as I was getting dressed.

“Dorothy, that cat has hold of a rabbit.”

“A bunny rabbit?”

My dad started to chuckle while moving about at a faster pace. Every once in a while when my dad really starts to laugh, his eyes water. He took out the handkerchief from his suit coat. “Dorothy, that *bunny* rabbit is bigger than he is.”

“Uhhhhh...” My mother responded in an overdramatic voice. “Sam, you have to save that bunny.”

“I’m going, I’m going.”

“Dusty caught a rabbit?” I followed my dad down the hallway to watch from our dining room window.

“He sure did. And that dog is barking, geez, stop it Brutus.” My dad headed out in the cloudy morning. As he walked across the lawn, Boo Boo, who had been barking this entire time, sat down and panted. Dusty was crouched down, almost lying down on the ground. Dusty had hold of the brown and grey rabbit at its neck. The rabbit was still alive -- its giant black globe of an eye blinked in terror.

I watched my father dad kneel down. Against his white sleeves, I saw his brown hands grip Dusty’s entire face. Boo Boo was up and barking again as if scolding Dusty.

After a couple of seconds of prying, the frightened rabbit bolted from the cat’s grip. My dad dropped himself down on Dusty, who attempted to leap after the speeding target.

“Egads, that cat is strong.” My father had to change into a new outfit for church.

“Good Boo Boo.” Mom called out in her dramatic voice to no one in particular.

“Good Brutus for saving the bunny.”

Dusty stalked around the yard for a couple of days. His head hung low, betrayed. My dad mentioned that perhaps Dusty was upset with us. “This was his trophy Dorothy!”

My mom shook her head. “That poor bunny.”

Here Dusty was bringing home his equivalent to a perfect spelling test for the refrigerator door and my dad let it go.

In the fall of 1989, Walt and I moved into an upstairs apartment with one of his fraternity brothers. We were living on Front St., a few blocks from campus. It felt like freedom. After being alone during my childhood, three semesters of living with dozens of people around you was similar to sugar-overload. Dizzying to say the least. I had had enough. I still wanted to be social, but I wanted to be social on *my* time. And we were.

Steve lived with his cat Buckshot, a Maine coon cat that had more than a few mean bones in his body. He was cuddly enough when he wanted to be. Most of his days were spent pacing, patrolling the apartment with a sour grimace.

Walt and I built a loft bed in our room. I had gotten used to sleeping on a loft in the dorms. It also made our bedroom larger and more functional. Buckshot loved to climb up the ladder and sleep at Walt’s feet. At some point, I had decided to get my own kitten. Steve agreed and thought another cat would be good company for Buckshot. I searched for “free kitten” advertisements and found one rather quickly.

Walt and I drove his 1980 midnight blue Toronado into south Marquette. We picked out a tiny black cat, only eight or nine weeks old, from a large litter. As I picked up the scrap of a cat, his white claws extended deep into my clothes catching skin underneath.

“Ouch!” I pulled him slightly away from me and rearranged him to a football hold under my arm.

“They’ve got nails.” The woman of the house announced. She seemed pleased to be “getting rid of another one.”

Walt and I headed to the car. He had climbed in and turned the key as I was leaning in carefully to sit on the passenger side with our new little one. The deep awakening grumble of the Oldsmobile engine terrified the teeny guy. Once more claws appeared everywhere. He kicked his way out of my arm and started climbing up my chest to my collarbone and neck.

“Holy Christ Walt!” I howled. His sharp claws were stuck into me. He was like a reptile slapping rocks underneath him -- not the cute fuzzy pet I had imagined. I waited for tiny spurts of my blood to shoot out of my body: a miniature Texas chainsaw scene of carnage in the front seat.

“Grab him,” Walt snapped.

“I’m trying. Starting the car freaked him out.” I was pulling him back down to my lap, his paws and legs thrashing within inches of my face.

“Okay, sorry about that everyone,” Walt announced. “Let’s try this again.” With that we cruised home in the big blue Toronado with our baby black kitten.

Buckshot was not amused. Upon noticing the itty-bitty addition to the household, the mangy cat looked at Steve. He then looked at us. He looked at the kitten. He looked back at Steve. His limestone green eyes glaring at all of us. He sat frozen. Frozen and mute. You could tell by Buckshot’s reaction he was indignant. He wanted to raise his voice at us, “What the hell is this nonsense?”

Instead the ornery feline stood up, snapped his furry tail at us and marched away; leaving the three inconsiderate adults and the kitten intruder behind in the living room.

“Now what are we going to do?” Walt asked.

“Let’s see how it goes in the next couple of days,” Steve suggested.

“What? The next couple of days? I don’t want to give this cat back!” I yelled sort of this teenager-type-yell; not really loud, but attempting to demand some sort of respect.

“We’ll see,” Walt replied.

During his infancy, Batman would lie down and sleep in what appeared to be quite a proper position as if his life was as a royal, surrounded by elegance and sophistication. When he did this, his skinny figure matched the shape of the sexy new Bat-mobile that zipped around Gotham. He ate furiously, lapping up everything we put on the floor. He also peed wherever he wanted no matter how hard we trained him.

Buckshot chose to sleep in our loft more often. This was the one place in the apartment where Batman was unable to disturb him. Batman’s legs were still too stubby to climb the ladder. This isn’t to say that Batman didn’t try. Oh, he tried.

Walt and I were awake one a weekend morning and lying in bed. Buckshot was pacing back and forth on the mattress needing attention from both of us. We heard Batman’s feeble mews below us.

Mew...mew...mew. Batman leaped up to the first step of the ladder. *Tha-pat.* Silence. *Tha-pat.* Two steps up.



Buckshot climbed on Walt's chest and flattened himself in a comfortable position staring right into Walt's face. Walt returned the stare. I propped myself up on my elbow to view Batman's attempt to gain access to the loft.

Tha-dump. The padded sound of Batman's paws landing on the carpet below was a clear indication he was down after only two steps. Nope. Not gonna make it today. This wasn't going to last forever. We knew that, but we don't think Buckshot knew that.

His mangy highness was at Walt's feet this time. Walt and I were lazily hanging out on another weekend morning in the loft. We heard Batman's mew below.

*THA-pat.* Silence. *THA-pat.* Sounds of claws on wood.

"Uh-oh." Walt murmured.

Buckshot sat up to inspect the happenings on the ladder. *THA-pat.*

"Oh no!" Walt moaned as if he had bad coffee. "Oh no!"

*THA-pat.*

Success! Batman was on the mattress. Walt and I both propped up on both elbows and stared at into two huge black eyes belonging to Batman. His skinny legs wobbled. Buckshot backed one step, growled and then pushed his way down the ladder. *Puda-puda-puda-puda.*

Batman, who had been sidestepped, from the furious exit, waddled towards us to be petted.

"Ya' know what Bucky's thinkin'?" Walt looked at me. "There goes the neighborhood." Batman curled up between us. We dropped back down to our pillows, scratched his head and gave him some love.

Batman is now 17-years-old. This black cat whom we have dubbed, the Grumpy Old Man, has one white whisker, a whisker proclaiming itself “alpha whisker” against the other, thinner charcoal branded whiskers that reach out from his soft black face. It is thicker and longer than the others. It could lace a softball. I would bet on it.

Batman’s head is about the size of a major league baseball. His wide dark eyes are still alert even though his body doesn’t move as fast as it used to. He was born in 1989, the year the first “Batman” movie with Michael Keaton was released.

When he is hungry, his cry can be a harsh wake up call, especially on weekends. His bladder and brain don’t communicate like they used to. This has caused contention in our house, all over our house. We have learned that in Batman’s old age, he has kidney problems.

Three times a week we must trick him or lure him within our grasp, grab him and drive him to the vet. Some days, he is smarter than us and he hides under the bed. I am convinced that he knows when Walt has called to cancel the appointment. He usually makes an appearance again as soon as the receiver is placed back on its holder.

So many years later and I can say that Batman is Walt’s cat. It’s true -- I feed him, medicate him, pay the kitty litter bill, and pay the vet bill, whatever...he is still Walt’s cat. It’s a tad embarrassing when your pet for 17 years snubs you in front of your friends.

There are days I wish he would pass on. He is sick all of the time, the vet has said, but he’s not in pain. Who would want to be alive and be sick all of the time? I think about that. Probably thousands of people live their lives in pain, in disease, in some sort of illness I cannot fathom. This is not to say I *want* Batman to die. I just don’t want him to suffer. And I confess, I’m tired of cleaning up after him.

Batman will leave us sooner rather than later and I fear Walt's reaction to this loss. It will devastate him.

The early morning of April Fool's Day 1998, Walt was awake and getting ready for work well before 6:00 a.m. We had been married for over seven years and living in a house that was renovated into two apartments. We lived on the first floor of the old structure. We were especially relived when we found the place because the landlords allowed pets.

Walt had been working morning radio for most of his adult life, but he had only been employed with the Great Lakes Radio Network for a few months. His new job was as one-half of the *Mark and Walt in the Morning* show. He loved it.

I had fallen asleep on the living room couch because Walt's snoring kept me awake. Most mornings Walt could get ready for work with all the lights on, water running, stomping of shoes on the floors...and I would sleep through it all. But on this morning Walt's voice woke me up with an alarming stir.

"Wimpy?" His voice rose. "Wimpy? WIMPY?"

My eyes popped open.

"April." Walt noticed I was awake. "Don't move. Don't look. Just stay there."

I froze and shut my eyes. Walt was standing near me -- his voice booming right over me. He was panicked. Without looking, I knew what was going on. Wimpy was only a couple of yards from me. He was lying on the small oval throw rug that was half in the kitchen and half in the living room. His furry black body was still. He had died overnight.

"I'm going to get a towel to cover him up." Walt was resigned.

