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Crossing Without Looking

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Crossing Without Looking

A thesis presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
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Department of English
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

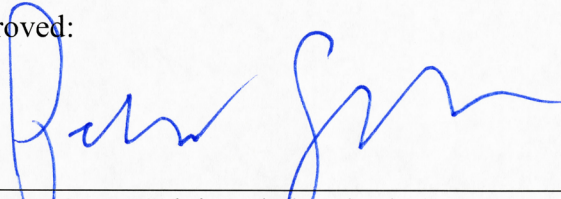
Miranda Campbell
April 2019

Crossing Without Looking

by

Miranda Campbell

Approved:



Professor Peter Selgin, Chair, Thesis Committee

4.18.19

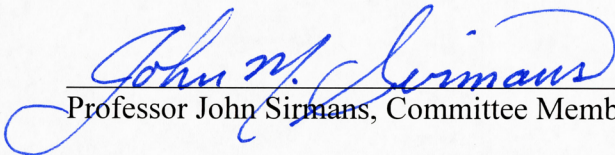
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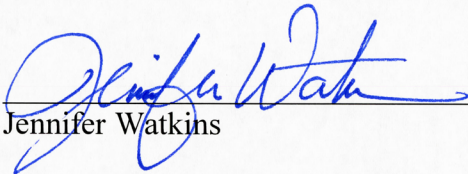
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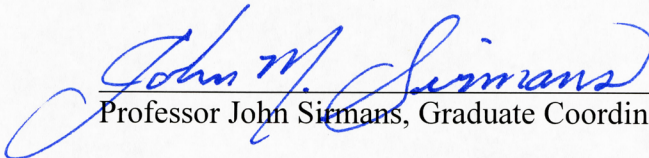
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Dedication

This collection is dedicated to my mother and stepfather, whose support has always come without question and whose love knows no bounds.

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“Sorry but nothing of much importance ever happened to me...I'm just a girl who forgot to look both ways before crossing the street.”

- Gabrielle Zevin, *Elsewhere*

“and in that recurring dream, I found myself trapped in some sort of gigantic game of which I was unfamiliar with the rules; lost in a labyrinthine town of dark and damp, criss-crossing streets, ambiguous characters of uncertain authority having no idea of why I was there nor what I had to do, and where the first sign of the beginning of understanding was the wish to die.”

- Franz Kafka

The Back of the Couch

Growing up, I wanted to believe that I was exempt from rules most other people seemed to follow. I didn't think it mattered if I ran with scissors. I didn't have to hold hands with my sister in public even though my mother insisted. Perhaps it was because my grandfather had absurd sayings like, "If you pick your nose, you'll poke your eyes out," or "If you cross your eyes, they'll stay that way," and I could always recognize the farce in things such as this. But I think it was more inherent and biological than that. "Consequences" were a vague concept, like a myth, told to you by your parents to keep you in line. Consequences weren't real until they happened to you.

When I was four, I almost drowned at the end of a swimming lesson. From what I remember, swimming lessons were always the same. When the instructor who held you let go, you had to swim to the instructor standing waist deep five feet away. The first few lessons consisted of more splashing and flailing than actual swimming. By the fourth or fifth, I became comfortable with the dog paddle. After each lesson, we were allowed "free time" to explore the shallow end. We were reminded to use the wall as a friend, if necessary. The shallow end had the shape of a large watermelon slice and was sectioned off by a long twine of blue and white braided polymer rope. Sphere-shaped floats were attached every few feet to keep the rope adrift. They looked like oversized pills.

Do not go beyond the rope, they repeated.

This drew me to it.

I wasn't exactly swimming yet. Mostly there were thwacks and strikes, bursts of frothy water splashed in every direction. That day during the free play, my toes guided me. I did my best stutter step. I imagine that underwater it looked like a slow dance.

Even now I don't know what I wanted, but if I was anything then like I am now, I'm sure it was more about proving to the instructors that I *could* go near the deep end, possibly beyond it, than it was about achieving something for myself.

The closer I got, the higher up on my tippy toes I became, the more I had to crane my neck. When I got to the rope, my toes did that strange thing they can only do in the water, that only trained gymnasts and ballerinas can do above water: they became "en pointe," supporting all of my body weight. I watched the rope bob up and down. One hand held onto the wall for support. I tried tip-toeing closer toward the rope when I slipped. My wet hand lost traction with the side of the pool deck. I made a quick, unnoticeable slunk underneath the water. And the water, like dropping a small ice-cube into a glass, barely made a stir.

I didn't struggle. I didn't put up a fight. After I slipped, my body rolled. I tried to stand upright. By the time I did, I was already in five-foot-deep water. My feet found the bottom, but they seemed glued to it. I froze. I couldn't remember how to pump my arms and kick my legs, so I did the only thing my body could in the moment. I threw one arm up into the air and hoped it would reach high enough to break the surface.

The scariest part when I think about that moment is that I don't remember deciding to stick up my arm. It seems as though it was involuntary, a response entirely unattached to my conscience. That if it weren't up to our impulse to survive, I might've drowned.

A family friend, who was in the water with his daughter, saved me. He lifted me up out of the pool. I heaved a huge inhale of open air. I ran straight up to my stepfather, sobbing and choking on water.

When I think about that day, I can still see the blurred bottom of the Frieda Zamba swimming pool. I can feel the chlorine sting my eyes, making my eyelids heavy. I can feel my

hand stuck out of the water, waving back and forth, like a white flag in surrender. Sometimes it seems like I can feel a cramping in my lungs, a “last chance” kind of pounding in my chest and ears, urging me to take a breath.

I think back on that moment right before my head submerged underwater, of staring at the rope and wanting—needing—to wander past it. It seems to me that after that day, I should’ve developed a fear, or at least some misgivings toward swimming. But the next day, when my mother took me to Frieda Zamba, I got back in the pool and dog paddled to the instructor in front of me.

When I was a kid, I used to walk along the back of the living room couch. I’d spread my arms, as if measuring my wingspan, and pretend the hard back of the couch was a balance beam or a tightrope. I liked being up high. I liked the challenge of making it from one end to the other without falling, of focusing my eyes, my weight, and my feet on a single spot.

My mother yelled at me every time. “Get down! You’re going to fall.”

“I’m not going to fall,” I’d say. I’d look up for a second, reassure her I was fine, but I’d keep putting one foot in front of the other. Often my mother had to remove me herself.

Five years ago, when I was arrested for a DUI, this was one of the first things my mother said to me: “This is you thinking you’re not going to fall off the back of the couch.”

I knew she was right. I’d driven drunk because I believed I wouldn’t get caught. I thought the odds were with me, not against.

Even today when I screw up, she says it. It’s her version of a low blow because she knows what it means. She knows that I know what it means, and that’s exactly why she says it. She says it to sting. Me believing I won’t fall off the back of the couch is me not having learned my lesson. It’s me repeating mistakes.

“I won’t fall,” I repeated as a kid. There were times when I came close, though. A few times my mother rounded the kitchen island just in time to catch me when I’d slipped. There were times when, even though I knew she hated when I did this, I was transparent with her. “Look at me, Mommy!” I’d yell, putting on a show.

It was around this same time that I stood up in the shopping cart during a trip to Walmart, slipped, and fell backward onto the tile head first. I don’t remember the moments right after the fall, but I remember when my head smacked the floor, my vision went black. I saw overhead fluorescent panels. Then all at once I saw nothing. Seconds later, my vision came back in fuzzy spots before finally smoothing out again. My mother tells me store clerks and customers ran up to us to make sure I was alright. She remembers thinking they all looked at her as though she were a terrible mother. That day ended with a trip to the hospital and a minor concussion.

I never stood up in a shopping cart again, but I wonder if that had more to do with the fact that my mother forbade me from it. Because I didn’t stop walking along the back of the couch.

This past summer, recognizing the area code as my hometown’s, I answered a toll-free phone call. A robotic female recording said I owed federal tax money and urged me to pay up or risk going to federal prison. She left a call back number.

Having been in jail before, I panicked. I called the number and a man with what seemed to be an Arabic accent picked up. Before I could say hello, he asked me to verify my address. I gave it to him. He asked if my name was Miranda Campbell. I said yes. He said that on his records it showed I’d lied on previous tax returns starting from the year 2012. I owed eight grand. I remember thinking this was strange, since the first time I ever filed taxes was 2015.

Aside from babysitting, I hadn’t had a job before then. He told me to hold on one moment. When

he got back on the line he apologized and said I was right: I owed a lesser amount of money instead. He asked if I was willing to pay this. If I wasn't willing to pay over the phone, the county sheriff would come to my doorstep and arrest me. I risked going to federal prison for up to three years. His words, exactly.

He repeated his question. "Would you like to pay back what you owe? Yes or no?"

I said, "Of course." Whatever it took so as not to go to prison.

I wanted to call my mother and stepfather to figure out if they could wire me money. The man told me I could not disconnect the phone call. If I hung up, the government would assume I was trying to evade my dues, possibly even flee.

"Even if I call right back?" I'd asked.

"Yes," he said.

Something didn't add up, but the idea that this was a scam didn't cross my mind. I thought of the past couple years, having to call my parents to walk me through filing taxes. It confused me every year—what I was supposed to claim, which boxes to fill out. It seemed possible, likely even, that I might've written the wrong thing.

The phone call lasted almost an entire hour. The information he gave was rushed. He spoke so fast, as though the words in his mouth were painful, and he couldn't wait to get them out. I had a difficult time processing any of it. I asked him to repeat himself a lot. The bromide phrase, "It all happened so fast" comes to mind.

I stalled. "Could you explain that again?" I put the man on speaker, so I could text my stepfather.

This is a scam, John replied.

But what if it's not? I typed back.

John called me. I merged it with the supposed IRS agent. John asked, “How do you know she owes this much money?”

“Because it says so here on my file,” he said.

“And what files are those?”

“My file,” he repeated. It became clear he was sticking to a script.

I listened as a silent third party. The more questions John asked (Can I have the name of your manager? Your employee ID number?) and the more hesitant the IRS agent became, the more I realized this was, in fact, a scam. The man became frustrated and loud. He’d almost pulled the wool over me, and he knew it. He knew he was so close to getting away with it.

When he hung up, I cried. The threat was gone—but the terror I’d felt was still there.

Before hanging up, John turned it into a lesson. He addressed me in the third person. “First, Miranda needs to know that if the IRS ever came calling, it would be in the form of a letter or an official document.”

“It seems so obvious now,” I said.

“Miranda’s never even made eight grand. How could she *owe* that much?”

That comment might’ve bothered me more in a different situation, but we were both able to laugh about it.

“On a serious note though,” John said. “Miranda has a trusting nature, which is good, but it gets her into trouble. She doesn’t want to believe in things like scammers, and for the sake of the argument, ‘bad guys.’”

I pictured him putting air quotes around bad guys.

“She chooses not to see these kinds of things when they’re right in front of her,” he said.

I sat on the edge of my bed and wondered what else I treated like this, what else my naivete overlooked. I could never drown. I would never fall off the back of the couch.

“You’ve always been that way, for as long as I’ve known you. Since you were two. My mother even said it after the first time she met you. She said to me, ‘She’s innocent that one. She needs to be careful when she’s older.’”

“Innocent?” I asked.

“She just meant that you were sweet and recognized that it could get you into trouble.”

Although the phone call was a scam, I had that same feeling of credulity, the idea that I was exempt from the natural order of cause and effect. If you stand on something unsteady, there’s a good chance you could fall. But for as long as I could remember, a small voice in my head seemed to whisper: *that could never happen, not to you*. Getting scammed was the kind of thing I read about happening to other people.

I got off the phone that day and wondered if I’d ever shed my innocence, that sense of trust and safety mostly born of ignorance. Why was I surprised when things like this happened? I thought of the writer Charles Baxter. In his book of essays on writing fiction, he mentions a trend he’s noticed in American writing, what he calls “the disarmed protagonist,” how many contemporary writers have never gotten over their American romance with innocence. Was this me in my day to day? “No one could go through their life perpetually shocked,” he says.

And yet.

Again and again, I turned my cheek. I chose to look away.

Hurricane Season

My fifth-grade teacher Mrs. Ziegler made our class form single file lines on both sides of the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton hallway. We faced the Easter yellow wall that peeled in patches. Our backs faced the person across from us on the other side of the hall. We got on our knees and crouched, our noses inches from the dirty linoleum floor, our arms raised protectively over our heads. We'd do this every August in preparation for hurricane season. When I crouched and leaned forward, I was more worried about my plaid jumper sliding up and revealing my underwear than about the ceiling above us tearing open.

When I got home from school that year, I told my mother about the drill. "When the hurricane comes, I hope it's a P.E. day. I'll be wearing gym shorts."

She laughed. "I'm sure you won't be at school if the hurricane comes. You'll be safe at home." She smiled. "With us."

That September, school was canceled. Hurricane season had arrived. My mother and stepfather John stayed home from work. We shopped for canned soups, beans, and vegetables; jars of peanut butter and loaves of bread; gallons of water; and AA batteries at Walmart. John nailed plywood over the windows. Everyone had a job and a place. This was our normal. Looking back, I realize a part of me looked forward to the late summer months every year.

A category four hurricane was on its way toward Palm Coast, our small beach town on the east coast of Florida. We hadn't evacuated even though we'd been encouraged to. Hurricane Frances was just another hurricane we'd stick out together.

When the power went out, my sister Katie screamed. My mother told her to knock it off. Though I couldn't see Katie, I knew she was smiling, sneaking a look at me. I stifled a giggle, trying not to egg her on.

I remember once John said to me that not everything Katie did was funny.

“Yes, it is,” I'd replied.

Katie was more startled than scared. We all were. We knew we'd lose power; we just hadn't known when. Katie and I checked under the kitchen sink for flashlights and the large lantern that cast a wide but dull glow. My mother searched cupboards for candles and matches. John rummaged through his unorganized computer desk looking for replacement batteries. This is what being a family is, I thought. It's enduring what could be the worst together and making the most of what you've got.

We set a cluster of white tea lights on the glass kitchen table. They gave me just enough light to finish the essay for my sixth-grade language arts class, “Who I Admire Most.” I sat in the low-lit kitchen nook, thinking about the things I loved most about my sister. How not only could she make me laugh, but she always wanted to. I thought about how, even though I was the little sister, she included me in everything she did with her friends. I sat there writing, my cramped hand moving across the yellow Steno notepad. Katie sat to my right stacking a full deck of cards into seven different piles. My mother stood in the kitchen concocting a hurricane snack: sticks of celery coated with creamy Peter Pan peanut butter then dotted with semi-sweet chocolate chips. John tinkered with his Canon DSLR in the dining room. A small flashlight beam danced around the ceiling every few minutes.

The wind rustled outside. Every now and then I heard a loud whistle. I pictured the trees in the woods behind our house whipping back and forth. Sometimes, if the wind really picked

up, the aluminum around our porch enclosure made a loud bang. There were times in past hurricane seasons when we'd walk outside the next day to find parts of the screen enclosure popped in.

Though the bang made me jump, nothing stopped my hand from gliding back and forth across the steno pad.

Hurricane Frances left us in the dark for a few days. We waited for the roads to clear of tree debris and fallen telephone poles so that FPL trucks, with their large white cranes, could fix each neighborhood's electricity. One night, while we waited for the power to come back on, John found sparklers in a dining room drawer full of candles, paper clips, thumbtacks, and scotch tape. We lit them, waving the long, beige sticks that remind me so much of the tops of reed grass in random patterns. We took photos with my mother's silver Canon digital camera. At first, what felt like random scrawling turned into creating shapes. Sometimes the photo captured a single letter. We formed short words, like love and hello, fiery transcriptions caught in the air. We entertained ourselves for hours. A smoky aroma filled the house. It felt like Fourth of July in our living room. I felt a roaring in my body, the same way the fireworks at the beach sent echoing booms and cracks through my chest with each pop of color. But this roaring didn't have to do with sound or decibel. It was warmth, a feeling of togetherness spreading through me the way liquid fills the volume of its container, flowing freely and completely.

We set bowls on the white tiles around our house to catch water that dripped from the ceiling. After Hurricane Frances passed through, John assessed the roof damage. Our charcoal gray roof shingles littered the lawn. A ceiling leak was not uncommon. When this happened, I'd always wonder if it might later interfere with our Christmas decorating. Every year John would take

Katie and me up onto the roof to help him with the lights. We'd crab walk and squat along the roof, clicking each oversized, colorful bulb into a pocket along the edge of the house. I loved being up there, peering over the edge, and waving to my mother below on the driveway, feeling much larger than I was. I remember watching the water gather in a dime-sized wet spot on the ceiling, deteriorating the plaster, and worrying that Christmas decorating would be different that year, if possible.

After finding the leaks, we opened the front door and found our large oak tree uprooted from the ground. Normally, it stood in the middle of the front lawn, twenty feet from the door. It'd been there for more than ten years. Now it lay on its side as though it were taking a nap. The top of the oak's branches and the green spindly leaves stopped a couple inches from my mother's master bathroom window. We were lucky. I'd had friends whose families and homes made it through safely, but with scars and scratches, trees blown from their roots that had fallen onto their homes. Sometimes their branches punctured roofs and windows, bringing the outside damage, inside. We'd made it through, again.

We walked around the oak toward the stump. The roots were upended in the air, curled in a way that reminded me of Medusa's black, snake-spiraled hair. The large hole made our lawn look hollow, almost desolate. The tree had also fallen onto the white lamp post at the edge of the lawn, obscuring it from our view. We were sure that it'd been crushed.

The next day, when John used an electric hand saw to cut the tree apart and lay in pieces at the end of the driveway for sanitation to haul away, we found the lamp post still standing, as if untouched. The light fixture—a fancy, white globe made of plastic—was cracked. Pieces of it lay scattered in the grass, but the light bulb beneath remained intact. It seemed odd or at least against logic. The large oak wrapped itself around the lamp post in a forced embrace, crushing

the thick, plastic accessory attached at the top, but when we flicked the light switch the bulb was wired to, the light still shone.

When I think of hurricanes and how, to most people, they pose a threat, these are the things that come to mind: waiting for the power to go out, my sister screaming when it did—not actually scared, but more startled by the sudden flicker into darkness, wanting to put on a show. I think of pulling out flashlights from the computer desk, standing them upright toward the ceiling so that they made a circle of light that spread upward and outward, my mother searching for candles in the dining room cabinet, blowing the dust off the tops of the small tea lights because they'd been sitting unused for almost a year. I think of settling into the dark and working on homework that was due when school resumed. It may have been canceled, but it did not mean the school work couldn't get done. It just meant it had to be done in an inconvenienced way. I think of taking breaks and playing the Memory Game at the kitchen table, flipping the tiles over until I found each cartoon picture's pair. I think of playing card games at that table, where I first learned to play Gin Rummy. I think more about the extra time spent with family and less about the unpredictability of a hurricane. The weather that thundered and howled right over us, but still felt a little bit like a ghost story.

I didn't watch the news. I only knew the storms were coming because my mother and stepfather told me. Power outage, filling the bathtub with water, and stocking up on canned goods were all part of a routine whose stakes I did not fully understand. Sure, I helped pick out my favorite soups like Chicken and Stars and Vegetable Beef, but that always felt like another day of distracted shopping at the grocery store with my mother. The real preparation, the

worrying—if there truly was any—was up to my mother and John: the adults. The comfort in our routine made it possible for me to forget what was happening outside.

Recently, I asked John about the hurricanes, whether my memories have failed me, or if there were in fact years, like 2004, where, aside from a power outage, a hurricane seemed more like a severe thunderstorm.

“There was a lot of that, sure,” he said. “But there was also some calculating. Your mother and I asked ourselves, ‘Okay, what’s the latest we can leave? We have to decide, let’s say, by Tuesday afternoon. If we wait any longer, we’re going to have to stick it out.’”

“Really?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. I’d bet most people who stay through hurricanes are like this, even the ones who seem calm. They’re watching, they’re sweating. They’re a little worried.”

“I don’t remember ever seeing you and Mom like this,” I said.

