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Anxiety Constellation

A thesis presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
The College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Leah Kuenzi
April 2019

Anxiety Constellation

by

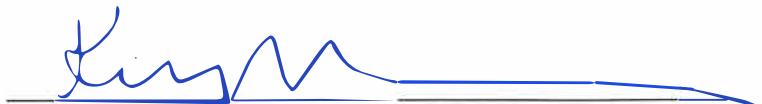
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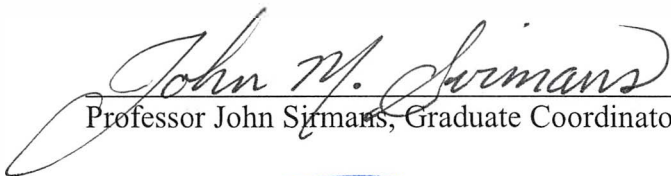
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Anxiety Constellation

When I was in second grade, we had to create flipbooks showing the different parts of a flower, each part listed on a different note card accented in red crayon, its name recorded in my sloppy childhood scrawl:

1. Pistil
2. Stigma
3. Stamen
4. Style
5. Anther
6. Filament
7. Sepal

It was an ongoing project that was completed bit-by-bit each day. The flowers I drew never looked right: each sepal out of proportion to the other, the petals drooping, the style too narrow. My hand refused to reproduce the sample drawing in the workbook with any accuracy. Instead of making progress, I spent day after day re-drawing each part, quietly crumpling each ruined drawing into a tiny ball. I soon realized that I'd never finish before the end of the quarter.

My parents had divorced earlier that year and my father lived in the next town over. My brother Hans and I stayed with him on the weekends. I remember one Saturday morning sitting on the floor of my father's bedroom, hugging my knees to my chest and sobbing to him over my

fears about the school project. What would happen if I didn't finish? Would I be punished? Shamed by my teachers? Kicked out of school? I told him that I couldn't do it right, no matter how hard I tried. He called my teachers, and in a conference, the adults in my life shared their bafflement about how much anxiety was contained within my small body.

Every surface of my mother's house was covered in her notes-to-self, oddly-shaped scraps of paper taped to everything: the microwave, the refrigerator, the back door. These notes reminded her to take the trash out or follow-up at the bank about a discrepancy she found when balancing her checkbook. She reminded herself to make dentist appointments and call her parents. She was always sighing, remembering something else that needed her attention, rummaging for a pen, and making a new note. Sometimes she even taped a note on her glass of water. She was walking out of the kitchen, perhaps, and didn't want to forget that she had put the oven on to pre-heat. For a while, there were scraps of paper torn from a pad of yellow legal paper taped to the floor-to-ceiling windows in our family room; just below those windows, my mother had set up several containers of bell pepper seeds, planted inside recycled tofu containers, to germinate. It was the sunniest spot in the house. At night, with the moon shining through the windows, the little bits of paper looked like stars in a vast constellation.

It is strange to me now that I would have confided in my father the worry I felt over that school project when it was my mother who picked us up each day and asked, "How was school?" Maybe I assumed at the time that my mother had enough on her plate, and couldn't take on any of my worries.

What would it have taken for me, at the early age of seven, to turn away from that tug of irrational concern over the little things? How could I have learned to just draw the damn plant, finishing what I started without also succumbing to the gnawing feeling in my stomach?

When I was a child, my mother kept an index card inscribed with the social security numbers of my father, herself, me, and my brother—listed in her neat handwriting as Mauri, Janet, Leah, Hans – tucked away in her purse. She didn't know what she'd need this information for—an intake form at the emergency room or to file a missing person's report, perhaps. Maybe it wouldn't be needed for anything at all. But it's better to be safe than sorry.

In the final months of 1999, the Y2K apocalypse was imminent, and Mom prepared by making a sofa from stacked containers of nonperishable foods. Smaller shoeboxes full of brown rice made the arms, and larger crates of black beans and canned vegetables formed the seats. She covered it with throw pillows and a floral sheet. You could hardly tell it was actually a form of defense against impending doom, and not a couch at all. Concealment was the goal: when the looting started, maybe our bare pantry would be taken at face value, and our foodstuffs spared from theft, hidden in plain sight among the common landscape of our furniture. She had a wood burning stove installed in our basement and stashed 25 pound sacks of red lentils in pillowcases. I sometimes cried at night, trying to fall asleep as I pictured shadowy figures rummaging through our house and taking all our stuff. She did her best to soothe and comfort me but couldn't tell me that everything would be okay. It probably wouldn't, she said, and it was better to be safe than sorry.

Y2K turned out to be nothing, but there was always some new source for my mother's worry. The dental insurance company was slow to send reimbursement for my wisdom teeth extraction, and so my mother was certain it would never come at all. The pilot light on the water

heater continuously burned out, and this indicated that the whole unit was dying. George W. Bush's war machine was going to kill us all. The tractor was making a weird noise. The lettuce crop wasn't thriving. Financial aid for my brother and me to attend college was unlikely. My mother's worrying was a vast web, its spinning a constant activity, whose sticky threads grabbed at me and clung to my arms.

One of the first lists I remember making was of possible names for the cat I adopted when I was eleven years old. I wrote them all out in a stream of consciousness – *Carl, Phil, Pantera, Panther, Salem, Fluffy* and so on. Then I wrote them in a new order, ranking them from favorite to least favorite. I crossed things off and added new ideas. I narrowed it down to two possibilities, then circled my final choice and wrote it in big letters on top of the piece of paper. How orderly and lovely the whole thing seemed: I wanted to find the best name for my cat, and I'd done it, just like that. I called him Pantera – Tera for short – and started making lists of everything. I made a list of friends to invite to my fourteenth birthday party and a list of the snacks and food I wanted to serve. I studied for a geography test by copying down the names of all the countries in Africa in alphabetical order. I bought my first day planner in middle school and charted my daily homework assignments. I woke up on Saturday mornings and reached for the small notebook on my bedside table to plan out my day: *call Brittany, write a letter to Jennifer, clean bathroom sink, mall with Kara, edits to English essay*. I marked through each item with a silvery gel pen when it had been accomplished. At first, the list was my friend. It always made me feel better.

Over time, though, the lists got longer; the items harder to complete as the incessant demands of adulthood overwhelmed me. The summer after I graduated from college, I had no job lined up. I arranged my few skills and larger number of interests into various configurations using online search engines. Reading through each job listing, I gave in to self-pity, and considered the possibility of spending my life watching *The Food Network* from morning ‘til night. No matter what time of day, Giada always seemed to be making some kind of pasta, or perhaps a no-bake cheesecake. My roommate Kelly and I were stragglers, staying behind in our senior-year apartment after graduation, with the primary difference between us being that she actually had a job, whereas I had “plans” to get a job. My plans turned into a daily obsession with finding out which vaguely Italian-sounding word Giada would over-pronounce. *Eel Don-tay. Ree-gah-toe-ni*. My computer screen sat open on the table in front of me, at this point abandoned for the past several hours, a list of traits that I would never measure up to glaring at me as I slumped deeper into the couch cushions. Usually I fell asleep around five, my face sticking to the terrible red vinyl. Kelly came home from work; one of us cooked dinner, the other did the dishes. We watched *Chopped* at 9:00, and again at 10:00. She went to bed. I scoured the internet for information about Ted Allan (Kelly and I had wondered about the host of our favorite show. What were his credentials? Was he a chef? Or just a savvy “foodie”?) Eventually this derailed into watching YouTube videos featuring a Japanese cat who likes to dive into boxes from across the room. I made a list of things that needed my attention the next day, and then didn’t do them.

When I was 25, my therapist said: “Make a list of new things to try. Make them small, make them manageable, so there are no excuses to be made. Get out of the rut.” It hadn’t yet

come up in my sessions how things had turned toxic for me and lists: how I used them to set impossible standards for myself, then punished myself for not being able to finish everything. So, I did as she suggested. At 25, my list-making had gone digital; a new file in the note-making app on my phone was titled, “New Things Make Happy,” a nonsensical inside joke with myself. For a few weeks, I kept up with a regimen of change. I took evening walks, looked into sewing classes, and emailed a local barn about getting back into horseback riding. I still go on evening walks sometimes when I’m feeling guilty about the rut.

Could I map it, could I chart it, could I trace a winding line of memory back to its starting point and stick a pin in the moment that my brain began to work in this way? I’m not sure. It may have started with the plant diagrams in second grade, but I have suspicions that an earlier origin is more likely. In photographs taken during my peewee ballet recital as a three-year old, I recognize a certain eager but distant and distracted look on my small face as I try to replicate the perfect plié pose and footing of fourth position, following along as the instructor demonstrates the movements. It is the same expression that I fight today when I feel I’m not quite measuring up, certain I’ll be discovered at any moment as the phony that I am.

As I write this essay, I have a list of notes at the top of the page, questions and ideas that I need to consider: sharpen that line, expand on that theme. I almost cannot write at all, fixated as I am on what is not yet good enough.

Making a list precludes most of my big decisions. When I was 24, I had an impressive-sounding job that I hated, and so I made a list of questions to consider, in order to take a hard look at my life and get the ball rolling on my next move:

1. Should I go to graduate school?
2. What should I study in graduate school?
3. Would I survive graduate school?
4. How much TV can I reasonably watch before I do permanent damage to my eyeballs?
5. Speaking of eyeball damage, do I still have health insurance?
6. Do I know enough about the Affordable Care Act?
7. Should I read more news?
8. Do other people my age read a lot of news, or do they just re-post things on Facebook that they skimmed in order to make themselves seem smart?
9. Should I apply for that job? Or that job? Would raising money for puppetry arts make me hate my life less?
10. Should I take a job offer simply for guaranteed income, regardless of the fact that when I went for my interview, the fire alarm was going off after a teacher's aid had burned some toast, and there were 300 crying children in the parking lot?
11. Should I even be a teacher? Or a teacher's aid? Or have anything to do with the molding of children's minds, when, after all, my own mind is a scary abyss of craziness?
12. Or should I wait and see what else comes my way?
13. Is my father on a more accelerated path to death than he was last year?
14. Okay, maybe don't think too hard about that.
15. Should I drink less?
16. Should I drink more?
17. Should I choose today to make a change or two?

No matter how many times I am spun into a fit of anxiety merely from the process of making a list, I seem to experience a kind of amnesia, like women who say that they forget the pain of childbirth after the fact. I always think that the list can be my friend again, that whatever our differences, we can work things out.

If herbal supplements could save a person's life, my dad would be alive today. Ginkgo Biloba. Ginseng. Green tea capsules. Flaxseed. Hawthorn. He ordered massive quantities of these supposed "miracle cures" from late night infomercials and health food catalogs. To make the daily routine more convenient, he divvied up a month's worth of daily dosages. He enlisted me to line up empty pill bottles around the edge of the bathroom counter. Then he counted out the appropriate number of pills from each supply and I dropped them into each of the empty bottles.

"What are all these pills for anyway, Dad?" I asked.

"To keep me sharp! Remember last week when I slipped up and told you that the state capital of Louisiana is New Orleans?" It was a favorite pastime of ours, mostly on car trips, for Dad to quiz my brother and me on the state capitals.

"But it's not! It's Baton Rouge!" I said. "Exactly! I gotta make sure I'm smart enough to keep you on your toes."

The pills weren't enough, as we sometimes tricked ourselves into believing they would be. My father suffered from stroke dementia, and some ugly mix of memory loss and muscle deterioration caused him to lose his speech in the several years leading up to his death. We talked to him, and sometimes he "talked" back by squeezing our hands in response to simple "yes or no" questions that we mixed into the conversations.

“Dad, Hans and Leah just got to town yesterday. They flew in on a United Boeing 757. You used to be a pilot for United, right?” my half-brother Scott would ask.

Two squeezes for no, a flash of playful frustration in his eye. Dad had been a Delta pilot. He used to dazzle our young imaginations by naming the makes and models of the airplanes that flew overhead as we drove down the interstate. Whether he actually could make these distinctions, or made random guesses to entertain us, I’m still not certain.

For me there was no ease or joy in interacting with Dad through these questions. Quite the opposite, I hardly knew what to say or what to ask him. I took to communicating with my father through pictures, poring over my albums and stashing away five or ten images in my suitcase: Dad and me planting some pansies in the long trough on our back porch; me unwrapping toys on Christmas morning while Dad looks on; my hands pressed to a giant whale tank at SeaWorld, Dad pushing a dolphin-shaped stroller in the background; my brother and me leaning on the side of his motorized wheelchair as we boarded a cruise ship to the Bahamas. I didn’t know what to ask, so I just told stories, flipping through the pictures, conjuring any and every detail I could remember.

The list is a sticking point in my marriage. I am no longer permitted by my husband, Daniel, to write my own lists. He has caught on to how hard I am on myself, yoked to my impossible to-do lists, and he tries, often in vain, to prevent me from hitting the same wall over and over again. If I’m really desperate, he will allow me to dictate a list to him, of no more than five items, to be completed over no less than 24 hours:

1. Buy brick for retaining wall
2. Get an emissions test

3. Research options for new window treatments

3a. Take measurements.

3b. Color scheme?

(To get around the five items rule, I sometimes sneak in extra details.)

4. Grocery shopping

4a. Are we out of butter?

5. Clean rubber seal on washing machine

In other words, no lists of 10 things that have to be done right away are permitted. If he comes across as controlling in this way, he is. I both deserve and need these limits.

Daniel says, “But what is the point of the list, if not to release the things from your mind? People make lists so that they can get everything out of their head and feel less anxious. You make a list for the purpose of staring at it and hating yourself until you’ve crossed everything off.”

I say, “But if I can just do these things right now, I promise, it won’t be like this next time.”

On the night my father died, I took the phone call from my brother in a dark corridor of the building where I attended choir practice each Wednesday. The vending machine glowed bright against my face, humming low and slow, as I laid my face in my hands and did not cry. I don’t remember walking to my car or what was on the radio, although I remember that I dropped my keys in a puddle while I fumbled to remove them from my purse, and there was some kind of noise in the background while I was driving. I remember that Daniel was folding laundry when I

walked in the door, and I said plainly, “My dad is dead,” and Daniel hugged me but I couldn’t hug him back because my arms were pinned to my sides. I sat on the couch for a few minutes, staring up at the crown molding, before announcing that I needed a pen and paper. Picking your battles is key: I think that Daniel knew it was not the time to deny me this request. He opened the junk drawer in the kitchen and pulled out a neon green notepad. I wrote furiously.