I covered my face with my pillow. “No!” Tears jetted from my eyes just as a deep wail exited my mouth. “Wimpy! Wimpy!”

Walt found the large beach towel with his favorite comic character, Batman on it and covered up Wimpy’s lifeless form. Walt picked up the phone and dialed work:

“Mark, I’m going to be a few minutes late. Our cat died.”

I was immobile on the couch. Now that the body was covered up I peeked at the figure. About an inch of his furry black tail was sticking out from underneath.

“I’ll be home early.” Walt assured me. “I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

As I lay on the couch I thought about my day. I was scheduled to leave town on a trip. Somewhere downstate. There was no way I could leave. I had to wait for another couple of hours before I called anyone to tell them we had a death in the family.

Walt came home from work. Wimpy was still on the floor wrapped up in his towel. His still, stiff figure was eerie to look at. It was even creepier to hold him. Walt and I drove to Chassell, to his mom’s house. Maija lived alone in the same house that Walt’s dad had constructed so many years before. Walt Sr. had passed a few years earlier so anytime we showed up at the house, she was glad to see us, to have company to talk with. Even though this was a sad occasion, she was pleased we were there.

Maija and I waited in her living room as Walt dug a grave against the west side of the house near the round massive cedar bushes. He came back in the house, breathing heavily from the manual labor. “Okay, it’s time.”

I got up from the couch and headed out the front door. Walt went to lift Wimpy's body out of the car. He carried him across the front lawn, the towel hanging off of his arms.

Walt placed Wimpy's body down carefully. Walt stood back up and put his arm out for me to go first. I kneeled down to say goodbye. I placed pinches of cedar and tobacco on him and around him. My hands grabbed at the cold dirt. My fingers cupped up the brown earth and sprinkled the soil over his figure.

I stood up. Something was sucking the air from me. I couldn't breathe and yet, I couldn't cry. I turned to watch Walt shovel dirt back over the still figure.

Instead, Walt went down to his knees. He used both of his hands to scoop up hills of earth. Carefully, Walt sprinkled the moist soil over Wimpy's motionless shape. Walt did this over and over until I could no longer see the white threads of the towel. The outlines of Walt's eyes were red with tears.

My cheeks soaked up the streaming tears.

Not even a week later, people at work attempted to replace Wimpy.

"My neighbor has the nicest cat; he's good with kids..."

"Your other cat is old now; he needs a companion to play with, to keep him young."

Thoughtfulness? Thoughtlessness? How could I replace Wimpy? How could I simply replace one cat for another? They aren't Matchbox toy cars. These are my kids, my little ones that I care for, that I pamper, that I play with. I was quite infuriated when

one person suggested, “I can bring my cat over tonight to see if it will get along with your cat.”

“No thank you!”

Several months passed. Walt had found a small photo of a long-haired black kitten in the newspaper. He already had a name typed under his photo. Merlin. He was nine months old and he was being held at the Humane Society.

“Let’s just go look at him,” Walt suggested.

I agreed. We headed to the Humane Society and met with a volunteer. She went to the back room and soon brought back a furry black cat in her arms. She placed Merlin on the floor.

“Oh, he’s so cute!” I beamed.

Merlin walked right up to me and jumped on the counter next to me and head-butted my arm. I lowered my face closer to his. He head-butted my cheek.

“Oh -- my -- gawd.” Walt stretched out his words and laughed. “Yup. I think we’re takin’ this one home.”

After a couple of days and a few pages of paperwork, we picked up our baby Merlin. He was in a cardboard carrier that contained one of Walt’s shirts (to get used of our smell). The ride home was a bevy of muted mews in the backseat.

“We’ll be home soon.” My assurances didn’t help much. *Mew, mew, mew.*

“Oh my gosh! He even sounds like Wimpy.”

“Not exactly like Wimpy.” Walt lifted the cardboard carrier out of the backseat. His body leaned to one side to balance him from the weight.

“He can’t be that heavy?” I asked.

‘You’d be surprised.’ Walt carefully put down the box and opened it up.

Batman, who had been in another room, came into the front room to greet us. He stopped in his tracks at what he saw climbing out of the cardboard carrier.

Like Buckshot, Batman was not amused.

## H-BOMB

*Dedicated to Henry*

Big Red, Hank.

Henry had several nicknames, more than anyone else I knew.

Walt simply called him H. My favorite...the H-bomb.

Skin hardened at the edge of thumbnails

easy to nibble on, nervous first impressions

left me vulnerable.

Henry and I were to meet.

Walt lowered his head as he walked through the  
rounded doorway. His mother's humble kitchen appeared  
tiny with his presence.

Henry bowed, wiggled to fit through the same door.

What kitchen?

I slid smoothly off the stool to shake the hand  
of my boyfriend's best friend.

His six-foot-seven figure cast a shadow. His hand gulped mine.

His head, red locks radiant.

He appeared to be on fire.



Hank was an escape. A movie with reels of tape spiraling and never-ending.

He was endless verses of a midnight melody. He was

an entertainer, a musician,

the center of attention.

He was magic.

Sunday morning late. I lie still. Breathe in.

Deep under the covers that smell of Wool-lite.

A shadowy reassurance lingers in the walls. The tattered blue

comforter that serves as curtain separates

me from the bright world.

Sunlight would rip open my emptiness right now.

Mourning tears

unstoppable.

I wailed at your wake.

my head hidden, nestled inside Walt's jacket, under his armpit.

Today I will get climb out of bed

and remember...

your bellowing voice,

how astoundingly tall you were,

your fiery hair and then when you shaved it off,

I will remember  
when you got your first tattoo, Yosemite Sam,  
your version of “My Little Pony,”  
That time you farted in Burger King.  
And I will remember your imitation of Elvis.

Today I will  
sort thick socks, scrub pots,  
type wandering thoughts,  
and there you will be... in and out of focus.  
You are still magic. Memories of you disappear.

Your daughters don't have nearly as many  
memories as I do. The little one, probably  
no memory at all. Only photos with edges that are  
starting to curl.

## ARRIVING HOME

Karen was my best friend when I started college. Shorter than me, with softer black hair, her voice timid in volume yet confident. Her Ojibwe face round, with equally round cheeks. Her eyes, deep and dark. She looked younger than her actual age.

When the three existing sororities didn't recruit Karen or me, even after we participated in several rush events, we gave them all the proverbial middle finger and took matters in our own hands. We founded our own local sorority and recruited several young women. Our local sorority won the Greek Week tug-o-war against the other groups. Revenge was the best success.

One Thursday night in early 1990, I was in an altered state of mind enjoying an "Eyeless Fish Night" at one of the local pubs (a memorable name that drew a crowd). Karen and I were on an endeavor; to slam shots of, "Blow Jobs."

A "Blow Job" was merely a plastic shot glass filled with root beer Schnapps with a touch of whip cream on top. The first goal in having a "Blow Job" was to down it without using your hands. Karen and I placed our shots on the table; we leaned forward, grabbed the plastic container with our mouths and threw our heads back. The second goal: no dripping.

(For anyone doing the math and wondering -- yes, I was drinking in a pub underage, but only by a few weeks.)

Unlike me, Karen was a part of a large family. She didn't have the *same* need or desire to be part of a sorority as I did. She had her own need. We attended functions

together, doubled-dated, and dressed up for formals. It was on that Thursday night, I asked her the question, “Will you be my maid-of-honor?”

“What?” Karen took my shoulders in her hands and held me still. “Oh my god, I didn’t even know if I was invited to the wedding!”

“What?” I was shocked.

She giggled and smothered me with a hug. “Sure! I’ll be your maid of honor. Let’s have another shot!”

Karen’s family is from St. Ignace, the first town once you cross the Bridge. During our long friendship, Karen served as a bridge in another way. She helped me cross from one life to the next. I’m not even sure if she knows.

“There’s a talking circle on campus. Some people from work are putting it on.” When Karen was upset, her words clicked like typewriter keys. “I’m so sure. What are they thinking!”

“What’s a talking circle?” I had never heard of one.

“Oh c’mon. You’ll see.”

The two of us scurried up the steps of the University Center. An odor I was unfamiliar with lingered in the hallway of the Explorer rooms.

“What is that?” I inhaled on purpose to catch a better whiff.

“Sage. You smudge with it.”

“You what?”

“Oh shit.” Karen mumbled. “I can’t smudge today. I don’t know if I should go in there.”

“Why can’t you go in there?”

“I’m on my moon.”

“You’re what?”

“My moon time....”

I waited for an explanation.

Karen’s head moved in side to side with her syllables. “My period.”

“Oh.” Without moving, I sank. I had no idea what she was talking about.

The two of us snuck into the room. We were late.

“This isn’t a *real* talking circle. Geez.”

I had no idea why Karen was so upset. Several rows of chairs were set up on either side of the large conference room. In the center was a circle of chairs. In that circle sat six or seven Indian people.

Karen found two open chairs near the back of the room. Once I was able have a seat I lifted myself off the chair to inspect those people sitting in the circle. There was a woman with very long straight hair, lighter in color than mine, but brown. She had thin lips and a tight smile. Another woman with black wavy hair, black eyes and very dark skin. She looked angry, mean or sad. Or maybe all those things. I couldn’t say.

Standing up near this circle was an old man. He looked to be shorter than Karen. His face was wrinkled like a prune and was about the same shade of brown. I was unable to see his eyes behind his dark glasses. He spoke slowly with a melodic rhythm. “These tings we talk about today. These tings are sacred to Indian people.”

His words, teachings drew me in. I was hypnotized from his voice and from what he had to say. Sure, I had grown up attending pow wows. I danced as a child. I competed.

But I had *never* heard teachings like this. Stories of Indian people by Indian people. I felt like I was floating to the ceiling. I wanted to kick out my legs like talons and push forth into the air screaming.