“Even if the kids never saw it, there were moments where your mother and I asked ourselves, ‘was it a mistake to stay?’ We weren’t as complacent as you guys think.”

“Hmm...”

“What?”

“You guys fooled me.”

“Don’t get me wrong. We were probably never as worried as we should’ve been.”

“What do you mean?”

“There were some years we actually went outside during the storm.” He talked about walking out to our pool enclosure, how we’d sit on the wicker chairs on the patio and marvel at the power of the winds. How some trees would tip so far over—30 degrees maybe—that they

seemed inches from snapping. He reminded me of one year when the next-door neighbors were in the middle of re-shingling their roof during hurricane season. Black tarp covered the rooftop. They'd either forgotten to take it off or realized it too late. During the brunt of one of the hurricanes, all the tarp ripped off. "We just sat there," John said. "Watching the tarp fly by, enjoying the show."

In 2017, when Hurricane Irma happened, I was living in Georgia. Hurricanes had become a thing of my childhood. Governor Rick Scott declared a state of emergency. "This storm will kill you," he said. "Prepare the body-bags." I wanted to drive home. I wanted to be swept up in the drama.

It was the first hurricane since Andrew in 1992 that would cover the entire state. It changed its course five or six times before picking which coast it would lean toward. I told my family to come stay with me in Georgia. Deep down, I knew what they'd say before I even asked.

"We're gonna wait it out," John said to me over the phone. "At least wait a few more days to see where it's headed."

I remember the days following Kilauea's eruption in Hawaii a couple years ago. One guy was immortalized on social media when he was reported as saying, "I won't leave my house until the lava is at my door." Floridians are made fun of for their bullheadedness and naivete in much the same way when it comes to hurricanes. My family was no different.

"I have room up here if you guys need it," I told John.

"We'll let you know."

When they stayed, I wasn't surprised. The more I followed Irma's coverage, the more nervous I became. At one point it became the strongest hurricane the National Hurricane Center

had ever recorded in the Atlantic just outside the Caribbean. It was moving with sustained winds of up to 157mph. I talked to my mother and John daily. My sister and her boyfriend made plans to stay with them during the storm. On the day they were predicted to get the brunt of it, I sat on the couch in my living room, working on my laptop. The bright afternoon sun filtered in through my white blinds. Though the air conditioning was on, my skin was sticky with sweat.

Still have power? I sent a text message to my sister.

Lost it about fifteen minutes ago.

Your phones better be charged! My sister had always been a quick texter, but the three dots that indicate typing seemed slow, teasing almost. I felt myself willing her to reply. When the dots went away, I rested my phone on my thigh.

It vibrated. *They are! Mine is on 98% currently.*

That's higher than it's ever been, I typed. *Maybe Irma is a good thing after all.*

I didn't have cable, but I refreshed my open internet tabs often, following news articles of Irma's latest coverage and its updated path. Twenty minutes went by, and Katie sent me a low-lit picture. I saw faint silhouettes of my mother, John, and my sister's boyfriend Damian sitting around the glass kitchen table, each holding playing cards. A small stack was gathered in the center of the table. Tea candles lit up their arms and chests. I couldn't make out their faces in the dim light, but I bet they were smiling.

My phone vibrated again. *John is drunk off wine hahaha.*

I looked at the picture again and noticed four wine glasses set on the table, my sister's and Damian's glasses filled with a red, John's and my mother's, a white.

I sent back a series of exclamation points and question marks, then a separate text that said, *John never drinks! I wish I was with you guys.*

I thought back to the phone conversation I'd had with my mother the day before. I sat on the top step of my apartment building stoop and asked her if I should come home or not.

That's up to you, she kept saying.

"I hate being away from home when stuff like this happens," I said.

"Well then do it. Just come home. You better leave soon, though. Your window is closing." I looked down at the time on my phone. 5:30pm. The storm would pass through in less than twenty-four hours.

"Is that stupid though? To drive toward the hurricane just so I can be with you guys when it hits?" I played with the shoelaces of my Converse and watched cars pull up to the red light in front of my apartment. I wanted to get in my car.

"No," my mother said. Her pause was long enough for me to reconsider. A six-hour drive to my childhood home—a home without electricity—a warm, but brief visit, followed by another six-hour drive back.

"I guess I should stay," I said.

I stared at the photo my sister sent and texted her back. *I bet you guys are playing Hearts.*

My phone vibrated seconds later. *How'd you know?*

I smiled, wanting more than anything to take up the empty chair around the kitchen table.

Normally, when hurricanes passed through, it was about getting through half of the night or a quarter of the day. But since Irma covered more than half of the state, many of the outer bands kept circling, hitting the same locations twice, maybe three times, losing steam while inching north toward Georgia. About a day after texting my sister, I tried my mother's cell phone.

She picked up and put me on speaker.

“How’d you guys make out?” I asked.

“Oh, we’re fine,” my mother said. At the same time, my sister shouted, “It was fun!”

“We still don’t have power though,” John said. “Almost every neighborhood here is out, so we probably won’t have any for a couple days.

“Which means Damian and I are going back to our place in Orlando.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “I’m glad you guys are okay.”

“Miranda, it was crazy.” I heard my sister’s voice again. “Last night I got up to get more wine, and the floor was wet. We realized water was coming in from the patio!”

I pictured our kitchen nook, how the white shuttered double doors lead out onto the patio. The Chattahoochee rock deck is a six-inch step down. I asked if the house flooded.

“No, but it might’ve. We obviously weren’t paying attention,” John said. “We had to sweep water out of the patio and into the pool.”

I pictured the four of them standing in the dark in ankle deep water, each with a broom in hand, sweeping water away from the house. “How was that?”

“Harder than you’d think.” While the three of them swept, John drained the pool into the lot behind our house. He knew he’d have to drain it, but not that early, not in the middle of the storm. “We weren’t really in danger,” John said, “but for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t really calm either.”

It felt like another moment I had missed out on. A time the four of them could look back on and joke about. How John had drunk too much wine, how Katie had made a spectacle of the whole thing, how they swept *water*, a menial task that on any other day I’d complain about having to do. How Irma was something we could not share.

One hurricane season not too long ago, after the lights went out, my mother and I pulled out an air mattress from the attic, blew it up, and slept outside on the pool deck. It was late summer in Florida, the air damp and thick, even with the windows open. We wanted to sleep closer to the breeze.

My sister was away in California. John watched us tuck the full-sized sheet under the bottom of the mattress and fluff our pillows. He looked at my mother and said, “Cool, I get a king bed all to myself.”

That night when my mother and I went to bed, we took turns lifting our bodies and falling back down, our weight puffing each other up and down on the air mattress. We were like children. We played on my cell phone. She nestled her chin into my shoulder as I showed her silly filters that made you sprout bunny ears or a mouse nose, ones that altered your voice to a squeak. She told me about the colleague at work who was giving her a hard time. For a moment, we’d switched roles.

Every now and then we yelled something like, “Man, it must suck to be in a bed with a huge, thick comforter” loud enough so that John could hear. I sweated through my cotton tank top and matching shorts. We edged the mattress out from under the patio and onto the pool deck so that when we looked up, the screen enclosure became our ceiling. I thought about how funny it would be if we woke up in the pool. It reminded me of the scene from *The Parent Trap* when the evil stepmother wakes up on her air mattress in the middle of a lake.

After a while, we both fell asleep. It was better than I remembered—sleeping in a power outage—because we had the moon, the stars, that earthy, musky smell from the oils of plants after a fresh rainfall, and of course, each other.

Wandering

When I first found out that my father was homeless, had been for a few years, my mind formed a boilerplate image of what that might look like. I pictured a greasy, tangled head of dark, coarse hair. When I was growing up, I'd watch him shave his beard down to buffed skin while a foamy, stubble mixture slid down the deep "o" in the sink. I pictured that hair, grown wild and unruly. Surely, it hadn't seen a razor in some time. I pictured threadbare clothes with patches of dirt. Would he be wearing those teal, coral, and plum colored nylon shorts—the kind of shorts defined to a different time—that he never took off? I pictured a held up cardboard sign with a hackneyed sentence that made passersby look away in guilt. Perhaps his old favorite saying: *Shit happens*. And I felt shame for this indoctrinated assumption so often simplified on television.

My father had run away eight years before, but I always assumed he'd found a safe place to stay, a roof over his head. For a while, he lived with his brother in Miami. We talked on the phone every few weeks. Less than a year went by before he took off again without telling anyone. When my mother found out he'd been homeless, living between shelters only a few towns over, I remember wanting to look for him with the same care and determination one would use looking for an old, treasured family photograph.

When someone runs away, and it's clear they're not coming back, after a while you stop wondering where they went. You realize how huge the world really is, how they could be anywhere—*anywhere*—and the simple act of looking seems futile. A little while longer and they feel dead. Not "dead to you," like in the abandoned, bitter teen kind of way. Just dead. They must be. Because where else would they be if they stopped coming around?

His homelessness left a dent in me that his running away didn't. When he ran away, he was still this great big adult that had not a lot, but some money and an old, grass green Nissan

truck I always felt infinite in, even at nine years old. Maybe it was the rolled down windows or the hard, classic rock surging through his speakers that made heads turn at traffic lights, but it felt like nothing could touch us in that small truck.

Even when he ran away it still felt like he knew what he was doing. But when I'd learned he was homeless, I couldn't help but feel I was the parent. There seemed this chance I could find him perhaps if I drove around a lot and searched hard enough. Though I thought about doing this, I never did. I wonder if that says more about our relationship than anything.

I'd thought, he's been so close this whole time. I wondered if I ever passed him on the street driving to and from the Volusia Mall or to an Ormond Beach Dermatology appointment, things I did so often my chances of riding by him, I knew, were significant. How odd that would be. Maybe I even looked him directly in the eye, but only just for a moment as I usually did when I saw a homeless person. It is rude to stare at anyone, but this kind of stare feels cruel, even if it is coming from a place that can only be described as a mixture of wonder, pity, and then gratitude and warmth for your at times frustrating but beautiful, lucky life. It seemed impossible, but also possible that we looked at each other and didn't recognize one another. Impossible because there's no way I could ever forget the face of my father. His ocean blue eyes that I didn't inherit, his big nose with a bump on the bridge that my sister did, his thick brown hair we both have. But it also felt possible because eight years is a long time. And if I think hard enough, I'm not sure I do remember what he looked like. When I try to, he's stuck with the same face the nine-year-old me last remembers, his mouth hung open in a loud laugh.

A thought comes to me—so simple, so basic, but true. We should've taken more pictures growing up. My generation is often criticized for the time spent on their cell phone, to wanting to document the moments more than they want to live wholly in them. A certain novelty of the

experience is lost, missed out on because of it. It's something my mother says often. Put the phone away. But perhaps this is the better way. By taking photos, we're not only securing a memory. We're drawing out the moment and the feeling that was had in it.

My father and I should've taken more pictures. At Rainbow Park, a kid's playground filled with wooden jungle gyms, seesaws, slides, swings, and monkey bars that we spent hours in every other weekend; the Regal movie theater that we only went to twice a year because my father considered it a special treat; or the gazebo at the end of the dock of the Ormond Beach Intracoastal Waterway, where'd we'd meet up with my father's friend and his black Labrador, Lady, and watch fishing boats pass. All of it feels picturesque in my head, but sometimes I wish I could hold a 5x7 proof of it in my hand.

Maybe I'm more like him than I think. Maybe all this time I've been thinking of him, driving past his old apartment, parking the car and getting out for no reason other than to picture my nine-year-old self run around the concrete slab where we used to play for hours... maybe I too have been wandering.

My Father's Backpack

1. Navy Blue Outdoor Products Backpack

When my father died suddenly of a heart attack in 2012, the only thing he left behind was his backpack and the few contents that filled it. His last eight years were spent homeless. A stranger found him on the ground in the parking lot of a Publix shopping center, his navy-blue backpack crunched underneath him.

Two days later, when my Aunt Jane dropped off his backpack at my mother's house, I couldn't get myself to open it, not yet. Aunt Jane didn't say anything when she left it. We talked about my father, shared memories of him and laughed. But the backpack and his homelessness were the awkward elephants we danced around. A couple days later, my sister picked it up off the living room floor and asked if I wanted to go through it with her.

"I can't," I said.

"Are you sure?" she asked. I nodded, put on a sweater, and left the house.

About a month after he died, I decided it was time for me to go through it. I made sure I was alone. I took his backpack from my sister's room, brought it to mine. Though no one was home, I shut the door. I sat on the edge of my bed, unzipped the backpack pocket by pocket, and laid the items next to me.

In it, I found several plain t-shirts, one pair of shorts ruffled at the bottom, a razor, two tubes of Arm and Hammer toothpaste, a small pair of metal scissors, his black Samsung flip phone, and an Eldredge & Davis P.A. business card browned at the edges. It felt a lot like putting together a puzzle, trying to determine what each item meant about the life he lived at the end.

But all the pieces were not there. I thought about the missing pieces, the comforts I wasn't just familiar with, but that I expected in my life: a toothbrush, a comb, a bed to sleep in,

family to fight with. All things he didn't have in his life at the end. I confronted things I had not questioned in years. I never considered that he might have been homeless. I only focused on the anger I felt at his running away. Now the truth, his way of life, sat in my lap.

The next day, I did it again. Always the same: right after school when no one was home yet from work. I did this for a few months. One time my mother caught me. She didn't ask what I was doing though. She didn't say anything. I took his backpack with me when I left for college that August.

Seven years later and I still do it. I take out the items, each of them conjuring a memory of my father and the time I spent with him growing up. I unfold and refold the shirts, take out the small items from the outer pockets, set everything next to me, and try to finish the unsolvable puzzle. Whenever I do this, I feel him in the room with me. It is as though we are holding hands.

2. Black, Plastic Generic Razor

When I take out his razor, a maritime, briny smell comes to me, but my mind does not wander to a marina or a beach. I think of my father's two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment in Ormond Beach, FL.

In our matching Tweety Bird nightgowns Katie and I stood side by side, staring in the mirror, giggling at our fake beards, our cheeks and chins lathered with thick, white, Pacific Rush Barbasol shaving cream. We smelled like an ocean breeze. Dad walked into the bathroom, the lower half of his face smothered in foam. He carried two silver spoons, holding one out for each of us. We took the spoons, looked up at Dad, and waited for the next step. He grabbed a cheap, green and black plastic razor from his medicine cabinet, pressed it against his cheek, and then glided the razor across his dark, coarse hair in swift strokes. "Like this," he said.

Katie scraped the spoon's curved side along her cheek, scooping a heap of shaving cream. The side of her face looked like the road when a snow plow moves its way along the pavement, two drifts of snow piled to the side, one clear path down the center. "What do I do with this stuff?" she asked, pointing at the cream piled onto the spoon.

"You rinse it," Dad said. He shook his razor free of stubble and ran the blade under the sink water.

I slid the cold spoon across my cheek, enjoying the sleekness of the motion, how soft my cheeks felt right after, though there was no hair to remove. I smelled beach waves curling just under my nose with each stroke of the spoon. I scraped until all of the shaving cream was gone, looked up at my dad, and cupped my hands. He filled them for round two.

3. Small, Silver Scissors

His manicure scissors, the kind used for stray cuticles or trimming a mustache, are small enough to keep in a cosmetics bag, a jean pocket, or, in my father's case, the front pouch of his backpack. When I hold his scissors, I think of my father's instinct to act with haste.

One weekend at our dad's, Katie and I decided to play "nurse," a game that involved putting a cool rag over my forehead. I was the patient. Instead of using a washcloth, Katie and I used our Gooze—the latest 90's gimmick. Like Play-Doh, Gooze was a gooey, sticky substance that changed shape and form with every mold. I lay flat on my back, morphing the cool gel into a rectangular shape, and spread it across my forehead. It took seconds for the Gooze to seep into my hair. I ran to the bathroom mirror, pulling the slimy substance. My roots tugged at my scalp. Hot tears sprang in my eyes. The line between where the Gooze started and ended mixed within my strands of hair disappeared. They became one, the Gooze sealed in.

I walked out to the living room where Dad lay shirtless across his pull-out couch watching *COPS*. I stood there for a moment, trying to summon words, an excuse. He turned to me. His eyes landed on the green Gooze in my hair.

“How the hell did you get that in there!?”

“I’m sorry!”

“Did you see her do it?”

Katie, wide-eyed, shook her head no.

Dad picked up his telephone. “I’m not dealing with this.”

I watched him as he stood silent, his jaw locked. He got my mother’s voicemail. He hung up and dialed again. On the third try, Dad left a voicemail.

“I’m gonna cut your daughter’s hair if you don’t pick up the goddamn phone!” *Your*. He shouted above my head, a tuft of my long, brown hair scrunched in his tight grip. I stared at the black-handled metal scissors lying on the bathroom counter. He waited a few more minutes, but the phone never rang.

Dad sat me on the edge of the bathtub. As he ripped and clipped at my hair, the scissors slicing close to my ear, he mumbled words I could not hear. Halfway through cutting, he made Katie leave the bathroom. I wondered why he didn’t want her to see. My hair fell to the floor in choppy pieces. I cried. Afterwards, I couldn’t bear to look in the mirror.

In old photographs taken shortly following this incident, I’m smiling. Not a meek, closed-mouth smile, but a wide, toothy grin. In those photos, I have uneven bangs on one side of my forehead. My hair looks patchy and unbalanced, like someone shoved a wig on top of my head. My brown mop gives a whole new meaning to layers. But I look happy.

When Katie and I returned to our mother's house after that weekend, my mother was furious. She called and yelled at my father over the phone, but she couldn't do anything about my hair. A week later we settled back into our routine, forgetting the whole thing ever happened. She also forgot about the voicemail he left on her house phone. For a while after the incident, when I was alone, I'd play back his voicemail and listen to it on repeat.

4. Two 0.9 oz Tubes of Arm and Hammer Advance White Toothpaste, Fresh Mint Flavor
When I hold the tubes, a lump forms in the back of my throat. Where is his toothbrush? Maybe he used his finger. The words 'fresh mint' on the tubes recall rock music on the radio and long, lazy Saturday afternoons. I smile. Nothing could touch us, then.

Dad always stopped at Jiffy Mart after picking Katie and me up for the weekend. He'd leave us in his truck while he ran in. Each time we'd beg him to buy scratch-off lottery tickets; sometimes he came out with a few, sometimes he didn't. At seven years old, I found this idea of chance thrilling. \$2.00 here, \$10.00 there. A chance to go to the movie theater with my dad and my sister, a chance for the three of us to have something other than Ramen noodles for dinner.

Most times at Jiffy Mart, he bought spearmint SKOAL. "What's that?" I asked him the first time.

"Dip."

"Can I eat some, too?"

"It's not for you, and I'm not eating it."

"Why can't I have some?"

"You're too little."

He'd twist open the small, circular can, take a chunk between his forefinger and thumb, and smear it in front of his bottom row of teeth. His bottom lip would bulge and stay like that, slowly shrinking the more he spit into an empty plastic cup he kept in his console. He bought it so often that the inside of his truck smelled like mint. For a long time whenever I smelled spearmint or peppermint, I would think of tobacco and the rough, black leather seats of his green Nissan pickup.

Whenever the three of us stopped at Jiffy Mart, sometimes two or three times in one weekend, we'd ask if we could go inside with him. He said no every time. I wonder if it was because he was afraid of being judged, for buying tobacco and beer with his two, young daughters. Perhaps it was the hassle of having to keep his eyes on us while he did.

I never did see the inside of that convenience store, but I remember the building well: the brown shingles lining the roof of the entire complex, the glass door decorated with cigarette ads, Bud Lite and Corona cardboard cutouts, and a blue, blinking neon sign that read *open* in all caps. I'm confident I could drive there today without an address.

One day he came out of Jiffy Mart and tossed two circular cans at Katie and me. "I got you girls something." Excited, I opened the can, but noticed its different packaging on the front.

"What is it?" I asked. The label read "Jack Link's Jerky CHEW."