Then, I got started. I walked to the counter and placed the bar stools on top so I could sweep and mop the floor. We moved the dining chairs and table into the living room. We pulled the refrigerator back from the wall and dragged the bar cart into the hallway. The kitchen was transformed into a blank canvas for my strange and indescribable grief. It had been on my mind that the floors needed a deep clean. There had been an unidentified sticky substance clinging to my socks for the past few days. I had no other avenue through which to experience my feelings. The words “mydadisdeadmydadisdeadmydadisdead” ran over and over through my head as I scraped a gray, sticky callous from the tile under the refrigerator, my fingernail splintering with the effort.

I sent an email to my office and then mechanically ate the dinner Daniel brought home, not because I was hungry, but because he asked me to, and I couldn’t think of a reason to say no. Several hours that first night were spent considering new paint colors for the bathroom, an old project that had barely gotten underway before we’d shoved the booklet of samples into a drawer and moved on to some other task. The dingy, yellowing white of the walls in that room had depressed me since we first moved in. I taped “Chestnut Stallion” and “Maplewood Trail” to my walls and tried to imagine new possibilities.

The next day, I called the electric company about the rebate we still hadn’t received for the water heater and turned the couch upside down to replace the little felt pads that keep the

plastic legs from scratching the wood floor. I knew I would not remember these things, so I made meticulous notes about the three days I spent slogging through a list of arbitrary tasks. I made a list of my lists.

On the third day of lists and grief, I got bored with actually painting the bathroom and left Daniel to apply “Burnt Sienna” to the walls. In the other room, I sank into the sofa, laptop resting on my knees, settling deep into research on the merits of various types of sun-tolerant shrubs to plant in our front yard. The shrubs made me think of the blueberry bushes my dad planted while I was growing up, and blueberries made me think of bananas, which made me think of how he ate one every single morning, which made me think of him cheerily asking, “Want a banana? They’re soooo good for you!” even though he knew I hated bananas. The final thought in the chain was simple and devastating: I would never hear his voice again, the nasal-y Midwestern twang, the slight upward inflection at the end of each phrase. At that moment, a loud sob mixed with a gasp escaped from some place deep inside. It was so unexpected that I looked around my house, reasoning that it must have come from someone or something else. Daniel came out of the bathroom and took the laptop from me, placing it on the coffee table, a chart of bushes that prefer acidic vs. alkaline soil glowing onto my face as he closed the lid. He spoke gently but firmly: “Tomorrow, it’s still going to be the wrong time of the year to plant shrubs” he said, “and your dad is still going to be dead whether or not you spend all night writing a list of everything you’ll ever do in your whole life.” He was right, but I wasn’t ready to concede. A moment of sorrow was all I needed, and I finished my shrub pro/con list before rinsing the paint brushes.

And what has the list given back to me, for all it has taken?

✓ ...There must be something, right?

On the one-year anniversary of my dad's death, I still hadn't done anything with the quart-sized mason jar containing roughly $\frac{1}{6}$ of his ashes, which were given to me by my half-brother Scott, unceremoniously and without much explanation, on the day of our father's memorial. I had carried my little canning-jar urn around the rolling hills of my dad's old family farm all afternoon, the tips of my fingers cupped firmly over the flecked and dented gold lid. It occurred to me that these may not even have been *new* mason jars. The thought delighted me, that Scott had gone into the cabinets of his kitchen, patching together a collection of six jars that once held garden tomatoes or pickled okra, bits of our father mixing with remnants of vinegar and oil. It made me smile, mercifully. My half-brothers walked ahead, surveying the lands of their childhood home, and I lingered behind, trying to find something in the landscape to connect with. Little by little, my older half-brothers unscrewed the lids of their jars and scattered bits of ashes around the rock where they used to take picnic lunches, on the banks of the rippling creek, and near some antique farm equipment that had been a fixture of the landscape for the last 100 years. I didn't open my jar, not even once. I carried it back with me to Georgia, through airport security, in my purse. The TSA officer flagged my bag for inspection, removed the jar, and asked me what it was. The opportunity to make a startlingly macabre joke at the expense of an unsuspecting stranger was too compelling to resist, and I replied, deadpan: "My dead father's ashes." He quickly and wordlessly handed the jar back, and I made my way into the terminal for a soft pretzel before boarding the red-eye back to Atlanta.

At home, I placed the jar on top of the filing cabinet in my office and promptly covered it with all manner of detritus — explanations of dental benefits, stacks of bank statements, a handful of 3D-printed knickknacks, my binder of choir music. A year later, I lifted the garbage in search of a book of stamps. A birthday gift "thank you" to my grandmother was overdue. My

anxiety was high that day, and I needed an easy thing to cross off the list. And when I moved the papers to the side, there he was again, the bright light in the room reflecting off the diamond pattern of the glass, splintering the gray dust into a thousand refractions against the beige wall. “Shit,” I said to Daniel. “My dad’s ashes are still sitting here.”

And so I abandoned the quest for stamps and started on some research. I vaguely remembered having read something about turning ashes into a tree with a composting urn that grows into a Maple or a Ginkgo. There were some options involving jewelry, though that option was too creepy for me, so I didn’t write it down. Launching his ashes into the sky inside a biodegradable balloon would have been my first choice, but it was too expensive. Throughout his life, my father had frequently expressed a desire to be pushed into the sea at old age, a custom practiced among Inuit tribes. Maybe I could put his ashes on a raft and float them out to sea? That option was sure to have its own list of preparation items. Legality? Logistics? Wouldn’t the tide just keep pushing the raft back to shore?

But that wasn’t the only thing I was working on that day; it was far from all that needed my attention in a “put down everything else right now, this is the most important thing” kind of way. I was leaving the next day to attend a friend’s wedding, and I needed to assemble a packing list, and then actually pack the things on the list. Her gift was stashed away in the closet, and needed to be wrapped. There wasn’t any wedding-appropriate wrapping paper in the house, so a trip to Target was probably in order. There was a big grant proposal due at the end of the month for work, and I owed a budget template to the accountant and a program statistics request to the education department. When was the last time I had cleaned the floors? The sticky substance had returned again, as it always seemed to do. I could say goodbye to my plan to go running; the

weather had finally cooled off and I was antsy to move but unwilling to compromise the precious time. The cat food was running low – add it to the Target list.

Warm autumn light streamed through a tiny wedge of open space, where the window blinds fell just short of the ledge. The sharp rays bleached out the screen of my computer so that all of my precious words of reminder were temporarily obscured. It was all too much to keep in my mind, that's why I had the lists. The warring tasks collided all at once, what few of them I could immediately recall, and everything went blank, quiet for a moment. How hard it is—still, always—to keep my mind straight when every worry in the constellation shines so brightly at once. Oh, yes, I remembered suddenly. The sticky spot on the floor. A good, easy place to start.

The ashes are still on my desk, hidden beneath a mound of distractions.

Mother Roots

I've waited too long already, I thought, as I carried a bag of manure over to the flower bed in my front yard and set it next to my trowel. Three weeks had passed since I'd visited my mother and taken home a small tray of *dusty miller* and *gaillardia* buds, each potted in an old yogurt cup or jam jar. The daytime temperatures were still too high for optimal transplantation, but the roots had outgrown their small enclosures, so it was now or never. I fastened my gardening gloves and kneeled down in the mulch.

When I was a child my mother often made promises about the weather. *By the third week in September, like clockwork*, she pledged to me—her reluctant garden helper, begging, always, to go back inside—as I whined about the summer heat. *The temperatures will come down by then. They will.* I believed her and tried to stop complaining as we plucked knobby carrots from the ground. She was always right about the earth.

Before the first little root ball was in the ground, I felt certain it was all for naught. I'm clumsy with the trowel (if you saw my mother use one, you'd think it was a natural extension of her hand.) I don't know how deep to make the holes. I don't know which plants should go side-by-side; which root systems are more dominant, and therefore should be left more space. I shoveled in a bit of Black Kow compost and a pinch of bone meal. I pressed in the sides of the plastic container to free the clump of dirt, and gently loosened the root ball with my index finger. What I lacked in instinct, I hoped to make up with memory, what I've seen my mom do a thousand times over. The hole was too deep and the little red leaves fell below the soil line. I set

the plant to the side, threw some extra dirt back in, and pressed it all down with my knuckles.

Don't pack the dirt in too tightly, I remembered my mom saying when she helped me plant rose bushes in my front yard the previous fall. *They need a little room to breathe*. When I had finished with all six plants, I stood back, surveying my work, uncertain.

My mother takes after her mother. When we visit my grandmother, who is 92 years old and still tending to her potato vines and pole beans, my mom goes outside in the evening for a jog and I see her through the portrait window afterwards, pulling fat raspberries from the bush. Grandma scolds her for eating the best of the crop, which she had planned to serve over ice cream after dinner.

“Are you kidding me? Who needs ice cream? Those berries don't need *anything* added. They are dessert on their own!”

My mother takes other things, too, from my grandmother's yard, like little trimmings of different types of plants. She says she wants to take them home and study them. Maybe she can bring a plant to life in her own garden with just a couple of its pieces, stashed away in a damp paper towel inside a plastic baggie. Mother magic.

My mother and grandmother speak their own language when my mother comes inside from her jog. She unties her running shoes and takes a long drink of water.

“Looks like your parsley bolted early,” my mother says.

“My yes,” my grandmother responds, “I've got to find a better cover crop during the summer so that the soil is just right for parsley in the fall.”

Their gardening lineage stops with me. My mother tried to teach me early on but I showed no interest. Now, I want to learn. Not just for me but for us. I want to find a way further

inside our relationship, which is characterized by her having to ask me, over and over, what it is exactly that I'm studying in graduate school, (she wrote it down after the third time she asked and it still didn't stick) and I can't remember the name of the man she met in yoga class and has been emailing with.

As my mother and grandmother chat, I try to read my book but my mind drifts, instead, to a familiar kind of fantasy that goes something like this: I arrive to visit my mother on the day she's out harvesting her bok choy crop. She hands me a kitchen knife and I kneel down next to her. I lift the leaves with my free hand and brush the dirt off the bottom of the plant, careful not to push too hard or cut it too close to the root.

"Have I ever told you about the first time I grew bok choy?" She asks.

"No, I don't think so," I respond.

"I was still married to my first husband Mike. We had this tiny raised bed in the back yard of our duplex and his mother gave us the seeds. We'd never heard of bok choy before – this was Wisconsin in the 1970s, after all. So Mike and I go out there one night after work—we'd forgotten to plant the stuff for weeks and his mother had asked us about it every time we saw her and we were sick of dodging the question—but it was almost dark so we brought a flashlight with us. Well the neighbors looked out their window and saw people rummaging around the yard with flash lights, and they didn't know what was going on, so they called the *police!*" She says, her voice rising and falling with the drama of the story.

"So the police show up and they come around to the back yard and the neighbors instantly see that it's just me and Mike out there—boy I bet they felt stupid—so the cops basically just turn around and leave as soon as they got there. There was no harm done but we were kind of shaken up about it with the police lights flashing and the whole neighborhood

coming outside to see what was going on. And then after all that hassle, the bok choy never even grew.”

I laugh and wipe sweat from my brow and ask, “Well, what did Mike’s mom say to that?”

“She probably thought we made it all up just to get out of planting the bok choy!”

And then we’ll be on our way out of the perfunctory ritual of family. On towards something more rooted.

In some ways, I’m starting to become my mother, as the cliché goes, taking on little characteristics of hers.

I cringe and try not to say anything when I see someone use a plastic zip bag when they could use a Tupperware container instead.

I never throw anything away. As I’m walking towards the trash can with a plastic to-go food container, I hear my mother’s voice in my head: *Think of what a village in Africa might do with that container*. So I take it to the sink to be washed and reused for something – what, I don’t know.

I’ve become a pescetarian, only an occasional fish-eater, mostly as a convenience to others, so that I can still be invited out to dinner without being *that* person. Of course, you don’t want to eat too much fish these days, with the oceans as polluted as they are. And do you know what the primary diet of farm-raised fish is?

My mother and I are both prone to rants, in mixed company, about class inequality.

Around my eyes, lines have started to form in the exact same patterns as the lines around my mother’s eyes. I never thought we looked alike (I match exactly the looks of my paternal

grandmother, I'm told) until I saw a photo of us, sitting in the back of my uncle's car, taken during a visit to Wisconsin to see her family. The blurred orange date stamp in the corner reads 4-97. I could be her. She could be me.

Whenever I arrive home to visit my mother, she is in her garden. I can count on one hand the number of times I've come around the bend and not seen her small frame hunched over a row of kale or a cucumber mound. These past few years, it's been flowers: Peruviana Red zinnias and Victoria Blue salvias and Heliotrope Marine and Everest Blue Cutting Ageratum. In 2014, she spent a year cultivating and growing flowers for my wedding, and now it's her latest business enterprise. It took a few extra years, but the wave of artisan farmer's markets and *bougie* grocery stores eventually made it to the suburbs. She used to be the only provider of organic acorn squash and Little Gem lettuce for miles and miles. Now, Fresh Market and Sprouts have undercut her prices. Membership in Earth Woman Farm, her community-supported agriculture (CSA), is way down. So she's on the lookout for the next opportunity.

The recent trip I made to collect the seedlings from her was no exception to the rule: as I rounded the bend of the driveway, I saw her head tucked between two tomato cages. I parked my car between the old Bradford Pear trees in front of the house and waited for the cloud of gravel dust to clear behind me before stepping out. My mother has tried a hundred different kinds of garden fences over the years, attempting to keep the deer from snacking on her leafy greens, but has finally given up on this impossible task. There's no fence anymore. Careful to walk on the cardboard-lined paths, I made my way over to her. She stood to give me a hug and pulled the gloves from her hand.

"I'm awful sweaty," she said, but she smelled the same as always: not unlike the soil.

I asked after a clump of violet-colored irises which grew inside of a wheelbarrow.