I awoke back into the actual stillness of the room when a woman from Karen's office seated off to the side lifted herself up from her chair a bit. She wasn't really standing and she wasn't really sitting. She was bent in half. She pointed and interrupted the old man as he took a breath in and pondered his next thought.

"Excuse me." She started, "I was wondering if we might be able to hear what our other guests have to share today." She looked like she was in charge of the event. I felt uncomfortable with her tone and the request.

"Oh my god. How rude!" Karen whispered. "You *never* interrupt an elder." Even without traditional teachings, I knew that much.

The old man excused himself and bowed slightly. He told a quick joke and took his seat. As more and more people around the circle stood up to speak, I realized how absent I was from all of this. Sitting there in the room, I was missing. I had no idea what was going on, or what was being talked about. I was confused. Sort of heated, sort of heartbroken.

"Hey, I have to get going." Karen stood up.

"I'm gonna' stay."

She nodded, "Okay, see you later." And she scooted out of the row and exited the room.

After the event was over, I walked up to the woman who looked sad. When she spoke to the audience, her voice was soft, reticent. She didn't look at anyone. She stared

at nothing in particular in front of her. She shared with everyone that she was still learning “the ways” and that while it was an honor to be invited to speak she didn’t really have too much to say.

I introduced myself to her, “Hi, um, my name is April. I guess I’m like you. I don’t really know anything either.”

“Hi.” She looked at me, but not directly at me. She avoided direct contact as if my eyes might sting hers.

“Um...I just wanted you to know I appreciate what you said.”

“Thank you.”

We shook hands. Her palm and fingers were tender. She was someone who worked with her hands everyday.

I was too nervous to say anything else to her. Or anyone else for that matter. I turned around and bolted.

In the months following, I made it a point to learn what I could. I began by finding the Native student office on campus. Located behind the cafeteria in the University Center, the Native student office always has the smell of coffee and wood furniture.

More and more I hung out with other Indian students on campus. I felt pulled between my life as an active Greek and my life as an investigative Indian. Karen didn’t exactly follow suit. She continued to be active in the sorority.

On Tuesdays, Native students met in the lounge for “real” talking circles. Not many people showed up -- that didn’t bother me. An older student named Ted led off the

circles. He was always in the Native student lounge. After a while, I started to wonder if he was really a student or just someone who liked to hang out.

During the winter months, I learned that Larry, the elder who was interrupted by Karen's office mate, visited Marquette to tell stories. This man was capable of sharing stories for hours. Because we were at someone's house, I usually ended up on the floor, allowing for those older than me to have a seat on the furniture. Old man Larry was very talented and full of stamina -- he could speak for hours. Body parts, my legs, butt and lower back of mine would start to cramp or swell with numbness from all the sitting still.

After some time I began to travel to teachings. Sometimes I would drive over an hour one way to listen to stories or teachings. Even though I hated being alone, I never felt alone driving solo to one of these events. It was as if someone was in the car or in my presence with me.

One deep winter night, I attended ceremonies. I had been invited to Fred's house. Fred, an older non-traditional student from Baraga had extended the invitation. His voice was soft but rough, as if he had bits of gravel inside him mouth.

"You should come up for teachings." Fred said. He leaned back in his chair, arms folded. We sat in the Native student lounge sipping coffee "Good teachings this weekend."

\* \* \*

Everyone is seated on the wood floor. My legs are extended out in front of me. I am leaning against a wall, breathing, wondering what was going to happen. There are only six or seven people here. The serenity in Fred's living room was thick.



No one is talking.

One lamp is lit down the hallway. A hint of illumination. Haze hangs around our faces. A natural, almost musk-like odor comes from the draped vapors. It smells similar to pot, but I know it is not.

Billows glides in the air in front of me creating lines, producing designs. Puffs of smoke softly puncture the ripple in the air. It curves, wraps itself around the small cloud. Another puff. More curves, more lines, more designs.

A pipe is handed to me. It has a long wooden stem; the bowl is heavy and warm in my grip.

I turn to whisper to Fred, "I don't know what to do."

"Tap your left shoulder." Fred pats his own left shoulder to demonstrate. "Then pray and pass it on to the person next to you."

Once the pipe is empty, the songs and stories begin...

...and end in the dark morning hours.

Light switches flick. Brightness hits the room. I squint and blink to protect my eyes. I rub them back into pain-free existence. Once my eyes adjust I look at the wool blanket a few feet away from me on the floor. There lies the pipe stem and its bowl, separated. A shell holding a stalk of half-burnt sage sits at the corner of the blanket.

"So you don't know what's going on?" A voice is challenging me.

I look up from the blanket. He is smiling. He is the man with the pipe.

"No. Not really."

"That's good that you are here." He stands.

Jim is over six feet tall. He is careful to step around the blanket. He strides towards me. His thick black eyebrows move as his eyes inspect me.

I stand to shake his hand, to thank him for allowing me to be there, to thank him for what he has shared. He slaps my hand aside and laughs. His arms spread open. “Gimme a hug.”

I am engulfed. Chills chase each other over and around my skin, up the back of my neck and down the middle of my back. These same minuscule winds wrap the two of us closer together. *Our own whirlwind?* With an open hand, he affectionately strikes my back. My face presses firmly into something at his chest.

“Ow. What is that?” I pull back and rub my cheekbone and temple

He laughs again and tugs at a strip of leather around his neck. From his collar, a thin eggshell-colored-tube appeared. “My eagle-bone whistle.”

I am stunned. *A what?*

He leans in and holds my face up. He looks near my temple.

“You okay there?”

I nod in his grip.

The smell of sage lives thick in my clothes, in my hair. There is a taste of it in my mouth. I stand tranquil, thoughts spiraling at an unknown rate. I am spinning into an unfamiliar wind. I am sweating.

My lips are puffy. I blink myself conscious. I have questions: they sit placidly upon my tongue.

I ask nothing.

LADY EGRET & ISHKODE

The gentle lady bird said silently,  
“Ishkode, who sits before me,  
could I be as crimson and commanding as you?  
Ishkode, what if I had the strength of the lightning beings  
who illuminate the midnight canopy with white fire  
and frighten the tiny windigos?  
What if I had the vigor of the violet thunderbirds  
who bring medicine to the red people during time of sadness?  
What if my wings were made of flame and I could  
fan the earth with lilac warmth and lazy luxury?  
Ishkode, what if my eyes were as sharp as your dancing spirit,  
your blue flame that warns the red people of danger?”

Manidoo ishkode said quietly,  
“Lady bird with your gentle walking sticks,  
you whisper dangerous desires to be that which you are not.  
You know not the daily fatigue of my flames  
in honor of the red people.  
You, lady bird, who nobly stands softly,  
you know not the intricacies of natural law contained by creation.  
You with your naive wishes aspire an elder’s existence,

don't you recognize that my life is  
temporal and quick. I can snap and pop  
into demise without consciousness.

Lady bird, you know not the destruction that  
my untamed children can cause.

You know not the sadness of a single spark stamped out.

You, gentle bird, quiet bird,  
you bring true life and wisdom to the stillness of the unsettling swamp.

Lady bird with your gentle walking sticks,  
be careful what you wish for.”

The gentle lady bird bowed in respect to Ishkode,  
then said, “I shall bite my tongue and tip toe home  
so these tender walking sticks will not burn.”

MY VAGINA DOESN'T WANT FRENCH FRIES

*March 1989.*

“Mom,” I whimpered.

“What is it April?” It sounded like she was rinsing something in the sink or washing dishes in the background.

“Mom, I’m scared,” I inhaled and began to nibble the inside of my bottom lip. “I’m scared I’m not gonna’ wake up.”

“Speak up April,” mom’s voice rang out through the receiver. “I just got done washing my hair and my hearing aids aren’t in.”

It did no good to roll my eyes so instead I looked around to see who was in earshot. I held the cold phone to my flushed ear.

“I’m scared.” I inhaled and began to shed tears. “I’m scared that once I go into surgery and go under I’m not gonna’ wake up again.”

At first it was a low unsure and unbelieving chuckle which turned into a ‘you’ve got to be kidding me’ laugh. “What? Of course you’ll wake up.”

“How do you know? The nurse wants me to sign something, some kind of waiver and I asked her why and she snickered and said, “well -- you *might not* wake up.”

Mom laughed even harder. Even though she was eight hours away her laughter felt like a pounding headache thumping against my temples.

“Mom, I’m not kidding,” I wiped my eyes dry. Pissed off. Fuck.

“You’ll be fine.” The whistle of her hearing aid blew. “You’ll be just fine.”

*Didn’t she realize that she better start being the compassionate mother she’d agreed to be? She signed on the dotted line didn’t she? She better live up to her end here. After all she didn’t give birth. She picked me out of a baby line up.*

“Why are you having surgery again?” her voice sounded disinterested, but that could have been my anger ears on.

I looked around the lobby again. I practically spat out each syllable. “The doc-tor has to re-move a sep-tum from my vah-gi-na.”

“Oh for pete’s sake,” she said with a implausible gasp, “...because of that boyfriend of yours?”

“No mom. It’s just there. It just appeared there.”

“It just appeared there,” she sputtered. “How did that happen?”

“I don’t know how this happened? I sure didn’t want it to happen.”

“How long will it take?” she finally sounded somewhat interested.

“I’m not sure, less than an hour, I guess.”

“Well call me when you *wake* up,” she offered.

“Okay.” I still wasn’t convinced I would wake up.

*A few days later.*

The studio lights were hot on my cheeks and forehead. A couple of days after my surgery I was at work and running camera for the annual public television membership drive. My feet were sore standing on the cement floor. The studio camera was taller than me. My

head tilted back carefully to watch the viewfinders. Images in shades of blue. No one liked camera three, except me that is. The staff said it was the most difficult camera to work with.