"Try it," he said. I trusted my dad, so I did. It became our favorite snack, the salty, beefy shreds tucked away in our bottom lips, puffed out like Dad's. We spent many afternoons riding in his truck, listening to classic rock on 95.7 The HOG with the windows rolled down. Dad sucked on his chew. Katie and I extracted the sweet, tangy, teriyaki from our jerkies. The wind whipped our hair in every direction.

5. Three Button Down Plaid Shirts, a White and Blue T-shirt with the Logo “Friends of the Poor: Walk a Mile in my Shoes”, One Pair of Khaki Shorts, a Yellow Shirt with Brown Stains that Reads “Proud American” Printed With a Bald Eagle and Two American Flags, One Pair of White Mid-Calf Socks

Most of the space in his backpack is taken up by clothes. I think of my closet, the clothes tight and compact because of everything forced into it, how even though I only wear half of what hangs in there, I won't get rid of anything, either. I don't know why I feel the need to unfold his clothes, only to refold and pack them in the exact same way again, until next time.

One weekend my mother was late for the Sunday night drop-off. We'd just come from Dad's apartment. He had to wait another half hour or so, idling in the truck with Katie and me outside my mother's house. We only saw each other two weekends every month. I didn't understand his rush, why he was fixated on a quick switch every time.

When I think about it now, though, I sympathize. He didn't want to be there. I understand not wanting to look back.

I always knew we were nearing our mother's house the angrier or quieter he'd get. The conversation would become more sparse. Sometimes the rides ended in complete silence. He hated reporting the weekend to my mother, their small talk at the end of the driveway, what he must've seen as their old driveway. *How was your weekend? What did they eat?* Their brief conversation sometimes ended in Dad flipping off our mother or calling her a pig for having put on weight before driving off down the road. Sometimes I'd catch him staring at the house when we pulled up. Was he wondering if anything inside had changed? Did my mother still have those white, leather sofas? Did she still listen to music play from the dark, oak Pioneer stereo speakers?

He was always moody before and at Sunday night drop-off, but we were used to it. That Sunday was different. After a half hour of waiting, he reached behind his seat and snatched our backpacks. He opened his door and slammed it shut. He unzipped the pockets and threw our clothes in bunches into the middle of the street. When they were emptied, he tossed the backpacks onto the road and headed for the bed of his truck. Katie and I were still seated, but we cried out for him to stop. Dad wouldn't look at us. He threw our Razor scooters onto the pavement.

“Get out.”

Without waiting for our mother to get home, he left us at the end of the driveway and sped off.

Pants, underwear, shirts, nightgowns, socks, hair scrunchies, sandals, a Scooby Doo stuffed animal, assortment of Beanie Babies, Lisa Frank coloring books, two scooters, and board games littered the road. Paper money, plastic people, plastic cars, and other loose game pieces were scattered everywhere. Most pieces settled in clusters, but in the lawn of the empty lot next door, a blue, plastic game figurine—a man—lay all by itself.

6. Ventolin HFA Inhaler, 125 Puffs Left

When I hold my father's inhaler, I hold one of the last things that ties me to him, an inconvenience that, when he was alive, he and I shared. While it's not something I enjoy living with, I know my father understood it the way I did. Though I've never told my sister this, I'm often jealous that she has age on her side—three more years with our father than I had. I'm jealous that they share similar features: his dark, curly hair, his long, slightly curved nose, his heart shaped face. I share his asthma.

Every weekend at Dad's meant another weekend at Rainbow Park, a playground filled with jungle gyms, seesaws, monkey bars, slides, swings, and other playthings made for climbing. The park had been built in the early nineties. Everything was made of wood. The jungle gyms creaked under my feet when I ran through them. It reminded me of the antiquated rickety, wooden roller coasters at old theme parks. The entrance to the park had an archway painted as a rainbow. One end of the rainbow featured a painted patch of grass with painted pink, yellow, and red flowers and white mushrooms. The other side had a painted pot of gold. Every other weekend, Katie and I would run under the rainbow's arc and disappear to play for hours. Sometimes Dad took a crossword puzzle or a newspaper, but mostly, he'd sit empty-handed. All three of us skipped meals at Rainbow Park.

Every so often I'd stop for a "breathing break." Seeing me run toward him, he'd hold up my small, red, Albuterol inhaler. I'd puff once or twice and turn to leave.

"Take it easy, Miranda. The park will still be there."

I'd look up at him with clasped hands and puppy dog eyes. He seemed bored and unamused. He didn't ever tell me not to go back and play, but sometimes he'd turn his head in the other direction without saying anything. I understand now that he wanted a buddy to sit and talk to, even for a minute. I think about how many minutes total that would give me with him if he were alive today.

It was at Rainbow Park where he first alluded to "going away."

"I'm going away, girls," Dad said sitting under one of the pavilions. It was so odd and random that neither Katie nor I said anything. But then for months, every weekend when we visited him: "I'm going away." I lost count how many times. For every going away there was an extra "I love you, you know that?"

One day, we asked. “Going away? Are we going with you?”

He smiled, a sad smile that seemed to look through and far beyond my sister and me.

Then I knew: this question didn’t have a simple answer.

He never elaborated more than “going away.” But one Friday evening when I was nine, he didn’t show up to my mother’s house like he always did. He didn’t call. Our mother drove us to his apartment, and we peeked through his windows. The pull-out couch, two end tables, and the brown easy chair that made up his living room were gone. I scanned the room, but couldn’t find his black, bulky Sony TV that sat in the corner. He never kept much out on the kitchen counter, but his black coffee pot with the broken lid wasn’t there either. His bedroom window could only be seen from the back of the apartment, but I remember thinking we’d seen enough to know that this room too was probably empty. The cartoons my sister and I often drew no longer clung to the refrigerator door.

7. Eldredge & Davis P.A. Business Card

This is how they identified him. Not by his driver’s license, through his brother-in-law’s law firm. The top-left corner has a small tear and yellow smudges. Had he been in legal trouble? I wonder if his lawyer knew all along where my father was.

One weekend before he ran away, Katie, my dad, and I sat on his couch, our eyes trained toward his TV, and waited for the *COPS* theme song to play. As soon as the inimitable guitar key filled the room, the three of us broke out in song, chanting, “Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do when they come for you!”

My sister and I sang it throughout the week back at our mother’s house. By Tuesday or Wednesday, she’d call Dad and yell at him for letting us watch trash TV.

“What? They like it!” Dad said.

“No, they don’t. They watch it because you watch it.”

COPS became our routine, our normal.

“What happens when they catch the bad guy, Dad?”

“They go to...JAIL!” He threw his hands up in the air as if telling a ghost story. We laughed.

“What happens in jail?” Katie and I reeled in for the story.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, if I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

Dad said this phrase so often we knew never to take it seriously.

We turned our attention back to the TV and watched the flashing blue and red lights catch up to the car it pursued.

A minute later Dad said, “Jail is where your mom’s trying to send me.” He said this as if he were telling us to use the bathroom before a road trip, or the same way someone says they’re going to bed. The room was quiet. Dad’s childlike spirit vanished. I knew the rest of the day, maybe even the weekend, would be like this: quiet and uncomfortable, Dad irritable and impatient.

“No, she’s not!” Katie said. Why would Mom do that?”

He paused for a long time before answering. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

8. Black, Pay-As-You-Go, Samsung Cell Phone

The flip phone didn't come with a charger. I'm not sure how my father managed to charge it. When I want to read the few contacts and the only message in it, I have a universal charger, but holding it is usually enough.

I pull my father's navy blue backpack out from the bottom right corner of my bedroom closet. It lies under old board games and sleeping bags. I sit on the floor of my room with his backpack. The beige wood floor feels cold and smooth against my bare legs.

Sometimes when I sit there and rifle through the contents, I wonder about the weather on the day he died. Was the sky clear and blue? Overcast? Did it rain? If so, did he find shelter?

I pull everything out, unfold the shirts, arrange them and the rest of the contents next to me. I stare into the empty backpack, wondering if what's not in there might tell me something that proves he hadn't suffered the last eight years of his life, shuffling between homeless shelters and littered highway underpasses. Was he one of the people who sleep in the little crook under the Granada Bridge—a cement cubby-hole just big enough for a man's body? Was he one of those men I see wrapped in dingy blankets, standing or sitting by highway exits holding flimsy cardboard signs? I wonder if I could've done more.

When I hold his pay-as-you-go cell phone, I think about the only text message in it, the text message he sent my sister twenty-three days before his death.

Merry Christmas Katie and Miranda. Love you both - Dad

It was the first time she and I had heard from him in years. At the time, I was too surprised and comforted by the message that I didn't consider how he'd gotten hold of Katie's cell phone number. I wonder now if his reaching out was the promise of further communication or a white flag. Perhaps it was to simply let us know he was still alive. The more I read the text message, the more I'm convinced of a surrender.

When I hold his cell phone, I'm reminded of one weekend many years ago when my father bought us walkie talkies to use outside on the concrete slab behind his apartment. Katie and I would congregate with the other kids our age whose families also lived in Orchard Garden, playing freeze tag or capture the flag until the sun went down.

I imagine us using these walkie talkies over the years, even after he disappeared. In my imagination, he sits under the Granada bridge overlooking the Intracoastal, or at a greasy table inside the Long John's Silver fast food chain we ate at most weekends, dipping hushpuppies into tartar sauce. He listens for the crackle of the walkie talkie. He listens for Katie and me.

What's your 20, Dad? Over.

Stereo static.

If I told you, I'd have to kill you. Over.

I think about who a person is after they've died, if what they last owned tells us more about the life they lived, or if it's simply what they possessed in the end. What is a backpack, really? A container of experiences and memories? It's certainly not a whole and conclusive picture of a person, but I fear that's what I hold in the case of my father. On the day of his funeral, the priest came up to my sister and me ten minutes before the service and asked us if we could give him "a summary" of our father. Since we hadn't seen him in eight years, neither of us was sure what to say. We told him he'd been homeless when he died, but we also told him about his life before, when we were kids. He was the head of maintenance at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. He loved the water. He loved *The Three Stooges*. He loved boiling his own lobster and dipping it into melted butter while sitting on his back porch. Quick facts that we hoped would paint enough of a portrait. He made the whole funeral about his homelessness, a slap to his memory. It's the only part of the funeral I remember.

There's no more time for my father to alter his story, if that's what he wanted. Perhaps that's why this routine is so necessary to me.

I fold his blanket, his plain t-shirts, and pick up the loose items. I make sure to put everything back in its original order. Sometimes there's even a moment when I convince myself that he's not really gone. He's just gone away, like he always told us he would. Any moment now my bedroom door will open, he'll ask for his backpack, and make some kind of joke about how I ought to wipe the sad look off my face because we're about to go to Rainbow Park or drive through Ormond Beach with no real purpose, just to drive and listen to classic rock. He'll remind me that I was just a kid when he ran away, that there was so little I could do, nothing really. Eight years of estrangement dissolves like shreds of jerky.

Rapt

When we were freshmen in high school, Owen sat to my right in Spanish class. He was a goofball, the guy that everyone liked and probably had a small crush on. The kind of crush that never amounted to anything but made class a little less boring. I let him cheat off my vocabulary quizzes every Friday. Owen never said or did anything to sway me into this cheating. I would see his half blank sheet of paper and angle mine in a way that only he could see. I don't know what first compelled me to do this. After a while it started to feel like a game, filled with smirks, quickly averted eyes, and in a strange, dorky way, a flirting. I was certain Owen felt it, too. Though it would be years before we started dating, I think this is where our story started. As two fourteen-year-olds too young and too cool to say how they feel.

The first time Owen and I were alone together, we walked along A1A in Daytona Beach in the center of a tourist and Spring Break locale, the streets lined with bars, souvenir shops, and mini golf courses. Classmates were throwing end of senior year parties in hotel rooms after prom, but we'd wanted to hang out ourselves. We'd been classmates for almost seven years now and wondered if there was something more between us. We came to an attraction called The Daytona Slingshot: a 120-foot-tall structure made of two large beams that formed the shape of a V, with a large, metal ball containing two roller coaster seats in the center. The ball clicked into the tops of the beam in a bungee cord contraption. The ride attendant propelled the ball into the air, where it spun chaotically as it gained momentum, rotating up over the beams and back down to the ground, over and over, until it finally ran out of force. From the ground it looked terrifying.

We craned our necks upward and listened to faint screams, our eyes trained on the ball falling toward us, and then just as quickly zooming out again. It reminded me of a jumbo-sized yo-yo.

“You want to do it?” Owen looked at me, a contagious grin stretching across his face.

“I don’t have any money on me.” I was glad to have left my wallet back in my room.

“I got us.” He grabbed his wallet from his back pocket. The ride was \$20 per person.

When it was our turn, the attendant motioned for us to step inside the ball. We sat down, he strapped us in, and then walked back toward the silver box with cogs and buttons that controlled the ride. “You guys ready?” he yelled from his station.

“We’re ready!” Owen shouted back.

“Alright, I’m going to give you a countdown. One…” The man released us after one, and we launched into the dark sky. I laughed and screamed at the same time. The entire time in the air—two minutes, maybe—Owen cackled and screamed like a ten-year-old girl. It was the most infectious, liberating noise I’d ever heard.

It was mania in the most euphoric way. I couldn’t tell how fast we were going, but it seemed close to what I imagine flying feels like. I’d never experienced an adrenaline like that before. I don’t know that I’ve felt one quite like it since.

Halfway through the ride I noticed a GoPro camera fixed on an apparatus inside the ball. The camera faced inward, our entire reaction caught on tape. After the ride, a man behind a booth showed us the video. We got to relive what I wonder today might’ve been our happiest moment together. He tried selling it to us for \$40. Neither Owen nor I budged. I never regretted not buying that video. It’s one of those memories that is not easy to forget.

A week later, we were dating.

Early into our relationship, Owen and I were coming from the beach when, in the voice of someone suggesting a bite to eat, he said, “Let’s go bridge jumping.”

“What?” I said.

“The Matanzas Inlet bridge. It’s right down the road.” He threw our sandy beach towels in the bed of his truck.

I’d always considered myself a fearless kid when I was growing up, my legs covered in bruises and Band-Aids, always trying to keep up with the boys. I was a curious child, which often led to adventure, but jumping off a twenty-foot tall structure into a body of water that led into the ocean seemed foolish, even for me.

“I’ve never jumped off a bridge before.”

“All the more reason to.”

He drove toward the bridge. When we’d parked and walked to the metal railings, I peered over the edge. Dark gray water rippled unevenly. The bridge seemed much higher from this angle than it did when we’d looked up at it moments before. One leg at a time Owen pulled himself over the metal railings. He would do this with or without me.

“C’mon.” He waved. “It’s not that bad. I’ll even go first.” I followed him, my hands sweating as they gripped the metal rail.

“Wait,” I said. “This is the Intracoastal.”

“So?” He shrugged.

I said, “It leads into the ocean.”

“And?”

“I don’t know what’s in that water! What if I jump on top of a shark?” I laughed. I pictured how unlikely and absurd this was, the odds of landing on the back of a shark as though it were waiting for me.

“Then just start riding it!”

Throughout high school, his jokes had been a trademark, but now that we were more than friends, I saw them differently. It’s strange how that happens. You start to like someone and realize they’ve been this way the entire time. You’re the one who hasn’t been looking.

Something about the way Owen carried himself made him seem invincible. I wondered if I jumped, I might feel this too.

Owen looked over at me and said, “You ready?”

Seeing his smile, I felt safe.

He let go of the railing and fell into the choppy, murky water, his arms flapping at his sides before disappearing beneath the surface. A large splash rose into the air. Seconds later he surfaced, jerking his head to one side to sweep the hair out of his face. Water droplets sprung from his hair in every direction.

“Your turn!” he shouted.

“I don’t know if I can do it,” I yelled, laughing at how I’d found myself bouncing lightly on my toes on the railing of a highway bridge, feet over the Intercoastal Waterway. I wanted to jump, to meet him down there and share in this moment, but I wasn’t sure if that was enough. In some ways this was a jump and nothing more. A jump into a waterway I’d swum in my entire life. But I also knew that we were moving toward something larger, that jumping would confirm that—a kind of trust, in him, in each other. There was a moment on the top of the bridge where I considered climbing back over the railing and walking toward the bottom of the bridge, yelling

down to Owen in the water that I'd meet him at the rocky bank. He'd climb out of the water and tell me it was okay. Maybe next time. The longer I waited, the higher up I felt.

Below and to the left of the bridge, I noticed a small seafood restaurant called The Matanzas Innlet. Its back patio, with assorted colored plastic chairs and tables, overlooked the water. Ten or fifteen people appeared to look up in our direction, waiting to see what I'd do next. All at once, they chanted, "Jump, jump, jump!"

I laughed and looked at Owen in the water. His head bobbed as he treaded. I could see each of his teeth. I let go of the rail and hit the cold water in less than a second. It felt like an ice bath—the cold remained cold—but it also felt good. When I resurfaced the first thing I found was his lips. I felt alive.

It became our thing: jumping off whatever we could find—ledges, cliffs, speed signs stuck out of the water for boaters—into muddy waters. I loved it. Not because of the adrenaline rush or because it made me feel adventurous and nervy. I loved it because it was ours, an experience and a feeling I could only ever attribute to him.

At one point about three months into our relationship, I told Owen I wished my father were alive so he could meet him. I said it because I liked the idea of them sitting on my father's back patio in his two uncomfortable, dark brown rattan chairs, laughing and talking as though they'd known each other for years. My father would look at me and wink. That wink would say everything I wanted it to. He'd lean back into his chair and ask Owen and me if we could come visit him again soon.

One time, Owen took me and two of our other friends out on his stepfather's small bass boat to go wakeboarding. I'd never been. When we were out far enough in the Intracoastal, I strapped on a life vest and jumped into the water. I floated on my lower back and crouched into a fetal position so that I could fasten my feet into the foot holdings on the wakeboard. Owen threw me the nylon rope. I grabbed the adjustable T-bar handle attached at the end.

“Don't try to stand upright on the board until the boat starts to pick up speed, okay?”

Owen said.

I gave him a thumbs up. Though I'd never wakeboarded, I was ready to learn. I had that feeling of a safety net again. Even if and when I fell, I felt that because I was with Owen nothing bad could happen to me.

The boat pulled, and I lurched forward. I waited for us to gain enough speed so that my legs could propel me up onto my feet. It was harder than I expected. Sprays of water splashed up and into my eyes. I couldn't get my body to roll forward in order to stand. I heard Owen yelling words of encouragement, but the boat motor was so loud I had no idea what he was saying. Soon though, I found my foot holding and was up on my feet, gliding across the Intracoastal. On both sides of me, the wakeboard sent out droves of compact waves. We passed a speed sign of 35 miles per hour. I knew we couldn't be going much faster than this, if at all, but I felt again as though I could be flying, this time across water.

We each took turns wakeboarding the rest of the day. I remember Owen stayed on his feet the longest, and when he got tired of the wakeboard, he attached a surfboard instead. Always the one to figure out how to raise the stakes, to keep things interesting and surprise everyone around him. On our way back to the dock we found a bridge, about thirty feet up. The four of us jumped into the water, over and over until the sun set.

We broke up at the beginning of our sophomore year of college, out of nowhere. One weekend, he was visiting me in college. That Sunday, he left single. Something was different that weekend. He was distant and on his phone a lot. When I asked him why he didn't want me to come to a party he was invited to, he said, "I don't need to tell you everything." Though I didn't have a concrete reason, it was clear to me we were over. The fact that I couldn't put my finger on why made it worse. I didn't want to be with someone who didn't want to be with me. I broke it off.

Weeks later—after we'd already stopped speaking—I found out that while we were together, he slept with one of my closest friends named Julianne. A lot. They went to Greek socials together and partied on the weekends. I found out each time they slept together, he'd tell a mutual friend of ours that he "fucked up again." But how bad could he have felt, really? Two weeks after I ended it, he was already dating someone new, and on social media, he'd deleted all of our pictures together.