“Oh those old things,” she sighed. “I can’t get rid of them. I shoveled them up last year and threw them in the wheelbarrow to make room for something else, and they grew just fine in the wheelbarrow.”

“I think they’re pretty,” I said.

“I’ll give you a whole hunk of them before you leave. Just get a trowel and hack off whatever corner you want. Really. You couldn’t kill them if you tried.”

She’s said this to me before, and I’ve somehow gone above and beyond to kill the unkillable.

Other goodies, too, found their way into a flat cardboard box before I left her house that day. Along with the irises—the dirt around the roots dry and cakey, the blooms impossibly strong—she had me pick a few things from her expansive collection of seedlings. Lastly, she reached into the pantry for an opened but full bag of Dulse, a dehydrated, Wild Atlantic sea vegetable snack.

“I asked one of my friends how I could get seaweed into my diet. I hate the taste but sea nutrients are so important.” My mother is always trying to improve her diet, which is the healthiest of anyone I’ve ever met. “Anyway, my friend – she really knows her stuff – she recommended Dulse. I can’t stand it. Eating it is a lot like chewing on an old shoe. But since you already like seaweed, I thought you might want to try it,” she said, handing the bag to me.

I took a strip from the bag and smelled it. The brine of the ocean was overpowering. It didn’t chew easily; I concurred with my mother’s conclusion about the old shoe. But there was a recipe on the bag that suggested frying the strips in a bit of olive oil to achieve a bacon-like taste and texture for a “Dulse-L-T” sandwich. I’ll try anything weird once.

When I got home, I saw that my mother had already sent a text message with further instructions: “Wait a while to plant,” she wrote “They’re still a little too small to make it in the ground with this heat.” I put the box of seedlings on my porch and forgot about them for a while.

My husband, Daniel, convinced me to plant mint in our little garden a few years ago. Neither of us knew any better, and we’re still paying for the mistake. When I told my mother what we’d done, she laughed and laughed. Mint grows like a weed and its invasive roots choke out anything else in its path. Keep it inside a pot or don’t plant it at all. My chives, parsley and basil, all growing in the same bed, didn’t stand a chance. It’s the kind of mistake that separates a gardener from an imposter; my mother the former, and me the latter.

When we built our raised bed on the side of our house, I imagined myself standing before tomato plants that stretched beyond their cages and harvesting cilantro by the armful. I’d have a bounty so great that I’d be hard pressed to find enough people with whom to share my homemade salsa, my cucumbers: the skin striped delicately with different shades of green. That fall, I read *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver, in which she jokes about Southern gardeners who leave bags of zucchini and squash hanging on the mirrors of parked cars and in baskets on their neighbors’ porches. It was only a matter of time, I knew.

I’d like to blame the mint for the fact that, even two years later, the raised bed is empty but for a yellowing dill plant and a few stalks of parsley.

My tomato plant lived a few months, perfectly happy within the confines of the red cage. It bore four tomatoes: two for us and two for the birds and the bugs.

The first cilantro plant turned to seed. I texted my mom to ask if I’d put it in the ground too soon. “As soon as you see the flowers form, pick them off promptly. Might reverse the

process,” she wrote back. In weather that is too hot for a plant to thrive, it starts flowering and producing seeds instead of leaves. It was too late to reverse the process. The leaves turned spindly and the flowers flourished. I harvested the dying leaves at the base of the plant before it was too late, chopped them finely, and sprinkled them over fajitas.

The cucumber seeds never made it into the ground. I spent hours doing research and determined that they might need more ground space than I had available in order to grow properly. The little envelope of seeds is stashed in the cabinet in my laundry room.

The mint, however, continues to thrive: once it filled the raised bed, it grew with the grass in the yard. When the lawn is freshly mowed, the air smells of nothing but.

My mom reads seed catalogs the way some people read celebrity gossip magazines. She keeps up with the news, (“when I can stomach it,” as she says) but she certainly knows more about the latest varieties of lettuce than anything that “the masses” pay attention to. When she’s waiting at the gate for an airplane, she’ll have three or four catalogs piled up on her lap, along with a notepad and a pencil, not a pen. A new idea comes to her partway through making a plan and she needs to make room on the page. Though she’s adept at email and has joined the world of text messaging, online ordering is not for her. She calls in an order just as the first class passengers are starting to board. It’s loud in the airport so she shouts her order into the phone while using the other hand to plug the other ear. A man with a briefcase stares disapprovingly.

When I asked my mother to grow my wedding flowers, I knew what I was getting into, or at least I thought I did. The seed catalogs covered every surface in her house as she hunted for all the things she was looking for. At the time she started on the project, she hadn’t grown flowers

for almost twenty years. Flowers aren't quite so forgiving as the vegetables she's long preferred in her large outdoor garden. As she tried to re-orient herself to the world of flowers, the planning year turned out to be more intense than I could have imagined.

July 11, 2014: Haven't planted any of the orange flowers yet, but those will be mostly annuals that don't need as much of a head start: calendula, cosmos, apricot statice, Mexican sunflower (burnt orange color), Iceland poppies, safflower, wallflowers and a dainty zinnia called orange profusion.

Ordering more seeds this month...Having a wonderful time with this...thanks again for entrusting me with the assignment.

March 8, 2015: I ordered 2 sweet annie plants and 2 bronze fennel. Both will add greenery and feathery touch. They won't have time to get very long or very big, but that might be perfect for the bridesmaid's bouquets or yours. They shipped today from VA. Garden is looking good...the agastache I transplanted last week are growing fast and some of the sweet william are beginning to form flower heads.

In the end, some things didn't bloom in time; though many of the plants grew just as expected, my mother focused on the things that didn't work and apologized profusely for her "mistakes." May is not a great time of year for flowers, she said: too late for the spring bloomers and too early for the summer. Three days before my wedding, she panicked and ordered \$160 worth of bouquet flowers from a wholesale market. The things she grew went into the table arrangements and rounded out the bouquets. My very favorite flower of the day—white flag snapdragons—came from her. They were in the bouquets and on the tables and lining the pews.

In my speech at the rehearsal dinner, I shared the story of her hard work with our guests: "Because my mom cannot graciously accept the praise I lavish on her, she would insist on me

telling you that not each and every flower you'll see tomorrow was grown by her. But I assure you that the most beautiful ones among them were picked from her garden." The night before the wedding, around 3am, as she was sorting through every sprig of bronze fennel in the bunch to find the perfect one, she said, "I just can't believe the carnations didn't make it. What a shame."

I thought about her incredible sacrifice of time and money, all that sweat equity, all that manure, all those weeds she pulled. And I wanted to ask her how she'd felt on the night before her wedding—the first one, and then, what was different at the second? But I hesitated; it's not how we are, I told myself. It's not who we've been all these years.

So all I could muster was, "Mom, the flowers are beautiful. They're perfect. All of them. Thank you."

There's a mystery flower growing in the bed in front of my house. Last spring, after my mother had spent the day arranging little clumps of snapdragons and dusty miller into hills of three, I watched over the next few weeks as a plant I couldn't identify shot up quickly, the small fuzzy leaves giving way to dark green foliage. It didn't wither on the hotter days in May, as many of the other plants did. Instead, it thrived; as I walked up the driveway after my evening runs, I noticed that it grew taller each day. After a few weeks, I grew suspicious of its origins. I couldn't remember planting it or watching my mom plant it. It wasn't grouped with anything else – almost everything we had planted that day grew alongside two others of the same kind, or in a mixed clump. It didn't flower. It just grew taller.

I snapped a photo and texted it to my mom. It took her a few days to respond.

"Showed your picture to a friend from yoga, she is the flower lady. Think it might be Echinacea but strange that it isn't flowering."

When my mother saw the plant in person a few weeks later, we both agreed that it was a weed: a pretty one, but a weed nonetheless. I would like to use the space for another clump of irises or gaillardia, but I wonder if we both might have missed something. Maybe it just needs a little more time, maybe just a little more, a little more still. Every time I go to pull it up by the roots, I can't do it.

It's not the only time this has happened. A different "mystery plant" has earned a permanent place in my garden with its sheer beauty. In early spring, this original mystery plant grows white iris-like petals with creamy yellow dots in the center of each bloom. When the temperature spikes in June, the petals shrivel. In their place, spiky red buds begin to form, the stems long and lanky, curving up and bending in all directions: *crocasmia*, I'm certain. That is the name my mother had said when she packed the dirt around the large root clump last April.

"The most beautiful red flowers. So vibrant," she said, scooping a bit of bone meal into the soil.

But the iris blooms confused us both. I sent her a picture; she wrote back, "Not *crocasmia* then. Hard to see in picture. Will have to look at in person."

A month or so after I sent the photo, she did see the plant in person. As we walked up my driveway after meeting for dinner, we stopped at the little triangular flower bed. My mother didn't hesitate and walked straight into the mulch. Her little black flats lifted off the backs of her heels as she tiptoed. She kneeled down and put her face right to the plant and looked at it from all angles. She took one of the long leaves in her hand and rubbed her thumb over it. I wanted to follow her, but wasn't sure there'd be room for me to stand without crushing a nearby patch of Queen Anne's Lace. So I walked onto the front porch, elevated just a few feet above the flower

bed, and hung over the metal railing so that I could get a closer look along with her. I wasn't quite sure what I was looking for, I never am, but I knew that my mother would show me.

When she had finished her assessment of the plant, she said she felt silly for not realizing it sooner: what I have is a clump of Dutch Iris that had merged with the root system of the crocosmia while the two plants had grown next to one another in her garden. When she dug up what she thought was a clump of irises, she took a bit of the crocosmia along with it. Before the plant flowered—the delicate iris blooms that give way to the spiky red ones—you'd never realize its blended form. The two plants share the same long, sword-like stems, the same waxy green shade, the same yellow freckles when the soil gets too dry, the same everything—almost.

My Father in the Key of Mystery

Of all the things I don't know about my father, the sound of his voice at the quiet moment of his favorite hymn—when the conductor's hands move in short, staccato waves and everyone in the choir leans in and breathes deep and sings slow—may be the smallest mystery. But maybe it's the only thing I'm looking for after all.

For the most part, no one in my family agrees on who my father was, or why. One such contested piece of family lore is that he joined a church in his sixties just so he could sing in the choir. The fact of his being in the choir is uncontested, but the reasons for his joining are unclear. My aunt believes it was just for the music. My older half-brother Scott is not so sure. Though our father was never effusive about his faith, Scott believes that he was a pious man.

I know my father mostly through a shadowy and disjointed collection of childhood memories, and more prominently, through the stories of others who knew him. By the time I was old enough to make a conscious effort at getting to know him, his mind was gone from stroke dementia. The last conversation I had with him was at the age of fifteen or sixteen. He died in 2014, a few days before I turned 24. Since then, I've been left to pick at the scraps, and coax every detail I can from the simplest events.

I'd never set foot in the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta (UUCA) before I showed up one hot day in August 2016—almost two years after my father's passing—to audition

for the choir. I'd sweated through my shirt walking from the parking lot. The heat and my nerves. I didn't know which way to go once I got inside the building so I followed the sound of the piano to the sanctuary. I tried not to look sheepish as I greeted the music director and started my audition. *Don't be too quiet, but don't be too loud either. Diaphragmatic breathing. Float lightly up to the high notes; don't hammer them too hard. But don't be squeaky,* I told myself. The music director was the husband of a friend and colleague at the time, Kristen. That's how I'd heard about and gained interest in the choir.

“But how churchy is it? I mean, I know it's a church, but like...” I had asked Kristen a few days earlier. I was a little wary of this “church choir” business.

“On a 1-10 scale of fire and brimstone, I'd safely put it at a 0,” she assured me.

I got a part in the soprano section. A few weeks later we went on a choir retreat to the north Georgia mountains and I spent the better part of three days pretending to know what was going on. I hadn't read music in years, and I'd never read music particularly well. I could hardly keep up, but embraced a “fake it 'til you make it” attitude. During the retreat we learned a collection of songs called *Missa Gaia*, a Latin/Greek hybrid title which translates to “Earth Mass.” During one of our breaks, I walked with new friends to the top of a lookout tower and surveyed the Blue Ridge peaks. A few bars of one song in the collection called “Blue Green Hills of Earth” played in my head.

For the earth forever turning,

for the skies for every sea,

to our God we sing returning home to our blue green hills of earth.

There is a children's movie about Beethoven that my brother Hans and I used to watch a lot when we were young. It's called *Beethoven Lives Upstairs*. The famous composer rents a room from a newly bereaved widow. He has a volatile temper and is often cross with the family's young son until the two form an unlikely friendship. The part I remember best is this: his deafness worsening, Beethoven bangs the keys as forcefully as he can and presses his ear to the floor so that he might study and learn the feeling of reverberation produced by each note. Hearing via touch. Evidence.

When I joined the UUCA choir, that's roughly what I sought to do: to press my ear to the floor of a Sunday morning choir performance and see what I could feel. What could I learn about my father's identity, about my own, at the intersection of faith and music? I thought I might coax some epiphany about him, about us, from this little act of communion. I pictured myself belting it out on Sunday mornings, hearing his voice inside my head, the tears pricking my eyes and the air going out of my lungs, fighting valiantly to finish the song while grief overcame me. I thought he would feel close to me.

When I was a child, my father took everyone he knew to hear the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra: guests from out of town, my cousin Sarah and her college boyfriend (they never asked to go, but made the mistake of mentioning that they were looking for something fun to do), my brothers and me. He wanted everyone to love it the way he did, but no one ever could. I can't recall the name of the piece or the composer on the one night I remember going. An usher led us to seats in the upper balcony just as the lights fell. The music went from nowhere to everywhere around us, the first movement rising and crashing in a dizzying fury. My father looked on, utterly entranced, stone still but for the slight sway of his shoulders, a human metronome. I raised my

hand to tap his shoulder, and his hand rose simultaneously, grabbing mine lightly, lowering it back to the armrest. *Listen. Just listen.*

During middle school I participated in the Counterpane community choir, led by my school's music teacher. My mother was also a member; the director had asked us to invite our family and friends to join. My brother sang too. My father was alive and well then, more or less. Since my parents' divorce several years earlier, he had lived just a few miles from my school, but did not participate. It never occurred to me to ask him to join.