My long denim skirt felt awkward with long johns underneath. My thighs began to feel damp with sweat. The harsh Upper Peninsula blew winter alive outside, but I was searing from the bright studio lights.

Our director, Jackie, announced our assignments over headsets as the on-air talent begged people for their dollars. The production team was split between the hot and bright studio and the dark and cool studio control room behind the white door.

“Volunteers are in our studios ready to take your call. Your membership is important to us so let us thank you on the air so it may encourage others to pledge.” Authoritative voices repeated familiar lines.

I moved side to side to comfort my aching feet. An unexpected line of liquid dripped from my crotch. My heart floated up to my throat.

“Jackie,” I whispered into my headset.

“A minute-thirty.” Jackie’s voice didn’t react to my pleading.

The balmy line of blood quickly became wet patches of warmth inside my thighs. A liquid inferno followed. I snapped my legs together in military concentration. My body’s juices slipped out of me with ease.

“Jackie...I think something’s wrong.” I gripped the camera handles. *Steady. Don’t move a muscle.*

“Less than a minute April,” Jackie’s voice continued calmly as the countdown began. “Ready audio, graphics, ready camera three. Give ‘em thirty seconds. Stand by audio. Stand by graphics, stand by for a zoom out camera three...”

My legs were numb with searing moisture. A balmy line of blood had reached my knees. It stopped. My hands clamped on handles of the large studio camera. Tears welled up within my eyelids. I blinked for clarity. My eyelashes were moist. Mentally, I hung as unpredictably as that last drop of blood on my knee.

“...give ‘em twenty seconds...stand by everyone. Run audio, run graphics, take camera three.”

My red light was on. I was live. My thumb and index finger cradled the zoom control on the handle. Careful, slowly, slowly, careful. I zoomed out to a wide shot.

“...and we’re out. Thanks everyone. Nice job. See you all in about an hour.” Jackie’s voice sounded relieved.

With a mechanical motion I lifted the headset off of my skull. I stood still. Cautiously, I pivoted and placed the headset on its holder. Had I bled all over myself? I hid behind the camera, terrified to look down to inspect myself. Images of blood against the light blue denim skirt.

I hadn’t. No one could see anything.

Jackie opened the white door and stepped into the studio, “What’s the matter April?”

My right hand waved her over. I pulled her in and leaned to her ear and whispered, “I’m bleeding.” I leaned back. We locked eyes. She was one of the few people who knew about my surgery.



Her eyes glanced downward towards my crotch. “I don’t see anything.” After a few seconds of silence she took a deep breath and grabbed my shoulder.

“Oh my God, why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you say something?” She whispered fiercely but with concern. “Walt’s in the control room. I’ll get him.” Jackie disappeared.

With each tiptoe, lifeblood gushed. The chaos of the studio moved on without me. The lights went down, the clip-on microphones put aside, and numerous cables were placed in figure-eights off to the side as studio cameras were dragged out of the way and along the walls.

Walt’s hulking figure was in the doorway to the studio. His voice held concern, “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

I nodded.

*About a half hour later.*

From the television station Walt took me to my dorm room.

*No roommate. No suitemate. Okay good.*

I kicked off my snowy boots one by one. I was used to the uncomfortable warmth between my legs. I shed my coat and threw it on the couch. My sock-covered feet met the cold cement floor in the bathroom. With thighs shut, I tiptoed to the other side of the bathroom. Locked the suitemates’ door. Tiptoed back to the middle where I stood in front of the mirrors. Walt filled in my doorway holding a pair of jeans.

“Not yet.”

He and the jeans disappeared from the entrance.

I looked in the mirror and started to unbutton my denim skirt until gravity grabbed hold and it hit the floor. The bulky fabric of my long underwear had sucked my blood and painted patchy colossal ovals over the inside of my thighs. It was worse than I had imagined. The stench pinched my nose with raw thickness and the wetness gave weight to the cotton material. I stood there and examined this situation for. I took off my socks. The bottoms of my feet reacted to the frigid floor. But I had to keep moving. Straddling an invisible saddle I peeled the stained long johns away one leg, then the next.

*Another half hour has passed.*

The ER nurse surveyed me up and down. Her head tilted to one side. “Where exactly are you bleeding?”

“I just had surgery...to remove a vaginal septum,” I was anxious. “And I believe the stitches broke.”

The ER nurse asked who my doctor was. I told her. She extended her arm and invited to sit down and begin filling out paperwork. The ER nurse wrapped my wrist with a blue plastic bracelet. KELLY, APRIL.

“Can he come in with me?” I asked.

“Is he your husband?” the nurse inquired.

“No. My boyfriend.”

“Sorry. No boyfriends.”

Walt’s blue eyes met mine. I shook my head no. He looked lonely and disturbed. I felt vacant without him.

The nurse escorted me back to an examination room with a door, instead of an open area wrapped by curtains. The room felt chilled and metallic. Metal instruments and florescent lights. Even the examination chair was frosty to the touch. Metal stirrups. I inhaled the icy air. I changed into a paper garment and put a fresh pad in my underwear.

I sat. My underpants were no match for the chill from the chair. My fingertips tapped the ends of the armrests. My eyes teared up. I swallowed, blinked and waited.

*Another forty-five minutes or so.*

The doctor arrived in a tan jacket that zipped up in the front. He took off his leather gloves and dropped them on the metal tray holding the metal instruments.

“Why didn’t you call my office?” his breath smelled of redness. Bitter wine.

“I didn’t know the number. I was at work...it just kind of happened.”

“What *time* did this happen?” his voice chimed with irritation

“Um...” I thought about this. “Ten to five I guess.”

“You should have called my office. I was still there.” His rubber gloves snapped on each hand. A clap of disapproval.

The chair motored back into position. Legs went up. Underwear was cut. Pad dropped. A nurse who also entered the room stood next to my propped up legs. The doctor wiped the area clean. I felt his displeasure as the tissue swiped and scrubbed at my tender skin. My watery eyes fell into the nurse’s gaze. She moved up the side of the inspection table and took my hand. Silence. Thick blood smell lingered.

“I was at a dinner party. If you would have called my office before five I could have been here and this all would have been fixed a long time ago.” His voice trailed off. He swore at the lack of good lighting. He adjusted the examination light over him and the one around his head. “This hospital needs to fix their goddamn lights...”

I blinked. Dewdrops ran down my cheeks. I blinked some more. I closed my eyes to stop the tears.

His fingers moved quickly. “All better now.”

I opened my eyes, lifted my head and looked at him. My head dropped back down. Not even a local. I heard paper rip.

With a blaze of pain my breath was stolen. His hand was inside me. *Burning*. He was pushing something in me. *Burning and stinging*. I felt as though I was being filleted. The delicate webbing stretched -- spread as far as it could go and then sliced with a jagged razor blade. My ass hung in the cool open air and I screamed.

“AAAAHHHHHHH.” It alarmed me, but also alerted me to danger. I tore my hand away from the nurse and with both hands lifted myself up. My eyebrows tightened. My eyelids widened and separated. I glared.

His white hair. His jacket. He was still wearing his tan jacket. He had a tie on. Lime green. The rims of his glasses were thin as thread. The wrinkles around his eyes. His breath. His fucking breath.

“Oh *stop* it,” he bellowed. “Just stop it. This padding is no larger than the average man’s penis.”

My back straightened, my legs still propped up. I was nearly folded in half when I grabbed his jacket at the base of his neck. I rallied my might to pull him towards me. My

voice escaped with such force it shocked me. “I HAVEN’T HAD AN AVERAGE MAN’S PENIS IN THERE FOR SIX MONTHS.” My hands dismissed him back to his perch. His face was level again with my crotch. I leaned back and closed my eyes. My yelling didn’t make the stinging go away. With enflamed agony, my vagina pulsed.

The nurse had turned away. She turned back and handed him something. More paper ripped. His rubber gloved fingers tapped gently at the opening. He spread my lips took his time to tenderly insert a small tampon.

*Today.*

Following the hospital incident, sexual intercourse was never the same. It was challenging. It was painful. It was a miserable. For periods at a time, sex was non-existent. Painful episode after painful episode, we cursed that gynecologist.

“Pull out, pull out.” I pleaded.

“What’s wrong?” Walt scrambled to move.

“I don’t know. It stings really bad. It feels like you’re ripping skin or something.”

Walt adjusted himself on the bed next to me. “I don’t wanna’ hurt you.”

“I know. This sucks. Fuck! It hurts so bad.”

“He did something to you. I know it. That fuckin’ nut doctor.” Walt hammered.

He punched his pillow.

“I have to go to the bathroom.” I crawled out of bed, my vagina hot as if engulfed in flames. To pee after this was horrific: like pissing razor blades.

I saw therapists (two of them). I visited gynecologists (six, maybe seven).

Discussions varied from “This is something from your past, it’s in your head,” to “Oh, it looks like a bladder infection. Let me write you a prescription for that,” to “Why don’t we try a biopsy, to get a better looksee.” The biopsy didn’t show anything and caused additional unforeseen complications.

I applied various creams, lotions and ointments. I drank tea, ate yogurt, applied cold water, and gagged on all sorts of pills. Any suggested method to doctoring my vagina was fair game. Nothing, *absolutely nothing* helped. Walt and I didn’t know what to do. It was wearing on us. We stopped talking about it. We stopped trying to solve what was wrong.

After one particularly frustrating intimate encounter, I insisted Walt find another wife. “You should just find someone else who you can fuck. Go...fuck her brains out!”

“Huh? I don’t want another wife.”

I threw my hands up in the air and paced in little circles around my corner of the bedroom. “I don’t know what to do anymore. I just don’t fucking know what to do.”