That first month after the breakup, Owen was in the car when I drove, listening to "Sweet Honey" by Slightly Stoopid, a song he loved so much he played it over and over on repeat. He was in the same sentence of the book I was reading, a sentence I re-read countless times—until it stuck—because I couldn't focus. He was in my phone, in the *ping!* that let me know I had a text message. I wondered, hoped, that maybe it was him. He was in my apartment, where he hung up a dark window shade that blacked out my entire room, turning it into the dark cave we used to take comfort in. He was in my bed where we played Candy Crush for an entire day, comparing scores and racing each other through levels, not once getting out from under the covers. He was in the drawers, where he accidentally left some of his old University of Florida t-shirts the day he

left me. And he was in the bed again, always the bed, the squeaks it made every time I rolled over at night to find the other side cold and untouched without his tall frame, the arms and legs that would accidentally kick me in the night. I even felt him lingering the first time I had another guy over. He was in my morning cup of coffee, trickling through my mind like the last bit of grounds poured into my mug as I stared at the Keurig he got me on our one year anniversary.

I wonder if years in the future, I'll stand in my kitchen, kiss my husband hard on the mouth and mean it, but at unpredictable moments, still cry for Owen, the way my mother used to cry for an old boyfriend. It didn't happen often. But sometimes, out of nowhere, my mother said the name, "Chris Lamb." When she did, her voice changed. A glint entered her eyes. I'd stand there, in the kitchen or at the breakfast nook, and watch her drift backwards through time, becoming seventeen again, smiling, being teased by Chris when she was still only his little sister's best friend, seeing his brown hair, his brown eyes, his easygoing smile, the best parts of him, the parts she'll always want to keep to herself, the parts she'll choose to remember him by.

I always knew we were near the end of her reminiscing when tears formed in the corners of her eyes. Her voice became softer, slower, and sometimes hoarse, like she was still—though years removed—consumed by this aged love, wondering what went wrong and if there was something she could have done to save it. She'd tell me how Chris met someone during his time in the army, wrote to my mother, and broke it off. They never saw each other again.

Then just like that, a phone call, a kitchen or washing machine timer would return her to the present. She'd walk over to my stepfather, whom she knows is the love of her life, and ask him to give her a "smooch." Then I know; it's okay to remove ourselves when necessary. I always wonder though if one day her story will be mine, if I too have her sentimentality.

Julianne took a photo of Owen and me back in the days of cheating in Spanish class. She must've snapped it quickly, neither of us paying attention. We were probably too wrapped up in our repartee. This wasn't unusual; Julianne took photos of everyone in our class, catching quiet moments and posting them on our IB Facebook page. In hindsight, I can't help but feel a twinge of irony that she's the one who took the photo.

She sat at a desk behind Owen and me, so that the backs of our chairs faced her camera. In the photo, Owen stares at me with a dumbfounded, but suspicious sort of glare, his eyelids heavy with playful scorn. You can only see our profiles, but the picture is so candid, so caught in the moment, that the angle is revealing. I wear a black soccer t-shirt. My hair is half down, half up in a loose ponytail that hangs just above my shoulder blades. My mouth is partly open. It seems I'm in the middle of making a comment, something sarcastic, perhaps a comeback of sorts. That would explain his defeated, unamused face, the look you give someone when they've bested you in a playful battle of comebacks, when your eyelids and eyebrows look almost as though they could be touching. His mouth rests in a flat line. He always sat to my right in that class. My right arm is raised to the height of my waist, my elbow bent, and right hand extended as if delving into some deep explanation of how I'm right and he's wrong. This picture still makes me smile. I imagine myself telling him something silly and juvenile, perhaps that our flirtatious cheating on quizzes is as far as he's going to get. I imagine this dialogue because in some ways I wish that's what I would've said.

Then I look at the photo again, the way my open palm faces upward toward the ceiling, fingers splayed like a claw crane in an arcade machine targeting a coveted toy. My palm faces upward, but it also faces Owen, a reaching out for something felt between the two or three feet

separating our desks. That open palm was an invitation or a rope, a connection I still felt tied to though he was no longer to my right.

For a long time after we broke up, I hated driving over bridges. Because I was a UCF student, I had student discounts at all the major Orlando theme parks. I avoided all of them.

I thought about all the adventures Owen and I had been on together the past year and a half. I once read researchers found that adrenaline inducing activities done on a date can make a potential partner more attractive to the other. If we meet someone in a dangerous situation, are we more likely to fall in love? Perhaps I was more in love with the adrenaline that came from being with Owen. When Owen went away, the thrills did too. A long time passed before I figured out how to be with someone again without those thrills.

A year after breaking up, Owen and I met for coffee. He looked older, chubbier in the face, his hair longer and darker, the obvious aging that could happen in a year's time. But he changed in a more subtle way too. Not like how the weather changes from fall to winter, or how our clothing style, taste in music or food evolves the older we get. We expect that kind of change. It was more like a tornado that changes its direction without warning. I could tell he wasn't the same person I knew, that he never would be again. I didn't find his yellow, green eyes as striking as I used to. Something in them seemed to be missing, hollow. When we sat down to talk, I felt he was looking through me.

His smile was no longer contagious but provoking. Hands that once clasped mine curled around a lighter and a pack of cigarettes, a new habit he picked up that he used to say was unattractive. He never was careful with his words—the class clown, the goofy guy who

sometimes made no sense, the silly one-liners I fell in love with—but he always had a filter. I realized that too was gone when he told me he was dating his most recent girlfriend for her family's money. The fact that he even felt comfortable telling me this said everything.

I asked him why he cheated. He shrugged.

“You really have no reason?”

“Not really,” he said. “Honestly, I was drunk every time I did.” I realized then that nothing he said would make me feel better. He cheated on me with a friend. That sucked no matter how you looked at it. It made me think about Spanish class freshmen year. I encouraged his cheating on rudimentary quizzes. Did my encouragement then also encourage him to cheat on me? Perhaps by telling him I never want to get married I left that door open, though I couldn't have meant it. I was seventeen when I said that; I didn't know anything about marriage. Now I realize that this desire to aid him on quizzes wasn't me simply being nice or feeling sorry for him. It wasn't even the flirtatious game I remember it as. It was a weakness.

“Are you happy?” I asked, looking down at my coffee cup when I did.

He took a long pause before saying, “No, but I'm content.”

When I think about that day now, Anton Chekhov's short story, “Gooseberries” comes to mind. I think of when Ivan Ivanich urges Aliokhin to not be satisfied, to not let himself be lulled to sleep.

“And you're okay with that?” I asked Owen.

“For now.”

I felt bad. Though he gave me no reason to, I couldn't help but want more for him. I realized I'd always be the girl who wanted to fix things, even if it wasn't my concern. I wanted

to shake him, ask him how he was okay with just being content. I didn't want him to let himself be lulled to sleep when it seemed like so much of our relationship was spent doing the opposite.

I'd spent the better part of the past year thinking about a guy who was not thinking about me. But sitting there I knew, for the first time in a while, that I'd be okay. Good, actually.

Afterward, we hugged. I got into my car and drove away. On my way home, I couldn't decide if he'd really changed or if this was who he was all along, if this was just him growing up and into himself.

One of our last adventures together was during an end-of-summer trip we took to North Carolina. We were climbing a rockslide in the backwoods of Banner Elk. I grabbed the rope that led to the top of the cliff. Owen trailed behind me. I led us with a confidence and zeal for adventure that he introduced me to on the Slingshot and the first bridge we jumped off a year before. I loved who I'd become with him. It wasn't just who I was around him; it was a self I'd grown into, a characteristic I realized had always been there but was waiting for Owen to pull it out of me. The jagged edges were sharp and startling on my bare feet, but we kept climbing, my trust not only in the trunk of a tree, ringed with a one-inch thick wool rope whose end I still couldn't see, but also in him.

Once he met me at the top, he reached out for my hand. "You ready?" he asked, clutching my fingers until my knuckles turned white.

"Ready." I nodded, unafraid of what might be in the dark river water rippling twenty feet below us. He gave my hand a tight squeeze, a quick and comforting pulse. We jumped.

The Gray Area

On the day of my last exam my sophomore year of college, my friends and I went out to celebrate at one of our school's busiest bars. We had been drinking vodka cranberries at our apartment beforehand. On the way to the bar, I got pulled over. Outside the Knight Library parking lot, the police officer had me perform three different kinds of sobriety tests. Follow the pen he moved from left to right without moving my head.

“Just your eyes,” he said.

The flashlight he shone into my eyes was blindingly bright. When I closed them, a white circle lingered behind my eyelids. For the second test, he had me stand on one foot and count my Mississippi's all the way to ten. The third was to walk twenty yards in a straight line, heel to toe. I remember thinking these were easy, that soon I would go home. Later I'd find out that I failed all three. After the last test, I was cuffed and taken to Orange County Jail.

I was nineteen years old.

A few hours after getting there, I was put into a cell—no bigger than eight by ten—with six other women. I'd been crying and though I never saw my face, I'm sure I looked as hungover as I started to feel. My head felt heavy. My mouth tasted of bile and fruit juice. A putrid smell filled the room. I looked up to see a woman with short, spiky, half-blonde, half-pink hair, sitting on the metal toilet in the corner, her cotton blue uniform slacks gathered at her ankles. She spoke to a woman sitting on the bench across from her.

“I stole a car in Marion County a few days ago,” she said. “They transferred me here this morning.” She reached for the toilet paper roll. “What about you?”

“Selling,” the woman said.

I tuned in and out of the conversations around me. There were several drug related charges and one for prostitution.

Two cement benches were built into the walls. I sat on the floor in the corner closest to the door, my back pressed against the wall. I crossed my legs at the ankle and hugged them to my chest in a way that made me feel protected. I sat as still as I could. Any movement would knead my spine against the cement, sending a cold, sharp spasm up my back. It was the only position I could get into that made me feel warmer. The cell seemed as cold as a meat locker.

The women talked with an ease I couldn't understand. They seemed open and honest about why they were there, almost as though they knew each other.

“Have you eaten yet?” The woman sitting to my right asked the woman next to her.

“Yeah, earlier they came around with mashed potatoes and meatloaf in the bunk room.”

“Damn, girl. You’re lucky.” She rubbed her stomach in wide circles.

They seemed not comfortable but tolerant of where they were. I wondered how many of them had been in jail before. I didn’t join in the conversation. The longer I sat there, the more I started to think: *you shouldn’t be here*. Then another voice would sound in my head: *But you are here. You did drive drunk*.

I rubbed my arms. It amazed me how I could get used to the shit smell, but no matter how hard I tried, my body couldn’t adjust to the cold.

“Do you think we’ll be next?” a young white girl asked the room. Trails of dried mascara streaked down her cheeks.

“No telling,” a tall, dark-skinned woman said without looking up. She sat in front of me, her head held high. The others seemed hunched over and relaxed, almost as if they were settled across a couch in the comfort of their own home. Each of us wore a badge clipped to our cotton

shirts with our first names printed in black, all caps. Hers read KIMBERLY. “It’s different every time. Guess it depends on when the public defender decides to show up today.” I listened for clues, anything that might tell me where I’d head next. I’d spent most of the early morning moving from room to room, my last name being called, an officer escorting me down a long, empty hallway toward a room with other inmates and then leaving without a word.

“How do you know?” the girl with mascara stains asked.

“That’s usually what happens. We’re on their time.” Kimberly nodded toward the small square window on our cell’s door. I thought that if anyone in here could tell me what might happen next, it’d be Kimberly.

She was the most talkative. I can't remember now why she was arrested, but I remember she was vocal about it. You could tell that whatever it was she did, she felt her illegal actions were justified. If it meant jail time, so be it. She kept repeating that she needed to get out to see her kid.

“I don’t care what it takes,” she said.

I saw her as a comforting presence, almost parental. Though I knew what I had done was wrong, it felt important for me not to castigate myself in here. I felt I could rely on Kimberly to keep me from crying, that she’d help hold my chin up. I almost wanted to do it more for her than myself. It seemed imperative here that I manifest a certain backbone. I wanted to be like Kimberly: to not cry, to hold my head high, to leave with my dignity intact.

The door to the cell opened. An officer making his rounds brought trays of sausage and grits. “Last call until lunch,” he said.

Most of the women stood up and grabbed a tray. The officer looked at me. Though I was starving, I shook my head. His eyebrows arched. He held a tray out to see if I might change my

mind. I shook my head again. When he turned to leave, I could've sworn I saw him shake his head too.

Kimberly hadn't gotten a tray of food either. This too made me feel better. It made me feel as though not eating jail food was the right choice. Her confidence was calming. It was the first time since I'd been arrested that I looked at someone, including myself, as more than a criminal, as more than the charge written on their official report.

"I don't care what happens in front of the judge," Kimberly said. "I just want to leave."

"Amen." The woman who'd patted her stomach said in between forkfuls of sausage.

I wondered if Kimberly was at all afraid, if her voice was as calming to herself as it was to me. Her eyes scanned the room. She nodded to me and asked, "Whatchu here for?"

Up until then, no one had spoken to me. I looked at her for a long time before answering. When I did, I had to look down at my feet. I said I'd been arrested for a DUI. Kimberly sighed, shook her head and said, "You don't look like you belong in here."

What does a jailbird look like, and why—in Kimberly's eyes—had I failed to meet the criteria? Was it because my hair was a natural color and parted to one side, not spiky and stuck up in gelled, bright pink spikes like the woman who could poop in front of strangers so cavalierly? The girl to my right had an eyebrow piercing, a nose stud, and tattoos lining both arms, but so what? I'd had a tattoo on my foot since I was sixteen years old, ear piercings since before that. I wanted to ask Kimberly what it was about me that made me look like an outsider. I've only ever been able to answer this one way. When I think about that day, my answer remains the same. Maybe I didn't look like I belonged because I looked lost, absent. I maintained an empty-eye look, the kind that looks through rather than sees and retains, because all I kept thinking about was being detained. I'd look up and see the small square window and think, *I'm*

in jail. My mouth wasn't hung open in shock, but not quite closed in a thin line either. It was stuck in a lowercase "o" where a small gap between my lips let in enough air to breath, a gap that seemed to circle the questions "where am I?" and "how do I fix this?"

I looked up and offered Kimberly a small smile. I expected her to return it. Instead, she looked away, shifting her head and her attention elsewhere, as if what she said was pure business, an agenda item in a minute meeting.

Months after the arrest, at my first Defensive Driving course, I thought about this. I remembered Kimberly's words. As the driving instructor took roll, I looked around the room. There were about twenty-five of us. They all seemed young, in their early to mid-twenties, like my college classmates. They sat quietly, respectful of the instructor. Had it not been for the "Check Yourself Before You Wreck Yourself" and "Mothers Against Drunk Driving" posters taped to the wall or the *Mindful Defensive Driving* workbook on my desk, I could've been in the Nicholson Communications Building for Script Analysis on an ordinary Tuesday morning.

You don't look like you belong in here. I turned the phrase over and over in my mind. I took solace in that thought, but was it true? Because I was, in fact, in jail. Perhaps I didn't "belong" because that seemed like a misconception at best, a typecast of certain people. Do most people who go to jail really belong there?

But I had committed a crime. I was frustrated with Kimberly because of this. In a way, she'd watered down what I did. I felt like I didn't deserve it. Didn't Kimberly know that I could've killed someone? That if it hadn't been for the hand of the law stepping in and pulling me over to ask why my headlights weren't on, I would've kept driving that night. I'd have made it to the bar and downed more vodka cranberries. Afterwards, knowing my car would have been towed had I left it in the bar's parking lot, I'd have gotten back behind the wheel and driven not

only myself, but three of my friends home. Instead of being arrested for a DUI, I might have been there for manslaughter. Or dead.

Most people grow up believing they're good. They have their shortcomings, we all do. Maybe they don't always say the right thing, or maybe they say too much. Maybe they're not always a good friend, or they put themselves first too often. Maybe they're assured by their family, their friends, their superiors: *you are a good person*. I would be shocked if most people who find themselves in jail at some point in their life grow up knowing for certain that one day they'll be cuffed and put into the back of a cop car.

People grow up believing they are good. That's one of the first and most basic lessons you learn as a child: the difference between right and wrong. I think about the television shows and films that my parents grew up watching—*The Avengers*, *Mannix*, *The Sound of Music*, old westerns like *Stagecoach* and *High Noon*. There is good. There is evil. Characters fall onto one side or the other. There is little to no room for the in-between. Even superhero narratives; they hinge on a villain, and vice versa. In film school we learned that a lot of set and costume design was based on this. The good guys wore white. The bad guys wore black. Now most of what we see in films and on television portray characters who inhabit the gray area where most people in real life exist, the anti-hero as they're formally known. Characters who seem to orbit the question, "Am I good?" I think of *Bonnie and Clyde* or *The Graduate*. We root for these characters even though they're a little villainous. They not only focus on but celebrate the flaws in their protagonists. Another show I can't help but think of is *Breaking Bad*, a show in which the whole plot pivots around a well-to-do middle-aged white man who cooks drugs. But if you were to ask him, he might assure you that he does so for the right reasons.

For a moment I felt like a character in a modern-day television show, one who'd approached a crossroads. It was the first time in my life when I'd done something to truly surprise myself, as though I'd lost a certain innocence. I found myself somewhere I did not expect to be, but at the same time I knew what had led up to it. I didn't expect to be in jail, but I also knew I should be. It was the first time I'd truly shocked myself. I wondered what telling my mother and stepfather, who'd never been arrested, would be like.

I remember coming home with my first pink slip in eighth grade, the first time I'd ever been in trouble at school. I'd been caught texting in class and was given lunch detention for a week. When I came home, I showed my parents the referral, and explained what happened. The first thing out of John's mouth was, "Finally you do something wrong."

"You're not mad?" I asked.

John laughed. "You were just texting."

My flaw was celebrated.

I return to the word belong: of German origin, mid-fourteenth century, meaning "to go along with, properly relate to." I didn't want to relate to the other women in jail. I didn't want to share my story for being there. I didn't want to eat the food they offered. I didn't want to follow.

But when it came down to it, I wasn't superior.

When I think about that day, I'm grateful for what Kimberly said to me. No, I didn't belong there, but I was there. There are some acts that need only be performed once for society to define us: murder, suicide, assault. The way I was raised, I'd convinced myself that going to jail, no matter the reason, was damning. That life afterward and the opinions that came with it, irreversible. But Kimberly reminded me that there was a before. I wasn't only made up of the day I drove drunk and the arrest after.

I wonder if I should've thanked Kimberly that day. Perhaps that would've been too much, taking our brief exchange too far, but she reminded me of something that was all too easy to forget when stuck in a room that forces you to confront your mistakes: most people are better than the worst thing they've done.

During my release, I collected my belongings from a plastic bag. I had ten days to drive before losing my license for six months. I had ten days to apply for a "business purposes" permit to keep my driving privileges.

Walking out into the warm Orlando sun felt good. My skin thawed. I didn't care when I started to sweat. I sat on a curb in the parking lot and waited for my friend Ashley to pick me up. When she did, she drove to a Dunkin Donuts drive thru and bought me a caramel iced coffee.

After she dropped me off at my apartment, I drove the hour and fifteen minutes home to tell my mother and stepfather. I fidgeted the entire drive back. I replayed the scene in my mind, what I would say, how they'd react. No matter how many different scenarios I envisioned, one image resurfaced. They'd have the same blank stare as I did in jail, looking right through me almost. They'd use the word disappointed a lot. Soon it was the only word I heard. My mind went to Kimberly again, but larger than that: a collective. I wanted to be delivering this news to a room full of strangers rather than the two people closest to me.

I thought about how, in the past, when I'd been on the phone with my mother and told her I was coming home for the weekend, her voice would get high. She'd say, "Did you hear that Scout? Your sister is coming home!" I imagine she'd pick up our family dog and kiss her face when she said this.

When I parked in the empty lot across from the house, my mother was walking her bike up the driveway. John was bent over his, messing with the chain. I thought about how weird it was to physically be in one place but mentally in another. It was a relief to be home, but I felt as though I hadn't yet left Orange County Jail.