My music-reading skills were shaky so I learned my parts mostly by ear. I had my brother play the bars on the piano at home and I sang them back. Sometimes there were solos available. Every interested person got the chance to sing through the measures.

On the day of the solo auditions for "I Got The Sun In The Morning" from the musical *Annie Get Your Gun*, I shot my hand in the air before I had too much time to think about it. I had a lot of fun singing the song; it was swingy and catchy and more or less in my vocal range. The piano started and the words miraculously tumbled out of my mouth: "*Taking stock of what I have and what I haven't / What do I find? / The things I have will keep me satisfied.*"

One of the parents in the choir got the solo, and I was silently relieved. I was happy to sing a little more quietly and blend into the high soprano harmony: "*Got no diamond / Got no pearl / Still I think I'm a lucky girl.*" I was safer there, anyway.

Here are four indisputable facts about my father:

1. Ate a banana every day
2. Brought a tray of apple fritters from the Kroger bakery to church every Sunday

3. Never met an instrument he couldn't play, though French horn was his favorite.
4. Listened to classical music at deafening volumes in his car

I'd like to confidently proclaim his favorite orchestral movements: Beethoven's 5th Symphony? Probably, but isn't that everyone's favorite?

The church I grew up attending (the one my father may or may not have joined for the sole purpose of singing in the choir) was called the Unity Christ Church of Today. The specifics of Unity—a New Thought Christian denomination formed in 1889—are still unclear to me. We talked about Jesus in Sunday school, about treating others with kindness. We learned how to meditate and focus on the light of a candle in our mind's eye. The concept of "hell" and eternal damnation was not part of the doctrine. I'm not sure about heaven. Our church was an old house. The living room had been converted into a sanctuary. The bathroom still had a 1950s era shower in it. The third bedroom on the right was the Sunday school room. I didn't make it to adulthood with my faith; whatever it might have meant to me as a child, I can't remember now.

Local musicians—friends of church members, friends of friends—would sometimes visit the service and afterwards sell their CDs from a little kiosk in the dining room. My dad was a faithful customer. I'd get to tear open the cellophane wrapping in the car on the way home, pop the shiny disc into the player, and search his face for that smallest sign of anticipation as new sounds filled our ears.

Though my voice is nice enough, I often look at a piece of sheet music and start sweating, my stomach tightening into a treble clef as I look at the blur of notes and tempos and moods and dynamics and think of following them all while also trying to figure out how a

sixteenth note is expressed and how to get from a low C to a middle B. But then there are moments when things click together, and I jump seamlessly from the top of my range to an odd note near the bottom of the scale. Moments when the rhythm is so apparent that there is no need to try to control it. How? What is it that pulls me from note to note with a mastery beyond my worldly comprehension?

In the UUCA choir, I always sat next to Carol Ann—fifties, angular features, kind eyes. Our seats were assigned based on our section (we were both sopranos) and how our voices complemented one another. Carol Ann’s vocal quality was piercing, mine more languid. We balanced each other out. Carol Ann was *good*. When I got lost, I followed her. The music often moved her to tears. After earthquakes and tsunamis devastated Japan, we sang a song of prayer on Sunday morning.

Mother Mary full of grace, awaken.

All our homes are gone our loved ones taken.

Taken by the sea.

“All those people,” she cried quietly to me during our rehearsal break.

I can’t recall the congregational hymns—not a one—that we sang at Unity Christ Church of Today, or the ones performed by my father’s choir during the service. I’ve looked at many hymnals online, but I don’t know the right one. *Unity Song Selections* is from 1941; that could be it. I’ve turned my brain inside out and tapped on the bottom to see if anything comes out: a few bars of melody, a single word or image from a hymn. I’ve gone back in time and pressed my ear to the door of the Sunday school room, but all I can hear is the vague plinking of the piano. The

little house still operates as a church, but it's not the same church. I've thought of going back, explaining my situation, and asking if there's anything stored in the basement from the previous tenants of the building. Would they let me take a look? I once had a dream of standing in the sanctuary. I reached for one of the worn books—held in wire baskets on the backs of the pinkish red cloth chairs—but when I opened the cover, there was nothing inside. Hundreds of blank, cream-colored pages.

I remember the closing prayer, though, every word. It is called the “Prayer for Protection.” The Sunday school kids joined their parents in the sanctuary at the end of the service. We all held hands.

The light of God surrounds us;

The love of God enfolds us;

The power of God protects us;

The presence of God watches over us;

Wherever we are, God is, and all is well.

I'm sure that my dad said the words along with everyone else. I think.

Here is proof that my dad didn't believe in God, or as close to proof as I'll ever have: My aunt, my father's sister, swore it. She didn't mince words. I know exactly what she said because I recorded it. In college, part of my grasping at the ghostly outline of my father was to collect stories about him from family members. Here's that part of the transcript from a conversation I had with my aunt: “He didn't believe in any God. To have faith in a higher being would have meant ceding his own sense of ultimate control. That was unacceptable to him; he thought he alone had the power to do anything he needed to.”

So why Church, every Sunday, the apple fritters warmed in the microwave, cut into quarters, set out on paper plates?

One Sunday at UUCA, my choir sang:

Singing, singing, oh the singing

There was so much singing then

We all sang, and this was my pleasure too

The boys in the field

The chapels were full of singing

Always full of singing

Here I lie:

I have had pleasure enough;

I have had singing.

I flubbed my entrance in the second verse because I was staring at a man—he wore a panama hat and had a silvery beard and eyes with layers of baggy skin underneath—who had come into the sanctuary on a motorized wheelchair. But of course it wasn't my father.

I looked for him everywhere; in every song we sang. Could the words of a song refer to us? Despite my best efforts, I found that in the UUCA choir, there was no new sadness to be extracted, no new tears left to cry. When our group sang—at the very best moments, our voices threaded together into a quilt that covered the room—and as the chills traveled up my spine at the apex of *Ubi Caritas (Let us rejoice and be pleased in him / Let us fear and let us love the*

living God / And may we love each other with a sincere heart), I thought and thought of my father. But I did not feel him.

He sang, and loved it, and had his reasons. And many years later, I sang, and often struggled, and loved it still. But we did not sing together.

I'll never sing with my father, but I sing to him often, songs like a swingy, jazzy version of "Deck the Halls" in 7/8 time. What songs threw him off his music-reading game? Driving home late one night after rehearsal, a twangy alternative/indie track by Feist called *Train Song* came on my playlist:

Nothing at all, in my head, to say to you

Only the beat of the train I'm on

Nothing I've learned all my life on the way to you

One day our love was over and gone

Would he like this song as I do, turn up the dial, close his eyes, growl through the low parts, float on top of the harmony?

The question that plagues me most of all is: What songs might my father and I have sung together—especially the ones I've never heard and won't discover on my own?

My schedule no longer permits me to sing in the UUCA choir. I simultaneously did and did not find what I was looking for, but either way, the quest feels complete somehow. I miss singing the third verse of "Blue Boat Home"—a congregational hymn—part of which goes like this:

Sun, my sail, and moon my rudder

As I ply the starry sea

Leaning over the edge in wonder

Casting questions into the deep

The Perfectly Sculpted Elegant Bohemian Messy Faux Feminist Updo

I'd really like to become the kind of person who can style her hair. I always think I'm right on the cusp of figuring out how to make that happen, of once and for all breaking away from the exactly three styles I can pull off (and, full disclosure, two of those three styles are "different" types of ponytails.) I'm a graduate of a women's college; at my school, the motto was a simple question. We heard it all the time: at convocation and other official events, saw it written on the welcome sign at the front of campus, and sometimes it was incorporated thematically into our courses: "Who will you become?" After four years of college and now, five years after that, I don't know. And trying to figure it out has been *exhausting*. I'm ready to reframe the whole question. Maybe I've been looking too far inside. Maybe I've been taking it far too seriously. Or maybe the question is actually incomplete. So I'm updating it and starting the quest anew: Who will I become once I've mastered the low chignon and waterfall braid?

I blame my mother, obviously. She never bothered, or didn't know how, to style her hair in any particular way, so she never taught me, either. She had a shoulder-length perm and wore horrible faux-leather headbands for most of my childhood. Once she'd maintained the perm look for about a decade, my mother got more in to gardening, cut her hair up to her ears, and wore it underneath a sun hat almost every day. She washed it a few times a week, usually late at night, and slept on it wet.

As a child I participated in ballet and gymnastics. For recitals and competitions, the instructor sent us home with a list of hair and makeup procedures. I'm sure my mother did the best she could. She sat me down at the kitchen counter—which was no small feat in itself, and could usually only be achieved with some kind of sugary bribe, like a glass of Sprite or a Hershey bar—and pulled out her ancient, crumbling bag of makeup. I never saw the makeup bag except before my dance recitals. She held the instructions in one hand, her brow furrowing as she read, and pried open a little jar of blush with the other.

“Um, okay...make a ‘fish face’ so I can put this on,” she said.

She dragged the brush across my cheek bones until I looked terribly embarrassed, which I was when the other girls saw me.

As an adult I've heard that, for optimal results, you should replace your mascara every few months. I'm not sure how many years had passed since my mother purchased the little pink bottle in her collection, but the substance she smeared onto my lashes was more similar in consistency to clay than anything else. There was so little moisture left that it almost immediately turned to dust and fell to my cheeks, giving the appearance of tiny freckles. Or dirt.

As for eyeliner, I think she pretended not to see that section of the instructions.

A generous coat of waxy, too-red lipstick completed the look. Then, she pulled my hair into a tight, lopsided bun, secured the many wispy flyaway and forgotten strands with bobby pins and an unholy amount of hairspray, and told me to hurry up and put my costume on.

To her credit, my mother also built my self-confidence by assuring me that makeup and fancy hairstyles were for women who were insecure about their looks, and were absolutely not necessary for me, because I was beautiful. And of course she believed that, because she was my

mother. But the other truth is that she had absolutely no idea how to teach me about that kind of stuff.

My sister-in-law Cindy, though, (my half-brother Steve's wife; they were old enough to be my parents) who I saw on family trips to Wisconsin over the summers, knew her way around every kind of braid that had ever been invented. And this was before the days of the online video tutorial. She may have just been totally winging it, inventing some of the things she did. When I lay down to sleep at her house, I could hardly close my eyes out of excitement. I knew that in the morning, while I was eating cereal at the kitchen counter, she would ask if she could style my hair. When she did, I ran, practically leaping, downstairs to get my hairbrush, then sat on the floor in front of the sofa and hoped that the styling session would last as long as possible. When she finished, she would hold the mirror behind my head and I could see that the transformation was complete. All that day, as we ran errands around their tiny town—to Piggly Wiggly for hot dogs and to the Lodi Community Center for the local high school's orchestra concert—I felt big in the world. Important. *Different*. I could hardly keep my hands away from the back of my head, running my fingers around the ridged edges and swirled strands. In the evenings I was sad to undo the clips and rubber bands, but I knew that in the morning, we'd start all over again.

Half of the women I went to college with would try to take away my feminist card if they knew I harbored a desire so trivial as achieving the perfect high bun with a braided wraparound. The other half would send me links to articles and videos that they themselves have used to achieve the status of hair goddess. The vast majority of us were like a classmate named Paula Owens, a feminist warrior who was furthering her education for one purpose, and for one

purpose only: to smash the patriarchy in any and every way possible. She lived in my freshman year dorm. Her hair was a half-moon ring of frizz around her face. It was big and usually messy, the perfect complement to her bohemian parachute pants and flowing floral tops. We took introduction to women's studies together and learned about internalized oppression, how many of us have been taught to hate ourselves (at least a little bit) because we have failed to live up to the standards (beauty and otherwise) imposed by ourselves and others. Our stomachs weren't flat enough. Our hair wasn't cute enough. We said too much or too little. We took up not caring about our appearance as a form of protest. We wore greasy top knots to the dining hall on Saturday night. We took the question of "Who will you become?" to a whole other level and decided to become, above all else, disrupters of the status quo. That's who Paula became, anyway.

A few of us were like Kelly Chambers. On the very first evening after orientation, when we'd been at college for about 12 hours, that girl put on her tightest and shortest dress, her highest pair of heels, her most dramatic smoky eye, and boarded public transportation to the nearest frat house. I don't even know what to call her incredible hairstyle, sculpted (truly, it was museum-worthy) from her shoulder-length golden hair. It was braided and curled and teased. It was simultaneously an elegant updo and something you could reasonably wear while running errands on a Tuesday. It somehow flowed freely while still looking as if it could survive an earthquake. It was the best parts of thirty different hairstyles effortlessly smashed together into one. I ran into Kelly in the hallway with toothpaste on my zits and sweat pouring from my armpits on my way to take a shower and fall asleep by 9pm. It was the early days when no one had friends and we went out of our way to make small talk in the common areas.

"Wow, your hair is so pretty!" I blurted out, or something similarly lame.

“Thanks! I like your...robe,” she replied. Though it was an absurd and embarrassing thing to compliment me on, she exuded a genuine warmth that made me feel like she *actually* liked my poufy, sky blue Hello Kitty wraparound with Velcro straps.

Kelly also took introduction to women’s studies. Did she pass the midterm, or even show up to study groups? No. Did she stay awake during class and always show up wearing fresh clothes that *definitely weren’t* the same ones she was wearing the day before? Also no. But she was incredibly kind. I once overheard her chatting in the hallway with a girl who worked fulltime while attending college; even still, that week, she was out of money and had no more points on her meal plan. Kelly retrieved a loaf of bread and a package of lunch meat from her dorm room and made a bunch of sandwiches to get the other girl through a rough spot. I’m not sure who Kelly became. But I have no doubt that she’s doing some good in the world. And I know for certain that she looks flawless while she does it.

I’ve been trying so hard to be a disrupter like Paula, not for the sake of appearances, but because it’s who I truly want to be. I call my senators to talk to their tired, overworked aides about adequate health care access for socioeconomically disadvantaged children. I’m not afraid to call out a sexist joke in a group of people I’m meeting for the first time and, if I’m having a particularly good day, can diffuse the resulting tension with humor. I bring extra bottled water—to share—along with me to protests against police brutality. I cook freezer meals for my friends after they give birth, pick up trash on the street, and always bring my reusable bags to the store. After Hurricane Harvey I spent the better part of a morning researching the best organization to donate money to (don’t just throw money at the Red Cross after natural disasters—lesson learned.) I’ve made a considerable effort to reduce the amount of palm oil I consume.