“I don’t know what to do either, but I don’t want another wife. I want you.”

His loyalty was sickening. I hated myself. I hated the fact that I was some sort of freak. I hated that I hated myself and yet there he was...with open arms to comfort me.

*Fuck you! I don’t want to be comforted. I wanna’ BE FIXED.*

These discussions and my mental mind games went on and on, year after year. He didn’t have to stay with me, but he did.

Out of nowhere, a couple of years ago, Walt informed me that he was researching medical websites.

“I think I found it.” He looked into my eyes. He didn’t have to explain what it was. “I think I know what’s wrong with you.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it sounds like you. It sounds like your symptoms. Check out the websites. Tell me what you think.”

After so many years of living with vaginal pain, after being convinced it was in my head, that it was an emotional condition because of my rape. I was skeptical.

I held the warm laptop in my hands and clicked my way to the Bookmarks.

“There it is.” Walt pointed over my shoulder. “That one.”

Welcome to Vulvodynia.com.

Vulvodynia, also known as vulvar dysesthesia, literally means pain, or an unpleasant altered sensation, in the vulva. It is characterized by itching, burning, stinging or stabbing in the area around the opening of the vagina. Pain can be unprovoked, varying from constant to intermittent, or occur only on provocation such as attempted vaginal penetration with sexual intercourse, a condition also known as vestibulodynia, previously known as vulvar vestibulitis syndrome.

I couldn’t breathe. My mouth hung open. I spun around in my chair and looked at Walt who was standing behind me. “What the fuck?”

“Did you read it all? Read it all.”

I turned my attention back to the screen.

Symptoms may be highly localized at certain points or may be quite diffuse and may range from mildly irritating to completely disabling. While a distinct sore area of redness may be visible, often the vulva and the vagina show no abnormalities or infections on gynecological and/or

dermatological evaluation. Unfortunately, many doctors are unaware that these conditions even exist, and may mistakenly suggest to patients that this is a psychological condition. It is common for women with Vulvodynia to suffer for many years and see many doctors before being correctly diagnosed.

My eyes watered, my nose tickled. Tears dripped down my cheeks. I sniffled in repeatedly. *Hal-lah-fuckin-luh-yah!*

HBO's hit series "Sex in the City" introduced Vulvodynia to its primary female audience. The popular four women sat around their favorite table at their favorite diner and made light of one of the primary characters and her situation. Charlotte, who suffered from Vulvodynia, was told by her gynecologist that her vagina was depressed.

Her friends' solution - feed it some French fries.

Was this the message that Vulvodynia sufferers wanted to be sent out to the public about this baffling ailment? Feed it French fries? Probably not, but it was the *only* message out there.

Vulvodynia doesn't affect just women. Partners are also affected. Walt has had to live with this condition for the past several years. Of course Walt cannot comprehend the pain, but he has witnessed the loss of my sexual self -- the emotional and mental decay from what was once a vigorous sex life.

Since he found these websites, I emailed one of my therapists and my most recent gynecologist, inviting them to review the websites as well. Neither one of them



responded to the message: although, my therapist and I did talk about it once after that. She didn't seem thoroughly convinced, but was pleased I was on a road to recovery.

Almost immediately after Walt's discovery, I ordered two books on the subject. The books contain conflicting research (are Hispanic women more susceptible or not?). But both have remedies that seem to be effective. Nothing that involved French fries (thank god). I'm not 100% back to normal, but I don't feel guilty, or that it's my fault or that I'm some sort of freak of nature.

And I don't want Walt to get a new wife.

## FOR THE HEALING OF ALL WOMEN

*Sunday morning. Baraga pow wow 2004.* The sun was brilliant. July winds blew shyly against my face. Lisa and I hung our dresses on hooks from the ceiling of her open porch to catch the morning draft. We decided to spritz our outfits with unscented *Febreze* (after all, they were wearing a bit of our summer odors from the day before).

Lisa's white satin jingle dress was dusty after a day of dancing, but it was still striking. Her brown hands brushed away the dust where they could. Hundreds of silver cones that hung from the satin material reacted to her touch. The cones swayed and sparkled from the sunlight. Her black velvet yoke also hung with her dress. Baby blue and yellow beads: an Ojibwa floral design.

My traditional outfit, a cloth dress made with deep blue velvet and colorful designs, hung a few yards away. It too was quite striking. Bright-colored waterbirds; purple, pink, orange and yellow sewn upon deep dark blue velvet. A circle of appliqué eagle feathers adorns the front of the dress. She is a bit snug around my bust, but overall a nice fit -- more colorful than my jingle dress.

My friend, Summer, initially wore this traditional dress. She did not wear it as much as she thought she would. She is really a fancy shawl dancer. More athletic, more movements and fancier outfits.

I could tell that she thought traditional dancing, albeit beautiful, was a bit too slow for her. I picked the dress up from her during the summer just before I left for Finland and just after my injury.

*Two weeks earlier 2004. Sugar Island pow wow.*

“How is your ankle April? Still bothering you?” Robelle sat a bit forward in her lawn chair, eager for my answer.

“My ankle is fine as long as I dance traditional,” I smiled at her, but the question poked at my emotions -- it’s been three years.

That weekend I had decided not to dance at Sugar Island. The sounds of the pow wow – drums, singing, bells, laughter, crackling fry bread oil -- were in the distance. Robelle and I had decided to step away from the action. We sat at our camping area where we could visit in private.

Robelle was not dancing either. She had a white top on with a long skirt that went right to the ground. Robelle was never one for wearing lots of make up, but her lips had a hint of pink lipstick. Her dark eyes were determined and she focused them on me.

“I just can’t dance jingle. Kind of sucks, but that’s the doctor’s orders -- no ‘bouncing’ on it,” I shifted in my lawn chair. An uncomfortable wave came over me.

“Yup...” Robelle nodded. “...jingle dress dancing is right out.” She took her fingers and brushed her hair away from her face. Her hair was much shorter than when I first met her. It hung just below her shoulders, a mix of black, charcoal, grey and white strands.

“I can dance when my foot is wrapped.” My hands moved around my ankle as if to air-wrap my foot. “See, there is this way to wrap your ankle, kind of like they do for athletes when their Achilles is injured. Anyway, I can sort of dance, but then I can’t walk. So that doesn’t do me much good.”

She shook her head, “No, I guess not.” Robelle did not take her eyes off of me. She was attentive to my every word -- which really only made me a bit self-conscious.

“I tried it a couple of times, but even after a couple of hours, I end up in pain, even with the foot wrapped. So I end up taking the wrap off anyway.”

*Unlike a volleyball or basketball game, pow wows last all weekend long. The pain was real even if I wrapped my ankle.*

My face began to feel warm and balmy...a sign that my cheeks were flush. The tears started to form. I stared at my feet. My toes wiggled in my sandals. I looked at nothing in particular so I would not have to look Robelle in the face.

“I can’t stand it,” I continued. “I can’t stand this -- being sidelined. This sucks.” My throat was starting to get scratchy. *Don’t crack now.* “Have...have I done something wrong?”

Robelle deliberately shook her head no.

*Don’t start crying.* “I really miss it...I miss jingle dress dancing.” We sat in silence. She anticipated the tears. “What the fuck? What did I do wrong?”

“You are in mourning,” Robelle said quietly. I watched her hands as they lay folded in her lap. “You did nothing wrong. You are in mourning for that dress.”

*Summer. 1992.*

“When you make a jingle dress, you have to be in the right frame of mind.” Robelle’s voice was soft but her tone was serious. Parental. “You have to be in a good place. Of course it’s always a good idea to smudge. I generally try to keep smudge going the entire time I am rolling the cones, but sometimes your smudge will go out. That’s okay.”

Robelle wasn't old enough to be my mom, but her authoritative voice was confident. Her long dark hair reached almost down to her jeans.

We sat across from each other at her large dining room table that had been converted to a temporary sewing center. A large abalone shell about the size of a soup bowl was placed between us. Grey sage leaves were made into small round bundles about the size of grapes. These tiny balls of leaves were burning steadily in the shell creating a thin line of smoke. The smell was bitter and gave the air a slightly harsh taste. But it was familiar and felt safe.

Robelle shared with me the responsibilities of a jingle dress dancer as I sat and cut up dozens and dozens of Copenhagen snuff can lids. Collecting lids was not an easy task: we often had to answer to looks of confusion upon asking for the lids.

Each lid carried a tart scent of tobacco and metal. Some of the lids were old and rusted. Some of them were new and gleaming. My job was to trim the sides of the lid so that I was working with a flat, round piece of metal. Robelle was helping me. We used scissors that were not made for cutting metal. My twenty-three year old hands were tired and not as self-assured as Robelle's. My right hand suffered. The muscles between my thumb and index finger cramped. The center of my hand throbbed but I kept going without complaining.

I held the lid with my left hand and the scissors in my right. I trimmed it in a counterclockwise motion over and over until a slender ringlet of metal was formed and the lid itself was flat. Over and over and over again I cut these lids: hundreds of them. Ringlet after metal ringlet. Vaguely artistic. Prickly against my tender fingertips.

Robelle's method was quick and simple -- take the scissors, cut into the lid lip with one turn of the lid. *Voila*, flat metal.

*Sunday 11:25 a.m. Baraga powwow 2004. Grand entry in less than an hour.*

As our dresses caught the summer air, Lisa and I sat on her dining room floor. The thick rug didn't cushion my bottom as I had hoped. Regardless, I sat "Indian" style on the floor and began inspecting my regalia accessories. Hair ties: blue, pink, lavender and white ribbons with a heart shaped abalone shell at the top. Bracelet: black, grey and silver beads sewn on to dyed grey leather. The bracelet was already ten years old.