"We didn't know you were coming home!" My mother hugged me. Though she wore sunglasses, I could see the skin around her eyes wrinkle when she smiled. I told them we should go inside. My mother started to wash dishes. John untied a bread bag and pulled out a jar of mayonnaise from the pantry.

I told them I had something important to tell them.

My mother put down the dishes and John, the butter knife.

I'd practiced all the way home what I might say, but I forgot all my rehearsed lines. I played with the rose pattern on my swing dress and stared at my lap. "I don't really know how else to tell you..." My throat felt caked with dust. A knot formed in the back of it. My mother brought her clasped hands to her mouth. She had no idea what this could be about, but my mother always had a habit of dramatizing circumstances before knowing the extent of them.

I swallowed and felt a tingle rise in my throat. I still hadn't eaten in almost twenty-four hours, but I thought I might throw up. "I got a DUI last night." For a second, they didn't say anything. Time slowed. My mother gasped, her hands still covering her mouth. I willed them to stay there. I didn't know if I could handle what might come out of her mouth. I didn't dare look at John, who stood to my right. My parents have never been physical, but I expected a slap—something. I expected lots of yelling. For a second, they didn't say anything.

Then John stood up from where he sat and walked over to hug me.

"This doesn't make you a bad person," he said.

I let the knot in my throat go and cried into his shirt.

As John and my mother walked outside with me to help carry in my bags, my mind wandered to Kimberly, to good versus bad, and the curious middle ground in which I'd found myself.

John asked if I wanted to go for a ride around town on his new motorcycle. I put on a pair of jeans. He handed me a thick bike jacket and an oversized bike helmet that made me look like a bobble head figurine. When we got home, my mother bought me a Publix sub—one of my favorite meals—and dark chocolate chips to feed my sweet tooth.

That night, they didn't ask me more about the "incident." It struck me as odd. We were a family of analyzers, of individuals who came up with solutions as soon as possible. John was usually good cop, rational cop, saying things like, "We can't dwell, so here's what we're going to do to make it better." My mother liked to hurt. She wanted what she said to stick.

I expected them to ask who I was with, to recount how the night had started. I expected us to talk about what we'd do next. When did I have to appear in court? How much would it cost to hire a lawyer? It seemed we should be talking about these things. But then I understood: that night wasn't about that. I recognized not just the good, but the grace in what they were doing. How despite having gone to jail the previous night, this night was about being alive, about being home and in their company for the first time in months.

Trigger Happy

I stared through the rear sight of a Glock 22, lining up the green dot in the center of the front sight. My hand wobbled. It took more mental strength than I had originally thought to keep one eye scrunched, the other focused on a dot no bigger than a single grain of quinoa, and beyond that, a fixed target. I pulled.

Pop. Jump.

Pop. Jump.

My heart leapt; my shoulders rose. Though I expected it, each time the sound startled me.

I knew I'd never get used to the noise, the thump, a loud crack felt in my chest. When Uncle Nick set off fireworks in his driveway every New Year's Eve, the sounds—the fountains, firecrackers, roman candles, parachutes, sparklers, snap pops, and bottle rockets—never bothered me. I got used to the fireworks every Fourth of July that Flagler Beach imported and set off over the pier, the green, blue, red, and gold bursts of light and fire scattering the dusky sky. Those noises I grew up with. They represented home, family, and tradition. But this I couldn't get used to. This was like a dangerously close snap of lightning.

Chris told me I needed a smoother pull.

“Relax,” he said. “You jerk to the side every time you pull the trigger. Try pulling the trigger more gently.”

The gun had a powerful kickback. “Gently” pulling a trigger seemed like an oxymoron. I shuffled my feet, planted a firm stance, and took aim again.

It was my friend's cousin, Chris, who offered to take me shooting. I'd never so much as touched a gun before. In the past, I'd seen friends post photos of themselves at shooting ranges on

Facebook and Instagram. They stood in a private stall, wearing noise canceling headphones. Some had their eyes on the target; others over their shoulder at the camera, peering over their clear safety glasses. They looked untouchable. I wanted to feel that too.

When I pulled up to Chris's friend's eighty-acre property in Fort Valley, Georgia, I thought about my mother. I hadn't told her what I was doing. I wondered what she'd think when she found out.

I grew up in a small town in north Florida, a place where going shooting and hunting were common hobbies, weekend activities, a family tradition taught and learned at a young age. But in my house, hobbies took place indoors with crayons and notepads, coloring books and markers, or on soccer fields with cleats and fertilized grass. Many of my high school peers' Facebook profile pictures' featured camouflage garments, proud grins, and dead deer held up by the antlers in a firm grip, blood dripping from their nostrils. Those photos weren't macabre or offensive; they were the norm.

My mother grew up on a farm in rural upstate New York in a small town called Kill Buck. Her family raised cattle, baled hay, and shoveled manure. Her two brothers hunted. Even after her entire side of the family moved to Florida, one of my uncles spent every hunting season camped out in his small cabin up in Kill Buck until the year he died.

My mother owned a .22 caliber Smith & Wesson handgun, a 20-gauge shotgun, and a revolver (all three weapons melted in a firestorm that, in 1998, devastated my hometown, including my stepfather's house and everything in it). She'd never taken me shooting, never asked if I wanted to. The guns that burned in the fire weren't replaced.

I got out of the car. Chris handed me a pair of silver, foam earplugs. They looked like screws. It was the middle of the afternoon, the day after a tropical storm, the air, muggy and dense. Torn bits of tree and wood lay scattered all over the ground.

Chris pointed toward a clearing in his friend's property. "There. That's a good spot." The ivy green front door to the two-story log cabin home was fifty feet to our backs. The space felt open, but quiet and still. Eighty acres of greenery surrounded the house. The back of the cabin faced a lake that zigzagged out of view. This seemed like a safe place to shoot a gun.

Chris grabbed a long, black case decorated in stickers and a small, but heavy, white cardboard box filled with ammunition from the trunk of his car. The assorted stickers read: *Voodoo Tactical, Rugged Suppressors, Trijico, Montana Rifle Company Est. 1999, Knight's Armament RBI*. An American flag sticker stuck in the center. Nothing says America like shooting a gun on a Tuesday afternoon.

When he first opened the case, I was surprised at how plastic, almost fake the guns looked. They reminded me of pool toys I grew up squirting friends with on hot, summer afternoons except painted jet black.

"It's much lighter than I thought it'd be," I said, picking up a gun.

"That's because it's not loaded." He showed me how to load the magazine with a fifteen round. I clicked it into the trigger housing. I remembered reading about a shooting that was prevented at my university when I was an undergrad. A disgruntled former student who'd been kicked out of school was found with high capacity magazines and over \$700 worth of weapons in his dorm room. He'd been planning a mass shooting. I didn't know what a "magazine" was and had to look it up. It felt strange to be loading one myself.

With the bullets loaded, the gun was a few pounds heavier. I was surprised by this. But the gun wasn't just heavier; now it was deadly. There was a moment soon after when I didn't want to be there. I didn't feel like I should. A voice in me seemed to say, this is wrong. I drove out here, saw how it was done. Perhaps that was enough.

But Chris kept explaining. I listened.

He brought three guns for me to shoot. Two, small handguns—a Glock 22 and a Glock 17—and an AR-15 rifle. These names and numbers meant little to me as Chris rattled them off. I associated them with what I knew from film and television. The handguns looked like standard police guns and the rifle looked military.

He demonstrated how to hold the .22. His left hand cupped his right. The weaker hand had to steady the dominant hand in the recoil. He pointed it toward the clearing and pulled. *Pop*. It was brief, his movements quick. I was so focused on his hands that I didn't catch what he'd said. He passed me the .22. I grabbed it with my left hand.

My right pointer, middle, index, and pinky fingers curled over my left four, with my right thumb fixed on top of my right pointer.

“You don't want your thumb above this.” Chris pointed to the pocket underneath the hammer, moving my thumb even lower.

“Why not?”

“When you pull the trigger, the slide releases and kicks back. Trust me; you don't want your thumb in the way when it disengages.”

I pictured a forgotten thumb punted backward, a splintering of bone knocked out of place. I must've been holding the gun for no more than two minutes, but I had to lower it. My arms felt like stones.

I took a practice aim again. My left pointer held all the power. There was nowhere else for this finger to go except for the trigger—lightly resting on the side, but not yet curled—which felt strange even in practice and with the gun on safety.

I kept hearing that voice. This is wrong. Even if it's just for fun. In time the voice became my mother's.

I stood with one foot planted in front of the other, my weight leaning into the gun for better control. This posture made for a steadier aim. Feet planted side by side made you more susceptible to the kickback. It meant a wobbly follow-through and a missed target.

I asked Chris about safety glasses. He waved his hand and said they weren't necessary. Each shell casing ejected from the side of the gun. "It's up to you, though."

I decided not to wear any.

Chris' instructions had a threatening tone. One misstep could result in chaos. The possibility was terrifying, but also intriguing. Danger was one unscrewed earplug or misplaced thumb away. I found this, thrilling.

I didn't feel ready, but I didn't think this was something I'd ever feel "ready" for. I learned, as it goes, you just have to pull the trigger.

Chris put out a small, spiked target for us to aim at. It looked like a jack from the old-fashioned Game of Jacks, except this one was orange, made of foam, and about the size of a hand. He set it down in the grass about fifty feet from us. I could hardly see it.

During my first few practice pulls, my hands shook. My heart rate felt normal, my breathing, steady. My entire body seemed at ease, relaxed even. But my hands—it was like they weren't attached to my body.

I gave the gun to Chris, thinking maybe I needed a break. Maybe it was my weak, noodle arms at fault. I held my hands out in front of me to see if they were still shaking. They were. I wondered if this was my rational side trying to tell me something, the Miranda who wanted to put the gun down and leave, the Miranda who couldn't help but think of things like war and Pulse and Columbine and Virginia Tech and Aurora, Colorado and Sandy Hook and the countless others that after a while become too much to think about. I hadn't even pulled the trigger.

Standing in the clearing with a loaded gun in my hand, I forced these thoughts out of my head. It wasn't until later, after enjoying shooting for fun, that I'd really begin to wonder what my enjoyment meant.

I pulled the trigger.

I missed my target. I fired again. I missed again. I missed for the first half hour. The more I missed, the more I became frustrated. I shuffled a few steps, replanted my feet. I pulled my hair up into a bun. I wanted to hit it, at least once. I realized how this could become a fixture for people.

I kept at it for a while, still to no success. Chris took the gun from me every few minutes, sinking a bullet into the orange jack each time. When it was my turn again, I lined up my rear and front sight. Something moved in my peripheral. It was quick, almost undetected. I lowered the gun. Then I saw it again. A cluster of bushes flitted, and I could see, just beyond the greenery, a brown marsh rabbit. Its head slunk lower behind the bush. He stared at us.

"He'll go away," Chris said. He took a few steps toward the rabbit. In a flurry of sloshy crunching sounds it scampered off through the wet leaves and twigs. I thought of a conversation I once had with my sister after our uncle sent us pictures of dead deer he'd shot.

“I could never shoot an animal,” Katie had said.

“What if you didn’t have a choice?” I asked her.

“What do you mean?”

“Like if it was life or death. What if a deer was your only source of food? How about then?”

She hesitated, but said no. I was annoyed by this, that she’d choose an animal’s life over her own.

“I think I would,” I said. But neither of us had ever been in a situation where that kind of primal fear of survival was put to the test. How did she really know? How did I?

After I hit the target once, I couldn’t stop. I hit the orange jack again and again, flipping it over as I did. It became covered in black marks of “mushrooming,” the lead from the bullet spreading in a circle as it hit the soft target. The orange jack looked like a leopard. I thought of a lot of things, but mostly I felt guilty. I wasn’t expecting to find this much pleasure in handling a lethal weapon.

“Onto the fun gun,” Chris said, pulling out the AR-15 rifle from its long, black case. He told me the sight was off, that even if I aimed, it wasn’t likely I’d hit anything.

He set out two canisters of Tannerite—a mixture of aluminum powder and fertilizer—on top of a tree stump even further out. He told me to keep my aim low. Once triggered, these bullets, .223 caliber, could fly for miles.

I knew there were no houses nearby. Still, I pictured a stray bullet soaring through the woods, cutting through trees and piercing leaves, settling into a warm body. I shook the thought from my head.

After the first shot I decided Chris was right: this rifle was fun to shoot—heavy and hard to hold, but no kick back. Everything was internal. The first few shots were about getting used to the gun. When the bullet finally connected with the Tannerite, charcoal colored gusts of smoke and grit flew into the air. It was smaller than the smoke cloud generated by a bonfire, but I was the agent of that combustion. It was the coolest smoke cloud I'd ever seen. My own, small-scale, fireworks display.

Once I started hitting the targets, I forgot everything around me. Everything disappeared. Chris, the scenic log cabin overlooking the lake, the smoky clouds gathering in front and above me, cloaking the air with the smell of burning wood and lead. I stopped offering Chris the gun to take turns. I wanted to be selfish. Though I wondered what this meant, I wanted to stay in that moment for as long as possible. I stopped hearing the voice in my head. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this much release. I wasn't just empowered by the guns, by pulling the trigger, but by Chris. He too had given me a gift, a kind of conviction or control. I was trusted. It heightened the power I already felt.

Afterward, I called my mother and told her about how much fun I had. I asked her why she never took me shooting. Her voice sounded stiff when she said, "I guess I never realized how much you wanted to shoot a gun." I didn't realize this myself until after having shot one.

In photos of myself from that day, I stand with my right foot in front of my left, my weight leaning into the gun, just like Chris taught me. One eye squints, the other is wide open. They are both focused. When I look at the photos, I feel even more in control than I felt in the actual moment of pulling the trigger. I am outside myself. I don't recognize the girl in the photo as me. She looks as though she knows exactly what she's doing, as if she's in total control, as if nothing can touch her.

Before We Go Out

The first thing Morgan does when we get into her Ford Escape is plug her phone into the auxiliary jack and find a song to play, usually something upbeat and with a fast tempo. All of our drives require music, but the one to the liquor store is different. There are a few songs on these trips I can always count on her playing. "Got Money" by Lil Wayne starts with its drum roll, "m-m-money" and Lil Wayne's raspy cackle. We sing as many words as we know, which are almost all of them, and dance as much as the slack in our seat belts will let us. We drive the few miles to the Beverage Depot and peruse the aisles as if we've never been there before, walking by the pre-made margaritas in their multi-colored array: classic, strawberry, mango; the craft beers with their modish graphics that feel hip and bohemian. We take our time, more time than we ever need, because the anticipation is as much a part of this as the going out.

Our drive back has just as much pluck and punch as the drive there. Our voices fill the car. I let myself sing off-key, which is not hard for me to do. If Morgan's in a particularly good mood, she rolls down her windows. Her hand catches in the wind. She moves it up and down like the undulating of waves.

When we get home, we make ourselves a drink in what we call "fancy cups," which is anything other than a plastic one. She goes to her room. I walk across the hall to mine. My hair is usually still wet from a shower. I hog the bathroom for the next half hour and blow it dry with a round brush, my frizzy strands sticking out in every direction. My hand cramps into a concentrated, stiff position around the handle of the brush. Sometimes I feel it might get stuck like that, but I brush and roll, brush and roll until each layer is dry. Morgan's hair is often already

dry, so she styles hers: curl or straighten, braid or wind up into a top-knot. When we start to get ready, I sometimes don't see her for the next hour, depending on what each of us is doing.

Always the same. We get ready on opposite ends of our old apartment. Every few minutes, she walks over to the bathroom to ask if her Jungle Red lipstick matches her outfit or to ask if she can pee, to which I always respond yes, of course, this is your bathroom, too. Still, she asks anyway. Or I walk over to her room to ask if my shoes match my top. Or we meet in the middle to belt out the last verse of a Cardi B song playing on our television in the living room.

We are separate, but together.

Of course, we need each other's help, too. I don't know that I'd enjoy our routine as much if not for Morgan's reassuring “yes” to the choker necklaces I'm fond of wearing. “Yes, to the choker always.” Or her deadpan honesty when telling me that a white blazer dress makes me look like I'm trying to be a “sexy scientist,” and it's also not Halloween. Maybe we don't necessarily need each other's help because we are grown women. But it doesn't take away from the fact that we can lean on each other, that we're lucky to have that option.

There's a moment right when we leave the apartment—right before we pull the string on the small lamp near our front door that we keep on for a night lite—where I feel as though the rest of the night won't live up to what we've fantasized in our heads. That the best part was in the trying, the putting an effort into our looks, making ourselves feel beautiful for a night, the sipping on a pre-made margarita mix and listening to music as we try on clothes we never wear but will never throw away either because maybe one day that bralette will have the perfect occasion to wear it to, or maybe one day those jeans will fit again. There's a moment when I worry that the best part of the night has already happened, that the rest will be a let-down, a built-up, idealized fabrication. There's a purity to the getting ready, to the small routine before

we go out, the idea that it's the early end of a late night and anything could happen. I think that perhaps I prefer that place of limbo, of opportunity—the place where nothing untoward or even *good* has happened yet—more than I do the overcrowded, quotidian bar. I know this. Every time we get ready, I know this to be, true. Though Morgan and I have never talked about it out loud, she knows this to be true too.

Still, we can't help ourselves. We pull the string on the lamp by the front door. We go out anyway.

The Saddest, Most Beautiful Place in Georgia

Recently a guy from Milledgeville asked me via text message if I wanted to attend a sporting event with him. It started as a joke. He asked if I wanted to take his Sunday morning serving shift. We engaged in a flirty back and forth repartee. When he offered to throw in an Atlanta United soccer game ticket, I paused. I'd been wanting to go to this game, but I'd gotten to a place in my life where I didn't really trust handouts. I don't know how or when this cynicism began to take place. I brushed it off as a joke, but then he asked again. I'm serious, he said. I wondered about the catch. I also wondered why this was the first place my mind went to. Instead of saying yes, why was I already waiting for the ball to drop?

I've thought about this a lot, how it's hard to weed out the genuine invitation from the one with an ulterior motive. Has the dating culture always felt so convoluted, or did this only start recently? I'm not sure if it has to do with being a millennial or the absurd do's and don'ts that we've been tricked into believing. The impression that there's a way we *should* act when a person is interested in us. How if it does not align with how we act naturally, then we need to change it.

1. Don't text him back right away.
2. Make him come to you.
3. Certainly don't seem too eager. Don't say you're looking for a relationship.

Maybe it's a mixture of both—my generation and the walls that are created from the technology we preoccupy ourselves with: cell phones, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. I wonder if it's because of the way in which millennials see the world: with a partial rejection of what has come before. A rejection of topics largely related to the way people view wealth and money. Things that were important to our parents aren't as important to us: purchasing cars,

houses, etc. Millennials forgo their own vehicles because of Uber and Lyft. Buying a house isn't seen as the next step in a young adult's life the way it used to be. Having a roommate in your late twenties isn't strange. It's a way to save money. We want to do things differently. I suppose we can. A lot of that has to do with technology and the way things are so readily accessible. My generation, as does every generation, seems motivated to act responsibly and want to "change the world." But is the personal responsibility there?

It brings me back to dating. It seems like a lot of the time we can't even follow through on the commitment to show up for a date. One's word meant much more twenty, thirty years ago than it does now. Maybe it's because dating has changed significantly. People don't date the way they used to. Apps have ruined the personal side a little bit. People no longer feel like real people. They've become a commodity. It's too easy to swipe right. I'm not exempt from this either. I made a joke to my mother recently when I showed her my Hinge profile and the list of guys who'd liked my page. "Look, it's like shopping for men!" I'm not proud to have said that, but that is my point: somewhere along the way, it's become normal to see dating as a product, through the eyes of a salesperson rather than a person looking to connect.

I asked the guy how much the soccer game ticket was. He said if I really wanted to come, he'd buy it for me. We texted for a few days after that, casual get-to-know-you conversation. When he stopped replying, I didn't think much of it. The conversation had come to an obvious end. But on the day of the game, with the kickoff only hours away, not to mention our drive to the stadium two hours, I decided to ask what the plan was. Three hours later, he told me he was already at the game, that he'd forgotten he'd invited me.