But on the other hand, I'm also failing to meet many of my own expectations for what it looks like to be a "successful" human being. When I think of all these failures, the idea of Paula is further away than ever. I care way too much what people think of me and spend days/weeks/year punishing myself for minor social transgressions. I once accidentally joined a paid tour (not the free one I thought I was on) at the Tower of London and when the guide finally asked me to leave, I was so embarrassed and felt so bad about taking advantage of his expertise in early medieval British history that I wanted to find an old stake and burn myself at it. If I get less than eight hours of sleep in a night, it is virtually guaranteed that I will have an emotional breakdown at some point during the next day. I change my job and my life plan every five minutes because if something isn't a damn fairytale situation, I convince myself that it's ruining my life and my happiness, and that my time would be better spent doing *literally anything else*. I can barely convince myself to leave the house for a job interview, because first impressions are everything, and I don't know how to apply eyeliner with a steady hand. Or curl my hair without it resembling an orphan Annie wig (it doesn't even look good enough to resemble the character's actual hair; it's one full level removed as a *cheap knockoff* of that original hairdo.) Most of all, I lack the infusion of confidence and emotional stability and spunk and "who gives a fuck?" attitude that I'm *certain* comes from having the kind of hairdo that makes strangers do a double-take in the grocery store. So while I tend towards being like Paula, I'm trying like hell to be a little more like Kelly, too, and that's not for appearances either. I genuinely believe that women who are living their best hair life are living their best *life* life.

Here are some specific problems I have, in order of how much they contribute to my perpetually ponytailed-existence:

1. Hair that is naturally flat as a sheet and moderately thin (not like a baby's, but not full and voluptuous either.) In my endless online quest for hair secrets, I have learned that different hair has different degrees of natural volume and thickness. This can drastically impact which hairstyles will look best (or work at all) for your hair. Do you know how much teasing and round brushing and product is needed to give my hair any lift whatsoever? If there were some kind of suspenders for your hair, I would be a forever customer.
2. Bad at following directions, and this one is related specifically to hair directions. Drop me in any part of the metropolitan area where I live without a map and I could figure out how to get home. I was really into origami for a while during high school and I would follow along for 3,754 steps needed to create a multi-color toucan or whatever. I was once assigned a term paper for an English literature class with four pages (single-spaced!) of guidelines and I got a 96%. But as soon as I start reading hair directions, my panic instincts kick in, I start stress-sweating, and my brain shuts down until the second I give up and storm out of the bathroom.
3. Not a lot of perseverance (see: changing life plan every five minutes when things aren't perfect.) There are *some* things that I will stick with until I figure them out. But when I'm braiding my hair and accidentally start gathering extra hair into one of the strands, or when I've been trying to do something BEHIND MY OWN HEAD (this is by far the worst and most impossible part of hair tutorials) only to realize that all I've done is create a birds- nest-looking ball of strands, I'm done.
4. Arm strength. I run a lot, and if it were possible to style my hair with my legs instead of my arms, I could become a beauty guru on YouTube tomorrow. Holding and shaping

your hair in strange configurations for up to thirty minutes with your arms above your head is no joke. I was once very close to achieving a moderately successful version of BuzzFeed.com’s “Dressed Up Pony” (sometimes, stick with your strengths) when my arms just gave out and fell to my sides involuntarily.

Despite all of these marks against me, I fool myself into thinking it could be so easy, and I am always on the lookout for the secret(s) that will unlock the evasive world of hairstyle perfection. I know it’s out there. (Maybe women who have figured it out are intentionally hiding the real secret from the rest of us—constantly throwing us off the scent with impossible-to-follow tips and tricks—so as to retain all the power granted from this discovery for themselves?) Last week I overheard two stylish women in line at Target talking about a hair tool that had changed their lives, a 1 inch “curling wand,” (I could use a little magic at this point) and I rushed home to review the available products on Amazon. I didn’t actually know what it was before I searched for it—that’s how completely out of touch I am with the ranks I so desperately wish to join. As far as I could discern, it’s a curling iron without a clamp on the side: a 400+ Fahrenheit metal stick around which you wrap strands of your hair to achieve a variety of styles, depending on your technique and temperature settings (a lower temperature and a looser spiral will give you a more “wavy” look; for tight curls, spin the temp dial as far as it goes and prepare yourself for the smell of burning hair.) Amazon’s top-suggested version of this product came with 4.3 out of 5-star product review out of over 1,000 customer reviews for just \$14.99. What could possibly go wrong? In anticipation of its arrival, I spent a few hours watching tutorial videos. With the right styling products (I’ll research those suggestions next), some women swore that a curling wand will provide a result that will last up to three days. I was ready for my transformation.

The curling wand arrived on my doorstep a few days later. I rummaged around under the bathroom cabinets for my \$40 bottle of hairspray (“makes all the difference!!!” declared one commenter on a beauty blog I read last year), and then stared myself down in the mirror for a few minutes while the control panel on the hot stick flashed different colors and finally turned green, indicating it had reached the desired temperature. Using the duck bill hair clips I’d previously purchased for a different ill-fated styling attempt, I drew a line from the top of my hairline to the base of my neck. Then, I drew another line through the middle of each of those sections, creating four more or less equal hunks of hair, and pinned all but one of them to the top of my head. The first, and hardest hurdle in my opinion, had been cleared. I inevitably end up re-curling or accidentally brushing out sections that have already been curled or missing whole sections entirely (again, how do people know what’s happening behind their head???) *Wrap to the left. Pull tight. Avoid tips of ears. Hold for 25 seconds. Release curl into palm of hand for 10 seconds. Spray generously. Release into the world.*

After 30 GODFORSAKEN MINUTES (impatience is also a key factor in my past failures) my hair was curled. Kind of. It had some waves and most of them were twisting in the same direction. If you saw a picture of my hair (I took probably 75 of them) after I was finished you might think, “Oh I see what happened, that girl swam in the ocean and then slept on her wet hair” (which for some luckier people is all it would take to achieve a flawless curly look). But I was happy with it. Kind of. I would have patted myself on the back if my arms weren’t numb, lifeless bone bags hanging at my sides. I snapped pictures from every conceivable angle. I coated the whole thing in one more layer of hairspray and carefully maneuvered my head through the neck hole of the dress I’d planned to wear to dinner. I snapped one more photo in the entryway where the lighting is really good. Then I opened the door and went outside.

That's when the Atlanta summer evening loaded its humidity shotgun and blasted my hair dreams right in the heart. By the time I sat down in my car, my hair had gone from resembling cool beachy waves to "drooled on tips of hair while sleeping and dried off with a towel." The good thing about failing so consistently at a particular task is that you're not all that upset when it fails again. It's easy to playfully roll your eyes and add it to the list of things you'll laugh about one day while you're putting the final touches on a halo braid and rushing off to the life you've always felt destined for.

A woman named Meredith cuts my hair. She's been my stylist since college. I see her about once every three months. Maybe once a year, if I have a little extra money, (usually around my birthday) I book a longer appointment so that she can color my hair in addition to cutting it. I almost always go with some shade of dark red. Once, about a decade ago, I had her bleach the entire underside of my hair and then apply a bright, fire engine red dye. It could only be seen when my hair was in a ponytail, a flashy accent that made me feel cooler than I ever had. I only wash my hair once a week (Meredith insists on this) and so the color usually lasts quite a while. Even still, it's expensive to keep up with that kind of thing. Plus, when the color fades away, I always feel a bit of relief. The pretending is over. I'm back to me.

After the shampoo and the cut, Meredith usually curls my hair. She works quickly, using a straightening iron, ironically, to achieve a curly look. She wraps each strand several times through the metal plates and twirls each curl around with her fingers. She's talked me through this process a hundred times and I've even practiced it a little in her presence so that she can give me pointers. Still, it's impossible to achieve on my own. I've sometimes thought of booking an appointment with her prior to some event our outing where I want to look especially nice. Just to

have her wash and curl my hair. But she works out of her home, not all that close to mine, and when I'm about to call her up, I always think of something else I'd rather spend the \$40 on. So I don't call.

I know what I'd have to do to fix my hairstyling woes. I've done it before. When my writing, a true source of joy and passion, wasn't progressing as I wanted it to, I forced myself into a daily timed free-writing habit and it was non-negotiable. When my anxiety got so out of control that it consumed every part of my brain and my life, I forked over more money than I had, went to counseling, and had a professional help me put the pieces back together. To fix my hair problems, I'd have to have a true force of will that comes from somewhere deep inside. All I've got right now is some superficial desire, something I've developed out of fear and a vague imagination that perfect hair will bring some kind of lasting fulfillment to my life.

Perfect hair is the fantasy I'll always strive for and never achieve: it is the fantasy of an easy way out, a "fix it" button for everything that makes me stress-sweat and keeps me awake at night. The perfect hair fantasy is a source of everlasting hope that life is not so hard as I've made it out to be all these years. If I figured out how to make my hair look like Katniss Everdeen's tomorrow, all that hope would melt away. Because then I'd see that Kelly Chambers—for all her haircraft and wizardry—had life no more figured out than those of us who wore our greasy top knots and didn't wash our hair for days on end.

So I choose to keep the dream alive. Every six months I'll feel really down about life and the world will feel heavy, so I'll break out the hot stick and the clips and set my computer on the bathroom counter, ready to hit play on a video called "Twist Me Pretty" or "Amazing Hair Hacks." I'll watch it again just to be sure I understand the technique and mime the motions along

with my guide. When it's time for the real thing, the first seven attempts will be terrible. *Okay, I've definitely got it this time* I will think on attempt number eight, and actually, truly, impossibly believe that to be true. On the fifteenth attempt, my fingers will start to ache just as my carefully-sectioned hair pieces all drop together. The whole thing will fall completely apart, and I'll be right back to square one, but I'll think that I'm getting closer every time.

Poems About Death

At the cemetery where we gathered to mourn my father's passing, my aunt Sharon pulled me aside and said she had a poem to share. "Let's wait until tonight at dinner," she whispered. "Will you read it aloud?" I agreed, before re-focusing my attention to the task of grieving.

A memorial stone at Forest Home Cemetery in Richfield, Wisconsin, bears my father's name—it is also the resting place of his parents and other family—though his body is mostly elsewhere. My four brothers, my aunt, and I had each been given a small mason jar of ashes that morning, one-sixth of my father for each of us who loved him most. We all wandered aimlessly amongst the headstones. I was unsure of what to do, what to say, and I wondered when we'd be finished. Occasionally one of us stopped to open our jar. My brother Hans scattered some ashes in a patch of wildflowers. My brother Steve poured some near the graves of our grandparents, buried side-by-side.

I never opened my jar. I couldn't find a place that felt right, a place where I felt my father, where I felt anything other than the stinging cold in my toes, my thin canvas shoes no match for the windy October day. I took my father's ashes back home to Georgia and put the jar on top of the filing cabinet next to my desk, next to an unopened box of paint brushes and a pair of broken sunglasses, a stack of recall notices for various parts of my car and some keys I need to return. The ashes have a suitable home amongst a pile of things put off, a pile of things I'm not sure what else to do with.

The night of my father's memorial, after the cemetery, over pizza at my brother's house, my aunt handed the poem to me. I unfolded the paper and everyone looked my way. I took a deep breath and hoped for the cynicism of T.S. Eliot - *This is the way the world ends* looped in my head as I looked at the dutiful sadness on everyone's faces. Or maybe William Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus* - "I am the master of my fate, / I am the captain of my soul." Years before, my sister-in-law had told me how the poem reminded her of my father. I was in the habit, then, of grasping at the traces of him, tracking down the things he loved, or might have loved, and demanding answers. So I'd read *Invictus*, and then read it again, intent on unraveling the strands, trying to see if I could take it apart and find my father. It's not the greatest poem, but it's dignified somehow, although I did not recognize him in its stanzas.

But no. The poem my aunt had chosen was not "important." It was all end rhymes and cliché and tidy sentimentalities.

As I finished reading my aunt's poem, the whole family cried—this was a wake, after all—red-eyed and snotty over the empty words. I wanted to open the front door and scream into the cold night air. But I didn't want to reveal that my heart was made of the same material as the headstone. And so I did the meanest thing I could: as the tears of my family were welling up and spilling out and all other tired descriptions about tears, my aunt looked at me and asked a question she thought she knew the answer to: "Oh, doesn't it just remind you of him so much?"

"No, not really," I said, shrugging indifferently at her as I tore off a hunk of crust with my teeth. *That* was more like my father.

The truth is that I don't even remember who wrote the poem my aunt chose, or what it said, exactly. I keep meaning to call and ask her about it, but if I did she'd probably think it

meant something to me. And I can't bring myself to either bear that lie or tell the truth. So I'm left to wonder at the specifics of its awfulness. I searched "bad poems about death" on Google and tortured myself for a while with the results, to no avail.

Maybe I wouldn't know it if I read it again. Maybe my aunt wouldn't either. I shouldn't place all the blame on her. She probably just thought it would be nice to read a poem at a funeral, and picked the first one she saw.

I, too, am still looking to find the right poem – some words that might give me permission to open the jar and say goodbye. If I do, I'll finally kneel down and spread some ashes at the base of it.

My Father Teaches Table Manners

July 2011, Madison, Wisconsin

I had always made excuses for the version of our father that my brother Hans and I got. My three much older half-brothers, though, had known a different, certainly better, Mauri Kuenzi. Our father was too old when Hans and I came along, I figured, by way of explaining everything to myself—55 when Hans was born, pushing 60 when I arrived. It seemed reasonable to think that, in his twenties and thirties, his children had been an adventure: that they asked, “but why?” to everything he told them, and he relished the challenge of coming up with new explanations; that they cried in the night at invisible terrors and he made up silly names for the monsters in their closets before chasing them out into the hall. But in his fifties and sixties he must have woken to a vague feeling of dread at the prospect of all that screeching, all that inane make-believe. The possibility of grocery store tantrums filled him with anger. And when he started having strokes and declining both physically and mentally, his young children must have become a painful reminder of his infirmity. He had lived so much already. He didn’t know how to make the world new for Hans and me.