My fingers ran through the emerald fringe on my carefully folded mint green shawl to clear out any tangles from the day before. A black makeup bag was on the floor next to me. Various pieces of jewelry, large turquoise rings, bone earrings and silver bracelets, hid in their respective places within the small bag along with hair gel, combs, deodorant and bobby pins.

Lisa was on the floor in front of a large mirror propped against the wall. She braided her long, black hair: her brown arms and hands moving rapidly twisting and weaving. I noticed the tattoo on her wrist in cursive. Slightly fading teal ink.

*Nemikigokwe.*

My brown eyes caught her brown eyes in a quick glimpse in the mirror. We giggled at nothing special. I wondered silently if this was what it was like growing up with a sister: trying on each other's clothes, brushing each other's hair, playing with each other's make-up and jewelry.

My tired knee-high deer hide boots needed attention. Two inch fringe hangs from the top of the boots. Temptation hit me. Sure enough I put the boot to my nose...and sniffed. The whiff of the soft deer hide did not hold its sweet smell from years prior. Was I searching for the scent of lingering memories?

I turned the boot over to look at the elk hide sole. "Damn!" The tape was coming off.

Lisa looked over at me. "A good blow-out this time, huh." We laughed.

My right boot had a thin, but very apparent rip. The rip was right against the bottom edge of the right sole, just under my big toe. The tear was over two and half inches long. The soles had never torn like this before. I had made a make shift bandage with white electrical tape the day before, but some of it was coming off already.

I checked the clock. Grand entry was quickly approaching.

With a flat palm, I stuck my hand in the front pocket of my black suitcase that is home for my regalia and some other sacred items. I pulled out a small roll of white electrical tape, not sacred, but definitely necessary. I cut several small strips of tape and covered the tear.

Bright, clean white tape stuck to the worn and coarse sole made of elk hide. I rubbed my thumb against the smooth tape and thought of my dad -- an electrician by trade.

My dad is not Indian. However, he made me these pair of hide boots for dancing when I was very young. He made them just a bit too big. "So you can grow into them," he said. My feet never did "grow into" them.

However, they started to hug the edges of my feet eventually. I do have other moccasins and do occasionally change my look depending on my outfit. But my knee-high hide boots always feel best when I wear my traditional dress.

*Summer. 1992.*

Tobacco stained my hands. My fingertips ached from the sharpness of the metal. My sore hands needed a quick rub. One palm at a time I wiped each hand as if drying them with a towel. A small cut on the inside of my index finger made me wince. I licked the cut immediately. My tongue recoiled: tobacco dust. I hung my tongue out yearning for the taste of fresh air. Robelle looked up and took notice.

“Even as you cut yourself now, you are sacrificing yourself for your people. This is a dress of healing for others, not for you. It is a sacrifice. It is an honor.” Robelle stood up from the dining room table and went to the kitchen sink. She wet some paper towel for my injury. Not missing a beat she handed me the moist paper towel, sat back down and went on with her teachings.

“This first dress is the only dress that I will help you with. After that, you are on your own. It will be your turn to pass these teachings on to someone else.” Robelle continued helping me cut the lids. She was moving much quicker than I was and with what looked to be little effort.

“Each time you roll a cone it represents a prayer for someone.” Robelle put more sage in the shell and lit it with a match. After it caught the flame, she waved her hand over the leaves to create smoke. “This is why you must first be in a good place yourself.



Each cone may be dedicated to someone different or several cones may be for the same person; maybe one who is very sick.”

After all of the lids were cut, I was to roll each of them with needle nose pliers. Robelle could not help me with this. These were my prayers. The muscles in my palms and fingers loosened with each turn of the needle nose pliers. I felt new to all this and thus inadequate to be “praying for the people” so I kept these prayers somewhat generic and close to home. I also kept them in my head.

First, I prayed for my mom. Then I rolled a cone. Not an easy task. Robelle showed me a couple of times how to roll these lids into cones. Her hands moved so confidently that she made it look too easy. I fumbled with the pliers as I turned the metal. I also tried to avoid the sharp edges. Pretty soon I got the hang of it and got back to my silent prayers. I prayed for my parents, family and friends. I prayed for my husband. I prayed for people I knew who were sick. I prayed for my friend’s son who suffered from leukemia.

“What if you run out of people to pray for?” *Silly question.*

Robelle had been lining up patterns and cutting up fabric. She looked up for a moment to answer me. “Prayer is a personal thing. Just pray from your heart. It will come to you.”

Hoping that I wasn’t cheating, I started over with my mental list. I prayed for my parents, members of my small family and some close friends, but this time I was more specific with everyone’s problems. My dad’s knees were bothering him again and mom was facing more hearing loss. This time the prayers were tougher but came easier. More

and more faces began to appear through my closed eyelids. Some people needed more than one cone. Matt, my friend's son with leukemia, needed at least ten cones.

*Sunday at noon. Baraga pow wow grand entry.*

Veterans raised their flags: numerous eagle feather staffs, the American Flag, the Canadian Flag, a Vietnam Veteran flag and several tribal flags. Colors, sounds and emotions ensued.

Little Otter, a well respected group of singers from northern Minnesota, was host drum. Their drum beat was unified, solid and purposeful. Over a dozen of them struck the drum assertively and with accuracy; their voices precise, high and melodic.

Beads of sweat formed against my back. Sunbeams peeked through the tall pine trees and struck me with a wave of heat as purposefully as the singers struck the drum. The timid breeze could not penetrate my velvet dress. My hairpipe bone breastplate hung over my shoulders. My mint green shawl was placed carefully on my left arm. A slight headache snapped at my temples due to the tightness of my braids. No matter. My feet felt every little rock under them and longed for the soft grass within the dance arena. My toes wiggled in their boots, ready to dance.

A buzz started in the grand entry line, dancers stood on their tip toes to see who had entered the dance arena already. Hundreds of women in bright outfits adorned with jewelry, beaded barrettes and eagle plumes in their hair waited for their turn to arrive. We all fanned ourselves with our eagle feather fans to circulate air around us. The ladies around me smiled and I smiled back. Grand entry goosebumps -- simply the best.

We were all eager to enter the dance arena -- the designated spot for dancers, singers and close family. In single file we entered the arena by age (or at least as close as we could get). We stepped with gentle intention, bending each knee slightly. Graceful step after graceful step our shawls swung from our arms. Our eagle feather plumes worn in our hair performed their own ballet in the air.

I lightly stepped upon the earth with each drumbeat: the heartbeat of Mother Earth, the heartbeat of our nations. Traditional dancers are generally older women so it was not unusual to find myself near the end of the line. On this day, I stayed towards the back of the line on purpose.

The jingle dress dancers came in the dance arena behind us women traditional dancers. A more agile dance, these ladies jumped and bounced on the balls of their feet. The steps exact, their motions faithful to each beat. I recalled what it felt like, entering the arena with my jingle dress on surrounded by other jingle dress dancers.

*The grand entries where the hair on my arms stood straight up....*

We entered the circle from the eastern direction and danced clockwise heading into the southern direction. Brown faces everywhere. Brown babies with black hair in pink sweat pants. Brown faces with black sunglasses. A blur of brown skin everywhere I looked. Pride consumed me.

*Where are the chills?*

Probably sixty or more women traditional dancers were in front of me; some in hide dresses, many in cloth dresses. Another four or five traditional dancers were behind me and the jingle dress dancers immediately behind them. My ears yearned for the

elegant resonance of the hundreds, thousands of cones shaking the air with a metallic melody.

I followed the traditional ladies into the western direction of the arena and raised my fan to honor the eagle feather staffs held by the veterans who were already dancing in place. The arena was already full of men and boys and now the women, the backbone of our people, were entering.

*It felt like lightning cracking against the ground, yet still, I was light and free as a plume.*

Gentle steps, knees bent slightly. My shawl swung and the fringe dangled. I moved forward now rounding the circle moving in the northern direction. Because of the July heat, the elder traditional women made the decision to dance in place. Even though I wanted to keep going forward, this was their right. I turned and faced inward. Our line of traditional women went from single file to dancing shoulder to shoulder.

The jingle dress dancers kept going around the circle. They moved directly in front of us continuing to go forward. As they danced in front of me I observed each of them. The vivid fabrics. The glistening reflection of metal cones. The sound. *I missed the sound.* The tender crashing of the cones consoled me.

There were over 250 dancers for grand entry that afternoon, fewer dancers than the night before.

*Summer 2000.*

My jingle dress is difficult to wash. The fabric soaked up sweat, smoke and summer dust from the pow wow trail. The organic smell really doesn't bother me. But I haven't washed her in at least a month. That was three or four pow wows ago.

But it's important to wait for a hot and windy day, not a forecast easily found in upper Michigan. See, I cannot put her in the washing machine because of the cones and I don't really trust the dry cleaners with her. She is such a sacred dress. But because of her cones -- 365 of them -- she is heavy. It can also be painful since I must hand wash her. The cones, made of Copenhagen lids, can cut.

I kneel down and twist the faucet on. My white antique tub fills slowly with warm water and my knees ache as they point down with all of my weight into the coarse carpet. I pick myself up and lean against the tub to pour a cap full of Woolite into the water. I drop my hand and shake foamy white bubbles to life.

I smell (or perhaps imagine) fresh, cherry flavored pipe tobacco as I undress the hanger. I carefully hold her with both arms. She hangs lifeless as if she has collapsed. I drop back down to my knees and place her into the tub, as if I am placing a child into bed. The dress probably weighs more than a child. The top of the dress does not yet dip into the water. Instead it lies back against the tub. She looks like she is sitting up, waiting for me to wash her back.