I thought about telling him off, but I ended up not replying. I realized there was a part of me that wasn't surprised by his stand up. Wasn't I waiting for the ball to drop? Didn't I call this right from the moment he mentioned the ticket?

Something similar had happened to me before. I went home with a guy after a night out at the bars. We'd slept together a few times prior. It was normal for us to hook up every now and then, usually separated by months at a time. One night after we'd hooked up, he asked if I minded if his dog slept in the bed with us. I told him I didn't mind. I remember waking up at four am feeling cold, then wet. I felt the sheets around me: all wet, soaking wet. Then I smelled the urine. The dog had moved to the floor. At first, I couldn't tell who had peed the bed, the guy or the dog, but I remember thinking the guy was angled in a way where it didn't make sense it was him. When I looked at the dog, her tail shook in between her legs. She lowered her ears. I didn't bother to wake him. I got up, threw my clothes on, and walked the ten minutes home. I wondered if he'd think it was I who'd peed the bed. Certainly we'd never speak again, I thought. He texted me and apologized that morning, telling me his dog gets territorial and does this whenever someone sleeps in his bed. I wondered why he'd let her up there in the first place.

My phone buzzed again.

Let me take you to dinner this week to make up for it.

We'd never had dinner together, never had more than a hookup. I told him I'd like that. I waited that week to hear from him. A day passed, then another. That Friday I texted him. *Still want to have dinner?*

He never replied.

When I told my friend Morgan about it, she asked if I thought he only asked me to dinner to make himself feel better. I didn't understand what she meant. She told me that sometimes

when a guy feels like he's in the wrong, instead of genuinely apologizing, he might ask if he can make it up to you by doing you some sort of favor—for example, dinner—but then not follow through. Disappear or “ghost” you, as the saying goes. She recalled a time when a guy she once slept with asked her to see a movie later that week and then never showed. Do guys really do this? Pretend they want to take you out just to save their own ego?

At first, I blamed myself. Perhaps I'd read too much into the words. Perhaps I'd put emphasis on all the wrong ones. I broke it down.

Let me. (Translation: You don't lift a finger.)

Take you. (Translation: I'll drive.)

To dinner. (Translation: Not coffee; not lunch: dinner.)

I'll admit, the last interpretation is presumptuous, reading between lines that aren't there. But I wondered why he'd gone out of his way. Why offer something just to pretend that he never offered it in the first place? I wanted to shout, “You started this, not me!” You opened the lid on the cookie jar, but snapped it shut on my hand before I'd even taken one.

When the soccer game stand-up happened, Morgan and I talked about the need to prove yourself. “Maybe he just wanted you to know he's got the money for it?” I knew she was trying to make me feel better. It didn't seem like it was about money. It didn't stem from a need to redeem. It started with a question about a sporting event. A question that was a non-sequitur, and so to me, felt genuine. I'm not sure what changed within a few days. I probably never will, and that's fine. But the same question nagged me. If this was always going to end with evasion, why even ask the question?

“I know this doesn't really fit the situation,” Morgan said, “but a Bible verse comes to mind. *‘And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.’*”

I saw her intention, that this guy started something, but he also ended it before anything happened. Morgan was right though; it didn't make sense. We laughed all the same. We laughed at my misery. It was as good a way as any to survive being stood up.

A couple years ago, one of my coworkers wrote a blog post called “Moral Turpitude.” He referred to the town in which we live as the saddest, most beautiful place in Georgia. In the post, he brought up things like Marion Wesley Stembridge, an infamous figure in Milledgeville’s history, known for owning a local dry goods store and for being a loan shark. Stembridge shot and killed three people in former downtown office buildings that are still used today. My coworker mentioned a car accident that had happened the weekend before when a student drove into the side of a campus building. It wasn’t until days later that it was reported. Even then, it was buried in page three or four of the paper. He talks about Central State Hospital, how Milledgeville was once synonymous with “going crazy.” His post was about trying to befriend a city that he felt never really wanted to reciprocate the feeling. I don’t know that I necessarily feel this way, but there are times when it feels like Milledgeville, and the people in it, are playing hard to get. There are times when I’m sitting at the table in the courtyard of my apartment building, listening to sirens whine past the corner of Jefferson and Montgomery and think to myself, “Have these sirens been wailing the entire time?”

I remember the first time I visited Milledgeville. The day was warm and cloudy. The campus took me by surprise. I stood on the expansive green of the front quad and stared at three of the

oldest buildings on campus, their red brick with white detailing and old antebellum pillars. Large oaks hung over the quad, shading most of the benches where students sat typing on laptops or lying with their backpacks underneath their heads as makeshift pillows. I was mesmerized by many of the administration buildings. Human Resources wasn't an office space on the second floor of a square shaped building, made up of tight-cornered cubicles and gray carpeting. Human Resources was known as the Wooten-Garner house, a two-story, late 1800's Victorian home, named after the Wooten and Garner families that once called it home. Its small wrap-around porch and brown rocking chairs made it seem like somewhere more than just a place to get signature approval. I'd never been on a college campus such as this. My former college was more contemporary, lots of glass buildings, buildings that seemed to try and one up each other in their fancy shapes. That first visit to Milledgeville, I felt welcomed, charmed. I thought I could easily make it home.

Now when I walk around, three years after moving there, most of the original charm has worn off. It reminds me a lot of the feeling I get when I go back to my childhood home in Florida. It's not the same as it once was. It never will be.

Last year, I took a class where a professor posed the question, can you ever really go home? He wanted us to ponder this as we submitted our workshops that semester. The year before that, a different professor posed a similar but different question. She asked us to think about our favorite food. I thought of the chocolate brownies in the cafe on the first floor of the library. We had to ask ourselves if it was possible to ever again feel the euphoria felt when taking the first bite of that food. Could it ever compare to that first time? I'd buy one of those brownies three or four times a week. After tax, they came out to \$1.66. I always made sure to have that amount in change on me. After a while, eating them was never quite the same. I'd be

halfway done with the brownie and wonder why I'd bought it. It didn't taste the same as it used to. The moment before buying the brownie was somehow more fulfilling.

When I walk around Milledgeville now, this is as close to those feelings as I get. I'll never have that initial welcoming as I did three years ago. The buildings look dirty if you stare at them long enough. The trees bend with a fatigue that it seems to me was not there before. It's hard for me to pinpoint when and how things began to look and feel this way. It feels a little transitory to try and locate the source of that sadness. But if I think long enough, a huge part of it has to do with a certain loneliness that has taken shape in my life now more than ever. Perhaps it's being stood up, which has never happened to me before moving to Milledgeville. And now that it has, it continues to. As much as I'd like to point the finger and put the blame on a place and the people in it, perhaps it's getting older and realizing the plainness in most things. Perhaps it's not being the youngest, shiniest option anymore.

This past summer, my friends and I went out a lot. The town was empty. The days seemed to last longer. We'd walk the sidewalks toward downtown late at night, sidestepping two-inch long cockroaches that scurried between our footsteps. Even though the sun had been down for hours, I could feel the slick heat rise up from the ground. My clothes clung to me. I'd often have a red rash between my thighs from too much friction. A beaded line of sweat glistened on the crease above my upper lip. We'd pass Allen's Market, Freeman's Barber & Beauty, Metropolis, Oconee Outfitters, Need-A-Nerd, and turn the corner of Hancock. I began to feel as though I could make that walk with my eyes closed. There was one time while we were walking that I pointed to an unusually large cockroach to warn my friends. As soon as our strides met with the cockroach, it scuttled away but also toward our feet, as creatures in flight often do. We screamed because sometimes things in life are still frightening even with warning. Then the

three of us hopscotched around the critter—a dance we were used to at this point—and cackled as we walked away. These were the stupid musings that made me feel close to my friends in a town and a time when I'd needed them the most.

I started to wonder when it was that walking to the bars with my friends had become the only enjoyable part of the night. I suppose I can attribute it to smallness of place, how there are times when I feel like I can't escape Milledgeville. I can't walk into the local coffee shop knowing for certain I won't run into a past date gone bad. I'd like to walk into a place and not have to make uncomfortable eye contact with someone who's stood me up. Sometimes I don't want to feel so suffocated. Sometimes I want the option of running away.

It was on one of those summer nights that my friends and I went out to a Milledgeville bar to hear a local band called The Norm. We stood at the threshold between the bar and the open dance floor, our elbows pressed against the sticky wood. I felt something cold and wet hit my calf. I turned around. I looked down at the floor and noticed a large ice chip. I assumed it was lobbed in my direction, that this is what had hit me. I looked up at the bar and noticed one of the bartenders was missing.

My roommate leaned into me over the brash music. "Sean is throwing ice chips at us."

I walked over to the bar and leaned over the side. The missing bartender was crouched on the ground, holding his pointer finger over his lips and looking up at Lisa, the other bartender. I pictured myself in third grade, shushing my friend to not give me up in a game of hide and seek. That's what this felt like. The bartender looked up at me and started to laugh. "Caught ya," I said. I felt a wave of inclusion coat my entire body. I laughed, and we flirted. He may have even winked. I'm sure I loved it. I walked back and leaned against the four-foot-tall partition, smiling

over this meaningless game. Ice chips were thrown my way every few minutes. Sometimes I threw them back.

When I think about that night now, I'm disappointed. It's that same feeling of being the last person picked for kickball teams in P.E. class. He didn't throw ice at me because I was special. He threw it at me because I was there. We didn't know each other. I didn't know him beyond his glib way of remembering my drink order or the fact that he was a "mocal." It's more than disappointing though because I realized, this was how we got to know one another now. This is how we communicate: by throwing ice chips at each other until our legs are numb.

We Are Not All That Different

In most movies and television shows, when a person is being pulled over by police, there's a shot of the rear-view mirror from the driver's point of view. As if this is the first place they look. But when you're being pulled over, there's no need to do this. The lights are bright and scattered; they seem to swallow the vehicle. At least that's how it felt when I was being pulled over on my way to a bar with my friends when I was nineteen.

My hands gripping the wheel, I eased into a restaurant parking lot. I turned the radio down. All three of my friends had stopped talking. I put my car in park diagonally across two parking spaces. I knew I had to keep it under control, so I convinced myself I was fine.

The cop came to my window. He asked to see my license and registration and told me my headlights weren't on.

I hadn't realized and accidentally clicked the dial twice for my high beams. He said he smelled booze coming from inside the car and on my breath. I said I hadn't been drinking. I thought that if I could get through this without having to speak much, I'd be fine.

In a tone that sounded more like a command than a question, the officer asked me to get out of the car. He asked me to walk in a straight line. He asked me to hold out my arm to my side, lift my pointer finger, and press it against my nose. Again, he said. I looked into the passenger seat window. Ashley motioned a thumbs up. Seeing him walk back to his car, for a second, I thought he'd let me go. I'd get a warning for driving without my headlights. I'd get a lecture and go home.

Back at my car, he unhooked a pair of handcuffs from his belt loop and cuffed my hands behind my back. A chill ran from my wrists up my arms as he read me my Miranda rights.

I waited in different holding cells at the Orange County Jail for a while. Three hours, maybe. Each time they moved me, I thought I was being released. Nobody told me anything. They'd call my name, tell me to go here or there, and sit.

Eventually, I was moved into a small room with a sign on the door that read "Intake." A clock on the wall said 3:20. An Hispanic woman handed me a pair of thick blue cotton pants and a matching t-shirt. "Put these on," she said. "Does your bra have wire in it? If so, that'll have to come off as well. I'll be right outside this door while you change."

I undressed. It should have taken a minute, but my movements were slow and sloppy. I kept my black sandals on. At least I've still got these, I thought. I opened the door.

"I need your shoes." The woman tossed a pair of rubber, rust-colored slides on the floor. I handed her my sandals. She slid them into a clear plastic bag with the rest of my clothes. I put on the slides. It was like standing on foam. I wondered how many people had worn them.

"Keep your ID clipped to your shirt at all times. Go ahead and take a seat."

The woman pointed to a door that opened into a large, circular room filled with plastic chairs. Six desks, with large computer monitors, were arranged in the center of the room.

I looked at the paperwork in my lap. I considered sorting through it, but I didn't want to read the report yet. I tried to focus on things around me. I wondered when they'd let me call someone. In movies people always got their one phone call. I hadn't seen any phones. I wasn't even sure who I'd call.

"Campbell!" A woman with short, blonde hair cropped close to her face stood behind one of the desks. She curled her pointer finger inward.

"Give me your hand," she said. I gave it to her. There were red marks around my wrist. I could still feel the cold metal handcuffs. She held my hand in front of the computer screen. An

app read my name, address, date of birth, weight, height, eye color, hair color and other personal information. She slid my fingertips hard across the clear screen. I've always felt that "suddenly realized" was purely a fictional trope. How often do people "suddenly realize" things? But when she grabbed my other hand and wiped my fingers across the screen, I realized I was being fingerprinted.

Tears blurred my vision. Every few minutes I broke into sobs. I wondered when I would run out of tears.

After being fingerprinted, I was directed to two police officers who held all of my belongings in clear plastic sleeves, like baseball card memorabilia. I looked at the cards that made up my wallet, that made up me: Target red card, Starbucks gift card, University of Central Florida student ID, MyPanera card, Yankees spring training baseball ticket, gas station receipts, \$15 cash.

"Before we take your belongings away, are there any numbers from your cell phone you'd like to write down?" The taller of the two men set my iPhone on the counter in front of me. My cell phone seemed insignificant in that moment. I wanted to bargain with them. If I left my phone, could I leave the county jail? Somehow, in that moment, this logic made sense.

"Yes," I said. I had my mother and stepfather's numbers memorized, although I still hadn't decided if they were who I wanted to call. I wrote down my best friend Ashley's number, but no one else's. I didn't want to involve people who weren't there. Not because I didn't want to be a burden, but because I had too much pride.

I was brought to a small room with a built-in concrete bench, a stainless-steel toilet, and a matching circular, sink that looked like a public water fountain. A small square window allowed for looking in and out. For the first time since I'd been arrested, I was completely alone.

I paced. When I started to feel nauseated, I sat down on the concrete bench and put my head between my knees. When it didn't help, I lunged toward the toilet, puking up bile and liquid; it smelled chemical and fruity. I stood up, washed the sour taste from my mouth, and ran water over my face. There were no paper towels, so I used toilet paper as a makeshift face towel. After blotting my face, I looked up. For the first time I noticed a small, square mirror over the sink. I wasn't sure how I missed it before. The outer edges were rusty and smudgy. The entire thing was about as small as a hand mirror, one used to see the back of your head at a hairdresser's. But this wasn't just any mirror. It didn't reflect my square shaped face. It was morphed, reflecting a distorted, altered image, like a funhouse mirror. Even if I could've seen my reflection, in that moment I'm not sure I would have recognized the girl staring back at me.

That was the first thing I liked about being there, the first thing that wasn't so cold. They wanted you to sit, wait, and think about what you did, but they didn't force you to look at yourself.

Soon I was put into a room with seven other women. Some I recognized from the circular room. I curled up in the corner near the door, pulled my feet in toward my chest, and zoned out. Being in jail reminded me of kindergarten or of being away at camp. Not knowing where to go or what to do unless directly told. Waiting around for the next set of instructions, all the while wanting to go home, just wanting your mom.

I tuned into the conversation around me. An older woman with short, spiky, blonde hair talked about her transfer from another county jail. She described her time there—five days—as “nice.”

“The food was delicious. They don’t make you do anything either; they just let you sleep all day.” She laughed.

Another woman chimed in. “I sat next to a girl earlier who didn’t want her food, so I got double.” It felt like they were trying to one-up each other.

A girl in the corner opposite me sat quiet. Her hair looked matted to her face. Her eyes were swollen, the rims around them red and wet. This made me want to talk to her. I squinted to try and make out the name on the tag clipped to her shirt. *BIANCA*. I opened my mouth to speak, but someone did before me.

“How old are you?” A woman sitting next to Bianca nudged her shoulder.

“Nineteen,” she said. We had that in common. I realized then, that in there, the smallest things gave me comfort.

“Damn, so young,” the woman said. “You don’t have anyone to call? Your parents?”

Bianca’s lips quivered. “My mom doesn’t care about me.”

It took me a second to realize that I’d started crying.

“I bet that’s not true.”

“I could die and my mom wouldn’t give a shit,” Kimberly said. I forced myself to look away.

Awhile later, someone outside the door muttered “Campbell.” The lock on the door clicked and an officer stepped into the room. “Campbell?”

I raised my hand.

“You posted bail,” he said. “This way.”

I stood up and followed him without looking back at anyone, not even Bianca. We walked down two flights of stairs before the officer told me to walk to the end of the hall and wait for another officer to escort me.

The hallways were long. Some had doors that led to big bunk rooms for people staying overnight. Some had cells lining both walls. Every now and then an inmate would come to their window, try and glimpse who was walking through. Some hallways were completely empty. But no matter what, the walk was always long.

Since I was a first-time offender, my lawyer got me into a program called Pretrial Diversion. The program, once complete, allowed you to expunge your record. Seal it forever. This meant I could legally check “No” when future employers asked if I had a criminal arrest history.

I sat in a classroom with about fifteen other people and watched a grainy video of the program requirements projected onto a screen. When the video ended, a woman at the front of the room asked if we had any questions before signing our contracts.

No one moved. Signing our contracts meant that not paying fees on time, failing a drug test, not complying with the ignition interlock, or getting into any other legal trouble while still in the program would result in ejection from the program. It meant having your case go back to trial.

When no one raised their hand, the woman read the contract aloud. The conditions and balances were as follows: \$20 intake fee, \$17 drug test fee, \$750 supervision fee, \$50 state attorney prosecution fee, ignition interlock fee (which differed with every installation location), DUI Level 1 class fee of \$250, required counseling fees, a \$1000 “donation” to Mothers Against

Drunk Driving, and the investigative cost of your case. Mine came out to \$100.18. I wanted to raise my hand and ask if that was it.

The money was hard to swallow. Luckily, I had parents willing to help pay for most of it. In hindsight, I probably took advantage of that. I didn't *have* to think about the money because it technically wasn't all mine.

What sticks most with me from that day was realizing I couldn't keep this from people anymore. The first few months after the arrest, I'd done a decent job of it. I made up reasons for my inability to drive to get coffee: my car was having trouble, my parents didn't want me driving until we figured out what was wrong with my battery, I was too tired, could you drive?, etc. By far, the worst excuse I came up with was that I ran a toll, so my license was suspended.

What was I supposed to say to my friends whenever I blew into a device in order to start my engine? What would I tell them when we had to wait a while after eating out? At the contract signing, I learned the ignition interlock alarm didn't trigger when it detected alcohol; it triggered when it detected sugar. I couldn't eat or drink in the car on road trips. I had to carefully plan meals and when I ate them.

Florida cut me a huge break; many states didn't offer this kind of program. But they wanted it to sting. It seemed absurd: paying off people (the system) to be discreet (expunge my DUI and drop the conviction.) In that moment, I couldn't think of a better way to spend thousands of dollars.

At my first AA meeting, when it was my turn to introduce myself, I stood up and said, "My name is Miranda and I'm happy to be here." But I didn't mean it. I wasn't happy to be there. I was court-ordered to be twice a week.

I wasn't sure how else to introduce myself. I didn't know I'd have to until each person went around the room. It seemed better than saying the alternative, what everyone else had been saying: "I'm so-and-so and I'm an alcoholic." This felt definitive and two-dimensional. I wanted to decide who I was going forward.

I looked at a man sitting at the table nearby. He'd introduced himself as Jack. He wore blue jeans, brown military boots, and a plain white t-shirt. His stomach hung over the sides of his looped brown belt. I smelled cigarette ash when he walked by to grab *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* from the box at the front.

That day I sat alone and didn't speak to anyone.

As with most people who've gotten a DUI, I was recommended for treatment. I opened the door to my first counseling session and saw six people sitting in chairs lined up on both sides of the wall. The room was no bigger than a tool shed. I thought this was strange. I wondered if we all had the same appointment time. Perhaps this meant we'd each be in and out within ten or fifteen minutes.