The father I knew had lines around his eyes. He usually seemed tired. He spent a lot of time in his den watching TV by himself. He left our family (my mother was his second wife) after his first stroke, in 1996, because he wanted my mother, Hans, and me to move into a retirement community with him, and my mother had no interest in raising two young children in

such a place. (This, I recognize, is just one simple explanation for their split; there were other reasons too, as there often are, and my mother also wanted out of the marriage.) He was gravely ill and physically disabled for most of my childhood. He was stern. Having been born during the Great Depression, he demanded that we clean our plates. He lectured us about being grateful for what we had. He was not unkind, and sometimes he let his guard down enough to laugh and joke with us. But on the whole, he knew the role of a father to be that of a caretaker and provider, not a pal.

So I had come to my half-brother David's house in search of a different narrative than the one I knew. Before I'd arrived, I'd told David that I was interested in learning and recording some of his stories about our father. We ate lunch outside on David's patio: pasta salad and grilled corn on the cob. Mary, my brother David's wife, sat to my left at the picnic table. Her shoulder-length blonde hair blew a little in the afternoon breeze. Her eyeglasses had fallen down the length of her nose and she pushed them back against her face. I didn't know Mary that well; she had only been married to my brother for a few years. But I liked her. She said "Dig in everyone!" and smiled at the spread of food in front of us.

I reached for the bread basket. When David passed the platter to me, I grabbed an ear of corn. My plate was full; there was no stalling left. I had no idea where to start. I was afraid of what David might tell me, even though I had no idea what it might be. Audio recorder in hand, I was as ready as I'd ever be to hit "play."

Mary got the conversation going, for which I was very grateful. My brother David (then and now) likes to talk about the financial sector, University of Wisconsin football, and the best spots around his neighborhood for foraging morel mushrooms. I was not holding my breath for him to open up – emotionally or otherwise – about our father.

“Leah, it occurs to me how little you must remember. That must be so hard,” Mary said. “How old were you when your dad had his first stroke—six? seven? What kinds of things do you remember about him?”

Some corn kernels caught in my throat. I fought against the urge to cough, and swallowed a gulp of lemonade. I held up six fingers in answer to her question. *Say something*, I thought. *Of course you have memories. Good memories. Try to think of a really good memory, something funny to get the conversation going.* Maybe it was because we were at the table, and the struggle to cut my corn made me feel foolish and vulnerable. I felt five years old again; at any moment, it seemed, my father would appear on David’s patio and scold me for how much food had fallen from my plate onto the ground.

I told her the story of my father teaching me to set a table properly, which always seemed pointless because none of our cutlery, plates, cups, or serving dishes matched: flower trimmed plates and blue coffee mugs for drinking glasses, seven different flatware styles, some scalloped and some plain. Who cares how it’s all arranged? My father cared. The knife had to go on the left side of the plate with the blade facing in, the fork next to it, spoon on the right hand side. Drinking glass to the right, wine glass next to it (we always set them out because it was the proper way, though my parents didn’t drink wine), a little to the left and closer to the center of the table.

David rolled his corn cob around and around, biting it intently, trying to get every last kernel. Mary took a bite of pasta salad but didn’t look away from me.

“I remember this one night,” I continued explaining to Mary, “My father taught me to hold a fork. My mom had made pizza, which we were not allowed to eat with our hands. Dad thought it improper, especially because we were young and would probably get sauce on our

clothes, hands, and mouths. I held my fork in my fist since it was the easiest way to cut the crust. Dad stared me down across the table, then came up behind my chair and lifted my hand to the fork, which I had been holding improperly. He arranged my fingers just so: thumb on top of the stem, about an inch from the base, pointer finger balanced on the side, middle finger, ring finger, and pinky finger tucked neatly into a curl. And I knew I wouldn't be able to pick it up correctly by myself, so I just held it in my right hand for the rest of the meal, and did everything else with my left one."

After describing the process and reliving it all over again, I felt very tired. I took another sip of lemonade.

David, whose face I couldn't read, put down his corn cob and joined the conversation at long last. "Well, you're right on all counts," he said, "except that the curl of your middle, ring and pinky fingers should lay against your pointer finger, not tucked under the stem of the fork."

"Oh really? That's not what he taught us. We were taught that the curl of the finger supports the utensil so that it can cut through anything on your plate. Even a steak, as long as it wasn't too tough," I said.

That is as much of an interview about our father as I ever got out of my brother David.

October 2005, Newnan, Georgia

My father picked me up for my fifteenth birthday dinner during the fifth inning of Game 4 in the National League Division Series between the Atlanta Braves and the Houston Astros. I'd been watching the game on TV when I saw the headlights of his minivan in the driveway of my mother's house. I had just come into a love of baseball the year before. Some kids in my class were Braves fans, and I wanted to fit in. My father had been following the team forever. Before

the franchise moved to Atlanta, they'd played in Milwaukee, near the town where my father was born and raised. I didn't care, back then, the way that I now wish I had, about this tiny overlap of our lives. He never took me to a game. I never asked to go.

We went to Olive Garden. The restaurant was one of my father's favorites and it became one of my favorites, too. We always went there after church on Sunday and when company came to visit. We stopped at locations across the four-state drive from Georgia to Wisconsin on summer trips to visit family. My father ate and ate when we went there. He could polish off an entire bowl of the chain's "bottomless salad" all by himself. When his plate was empty, he'd press a breadstick around the edges to sop up the remaining salad dressing. We never skipped dessert.

"Too full for dessert? No such thing!" he would say, and order a piece of black tie mousse cake. I'm convinced that Olive Garden is not the same as it used to be. Now, it's the brunt of jokes about terrible, inauthentic Italian food. Back then, it was "fancy." Reputable, even. Everyone wore nice clothes. The tables were covered with starchy white table cloths; we were warned, by our father, to be careful.

The Braves were enjoying a comfortable lead when we arrived at the restaurant. We figured that lead would hold. In the parking lot, my father backed his minivan with its retractable wheelchair ramp into a parking space without looking behind him. It had been almost ten years since his first stroke, and in that time he'd become quite adept at navigating his physical disability. He took his wheelchair along rutted hiking paths when his family came to visit. He took it through muddy terrain at the Falcon Field Air Show every year. He was always taking it somewhere that most wheelchair-bound folks probably wouldn't attempt. When we got inside Olive Garden, he asked for a booth, and parked his wheelchair at the end of it. We hadn't yet

finished the first round of salad and breadsticks when the waitress came to check on us, and my father asked for more. Our entrees arrived: chicken picatta for Dad, eggplant parmesan for me. We chatted—I'm sure of this, because fathers and daughters do not sit in silence during birthday dinners. But the details of the conversation are maddeningly gone now, my mind filled instead with the stupidest little details, like the fact that I wore a gray shirt with red accents. I remember this because when I got some sauce on my sleeve, it blended right in. In memory, all I can see is his face across the table as I ask the waitress for a refill of raspberry lemonade, and we stare blankly at one another, our mouths unmoving, except to take a bite of a breadstick.

The server cleared our plates. We shared a piece of his favorite cake. My father ate fast; sharing anything with him meant getting less. But he saved the crust, made entirely of chocolate chips, for me. He watched me closely as I struggled, then slowed, then stopped eating altogether. He reached his spoon across the table and scooped up the melting, chocolate sludge from the bowl.

I turned fifteen, for real, during the eighteenth inning: in the passenger seat of my dad's minivan, engine running, the radio turned up loud. Things had taken a turn for the worse while we were inside eating dinner. The announcers' voices crackled, and I could hear the *thwack* of the ball in the catcher's glove. There's a split second, after the pitch is thrown, when a radio listener has no idea what's going on. Did the player at bat take a swing? Did he make contact? Did he get caught looking at the third strike? I tried to read my father's face at such moments, to see if he knew something I didn't. At 8:42 pm, I stared at the digital clock on the dashboard, waiting for the minute to turn over. I liked to observe the minute of my birth and ask myself if it felt any different to be a year older. It never did.

The game ended with a walk-off home run in the bottom of the eighteenth. The Astros won. My father switched the radio off, sighed, and said, “Well, at least we had some cake today. So it’s not all bad.” In the days after his death these words of my father’s consumed me. Of all the moments I might have wished to return to, I thought of little else than going back to the cheap vinyl booth at Olive Garden, listening to our favorite team lose an important game, and sharing (70/30) a piece of cake.

June 1997, Lodi, Wisconsin

Eager to unite his adult and young children, my father brought Hans and me to visit our older half-brothers each summer. My brother Steve and his wife Cindy had recently moved into a little bungalow on Lake Wisconsin. My brother Hans and I, along with Nathan and Natalie, my brother Steve and his wife Cindy’s two kids, sat at the dining room table waiting for dinner to be served. My father and Steve were outside on the deck, just off the dining room, grilling the last batch of sausages before coming inside. Cindy was in the kitchen finishing the potato salad. When she brought the dish over to the table, she told us kids to go ahead and start eating. She sat down with us as we waited for Steve and my father to come inside.

The carpet below our feet was so white. Brand new. Hans, ten years old, reached for the bottle of ketchup and squeezed with both hands. He missed the bun. The ketchup hit the floor. Cindy screamed, not in the normal way you’d scold a child. Her anger was fierce, tomato-eyed and vinegar-faced. I’d never seen someone get so angry for something so trivial. Hans’ face contorted into a sad, small wrinkle. He howled in agony. He was banished outside to eat by himself. My eyes followed him to the porch but I said nothing. I didn’t move.

Nathan and Natalie went still and silent, too. Steve and my father were still outside during the incident, but the door was cracked, and they knew. They knew. Steve took the last sausage off the grill and asked Hans if he'd like to have it.

“Yes,” Hans said

“Yes, please,” my father sternly corrected him.

“I think he's had enough,” Steve said, handing Hans a bun.

I said nothing.

I still carry Hans' sadness with me today. I cannot explain why I often picture this day when I look at my brother—biochemist, organic gardener, sourdough bread baker, depression and ADD sufferer, Gap credit card holder, hairline receding, glassy marble eyes, mumbles a little, hugs you sideways—now a man like our father, who had done nothing in the face of my brother's small hurt. I have never asked Hans if he remembers this the way I do. I'll never know if we share this pain, or if it is all mine. We don't talk much about our father. We have an unspoken agreement that his absence is easier for each of us to bear alone. I'd like to go back there, to the deck where our father treated my brother's pain with indifference, stand close to my father's face, and say, “In a few years, you'll die alone, your mind gone. Is there anything else you'd like to say to your son?” I crave the taste of that question on my lips, to diminish him.

January 1999, Orlando, Florida

My father took us kids—his grandson Nathan (11 years old) and granddaughter Natalie (7 years old), my brother Hans (12 years old), and me (8 years old)—to Disney World. He bought a vacation package: hotel, park admission, souvenir photography, and a \$1,000 prepaid

meal card, redeemable in any park or park-owned restaurant. Even with three adults (my father, my oldest brother Steve, and Steve's wife Cindy) and four children, \$1,000 was a lot of money to spend on food over just four days. Eating was a game; everyone won a prize. We asked for cups of M&Ms at breakfast that we pressed into pancakes shaped like Mickey Mouse's head. At a Chinese restaurant in Epcot, the adults had steak, and the children asked for second helpings of fried rice, which we tried to eat with chopsticks, grain-by-grain. We giggled and squirmed at each other's antics. My father stared us down across the table. We were careful not to go too far. After *Tower of Terror*, we stopped at a stand for fresh-squeezed lemonade in souvenir cups. For an afternoon snack, we had ice cream bars and popsicles molded into the faces of Goofy and Tinker Bell. When one of us kids barfed it all up on the Teacups, we were comforted with mounds of fluffy cotton candy, pink as the inside of Dumbo's ears. It was all food and fun until the last night, when we got dressed up and took the monorail to the fanciest restaurant Walt Disney had to offer. Mauri Kuenzi would get his money's worth yet.

Inside the Grand Floridian Hotel, I thought we had entered a new world in which we did not belong. It was hard to believe they let children in there. The chandelier glittered and cast a shadow of itself on the opposite wall. The chair backs were ornately-carved to look like the bud of a flower. The cream-color tablecloths looked as though they could withstand a hurricane and not budge. The tables were pre-set: two rose buds in a short crystal vase, a small table lamp by which to read the menus in the otherwise dimly-lit room, silver-rimmed salad plate stacked on top of an identical dinner plate, salad fork, dinner fork, unknown purpose fork, butter knife, bread knife, water glass, wine glass. How my father must have relished the attention to detail, the order imposed by the small act of setting a table properly.

When the waiter arrived to take the orders, I was determined to prove my goodness. I spoke: slowly, clearly, eye contact, smile, “please” and “thank you.” The other kids ordered hamburgers but I opted for the grilled cheese, even though it was made with ingredients I didn’t recognize. I was not picky. I sipped my water without slurping. I was seen and not heard. My father made no indication that he realized the effort. When the food arrived, the server explained that the chef did not make hamburgers. In front of the other kids, he placed a piece of steak cut into a circle atop a sliced dinner roll with cracked grains and seeds baked into the crust. There was no ketchup. He offered smoked tomato aioli instead. I remember this specific detail for the absurdness of it. I had never heard the word aioli before, and it stuck.

I looked sharply across the table at my counterparts. *Do not*, I willed them, *Do not say what you’re about to say*. They didn’t stop. “This is gross,” “No ketchup?” “Why does this bread have all this stuff on it?” came their complaints. I stole a look at my father, and hoped he wouldn’t meet my eye. I wondered what would come next: a lecture about gratitude? A stern warning to clean our plates no matter what? His silent seething, tight-jawed and flat-faced?

His face wrinkled, like he might yell, but instead he brought his fist to his mouth in an attempt to stifle the ragged fit of laughter that suddenly overtook him. What he might have said is a mystery now. I remember only the beating of my heart, that booming relief inside my chest.