The temperate liquid is soft against my hands and arms. I hope the Woolite is gentle to her. She shifts in the water as if to move on her side. My hands must move fast because she cannot stay in the water long. I carefully select pieces of her, first the stiff arms, then the front of the skirt. I rub the fabric together furiously. I turn her over and

wash the back of the skirt. I turn her back again to do the top part of the dress last. This area has painting on it and I am shy to really scrub this part for fear the paint will be altered or even ruined. I submerge her breast, collar bone and shoulders into the water. Gently I massage the top. Detergent bubbles have foamed and covered the entire dress as it is submerged. I lift her back up with one arm as if holding a baby and drain the water. I then rinse the dress off with cold water: perfect refreshment for a hot summer day. I squeeze parts of the dress to ring out excess water. I put her back on the hanger and place her on a hook outside to dry. I look at her. She is beautiful.

She is my third and favorite jingle dress. It has been eight years since I started dancing jingle. I look at her for a while as she blows gently in the breeze. Mainly maroon fabric in color with green, maroon and pink ribbon. The fabric is a bit heavier in nature -- to help hold the cones. The maroon color is purposeful. It represents the life blood that we women give each month. Our moon time is sacred time. I do not dance when I am on my time. This is considered ceremony. Each month our bodies cleanse themselves. To dance would be disrespectful to the medicine in that dress. To dance would be disrespectful to the ceremony at the pow wow. It would be disrespectful to my own ceremony.

The top of the dress, satin eggshell in color at one time, is now a bit worn and faded but still maintains a minor sheen. At the top of the dress are the paintings. The paintings are of roses, specific roses. The edges of each petal are dark pink and naturally fade into a white flower. This is my favorite type of rose.

On the front of the dress at each collarbone a matching pair of rose buds peeking out from their opening petals. This represents the stage of a girl's life: opening up to a

new world around her, where she will face changes -- her first moon time, her first real kiss or perhaps her first fast.

The sides of the arms have matching roses, one fully open, two smaller roses open a bit more than the front ones. One can see the inside petals more. This represents the young women who are not quite adults but no longer children; women who are not yet mothers, but are learning how to take care of young ones.

On the back of the dress there is a full bouquet of roses in full open bloom. These roses represent the adult woman. This is where I am at in my life. I am not a mother, but I do have several children in my life and several women surrounding me on my path.

This bouquet represents that collective of strong women at the full bloom of their lives. It helps me remember the women in my life; women who have helped me become who I am. Women who have taught me life lessons, women who have sung with me, sweat with me, danced with me, cried with me, sat silent with me. It reminds me of the women who have laughed with me, prayed with me, taught me, learned with me. These women know who they are. It is for these women and all women that I wear this dress.

The dress is sacred. She is sacred. I have fasted for her. I have given offerings for her. I have given away gifts to others for her. She is for the women, to honor the women. She is for the healing of all women.

*Sugar Island 2004.*

“You are in mourning,” Robelle said quietly. I watched her hands as they lay folded in her lap. “You did nothing wrong. You are in mourning for that dress.”

“Yeah, I know.” I sighed and concentrated: *No crying*. “It’s just really hard because I have been working on this new hide dress and I feel as though I am having a slow time of it because I still feel like I should be a jingle dress dancer....” *Oh shit. I’m going to start crying*. “...and I can see her all the time. She is hanging right in my sewing room.”

I stopped to think about this. *Was she watching and wondering?*

“Perhaps you need that dress to heal you,” Robelle suggested. I looked towards her for her wisdom but didn’t make eye contact. “Do you remember when I carried Kristin’s dress into the arena?” My head nodded. Kristin, Robelle’s youngest daughter, was sick and facing many challenges in her young life.

Robelle continued, “Do you remember how I hung it over my arm and carried the dress like a shawl? Perhaps that is what you need to do. Let that dress heal you now. The people who know you, who love you...they will understand what you are doing.”

I simply continued to nod in agreement and looked at the grass below my feet.

Robelle and I talked more about our hopes for the future, our own healing. I heard the drums in the distance. The recognizable sound of the drum and Robelle’s voice comforted me.

*Baraga pow wow. Sunday sometime after 3:00 p.m.*

The emcees announce the jingle dress exhibition. Drops of sunlight reflect off of the metal cones, beads, shells and silver causing a glittery wave of lights in the dance arena. Many of us in the audience stand out of respect for the sacredness of these outfits and the sacrifice that these women make to dance for our people.



I watch Lisa in her white dress. She appears confident, proud. Her cones move with each beat of the drum, her moccasins bouncing off the earth with each step. She lifts her eagle feather fan for the honor beats in the song. I watch her and all of the ladies out in the arena with her. The cones crash together. It is like a rain storm, a healthy rain, a rain for cleansing and healing -- it is the sound of the dress that I miss most.

I happen to look down at my feet. Unconsciously, my toes are tapping -- specifically, the toes on my right foot. I don't feel the tear under my big toe. I pick my right foot up and check on the tape anyway. *Still holding -- but not nearly as white as earlier in the morning.* I set my foot back down and secretly wish that one of those dancers is dancing and praying for my right foot with its injured ankle.

The song comes to an end. The velvet dress is thick shrink wrap against my body. My back is full of sweat beads. I hang my head. I am aware of my thoughts.

My traditional dress is a lot like that white electrical tape on the bottom of my sole -- a polished bandage doing its best to keep me together even if just for the time being.

If only I didn't feel the enormous tear within my spirit.

## GRANDMOTHER TURTLES AND THE NAMING CEREMONY

“The person who gives this young woman her name should carry a pipe.” Hilda’s long braid hung down her back, a straight beautiful line of gray strands announcing her duality: separating the physical from the spiritual.

“I don’t carry a pipe...not now...it’s complicated.” I sat near Hilda in whispered conversation, our knees almost touching. She listened carefully, watching me closely with her dark eyes. They looked around me, through me and around me again. She asked, “And it was you who had the dream?”

“Yes.” I replied.

“Tell me the name.”

“Gitchi Niimkii’kwe.”

Hilda pondered these Anishinaabe words for a moment. Her hands folded; her fingers wrinkled with earth wisdom and dish washing. Her voice was rough and firm even though she was whispering. “Great Lightning Woman. It is a strong name.” She pointed at me. “Find a pipe carrier and see that the name is given as soon as possible.”

There is a grandmother who lives with me in my house. It is a turtle, a female turtle who has faded from her original green shade. This grandmother turtle is a pipe bowl that was gifted to me a few years ago. It is no bigger than a golf ball. The stem is close to ten inches long. It is from the woman who carried this pipe before me. I must fast for this grandmother pipe. When I do fast without food and water for four days I will make a new stem.

Danielle has bright eyes, dark skin and rich caramel colored hair. At first glance she appears young, but inside she is old. We used to sing together. I used to braid her glossy hair between my fingers. Her hair always took to my braids easily. She is shorter than me, but not by much. She loves to dance. Danielle already has her Anishinaabe name.

“She already has a name!” Blurriness. Pine trees. Singing. Long, green grass. An unseen elder woman’s voice deep within the hollows of the thick branches. *Gitchi Niimkii’kwe*. Thunder explodes above me. There is no rain. *Gitchi Niimkii’kwe*. She yells again. The voice is above me. Below me. Within me. “But she already has a name?” I yell back.

Hidden spirits sparkle in the thickness of the brush. Dancing. Purple butterflies.

Blurriness. My legs lift and I sprint along side of the woods deep in the grass following the vapor trail of these messengers within the woods. Charcoal clouds overhead travel above me. “I can’t. She already has a name!” I pant as I run. The voice begins to fade deeper in the darkness of the unseen forest. *Gitchi Niimkii’kwe*. I run into an unseen tree. My head aches. I lean on it and rub its smooth trunk. My own voice fades. “She already has a name.” I smack the tree. *Gitchi Niimkii’kwe*. I smack the tree once more. “I can’t.”

I wake. My hand burns from smacking the aged wall with the baby blue paint. “I can’t.” My own voice startles me. My lips are almost touching the wall. Our limp mattress lies on the wood floor. I roll on my back and sink into my pillow. “I can’t.” Walt has already left for work. I think of Danielle in my solitude. Why was this given to me? She already has a name.

The first grandmother given to me was big, fat and dark green. She was also a turtle. But she was all shell. Something was missing from that pipe. It took me some time to learn this. I did fast for four days and four nights. No food, no water. It was winter. But I still had a fire outside of the garage. It has been said that one should not fast in the winter because our helpers are asleep. I'm not sure why, but I have fasted twice in the winter. I tend to sleep too. I fasted inside a silent room and did beadwork with red, black, white and silver beads while no one was home. As I beaded I sat with the pipe next to me. She was pretty enough. Very smooth. Heavy as a piece of fruit, a good size apple. She smoked. I cleaned her afterwards. But something was missing from her. She was empty inside. All shell, no body. All smoke, but no spirit. I learned much later it wasn't mine. I gave her a new home in the big lake with some tobacco.

"Did the name come to you in the language?" Robelle asked.

"Yes." I replied.

"Well then you should give her that name."

"But she already has a name." I am pleading.

"That happens once in a while. Some of us carry more than one name. It's not very common, but it happens."

"Why was this name given to me?"

"Why is the sky blue?" Robelle chuckles between us and our heart to heart.

"Hilda says that I need a pipe carrier to give that name."

"What does Danielle want?"

“I think she is okay with me giving her the name.”

“Then, that is what you do.”