"Who's next?" A short, Puerto Rican woman named Trish looked around the room. One by one people got up to hand her cash or a check and a white sheet of paper. Some sheets she signed, others she waved out of her face.

An older woman with her hair tied back into a low ponytail walked up to Trish. Trish took her session fee. She held the sheet of paper out in front of her, her eyes peering over the rims of her glasses. "Why did you only go to one meeting this week? Now I expect three from you next week." She handed the woman's paper back blank.

Trish's eyes met mine. She recognized I was new. She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers. "As a warm welcome, we're gonna take your urine." She laughed. The class laughed too.

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“I need a urine sample. For a drug test. Which means you owe \$25 plus the \$30 group session fee.”

I nodded and wrote Trish a check. I thought counseling would be private. This reminded me a lot of what it was like to be in jail. They gave me a piece of paper, told me to show up somewhere, and expected me to know what to do beyond that.

I tried to keep an open mind as each person shared their story. Mike told the group he was on his fourth DUI. Kayla sat there quiet but nodded in agreement. Kristen told us she’d been in group therapy for almost a year now. They wouldn’t let her “graduate” because she couldn’t pass a drug test. Jesse, a middle-aged man with dry paint stains on his pants and one of the raspiest voices I’d ever heard, said he’d been drinking and driving with a beer in his lap since he was sixteen years old.

I felt I couldn’t relate to anyone. During their stories, people laughed. Trish laughed. They made jokes about how much they missed drinking, how drunk they were the nights they were arrested. At the time, I still couldn’t find the courage to confide in my sister about what I did. I decided that if this was anything like the required AA meetings, where I wasn’t forced to share my story, I’d pay my fees and be on my way.

Then Trish turned to me and said, “Miranda, why don’t you tell everyone why you’re here.” Before I could respond, she added, “Oh and Miranda, you have to have a personality in here.”

Each week at group therapy, we had to repeat our reason for being there, our “story” as they referred to it, in case of a newcomer.

I had just finished recounting the night I was pulled over. “I guess I didn’t have my headlights on.”

“You guess?” Trish raised her voice.

Our eyes met. I played with the loose dead skin around my cuticles. “I mean...”

Trish’s eyebrows raised. She looked down at me over the curve of her glasses.

“I mean, I forgot to turn on my headlights.” I thought that would be enough, but when Trish didn’t move onto someone else, I looked at her. Her eyebrows were still raised. I thought I could see the word “and?” forming on her lips.

“Because I was drunk,” I said.

“Thank you, Miranda.” She turned away. “Who wants to go next?”

I’d seen her do this to everyone here: pick at one word she didn’t like or a tone she found cavalier and disrespectful. In a way, I was impressed with her attention to detail, her ability to tune all the way in even though she listened to the same stories’ week in and week out. She always found a way to have the last word.

I was in my fourth week of group therapy. We talked about what we’d learned in the past week at individual AA meetings, how we planned to apply it to our life. Jesse talked about addiction. “First the man takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes the man,” he said.

Counseling and AA meetings were cells on a spreadsheet I was filling out. Show up, get the signatures, leave. Countdown the days until I was done. I didn’t find comfort in each other’s experiences because I didn’t want to. I preferred to think we were all so different. If I admitted we weren’t, then I was admitting that I did, in fact, need to be there.

I thought about what Jesse had said. Something about it seemed familiar. “First the man takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes the man.” Then it hit me: It was the same with emotions.

We often refer to feeling emotion as if it is under our control. It can be, but this isn’t always the case; many times, it’s the opposite. If we give emotions total control, they will take it. Even when we don’t want to admit it, our emotions are inherent in every choice we make, every celebration, every struggle.

Jesse finished talking. He leaned back into his chair and lowered his paint stained hat over his face, like he did every week after his turn. Trish told him to take off the hat. Jesse shifted it a little higher on his face, just enough to see the tip of his nose. Trish let him be. I smirked.

I realized what connected me to each person in our sessions. Trish pushed us to relate to one another in our meetings. A lot of us, myself included, pushed back. I wanted to see myself as separate. I’d been so focused on how the people in group therapy had dedicated a life to drinking and driving, that I’d overlooked the most basic affinity linking us all: our giving something else complete control. Perhaps it was alcohol for Jesse and weed for Carl, but for me, it was denial, my readiness to dispense blame. We were all guilty of giving something the power to seize us. I started seeing each of them differently: Kristen, Carl, Kayla, even Trish. I kept feeling like I didn’t belong, but I was there because of my own actions, because of a choice I made. Our lives are comprised of cause and effect, of acting and reacting, the way we handled situations we found ourselves in. *If we give emotions total control, they will take it.*

My impulses, starting from the moment I was pulled over, had been to react quick and to point the finger. As different as we may have looked, my group therapy members gave me what I

needed to accept my situation. They'd been doing it the entire time. I knew on paper why I was there. My struggle wasn't with alcohol. I needed something I learned years ago in a psychology class, a concept called cognitive reappraisal. By changing my thoughts, I could change my situation, the way I emotionally acknowledged it.

It was the first time at group therapy that I felt—on my own volition—the need to share. The first time I felt I had something worth saying. I raised my hand.

Sharing Flagler Beach

First Kiss, Almost

In the early afternoon of my freshman year of high school, I wait for Adam to pick me up from my mother's house. It's our first date—my first date ever, really. Adam has his permit. I'm only fourteen. So technically I'm waiting for two people: Adam and his best friend Mark. Mark isn't our chaperone, but he is our ride.

I get a text from Adam. *I'm outside.*

I sigh. I was worried he might come to my doorstep, but this is better. I don't know what's standard. I have no standards, but the doorstep feels too formal, too soon. I walk out to Mark's Chevy Avalanche to find Adam sitting in the passenger seat. He smiles, his mouth full of braces, and motions with his hand for me to get into the back seat. I'm disappointed. I may not have had standards leading up to the night, but I like Adam a lot. He's my first real crush. I want him to want to sit next to me. I open the backseat door and grab the handle on the upper inside to hoist myself up onto the black leather seats. We exchange "hello's," "how are you's," and drive toward Flagler Beach. I don't expect the date to go a certain way—good or bad—because I have nothing to compare it to. Yet somehow there is still pressure, compression I feel in my whole body. I feel like I might mess it up with another person watching. Mark and Adam talk about professional soccer teams: Real Madrid and FC Barcelona.

"Miranda, who's your favorite team?" Mark asks.

"I actually don't watch soccer."

"But don't you play?"

Though I know it wasn't Mark's intention, I feel stupid, like having to skip a question on a quiz.

“I guess I just prefer to play more than anything.” I fiddle with the seatbelt.

Adam laughs. “You can’t do both?” I know they’re teasing, that it’s meant to be lighthearted. Still, it feels like a strike against me.

I look out the window. We’re passing over Flagler Beach bridge, and I turn just in time—at the peak—for the best view of the Intracoastal below. At the apex, you can see the calm, still water stretch for miles, maybe even as far as Ormond Beach, a town fifteen minutes away. Small docks leading to expensive homes made of treated wood and metal roofing line the 200-foot-waterway. Boats of all sizes float at the ends of docks, waiting to cruise the channel. The sun sets from the opposite direction, peeking through spaces between trees and homes. Obscure shadows made from the tops of trees reflect along the water. I turn my head and face the direction we just came, the bottom of the bridge receding the closer to the beach we get. The sun is blinding. I shade my eyes and face toward the front again. Fourteen years of living in this town and this view never gets old. I still wish to see the beach at sunset.

“Where do you guys want to go?” Mark asks.

I say, “Anywhere” at the same time Adam says, “Sally’s Ice Cream.”

At the end of State Rd A1A, Mark makes a left turn. He parks outside a tiny, pastel pink shack with a large, white sign that reads Sally’s Ice Cream in squiggly, blue lettering. My legs make a suction sound as they peel off the seat. I pray my armpits won’t do the same if I were to lift my arms. Adam pays for my waffle cone. We eat together at a wooden picnic bench overlooking the beach. The murky waves crash and send sea spray up into the air. The waves, more a lull than anything, are comforting in their clash against the coquina rock sand.

I realize I’m too quiet. I want Adam to like me, but I worry I’ll say the wrong thing. Sometimes I want to reach back in time and tap my younger self on the arm. *Speak!* When you

like someone, it's so much easier to not try, to abandon the feelings. It's so much easier to stay home.

Adam and Mark bring up a recent soccer match they watched on TV. They use words like "hat trick" and "Messi." I smile and nod. I follow along. When we're finished with our cones, Mark suggests we walk the boardwalk. I wonder why he's still here with us. Could it be that Adam asked him to stay? That he's just as nervous as I am? Whatever the case, I'm relieved. I didn't realize how much I'd need a buffer.

We head three blocks north toward the pier. The wooden brown slats on the roof create a large upside-down V, a small nook for sightseers and fisherman to gather their gear before walking onto the exposed pier. On both sides of the deteriorated roof, FLAGLER BEACH is spelled out in white, blocky lettering. The letters are worn, the edges yellowed and eroded from wind-blown sea salt. It's one of my favorite parts about Flagler. The atmosphere feels so opposite of commercial.

I hold my black Volcom flips flops as we walk the blue paneled boardwalk, the cracked wood rough against my bare feet. We come to the giant, colorful chalkboard—a makeshift community mural—brimming with signatures, doodles, and often profanities. The chalkboard is at least thirty feet long and six feet tall. It borders the side of The Funky Pelican, a beachside brunch restaurant connected to the pier. Assorted color chalk sits on the railing for tourists and locals to decorate the chalkboard. It's covered top to bottom by the end of each day, the board covered in a mass of colors, pictures bleeding into one another. Someone from The Funky Pelican hoses it down every few days, the canvas is restored to a plain blackboard, and the mosaic begins all over again.

Today, there's a few blank spaces. The three of us stop and sketch. I pick up a thick, blue piece of Crayola chalk and write my name in loose cursive. It's sloppy. I erase it and do it again, over and over until I think it's perfect. I look up to see what Mark and Adam have drawn on the opposite side of the board. I see a small soccer field. Two cartoon men stand on opposite sides of the field—one with a soccer ball at his feet, the other waiting in anticipation for his opponent. They each wear a jersey detailed with a player name and number. One reads MESSI, the other RONALDO. Tiny emblems—team logos—are etched into the corner of the jerseys. I feel like I'm on a double date. Adam and me. Adam and Mark. I wonder what Adam is thinking. I wonder if he thinks the date is going well. We haven't interacted as much as I'd hoped. In a way, that makes me feel like there is still a chance. I haven't yet said the wrong thing.

They call me over and encourage me to draw my favorite professional soccer player. The only one I know is also one of the most famous in history: Mia Hamm. But she retired years ago, so I draw myself instead. CAMPBELL #4. I put an *FPC* emblem in the corner, the abbreviation of the high school where the three of us attend and play soccer. They half smile, the kind you give when you're trying to be polite.

The last stop on what's started to feel like a guided tour is the actual beach. We walk down the wooden staircase leading to the orange, coquina rock sand. Once we're on the beach, Mark breaks away, telling us he'll be up at his truck. He turns to leave. I realize I don't want him to go. Though I want to be, I'm not ready to be alone with Adam. I clench my teeth and scrunch my toes, tensing one body part at a time until I feel a cramp in my calf. Adam and I make trivial small talk. We ask each other's favorite food, favorite color, favorite television shows.

The occasional car passes. I hear reggae music from the rooftop of Fuego, an outdoor bar across the street from where we sit. People laugh as they sit on the stone edge that surrounds the large bonfire out front. I can't hear the waves as much as I could before.

"Can I kiss you?" Adam asks, but the question feels forced and unprecedented. Though I know Mark isn't interested in me, he's made a point to engage with me more than Adam has this whole time. My muscles tighten again. Adam's damp brown hair hangs just above his eyebrows. In that moment, I realize I'm not ready to date. I'm not ready to be more than a friend.

I search for something, anything to say. "I don't think so."

A few weeks later, as I round the corner of the 700 building on my way to Mrs. Alvez's Biology class, I see Adam in the courtyard at school, holding hands with and kissing tall blonde, Taylor Hastings, the girl who I heard had been pining after Adam for months. He chose to go on a date with me, but in the end, he chose her. I think back to our beach date. I'm not surprised why.

They break apart from their kiss. I look away just in time. I have to walk past them in order to get to first period. When I do, I pretend I don't see them.

When the Music Stops

Dan picks me up in his mother's white Tahoe. He comes to the front door even though I ask him to let me know when he's outside. He says hello to my mother, shakes my stepfather's hand, and tells them our plans for the night. Dinner in Flagler Beach, home by ten o'clock. When he starts the car, Sublime plays through the speakers. Dan and I bond over music. Sometimes it's the only thing we talk about. Sublime, Slightly Stoopid, Arcade Fire, Rebelution. Our uncomfortable silences are filled with musical rhythms. Sometimes, when he has his guitar with him, he's the

one that plays them. In the car, when each song ends, I want the music back. I want the next song to start.

When we get to Flagler, we eat UFO's—a saucer shaped burrito filled with chicken, cheese, and all the toppings of your choice—at A1A Burrito Works. Afterward, we walk a couple of blocks to a 7 Eleven. Dan buys me a Diet Coke, himself a Sprite, and we walk down the boardwalk.

“Odd or even,” he says.

“Huh?”

“Just pick one.”

“Okay...odd.”

He nods his head at something high above and behind me. A group of pelicans fly past us. He stares at them as they pass, squinting his eyes as though in concentration. “Ah, so close,” he says. “Ten. Even.”

He explains that whenever you see an approaching flock of birds you say odd or even. Without looking, the person you're with guesses how many birds might be in the flock. He laughs and says, “I know, it's stupid.”

“No, I like it.” We play this game throughout the night, in between conversation. It surprises me just how many birds pass in a single beach outing. I wonder where he learned the game, how many other girls he's played it with, if any. Eventually he asks if I want to walk along the beach. I say yes.

We take off our flip flops and leave them underneath the staircase at the 1 St. boardwalk. Flagler Beach is deserted, quiet, free of spring breakers and tourists. It's the kind of beach where it's safe to leave personal belongings—a laid out beach towel, beach bag, cooler, etc.—go for a

walk, or run across the street to a gas station for snacks and know for certain everything will be where you left it.

Dan and I walk half in the sand, half in the lukewarm ocean water washing in and out. We leave footprints in the sand. My bare feet step on jagged shells, cracking them into small pieces. The sharp stabs feel good. Our arms bump against one another every so often. Each time Dan apologizes. I want him to see it as an opportunity to grab my hand. After a few more bumps he finally does. We interlace fingers. We stop and stand face to face. The sun has set. I can barely make out the features of his face, but I know his light brown, wide-set eyes are there, his nose that hangs so low that when he smiles, the bottom of it seems to touch his upper lip. He puts his arms around me and kisses me on the lips. I know it's not going well when his teeth mash against mine. We can't find the space where lips are supposed to meet. We stop soon after and keep walking. We don't say anything for a couple minutes. I wish for music.

When we get back to the Tahoe, a loud boom followed by a crack erupts from somewhere in the distance. A fireworks display decorates the sky in blues, greens, reds, and golds. I lean on the hood of the car, watching the bright explosions. Dan sees it as an opportunity. He sidles up close behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. My back is to his chest. A couple seconds into the embrace, it's uncomfortable. My arms have fallen asleep. My left elbow digs into his side. Despite this, I want to power through. That's what you do when you want something to work. You overlook the small disparities that don't amount to anything other than first date jitters. You fight for it.

"Yeah, I'm uncomfortable," he says, laughing it off. He moves his body so that we stand side by side, no longer touching at all. We watch the rest of the fireworks in silence.

Friends with the Occasional Benefit

My best guy friend Brian drives us to the beach when my mother and stepfather are on their nightly bike ride. This makes it easy to sneak out my mother's stash of vodka.

"It's Monday Funday," he said earlier over the phone.

He picks me up twenty minutes later. I walk out with a Zephyrhills water bottle full of a Stoli and pineapple juice mixture. He tells me that's not enough. I roll my eyes. A few minutes later, I come back out with a water bottle and a half.

"You know it's a school night. I can't be out late," I say, sliding into his Mustang. He doesn't respond, just smirks and backs out of the driveway. He drives a few miles down the road to Flagler Beach and parks on the south side of the pier across the street from Giuseppe's. It's been closed for hours, but I can still smell pizza grease steaming from the glass doors, the tiny, square window looking out onto the boardwalk for beach goers who'd rather grab a to-go slice than have a sit-down meal inside. We walk down the wooden boardwalk, water bottles in hand, and leave our shoes at the bottom of the stairs. Our feet sink into the wet sand with each step. We take swigs as we walk, letting the alcohol warm our bodies, giggling a little more every minute. My lips feel numb. I smack them together to make sure they're still there. Eventually Brian and I stop to sit in the sand. We reminisce—best days, worst days, high school graduation in a month, where we'll be going afterward. Brian is my good friend, my good friend that I like to kiss. It is a mutual affection. I feel I can say whatever is on my mind.

"Hey Brian, I forgot how you kiss. I think you should remind me."

He laughs. I can see every one of his teeth. "What a line," he says. "I might steal that."

Today, he tells me it's a line he uses on girls he's previously kissed. Today I think, what a stupid thing to say.

We kiss for what feels like a few hours. Eventually my mother texts me that I need to come home. When we get back in his car, he plugs his phone into the auxiliary cord. We belt a song we both love the whole way home. There's no goodbye kiss because that would be weird. When we see each other at school the next day, he asks if I'm going to this weekend's baseball game. I tell him of course. He suggests we ride together. We act as though the night before never happened.

Limbo

Ben and I meet each other next to the pier in Flagler Beach. I pull into any empty parking spot in my mother's emerald green van. Ben leans against his white Subaru sports car. When I get out, he lingers for a moment. I move toward him, and we hug. His dark brown stubble brushes my chin in the recoil. I breathe in his clean, but spicy cologne. We meet at the beach to talk about the previous weekend. He'd heard I kissed another guy. Ben and I aren't together; we're in that cloudy in between stage, still figuring each other out. But still, he wants to know why I did it. That's fair.

Instead of walking on the sand, we hoist ourselves up onto the light blue railing that lines the boardwalk, dangling our feet over sunburned shrubbery and cacti, and face the dark ocean. The sun set a few hours ago. All I can see is the white foam of a wave crashing. He puts space between us, more than usual. The dim moon is small, hanging low over the water. It gives off as little light as the weak, orange glow from the overhead street lamps.

"So, why did you kiss him?" Ben doesn't look at me.

"I don't know," I lie.

Ben and I have hung out several times, always in group settings. The first time I met him, I was with one of my best friends, Meagan. She introduced us. “You guys would be so cute together,” she said. In high school, this seems to be one of the main criteria for dating.

One Saturday morning, Meagan and I surprised Ben by showing up unannounced at his house. It’d been awhile since they’d hung out. She wanted to see him. I remember her calling it a perfect opportunity for him and me to meet. She made breakfast and caught up with his parents. I sat at the kitchen bar top and watched, waiting for Ben to wake up. I wondered then if Meagan’s matchmaking was her effort at due diligence or an attempt to transpose any feelings she had for him onto me. I was never sure Ben and I were a good idea from the beginning. Doubts aside, I gave it a chance.

“You don’t know why you kissed him?” Ben asks.

The truth is I do know. I want to tell him I could never really let his closeness with Meagan go, how when they play wrestle, right in front of me sometimes—Meagan’s shirt rising up and revealing her pale, flat stomach, Ben’s hands gripping her torso, just underneath her breasts—it feels intimate. It makes me think I should leave the room. I want to ask him why we don’t hang out one on one, though he and Meagan will fall asleep at each other’s houses. But I also want to be a cool girl who accepts these things and is never bothered by them, let alone brings them up.

Instead, I tell him the reason I kissed another guy is because I was drunk, which isn’t a complete lie. But it’s a half-truth. It seems I haven’t quite learned a thing. Since my very first date, I haven’t learned to find my voice. I wonder if there’s some sort of middle ground to be reached. Maybe once I figure out what I want, I’ll figure out when to speak up. I like Ben, but it

turns out I like guarantee more. I like knowing for certain what I'm up against. I like the familiarity of being in control.