October 2014, Hubertus, Wisconsin

It is possible to fill the wound of bereavement with food. If you disagree, you haven’t eaten enough. At my father’s memorial brunch, I ate beyond reason and without limits. Eggs benedict with golden hollandaise. Roasted asparagus. Smoked salmon. French toast and waffle sticks topped with powdered sugar and piled with whipped cream and chocolate chips, slathered

with maple syrup. Crispy fried potatoes with onions and peppers. A spinach and mushroom omelet topped with a garlic mayonnaise sauce. I imagined my father looking down, watching me eat, nodding. I walked back to the buffet line and got a second helping of potatoes.

When I was so full it was hard to breathe, I went outside into the yard of the Copper Dock Restaurant, which backs up against Friess Lake. The sun disappeared behind a cloud, and my skin prickled with cold. I've never been a smoker, but I wanted a cigarette. I sat on the pier for a few minutes and watched some dead leaves float around the surface of the water. On the way back to the table, I grabbed a chocolate chip cookie from the dessert tray.

No one was speaking when I sat back down. My aunt speared an olive with her fork, looked at it, and put it back on her plate. I was seated across from my brother Steve, whom I hadn't seen in nearly five years. After he'd moved away from Wisconsin, the state where most all of my father's extended family lived, we lost touch. He proposed a game called "my last five years in five minutes." We each attempted to hit the highlights of what we'd been up to. As a flight instructor, Steve had bounced around to different roles at Air Force bases in Colorado and Oklahoma. He was back in the cockpit after several years of simulation training. I tried to piece my story together but struggled. I was too stuffed to think. "Let's see...college ended, I did some work in nonprofit fundraising and some tutoring, well the tutoring was first, right after college...uh...we bought a house, nice area, lots of...parks. I adopted a cat." My stomach gurgled.

"Oh boy, I ate way too much," Steve said, rescuing me from my own embarrassment. "But you know what dad always said: 'Eat for the hunger that comes.'"

I had never heard our father say this. On a different day, I might have bombarded Steve with follow-up questions. When did Dad say that? Was it more than once or just an offhanded

comment? Are there any funny stories associated with him saying that? Is it a phrase his parents said during the Depression? Was it supposed to be funny, or cynical, or both?

I took a breath and let it pass. What more could my brother tell me that I didn't know? What other explanation was there for our gluttony? We were eating for the hunger to come. I thought of all the things I didn't know and never would know about my father. Could the scraps be enough to sustain me, to hold him in my heart and mind? I knew they likely would not. I considered a lifetime of little moments when he'd pop into my mind, and I'd be left wanting, always, more of him. I stared at my plate where a quarter of the cookie remained. I reached for it, and washed down the crumbs with a sip of coffee.

My Mother and Other Doctors

I often joke that my mother will out-live me. I'm convinced it's true, unless a silent disease sneaks up on her: a tumor on her ovary, or a blood clot in her leg.

“Unlikely,” I can imagine her saying. “I’ve got a supplement for that.”

She hasn't seen an MD in years. She lives on kale, spirulina, carrot juice, kombucha, and garlic. She'll drink some soda once a year or so, just one or two sips from someone else's cup after eating something salty. Root beer is her favorite. I once saw her drink a whole glass at a pizza buffet, but that now seems so impossible that I'm certain I imagined it. Cheese is mostly for special occasions. Sometimes Saturday night is a special occasion. If someone prepares a bowl of salad for their potluck meant to serve an entire party's worth of people, she will pull me aside and tell me that she ate a salad of that size all by herself for dinner last night. But hers was made from spinach and baby kale, which is nutritionally far superior to spring mix.

As a child I once remember watching her shred purple cabbage for a salad and asking, “Is that stuff really good for you?”

“It's downright medicinal,” she replied.

The first time I entered her world of alternative medicine, I was six years old, and my ear was on fire. I could hear the drum beating, pulsating in time with my low whimper as I lay on the couch and thought about being brave. My mother stood at the stove over a small saucepan of

olive oil, a fat clove of garlic bubbling in the middle. She set it aside to cool for a few minutes, then sucked the oil into an eyedropper. If she spoke soothing words, I don't remember them now; I was fixated only on the fear of what would come next. I imagined the dull heaviness of water in my ear like when I did a flip in the pool and spent all afternoon shaking my head from side to side, trying to free the droplets. I waited for more suffering as she kneeled down beside me and positioned the dropper into my ear canal. I felt the oil slide down to the magma-hot core. Slowly, the beating calmed and the fire began to cool.

Garlic is still one of my mother's favorite cure-alls. To ward off the common cold and chest/nasal congestion. To boost overall immunity against viruses and bacteria. Or to keeps one's heart going strong. I witnessed her ritual at the kitchen counter where I sat one Saturday afternoon during a visit, crunching on cucumber slices, fresh-picked from her garden. We were going out to dinner that night, and she liked to take precautions before joining the germy masses. A dab of tea tree oil on the wrists also helped to keep her safe from sickness in a crowd. She minced a clove nearly to pulp and placed a heaping pile on the back of her tongue, swallowing it down with a swig of water from her quart-sized Mason jar full of water, lemon juice, and cayenne pepper. "This mix is great for your gut," she told me. I'd heard her spiel about the gut before, how it has its own intelligence that rivals the brain. I was careful not to ask any follow-up questions, lest I endure the lecture a second time.

About the garlic, I said, "I couldn't do that. I'd be burping up that smell for days."

"Beats a week in bed with a fever," she said.

During my freshman year of high school, I spent a week in bed with a high fever. The flu. We've all been there – pile on the blankets and still your bones shake, threatening to expel you from your own skin. I fell asleep and dreamed I was hibernating with a family of bears in a damp cave. The damp cave turned out to be my mound of blankets. I woke up sweating from everywhere, got up and dried my hair with a towel, washed the sweat from my palms with cool water, then got back into bed. My mom knocked lightly on my bedroom door every few hours, the tapping sound mixing with the plot of my fever dream. She brought me strong doses of oregano oil diluted with orange juice. No amount of mixing brought the two liquids together. The oil floated on top in swirled patterns. I pinched my nose and sucked it down. The thermometer read 103.4 degrees. I thought of the funny stories my mom told me about germs when I had been sick as a little kid. How the germs don't stand a chance when your body turns up the heat. Shrivels 'em up, dries 'em out. "Your body knows what it's doing," she said.

My thyroid may be malfunctioning. It's going to take a while to get to the bottom of it, I'm sure. I had blood work done by my primary care physician, but my orthodontist (who also specializes in "naturopathic medicine") insisted that "the docs" are clueless about the proper testing required to diagnose this complex issue. I've got braces as an adult (hence the orthodontist) because, when I was a kid, my mom was pretty sure my teeth would straighten out on their own.

"The body is very good at taking care of itself," she always said.

Why is an orthodontist diagnosing a potential case of thyroid disease? This is the rabbit hole of alternative medicine. Everyone knows someone. None of them are doctors per se, but they can help, don't worry. I got a referral to my specific orthodontist from my dentist, who I've

had since childhood. My mom, brother, and I made visits every six months for cleanings. Even when he moved his practice an hour and a half from our house, we kept making the trip. To my mom, he may as well have been the only dentist in the world, and if he was, we'd all be a lot better off. She started seeing him when my parents first moved to Georgia in the 1980s, and the first thing he did was remove and replace every mercury filling in her mouth. His office walls are covered in photos—rather, faded-color computer printouts—of blister-covered mouths, side-by-side with regular, healthy mouths. They are before and after shots, “with mercury fillings” and “six months after mercury removal.” Some of the rashes ooze yellow liquid. One extends from the corners of a woman’s mouth all the way down to the base of her neck. Another rash, I’m convinced, is shaped like Italy. There’s a book on the table in the waiting room called *Dressed to Kill: The Link Between Breast Cancer and Bras*. It’s been there as long as I can remember. I asked my mom about it one day in the car on the way home from an appointment; I was a teenager at the time.

“Why would it be legal to sell bras if they cause cancer?” I asked.

“Just follow the trail of money,” she told me. “You think they’d shut something down just because it gives people cancer?”

I wondered who “they” were, but didn’t ask.

I don’t know what answer my mom is searching for in this maze of alternative healthcare. She’s been looking for decades, long enough that some remedies have fallen in and out of favor several times over. The macrobiotic diet. Elderberry syrup. Juice Plus supplements. Colloidal silver. Trace minerals from the sea, a refrigerated liquid supplement which tastes mostly like cherries and only a little like the earth. Antimonium tartaricum tablets. Kombucha. One year,

tofu is going to save us all; the next, it causes cancer. Genetically modified soybeans, you know. Bad news.

My orthodontist/naturopath had me track my body temperature for ten straight days. I stuck the thermometer under my armpit while brushing my teeth each morning, and tried to stay optimistic. At the end of the week, each of my daily readings were about one degree below the normal 98.6 Fahrenheit.

“Do you have cold hands and feet?” he asked at my next appointment, and I nodded and laughed to myself, thinking of my long-suffering husband who shouts “ICE CUBES!” whenever I accidentally touch my feet to his under the covers.

“Do you feel fatigued after lunch?” Yes.

“These are all signs, of course. We’d need to do more work to get to the bottom of it,” he said.

I knew he meant these were signs of a thyroid problem. I imagined what he really meant was that I had failed in some crucial way to keep my body safe, and worse, that these signs indicated larger crimes against it. I had eaten things I shouldn’t. I had not eaten things I should. I had been short-sighted and impulsive. “You only have one body, and now you’ve gone and fucked it all up,” is what he didn’t say.

When I left his office I headed straight to Chick-fil-A for an egg and cheese biscuit, so oily it turned the paper wrapper translucent. Hash browns too, which I dipped into a mixture of mayonnaise and ketchup. It gave me some kind of angry pleasure to imagine what kind of damage this grease bomb might wreak on my thyroid, specifically: leaching calcium from my bones, sucking all the selenium from my soul.

I told my mom about the thyroid dilemma when I saw her the following weekend. She was pleased to hear about the naturopathic credentials of my orthodontist.

“If Dr. Dressler recommended him, I’m sure he’s capable of great healing,” she said.

I told her about the course of treatment he had proposed: a hair follicle analysis (\$125) to determine any mineral imbalances that may indicate hypothyroidism (low selenium levels, for instance, pose a problem for thyroid health) followed by adrenal gland testing (\$305) if necessary, and finally a blood test at “the right” lab where they’d test for “the right” thing. My mother’s fear of the medical establishment slowly slithered into the conversation.

“Do not, I repeat, do not allow them to put you on Synthroid,” she said with a serious life and death look on her face, like there was a venomous snake curled up behind me, ready to strike, and I needed to avoid any sudden movements. “That stuff is total garbage. It just pumps you full of the T4 hormone, but the very problem with most thyroid disease is that it prevents the body from converting T4 into T3. So what good does that do? What you want is natural desiccated thyroid. That stuff has been around for a hundred years, and it worked way before the drug companies came along,” she said.

I did a quick Google search on my phone and found several products that fit this bill. It was hard to tell what’s what, though. Some were actual thyroid hormone: bovine and porcine sources, mainly. My mom and I are both vegetarians, but I didn’t bother to point this out. Other products were designed to boost thyroid functioning through other means – things like selenium supplements. One Amazon customer wrote, “If you have thyroid issues do not trust the doctors. They are all about how to make money rather than how to help you.” I was impressed but not altogether surprised that my mother’s health conspiracy theories had spilled over into places like Amazon product reviews.

I continued to scroll through the listings, reading descriptions and weighing my options. “It is insane and annoying to me that there are all these diagnostic steps for something that seems pretty routine,” I complained to my mom. *635 damn dollars just to get to the bottom of a problem I may or may not even have. Fuck my thyroid, I thought. Unless there’s nothing wrong with it. Then fuck everyone around me for ringing the alarm bells and trying to take my money.*

“Your health is a big picture. You can’t only look at one piece and expect to understand what’s going on. That’s what doctors do. They look at one little symptom or one little problem and they write you a script and send you on your way. And what do they know?” she asked.

It was comforting, really, to grow up believing that there was a magic cure for the things that caused me pain: for that woozy stomach feeling, for the hacking cough that cracked my chest open, for the chills that jarred me awake in the middle of the night, for the weeping rash that bloomed for weeks across my neck, and for the infected pore on my shoulder that burned and ached. And if my mom didn’t know it off the top of her head, she could track it down.

When I was in first grade, a girl in my class named Jessie had stomach cancer. Her hair fell out in big clumps over her desk. Sometimes she threw up her breakfast during story time. I felt sad for her, not just for her immediate suffering, but because her mom didn’t have the right book, high up on a shelf, to be able to pull down late at night, crack the spine, and pin under her legs while sitting in bed massaging her face in a specific way to maintain the elasticity of the skin. Her mom didn’t know of a special clinic in Canada, or know the right healer who could do a body scan and measure the toxicity of her blood. Her mom didn’t have a cabinet full of herbs or a garden full of medicine.

When I get sick as an adult, I don't know who to be or what to believe. I perch on the ledge of my bathtub and rummage through a plastic tub under my sink, looking for inspiration. Urinary and bladder pain strikes often, without warning or probable explanation. Sometimes it's a full-blown infection of the urinary tract, but worse than that (because you can't get antibiotics for something that doesn't show up on a test) is the feeling of a candle flame that is slow to catch, but once it does, shoots upward in a sudden, violent arc. I reach for the Uva Ursi/Marshmallow Compound, the same giant glass bottle I've had since high school. My mom found a new herbalist around that time. More accurately, she found a new company out in Colorado and a friendly sales guy who claimed expertise in holistic healing. One formula they sold was called Brain Tonic, featuring a plant called *Baccopa monnieri*. It promised to aid memory and improve functioning of the vascular system. A blend of *Echinacea* and goldenseal would fight infections such as the flu and common cold. Uva Ursi/Marshmallow Compound, the new silver bullet cure she delivered to my bedroom one day, would aid in the breakdown of uric acid and purines. At that point I'd been urinating every ten minutes for almost eight hours straight. If she had produced a pile of sludge from the bottom of a pond, I would have whisked it into orange juice and slammed it like a shot.