For some time the second turtle has been asleep. She is asleep because I am so awake. Awake in everything but my spirituality. Awake in long days at work, awake in tedious demands of school. Awake in awareness of my parents’ declining health. Where has my journey taken me? I remember walking along the path of the quill, the quill of the eagle feather. The very bottom of the quill is white, nearly transparent. This is our babyhood and childhood. There are no hairs, no interruptions in our path. We are pure. Oftentimes, the hairs of an eagle feather are chaos at the bottom, plume commotion, white hairs flying about in beauty, barely hanging on to the quill. During that time on the path, our own life is chaos. This represents our teenage years. But soon the hairs come together, glued with darkened certainty, hairs turn into a deep brown or black. The quill and feather are solid. This is our adulthood. It is here we strive to keep balance. However, the hairs can separate if the feather is not taken care of. Just as our own lives can be far from that path if we do not take care of ourselves. For some time, perhaps even years, this second grandmother has been asleep because I put her there. Now is not the time for her to be out. Will I know when she needs to wake?

“I had this dream and I feel strongly that I need to speak with you about it.” I face Danielle’s entire immediate family as I speak in their living room. “I had this dream about a name for Danielle. I know she already has a name but it came to me in the language four times.” My eyes scan their faces for a reaction.

They are all still.

I, too, am near frozen. My chest is tight with anxiety. “I wanted you to know. I want you to think about this. I would be honored to give her this name.” Danielle’s father has very dark skin and black hair. He is wearing jeans and a bright red baseball cap. He does not look directly at me but begins to speak, “I have heard of people having two names.” Silence. He speaks again, “We will talk about this as a family and let you know.”

It is a Sunday afternoon. Two of my dear friends, Julie and Dianne, have accompanied me to Danielle’s house. The house smells of cooking food, feast food. Venison, wild rice, soup. My mind sinks into a trance as I sit by myself. I delight in the smells of the kitchen. I find comfort in the smells of sage and sweetgrass. I think hard about why I am there. My legs cross under my thin skirt. The clanging song of utensils, pots and pans has stopped. Family, friends and people unknown to me stand in a large circle in the dining room. On both sides of me Julie and Dianne hold their shakers.

The three of us begin to sing. The naming ceremony begins.

## TO DANCE IS TO PRAY

### I. Grand Entry

A gathering of ages begins.

Beaded moccasins dusty, eager. You step aside,

between,

in front of,

behind

other Indians. Relations.

Beaded earrings glitter

glass seeds of spirit

appear, disappear

morning lights dance atop blue waves of thin air.

Beads of sweat moisten your brow,

you beam, grateful for the sun's appearance,

its countenance.

You step some more. Watching

are keen eyes

wrinkled with wisdom.

Braids, soaked in bear grease,

wrapped tightly, thick with

story. White plumes partner in dance with the  
afternoon breeze.

Tailored colors ripe with boldness  
satin ribbon on satin shirts, satin skirts.

Silver bracelets,  
copper bells,  
quill barrettes,  
turquoise rings,  
furs...shawls...shells...  
you step some more.

A porky roach atop the Ogitchidaa,  
a crown of Indigenous rights. Veteran. Warrior.

His arm bears a tattoo, *Native Pride*.

Bones drape his chest; warrior's armor.

Leather straps tight around his jowled face.

His black eyes meet yours. He extends his hand.

You shake it.

You keep moving, searching for your place. A mother inhales  
a Marlboro cigarette  
standing at attention between her fingers.



She smiles. You return the gift, nod  
and tiptoe in behind her, behind her daughters, behind their daughters  
securing your place in line.

You stand patient, swallowing the summer breath,  
Snapshot memories of pow wows past. Your toes  
wiggle, ready.

Your fingertips tender with anticipation  
caress the eagle feathers  
of your fan. Thousands of Indians,  
dancers, mothers, uncles.

You stand alone  
in prayer.

*Strength -- fragility*

*Wisdom -- humility*

Your blood pumps with purpose,  
in rhythm. Thunderous chills climb,  
your spine – spirit passengers riding your bones  
ascending, spirits of those yet to be born. Spirits of those  
who have passed on, spirits of those  
who lie alone, awake  
dying.

The heartbeat sounds. The host drum now ready

a thousand footsteps will erupt.

Grand Entry begins.

## II. Sneak-Up

A bouquet of *miigzii miigwaang*,

eagle feathers, form a bustle on his back.

They shake. He shakes.

Copper bells on tanned ankles

clang for attention.

Drumbeats call him to --

the hunt begins.

He leans over, searching, searching

his father's dancing stick in his

right hand, his eagle feather fan in his left.

He bows towards Mother Earth

once and then again.

His eyes lifting to the sky

seeking, searching

He bows again and tracks his spirit

prey. His black eyes hidden in red face paint, his face hidden in

dance, his footsteps hidden in lightning, his sorrow

hidden in pursuit, his hunger hidden in pride.

The final drumbeat. Stillness.

He greets his kill.

### III. Feast Time

My wooden bowl filled, overflowing

I suck salt pork from hominy soup

nibble sautéed venison with bits of bacon

hand harvested wild rice

with cranberries and cashews

and light, flaky fry bread giving me moist kissable lips from fry bread grease

black coffee

with too much sugar

savor a swig or two of that coffee

fried whitefish caught only yesterday and a

thick slice of that juicy meatloaf

that juicy, juicy, greasy, greasy meatloaf

that greasy spill inside oven #2

that caught fire and almost

burned down the tiny kitchen            with all of us            in it.

potato salad, fruit salad, leafy salad, pasta salad,

tuna salad and that surprise jello salad

that turned out *orange*

when we all think it should have been *red*.

spaghetti noodles, penne noodles, green beans, pork and beans

more coffee *damn*, that's good coffee...

commodity peanut butter cookies, spicy pumpkin

bars with melting whip cream, chocolate cake with white

frosting, a giant bite of gushing summer watermelon that drips

down my chin.

while managing my mouth

full of laughter

I thank the Creator with each spoonful that I am here

savoring the

flavors of feast time.

#### IV. Two-Step

“Ladies choice two-step,”

announces the emcee. “...swing and sway the

Anishinaabe way.”

You've never known a two-step to not be ladies choice.

You sit back in your maroon colored  
lawn chair and fold the fringe  
of your hide dress in your lap and then fold your hands.  
You inspect the mother-of-pearl stone ring  
on your wedding ring finger and ponder your choice  
to marry a white man.

“Ladies,” the emcee continues.  
“If he turns ya’ down. He’ll owe ya’  
a fry bread taco and a Pepsi Cola.”

You have known men to turn you  
down and you have returned to your seat  
thirsty and hungry. Starving  
for your own man’s touch  
between your lonely  
fingers.

You inhale the coolness, evening  
air ripe with lustful apprehension,  
as couples wrap their arms around each other  
and step closely in time  
the scent of your lover

absent.

You wiggle the ring you wear  
on your wedding ring finger  
to remind you that the sweethearts, lovers,  
married couples -- no longer lovers,  
cousins, siblings -- all of them,  
all of them dancing in the long, steady line --  
in tonight's two-step  
will eventually  
go back  
to their seats  
too.

## V. Healing Song

Silver metal cones, beads, shells and dripping summer sunbeams  
a sparkling wave  
illumination  
in the dance arena.  
The audience stands out of respect  
for the sacredness of these  
jingle dresses,

the sacrifice these women make

when they dance

for our people.

The metal cones crash gently

a vigorous rain,

for cleansing for healing --

it is the sound of my dress

that I miss most.

My heart thumps one beat after another.

I look down at my feet.

The rip in my moccasin is under my big toe. I pick my up my foot

to check the electrical tape holding my

moccasin together and secretly wish that one                      only one

of those dancers is praying for my right foot

with its injured ankle.

I secretly wish that one,    only one

of those ladies is praying for my spirit.

Beads of sweat fill my back. My dress

shrink wrap

against my moist body. I hang my head

aware of each selfish thought.

My traditional dress like the white electrical tape on the

bottom of my sole -- is a bandage doing its  
best to keep me together. The song ends.

#### VI. Hand Drum Contest

Five guys, tall. All of them  
their hair tied back  
in a pony tail  
hanging black silkiness. All of them  
in their white sneakers and white hats  
in time  
in beat  
in voice  
singing sweetly  
to their sweethearts  
about the night sky, the moon's light, the  
magic stars and their eternal  
hunger  
for  
fry bread.

#### VII. Giveaway

Blankets make the best gifts.  
Soft woven



colorful threads of warmth  
wrapped around you and your lover  
you stand on your tiptoes to greet him  
to kiss him. He kisses you back  
wraps his arms around you  
lifts your body to meet his.  
The blanket still wrapped around the two of you,  
holding your devotion within,  
together  
in concert.

You cling to each other  
tighter  
on Sunday night  
after being apart                      after being in  
your own      individual worlds  
his of blues, yours of spirit.

Your foreheads meet  
bodies tired after fulfilling weekends -- exhausted  
still you look down and inward  
into each other's soul  
thankful that you are safe      within embrace.

His heart sounds  
against your chest     the presence of heat  
rises from within the colorful threads.

You breathe deeply  
gratifying desire     inhaling  
the perfume of his body  
the scent of his hair  
-- his whole being.

“Where did you get this blanket?” he whispers.

“The giveaway.”

His cheek,  
patches of sharp stubble,  
rubs against the smoothness  
of my face  
our lips  
dance.

## ON THE FOUNDATION OF SACRED

Some day we will know why our  
children do not sing songs of their  
ancestors. All of our futures  
rely on the values of ancient wisdom  
emotionally driven, spiritually guided  
divine intervention needed on the unseen path of tomorrows.

Some day we will know why  
children were taken from their  
adoring parents only to be  
raised in the ways of another's  
religion. It is not for us to understand  
every answer today. For we will know the  
direction of our future when we step upon it.

Some day we will know why the indigenous  
angels blow their eagle whistles to the sky away from the  
cries of our drowning relations who have come to  
rely on the power of neediness and greediness. I must not question. I must simply  
embrace the faith that the Creator will bring each of us to the  
day of our meeting with a full stomach and undying love in our heart.