He tells me he doesn't want to stop hanging out, if that's what I want. "Don't tell me now though. Think about it."

I nod and say, "I will."

Our butts become numb after sitting on the narrow railing for too long. I suggest moving to one of the pavilions next to us. Before I sit on the bench, Ben stretches his body along the wooden picnic table and faces up. He pats the empty space next to him. I lie down, put a couple feet between us, and stare up at the sky. Looking straight up, it seems so bright, the stars big and bold. The streetlights must've turned off a while ago without our noticing. My hands lie at my sides. Ben's are clasped over his stomach. I think about reaching for his hand, but don't. We lie across the table, side by side, in a limbo of sorts. I'm surprised but relieved that we can be like this with each other, favoring the quiet. It seems clear to me: neither of us wants to ruin a good night by talking just to talk, just to fill a silence that doesn't need filling. For a moment my mind wanders back to Meagan. But Ben is here with me, and I suppose that counts for something.

Two is a Crowd

I go to the beach alone, too. I pack my Australian gold sunscreen with the built-in bronzer, a towel big enough to fit three of me, whichever book I'm reading at the time, and a couple of water bottles in a brown with white embroidery tote bag. I drive to Flagler Beach in my red Chevy Malibu and turn left toward northside. I drive at least ten blocks north. The further away from the pier, the emptier the beach. When I park alongside the road and get out, I smell burnt eucalyptus drift through the air. I smell fried fish and hamburger grease from the beachside

restaurants that line the other side of the road: Finn's, The Golden Lion, Turtle Shack Café. Call it sticky, call it fishy, call it too much sunscreen; no other smell reminds me more of home.

I find a spot on the sand, lay my towel over the uneven patterns, and sit. When the heat becomes unbearable—the sun beating down on my skin, my whole body slick with sweat and salt—I walk into the ocean and wade a few feet in the water. Never further though. I wonder how when I was a kid I could go so far out into the ocean, sometimes to the end of the 100-foot-long pier. I think, good for her. It seems to me that girl had more nerve.

Now when I'm in the water, I like to go right where the waves break, diving head first under each wave right before it crashes. When the temperature hits 90 or more, every dunk in the water is refreshing, like a cleansing, a washing away.

My favorite time to go to Flagler is the evening, that odd time of day where the sky turns from light to dark without warning. The sun starts to set but takes its time. The yellow orange glow turns to light pink, sometimes purple, always at a slow crawl. Then out of nowhere, the colors go dark all at once. I like seeing both sides of the beach. One is so distinct from the other. I like that when the sun sets the ocean turns into a faraway sound, a rushing in and out of waves that I can't see but know for certain are still there.

When I take myself to the beach, when I'm there alone and there's no hand to wonder if I should reach for, there's no pressure. When there's no pressure, I feel a peace unlike any I've felt when the space beside me is filled. Sometimes when I'm at Flagler Beach, and I notice a formation of birds flying toward me from the distance, I look away. I think, *odd or even*. I look up just as the birds fly past and do the calculation in my head. I don't always guess right, but it's the work that counts, the act of trying and trying until I get it right.

F-150

2001

On our way to Movie Gallery to rent VHS tapes for family movie night, my stepfather, John, played 96.5 The Eagle on the radio in his red Ford F-150. I stared out the passenger side window as we passed Buddy Taylor Middle School, a McDonald's, The Palm Harbor Golf Course, and neighborhoods organized alphabetically through my small hometown in Florida. We listened to classic rock, driving by tall pines and dense underbrush.

John lowered the volume on the radio. "Guess the artist," he said.

I turned to face him. "Huh?"

"Guess who's singing right now."

After another moment of my silence, he laughed. "I know you don't like my music, so guess the artist. If you can guess correctly, I'll let you change the radio to whatever station you want."

I was seven years old, so I guessed at random, artists whose names I'd overheard my mother or John mention. Aerosmith, Eagles, The Police, Led Zeppelin. None of my guesses were right, so we stayed on 96.5.

He told me the song was called "Paint It Black" by the Rolling Stones. For a long time after, when John and I played his music trivia game, The Rolling Stones was always my first guess.

2003

When we pulled up to the motocross park, Pax Trax, John parked his truck behind the bleachers. He came to the park every weekend where he rode his KTM dirt bike around the looping track. Ever so often, Katie and I went with him.

When we saw John finish his ride and start to take off his gear, we tossed our Barbies inside the cab of his truck, hitting the locks on both doors before walking toward the track to meet him. He asked if we were ready to grab dinner. We nodded and raced him back to the truck.

He let us win with a smile. When he pulled the truck door handle and his hand sprung back with a jolt, his face went still.

“Who locked the truck?” he yelled.

I could never bring myself to meet John’s eyes when he yelled. Something about its infrequency, the hard stare and deep voice so unlike him. Whenever something small set him off, it was always startling. I looked at Katie instead. “Were we not supposed to?” she asked.

He ignored her. “Why would you lock the doors?”

“So no one steals anything.”

“There’s nothing in it to steal.” He looked at us like we should’ve known better.

“Where are your keys?” I asked. Katie nudged my side, shaking her head in warning.

John gave me a look as he climbed into the back of his pickup. “They’re under the floor mat where I always leave them.” For the next fifteen minutes he jimmied the two small panels that split in the middle on the sliding rear window. He grunted and mumbled, “God, fucking damn it,” waving his hand in the air. He held his fingertips up to his lips in pain. John rarely cussed. When he did, Katie and I knew to stay quiet, to not get involved even if it meant helping. We stood by the front of the truck, out of John’s sight.

After twenty minutes, he grabbed a screwdriver from the small tool box he kept in the far-left corner of the truck bed. “If I have to break this latch to get in...” Inch by inch, the rear window edged open. Eventually, we heard a pop. He wrenched it open all the way. The window was so small that only I could climb through in order to unlock both the driver’s and passenger side doors. I searched for the keys under the mat and handed them to John. He yanked them from my hand.

On the ride back, John skipped the right-hand turn toward Wendy’s—our tradition after a trip to the racetrack—and drove home. We weren’t surprised that John didn’t speak to us. We were when he didn’t turn on classic rock to fill the silence.

2005

My mother asked John and me to go pick up the takeout she ordered from Houligan’s Irish Pub. John grabbed his truck keys from the kitchen key rack, I put on some shoes, and we walked out to the driveway. I heard John open his driver’s side door. I waited for him to pull the handle on my side and unlatch the manual lock. But he didn’t pull the handle right away. Instead, he got in, started the truck, and stared straight out the windshield, pretending to forget I was there. Then with a look of mock disbelief, he turned to me, his eyes wide and mouth hung open as if to say, *Oh! Have you been there this whole time? I didn’t even see you!*

I smirked and rolled my eyes, communicating that this joke had gotten old, though it always made me smile, and waited for the thunk of the handle so I could climb in beside him.

2007

One time when we were driving down Belle Terre Parkway, I remembered neither of us had locked our doors. I swung my arm up and slammed down the passenger side lock as if my hand were a mallet in the high striker strongman carnival game. Not out of a safety precaution, out of the pointless amusement we invented to pass time. Who could remember to lock their door the fastest?

“HA! I beat you,” I said.

John leaned his propped-up elbow closer to the window, toward his driver’s side lock. I heard a thud. He jerked his head. I smiled.

I pointed my finger at him. “See, I did win.”

The skin around his eyes stretched as he tried not to laugh. “I don’t know what you mean. My door has been locked this whole time...see?” He moved his arm to show the sunken nob on the door, but we both knew he’d been caught.

“Uh huh, I’m not buying it.” We slowed to a red light.

His foot eased into the brake, and he shook his head. “You’re just too quick for me.”

2008

John asked me a math problem on the truck ride to school, something from a lesson we went over the previous night. He usually did this on an important test day. At the time, I couldn’t keep geometric sequence formulas straight, something I learned a few modules before. Rarely did he show frustration at my not understanding a concept, even when it took hours for me to comprehend. If there’s anything I remember about studying with him, it’s his unwavering patience. But that time was different. John turned to me, his palm open as though he were

standing at the front of a classroom giving a lecture, and said, “You can’t forget something you’ve already learned, even after you’ve been tested on it!”

I waited for him to finish.

“Miranda, I know you hate math, but you can’t just throw each chapter away! You’ll need that knowledge later—”

“I know!”

He sat back into his seat.

I lowered my voice. “Don’t you think I know that?”

“Then tell me the formula for an explicit geometric sequence.”

I pretended to think about the math problem. All I could hear was the pissed off voice in my head. I searched—scrambled—to come up with the jumble of letters and numbers just to shut John up.

“I can’t remember,” I said.

It’s the only concept that I forgot from the sections we’d gone over. Everything else I understood, had memorized. But still, John couldn’t help himself. “I hope you don’t fail your test.”

2010

John set out small, orange cones in the deserted Food Lion parking lot. He set up a weaving pattern, a regular parking spot, and two cones that represented the front and back end of a parallel parking spot. I sat in the driver’s seat of the truck with the windows rolled down so that we could hear each other as he spoke.

“I want you to swing wide as you take this spot,” he said, moving his arms in an arc. “If you can, you always want to swing wide, especially in a truck.”

We’d been out there for over an hour. I leaned my head out the driver’s side window. “I haven’t hit a single cone the last five times.”

“So do it a sixth.”

“Please—”

“Again,” he said.

I pulled the gear shift down into drive and edged forward, making sure to swing wide.

2011

I had to be at the field early for warm up before my home soccer game. Earlier when I’d asked John if I could take his truck, his head rolled back, and he sighed. He let me anyway. He usually rode to the game with my mother in her van, but afterward rode with me for the brief two-mile trip back home. We always talked about the game.

That night, we tied with Spruce Creek—our biggest rival. I sat in the driver’s seat and waited for John to put his camera gear back into his duffel bag. He took our team photos and later posted them on fpcsoccer.com for my teammates and their families to check out.

There were times right before he slid into the truck when I stared straight ahead and pretended to forget John was waiting for me to unlock his door, just like he did with me. But that night, this joke of ours felt exhausted, like I’d be forcing it. I wasn’t happy with the way I played. I leaned over and pulled the handle to let him in.

“Good game,” he said.

I put the truck in drive and pulled out of the school parking lot. This dialogue felt tired and familiar. I didn't know if John meant that I actually played a good game or if he felt obligated to say it.

“You guys should've beaten them.”

“But we didn't.” We needed a win to be first in our conference.

“Miranda needs to go after the ball more. Miranda's a great player, but she needs to be more selfish, a ball hog even. Don't be afraid to keep it.”

I hated when he referred to me in the third person, something he always did when we talked about soccer. He must've felt the frustration radiating from me, saw me replaying the game in my head. I often wondered if by referring to me in the third person, he felt he was keeping his criticism, himself, at a safe distance.

I wanted to tell him he wasn't my coach, that if he really cared so much maybe he should get out on the field and show me what I was doing wrong. But not that I was trying, never “I'm trying.” That wasn't good enough. Not for him, and not for me. Instead we sat in silence because sometimes that's how John and I understood each other best.

2012

John told me to put on clothes I was willing to get greasy. I walked outside wearing soccer shorts and an old gym shirt from Catholic school that my mother used as a cleaning rag. The hood of his F-150 was propped open. Two black circular pans sat on the driveway next to a jug of 5W-20 Havoline oil. One pan held a thick dark brown liquid almost filled to the top. The other held a small canister covered in what looked like the same dark brown sludge.

“I've already done the hard part,” John said, looking down at the oil-filled pan.

“What are we doing?”

“I’m teaching you how to change your oil.”

“I don’t even have a car.”

“You will someday. Come here.” We got down on the ground and looked up under the truck.

“The oil circulates through the engine to keep it lubricated, to keep it running. The bottom of the engine holds all the oil.” He pointed up toward a knob. “See that plug there?”

I nodded.

“That’s the drain plug. The ring around that is the gasket. This is where you let all the old oil drain out.” Every few sentences required a nod, an “okay,” or an “uh-huh.” All of John’s lessons needed these small reassurances that I was, in fact, keeping up. “It depends on how hot the engine is, but in the summer or if the engine’s just been running, it should only take about three minutes for the oil to drain completely.” He pointed to the pan on the driveway. “I’ve already done that and put in the new oil filter.”

“I suppose now is the fun part?”

John smirked. We inched out from underneath his truck and stood over the open hood.

“What I mainly want you to remember is how to measure the amount of oil you have.” He unscrewed another black plug branded with an oil can symbol on the front. It reminded me of the oil can Dorothy uses on the Tin Man. He grabbed a plastic funnel to put over the plug hole and told me to pour six quarts. I gave him a blank stare, the kind you give when you’re thinking hard. I’d never eyeballed six quarts.

“I’ll tell you when to stop,” he said.

I poured and watched the oil disappear beneath the funnel. After, he showed me how to check my oil level with the dipstick. He pulled the top of the ring and a metal stick with a curved end slid out. Small pinholes and hash marks lined the bottom. The metal stick was wet with oil up to the fourth hash mark. “This,” John said, “means you have a full tank of oil.”

“What if it’s only at the third?”

“That’s all right too. When you first change the oil, you want it to be at the top. As long as when you read the dipstick, the oil isn’t below the first hash mark, you’re okay. If it’s below, pour more oil in.” He took a dirty rag, wiped the end of the dipstick clean, and handed it to me. “You try.”

I pulled the dipstick in and out, offering my own readings even though the they all showed the same amount. I knew that for John, it was about the work, the proficiency and the retention that came from repetition.

When we were done, John told me that changing a vehicle’s oil yourself costs the same amount of money as taking it into a shop. But this didn’t surprise me. “You learn by doing,” John said. Sometimes I wonder how he didn’t end up a teacher.

“Besides, mechanics love to tell you that something else is wrong with your car. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve ‘needed new tires.’” He curled his fingers around the words needed new tires and shook his head. For a moment, I pictured John having a blowout on the highway. If this were to happen, he’d still find a way to prove he wasn’t culpable. There would’ve been something in the road before he blamed it on his resistance to let someone—even an expert—tell him what to do when he’s fully capable of checking the tire treads himself.

“What if I really do need new tires?” I asked.

“I can tell you if you need new tires.” Then John gave me a lesson on the difference between acceptable tire treads and ones that are wearing. I couldn’t decide whether to roll my eyes or laugh.

2013

I set my JBL Bluetooth speaker in the middle console between John and me and queued up the music library in my phone. A hip-hop song called “Berzerk” filled the truck with a harsh, tinny beat. The song is appropriated, sampled from an old Billy Squier song. I wondered if John recognized this as we listened to it.

John looked over at me and said, “You like this garbage?” An untimely lyric—“say fuck it before we kick the bucket”—played before I could answer. We both laughed.

“It’s not garbage. Besides, sometimes I just enjoy the melody.”

He nodded, not quite convinced that this notion made it appropriate. We listened to the song all the way through. No matter what played throughout the ride, he didn’t once ask me to change the music.

2015

John asked if I wanted to ride with him to Walmart because he needed car parts, again. Sometimes it felt like he wished for something to break down, a gadget to stop working. Mr. Fix-It, “but only on his terms,” as my mother liked to say. His headlight nozzle popped off years ago, but he keeps the nozzle in the middle console when he needs to turn on the headlights. I often wonder if he’ll ever replace it or glue it back on so long as he keeps his F-150. The longer he

waits, the more I'm convinced a part of him prefers it this way. Because this way—popped off and pending—the nozzle will always be in a state of fixing, of needing to be mended.

When we walked out to his truck, John did something he'd never done before. With his keys in hand, he whistled and walked to the passenger side door. He unlocked it so that I could climb in first. My head jerked back, and I looked at him. He kept walking. A sad, somewhat weightless thought filled me. Something *big* just happened. It felt like John and I had outgrown a phase. I lingered at my door a second longer. I wanted him to see that I was shocked. I wanted to talk about it without having to bring it up myself. But he didn't notice me. He unlocked his side, and without looking said, "Well... you getting in?"

2016

On our way home from trivia at The Brass Tap, my mother asked John if he could stop at Pentair, the water treatment company they both work for, to pick up her laptop charger that she forgot.

"Man, we were so close!" I brought my fist down on my knee.

"I know," my mother said. "We can never get the order right." In the last round of trivia, the host asked to put the following affairs in order. Most times it was events in history. One time it had to do with the geographical locations of cities: list them in order from most west to east. The one time we got the chronological question right, we'd been asked to put the release dates of the following movies in order from earliest to most recent: *Mask* starring Cher, *The Mask*, starring Jim Carrey, *The Mask of Zorro*, and *V for Vendetta*. We won \$40 that night. My sister's boyfriend shouted that we were rich.

"That's because the years are always so close together!" I said. "Ugh, it's frustrating."

“Next week,” John said. “We’ll get them next week.”

We were approaching our turn onto State Road US1—a road that runs parallel to woods—and John wasn’t slowing down. Instead of making the right turn onto US1, a turn he’s made since 1996, he drove straight. It almost sent us into possible oncoming traffic, and then into the woods, into thick compact pines. We were going 50 mph.

“Woah woah woah, slow down,” I said.

When he realized what he’d done, we were already in the middle of the other lane. He braked hard and jerked the wheel to the right. We hadn’t quite reached the trees. He maneuvered his way across a grassy median and back onto the right side of the road, the truck jerking up and down as it drove over divots and other hidden bumps in the grass. I realized I wasn’t scared. I was embarrassed for John.

I asked him if he was alright. He stayed quiet for a long time before saying, “I’m sorry. I didn’t see it.” He was silent the rest of the ride home. I knew well enough not to say anything else about the incident. My mother did too. She looked back at her phone and kept playing her Mahjong app. The three of us chose to forget it happened.

2017

On the way to AutoZone, I looked up and saw a green, plastic toothpick with a slightly curved end fastened into the driver’s side visor. This didn’t surprise me. John always kept one close: in his wallet or pocket, an empty cup-holder in his truck. If it weren’t for the fact that every so often (though probably not often enough), I noticed the mounted toothpick change color, I’d worry it’s been the same one stuck up there. The thought, at first, made me cringe. But if I were to learn

he's never swapped it out for a clean one, I think a part of me would find it comforting to know that some things never change, how not enough stays the same anymore.

"How old's that one?" I nodded my head up toward the green toothpick.

John smirked and shrugged at the same time. "Hell if I know."

2018

Driving to Terranova's to pick up pizza, John asked how my writing was going.

"It's going," I said.

"That's vague." He looked at me.

"I just wish I was more productive this summer."

"It gets away from you, doesn't it?"

I nodded and thought for a moment. "I guess that means your three-month check-up is soon then, huh?"

"Yep."

He'd been fighting bladder cancer on and off for the past two years. When family and friends asked him how he was doing, my mother usually did the talking. *Please keep him in your prayers.* The same cycle: surgery, catheter, three-month check-up, dark spot on scan, surgery, catheter, three-month check-up, etc. Normally I didn't ask, but normally John didn't ask about my writing. These kinds of prying questions felt necessary now.

When my mother and I talk on the phone, she'll sometimes ask when I last spoke to her mother.

"Not in a while," I usually say.

She responds the same way every time. “You know, I don’t know how much longer we’ll have grandma.” I often wonder if she’s started to think the same when it comes to John. If she does, she doesn’t say it out loud. Though it’s something I’ve started to think about, I certainly haven’t brought it up.

“You nervous?” I asked John.

“Not even a little,” he said without taking his eyes off the road. I didn’t press him anymore, because I knew he wouldn’t offer much more than that. Besides, his certainty and fixed stare when he answered was somehow enough.

After that, we were quiet, a comfortable quiet, the one that felt right and satisfying. As we settled into the stillness, not saying a word to each other, not even playing music at a low volume, the kind of volume that John finds “just right,” I contemplated taking my old high striker arm and whacking down the lock on my door. I contemplated stirring us both from our reverie, letting John know that even though I was 24, I was never too old for our games.