Fifty drops—the glass tube half full—into a glass of orange juice. It changes the bright orange color to a murky brown. I pinch my nose and take it down in one gulp. The earthy taste of leaves and dirt settles on my tongue. If that doesn't work, I've got little purple phenazopyridine pills from the drugstore. It turns my urine the color of a traffic cone, but there's something about the dye that kills the pain. I get around eight hours of relief from the phenazopyridine, maybe double that from the herbal tincture. After that, the pain comes back and I live with it for a day or so until it disappears on its own, then comes back at some later time I cannot predict.

There's no medical explanation for these troubles. Or maybe I just haven't found it yet. After suggesting a routine list of things to try—cranberry pills, cut out white sugar from your diet, empty your bladder before and after sex—my doctor concluded that some women just have sensitive bladders.

“There's always a reason,” my mom insisted.

And so I consulted a second doctor; not an MD but a DO (Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine.) “Much better, way more thorough, looks at the whole picture,” my mom wrote in an email. She had asked around her circles to find someone close to where I was attending college at the time.

On the wall in the DO's waiting room hung the motto for her practice: “Where health is more than the absence of disease.” She got me started on probiotic supplements and selective diet restriction based on eight common food allergens she believed may have been irritating my bladder. Week 1, cut out tomatoes. Week 2, reintroduce tomatoes, cut out wheat. I kept a daily journal noting any changes in my symptoms, and for the most part, there were none. I still take the probiotics, which seem to have improved my digestion.

And because I'm young and mostly healthy and don't have infinite time and unlimited money to pursue new doctors and follow-ups and tests and pills and cures and herbs and other forms of witchcraft, I'm left to my own devices, my own pseudo-scientific fixes. Most days, though, I still just sit on the toilet and reach for the little purple pills, or maybe the little glass bottle. Leaves on the tongue, traffic cone urine, take a deep breath.

All the wackiest cures come from Germany. Add that one to my mom's list of reasons that Europe is superior to the United States. Universal healthcare is an obvious one. Male

circumcision is banned in Denmark and Sweden. The food is purer, with fewer chemicals approved for human consumption. I was sometimes reminded of this as a child when I begged for orange or blue junk food.

“That crap would never fly in Europe.”

In 1998, my mom’s dad was four states away, dying from lung cancer. A pack a day for 40 years. Brandy and Coke at the dinner table, an ice cube clinking in the glass as he tipped his head back. A German woman named Hulda Regeher Clark knew how to save Grandpa Wally. Clark’s book, *The Cure for All Cancers*, posits a simple solution: rid the body of parasites, rid the body of disease. The abstract reads, “The killing of all parasites and their larval stages together with the removal of isopropyl alcohol and carcinogens from the patients’ lifestyle results in remarkable recovery, generally noticeable in less than one week. Cancer could be eradicated in a very short time by clearing our food animals and household pets of fluke parasites and by monitoring all food...Stopping consumption of mycotoxins and ceasing exposure to copper, cobalt and vanadium is essential for tumor regression.”

Clark’s “research findings” are currently featured on websites such as “Quackwatch.org” and the National Council Against Health Fraud. This was not enough to dissuade my mother. Pharmaceutical companies make a killing on cancer drugs and treatments, she reasoned. So if the cure for cancer were really right in front of us this whole time, and gained enough traction to become mainstream, what would that mean for their bottom line? They’d never let that happen. They’d bury it deep, discredit it by whatever means possible.

The Digital Generator Frequency Zapper is an important part of Hulda Clark’s cancer care protocol. The device is still sold online; though Clark died of multiple myeloma in 2009, it seems that her son carries on her business. The device is allegedly used to distribute low-voltage

direct current electricity through the body at specific frequencies. Clark's website claims that she "tested millions of frequencies in order to discover the actual resonating frequencies of pathogens, and destroyed these same pathogens by Zapping at the actual resonant frequency of each and every Parasite, Virus and Bacteria." The new models of this little machine look quite different than the one my mom had. What used to be a small white box with an analog on/off switch now looks something like a calculator, with numbered plastic buttons and a digital display. The adjoining wires and copper tubes, which are held one in each hand by the user, look the same as always. The Zapper is meant for cancer patients, but can be used by anyone (like my mom) who is looking to rid their bodies of the parasites, viruses and bacteria which are responsible for everything from irritable bowel syndrome to headaches and depression. My mother had bought her Zapper years before my grandfather was dying. She used to sit with in her hands at the kitchen table late at night, setting one of the tubes down every so often to take a bite of stovetop popcorn (one of her favorite snacks) from a big silver bowl.

With the Zapper held out in her hand, my mother sat at her parents' kitchen table one summer night and tried to save her father's life. My grandparents never used the air conditioner unless there was a heat wave; normally, they opened all the windows and the screen door, and the smell of cow manure, mixed with the salty sulfur of the tap water, hung in the air while my grandmother washed dishes. My grandfather was almost dead by then, in bed all day except for dinner, where I lost my appetite looking at the bulging veins that poked out from the yellowed skin on his wrists. Doctors had removed the better part of both his lungs, but the cancer had spread to his throat and liver. He was still drinking Coke. If he knew what was coming for him, there was probably still a splash or two of brandy in there. My mother pleaded with him to take the little copper tubes into his hands, but he refused.

This is the health conspiracy bubble that I grew up inside, where doctors are worthless pill-pushers who don't know the first thing about how the human body works. Where you're better off on your own in an herb store talking to the salesperson as you hunt the shelves for a little glass bottle of tincture that has been intentionally hidden from you by the medical-industrial complex. Where plants are medicine and medicine is likely to make you sicker. As a grown adult with a college education and a Facebook feed full of actual scientific studies and engaging videos and op-eds about the safety and necessity of vaccines, it should be a no-brainer for me to recognize the objective nonsense of my formative medical education.

I've been a vegetarian off and on for ten years, solidly now for three, because I am my mother's child, and I cannot seem to escape her influence. Nor can I forget the terrifying, sickening images of pigs in factory farms that she pinned to the bulletin board in our kitchen. I make an exception for duck liver, though—or, rather, for a medicine that contains it. Or maybe, more accurately, has traces of it. A homeopathic cold and flu remedy called “Oscillocochinum” was invented by a French physician named Joseph Roy in the early 1900s. Roy believed he'd found a causative bacterium (which he named “oscillococcus” after its tendency to jump and oscillate under the microscope) that linked viruses such as herpes, chickenpox, and shingles to other diseases ranging from eczema to cancer. Following a key principle of homeopathy, which claims that a substance which causes symptoms of illness in a healthy person will cure a sick person who suffers from the same symptoms, (“like cures like”) Roy searched for a source of this bacterium that could be distilled into a medicine. Believing that he observed the same

oscillococcus bacterium in the liver of a muscovy duck, this became the primary ingredient for his cure.

A scientific blog from McGill University in Montreal describes the preparation of Oscillocoquinum this way: “Take the carcass of a duck and place 35 grams of its liver and 15 grams of its heart in a one-liter bottle filled with a solution of pancreatic juice and glucose. When after forty days the liver and heart have disintegrated, dilute the solution to 100 liters. Repeat this dilution another 199 times, shaking in a specific fashion each time. Then take a small pellet of milk sugar and moisten it with the resulting solution.” Based on the dilution, scientists say you’re unlikely to get even a single molecule of duck liver or heart in your tube of pellets. When asked about the safety of the medication, a spokeswoman for the manufacturing company responded: “Of course it’s safe. There’s nothing in it.”

I came home early from work a few years ago, body crumpled from that old, familiar achy feeling. My husband found me on the couch under three blankets, teeth chattering. I reached for the little white tube on the coffee table. From looks alone, you can’t tell the crystals apart from coarse-ground sugar. They taste sweet, too. You could mix a few into your morning coffee and probably not tell a difference. I popped off the plastic top and dumped the contents under my tongue. Suddenly I was five again and sitting at the kitchen counter wrapped in my Tweety bird comforter while my mom chopped carrots for minestrone soup and the oil sizzled in the pan and she laughed at the *News from Lake Wobegon* as sunlight poured in from the skylights, streaking her face, which was brown and warm from pulling weeds in her garden all morning. She handed me a tube of magic crystals and said, “Just like that, right under the tongue.”

“You know those things do nothing,” my husband said.

I considered the chasm between my knowledge and my actions, the choices I make despite my better judgement. How would I choose to care for my body? Was I my mother’s daughter after all, or a woman of my own making? When I’m ill, will I drive to the doctor’s office or scour the pseudo-scientific corners of the internet in search of some magical elixir? Could I be both, and do both? I didn’t know, so I gave my husband the simplest response.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

At The County Dump

One night when I was five or six years-old, snuggled into my mother's bed for our nighttime routine, I learned the word "human being." She always read to my brother and me—usually storybooks, but sometimes other things. That night it was a periodical – *National Geographic* or *Sierra Magazine*. My mother subscribed to both. Curled against our mother's side my older brother looked at the pictures. The article was about the rapid proliferation of landfills and environmental destruction in the United States. I closed my eyes and thought of sleep, comforted—at first—by the sound of my mother's voice. As she kept reading, my mind seized on certain words that scared me. "Trash. Landfills. Destruction. Human beings."

"Human beings" sent my mind running wild. I wondered: what was a human being? I formed a monster in my mind: Godzilla-like, hellish teeth, snarling, grabbing bird eggs from their nests and smashing them on the ground. Trees burning. Foxes scurrying away with their tails between their legs, wolves growling and showing their teeth, everything turned to ash and dust. Behind my closed eyelids the forests burned and crackled.

I felt certain "it" would come for me next. My lips quivered, then I sobbed.

"*Human beings* is just another word for people," my mother said. "I'm a human being. *You* are a human being."

I feel that I've become the monster I feared. These days, my husband Daniel and I live in a brick ranch with a sloping, sickly lawn. When we couldn't get the grass to grow, in accordance with the neighborhood standard, we hired a company with a green truck and sloshing tank of liquid chemicals. The yard is serviced every other month. A technician sprays the grass. From the window I watch him empty a bag of fertilizer into the spreading machine. He throws the bag into the bin at the end of the driveway.

The weeds adapt, grow stronger than ever. The lawn is just weeds now, but so green it looks spray painted.

The technician leaves the invoice—a wax-coated piece of paper, which cannot go into the recycling—stuck in the screen door. \$34. Once I've paid the fee, the invoice joins the empty fertilizer bag in the trash can.

At the county dump, large and heavy objects cost extra to dispose of, but not on “free dump day.” Daniel and I had been waiting months for it, the date marked on our calendar. When the day arrived, we spent the morning loading our cargo trailer with the remains of our demolished screened-in porch. Rotted beams. Plexiglass roof. Mesh screen. In a photo I took, once we had everything loaded, an old, cracked toilet left behind in our yard from the previous owners of the house sits atop the pile of construction materials. The wooden rails on the trailer bend visibly from the bulk. The trailer is connected to Daniel's car, a 2-seat convertible with enough torque to pull the trailer, riding low on its tires from the weight. The wooden scraps are badly stained and molded from months of sitting uncovered in our backyard, awaiting proper disposal.

What is *proper disposal*? I hide damaged things (the cheap yoga mat from college – torn to shreds, sheds foam all over the floor; the mini food processor with the broken lid; a picture frame with a plastic edge that is snapped in half) in the corner of the guestroom closet to avoid throwing them away.

I'm well acquainted with the trash along my regular running route. Gerald, who lives a few houses down from me, does a weekly trash pick-up on the main road just outside our neighborhood. There's always an exploded bag of garbage in the middle of the road outside of the Five Oaks apartment complex. Apartment residents routinely load their trash bags onto the roofs of their cars to drive them to the dumpster, forget to stop, and drive out onto the main road with the trash bag still atop their car. I run past Gerald in his reflective orange vest. I wave to him as he stoops and bends, a giant plastic bag ballooning out in the wind behind him. He waves back and lowers his long, silver-pick-up tool to the ground: Styrofoam containers. Coke bottles. Dirty diapers. An onion ring.

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“Don't use a Ziploc bag for that hunk of cheese! We're just going to pull it back out of the fridge in less than a day and finish it.”

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Each morning before the sun comes up a car arrives in my neighborhood. The driver proceeds slowly (never stopping completely) through the cul-de-sac. He leans out the window, throwing a neat little trash package into each yard. *AJC Reach*, officially known as an “advertising circular product”—it looks like a newspaper but isn't, comes in a plastic bag (to add

insult to injury), and, though no one has asked for it, is produced and distributed by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. A Google search yields dozens of angry complaints.

There are Facebook groups, webpages, and community action initiatives. There are widespread calls for people to cancel their subscriptions to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* until the company responds to community complaints about their “advertrashing” practices.

One commenter writes, “They deliver it on trash day, so it's right next to my dumpster when I go to the end of my drive. Perfect timing!”

I read on one of the pages that concerned residents should email reachee@ajc.com to unsubscribe their address. On January 20, 2015, I write:

Subject: “UNSUBSCRIBE 3428 Montreal Way from AJC Reach.”

I would like my address, 3428 Montreal Way, Tucker 30084 promptly unsubscribed from AJC Reach. We do not wish to receive any more litter in our driveway.

I receive no response. The papers keep coming.

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There is no *away*.

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One evening last year, my sister-in-law and I were walking back to our cars after meeting for dinner at a restaurant. I was doing my usual rant against Styrofoam containers being the standard choice for restaurant leftovers.

“Yeah, I agree, Styrofoam sucks,” she said. “Speaking of restaurant trash, did you know that there are entire social media profiles – like on Instagram and Tumblr and stuff – and all they do is post pictures of chicken bones that have been thrown in the street?”

“No way! Dedicated social media accounts just to show chicken bone trash?” I asked.

No way is it common enough, I thought to myself. The next day, I was out for a jog. Just outside my neighborhood, I ran past a chicken bone stuck in a sidewalk grate.

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Blueberries from California. Nectarines from Mexico. How many miles in a refrigerated tractor trailer?

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As Daniel maneuvered the loaded-down trailer out of our driveway en route to the county dump, I wondered, is this all trash?

Could we burn the wood? Cyanide and arsenic. Green with chemicals. Arsenic fire in Georgia in July?

Could the metal be recycled? Fee for pickup. Save some money? Wait? Ruffle the neighbors' feathers with our backyard trash pile?

No. Maybe next time. This time, the easy way out. I have a lot of excuses but no reasons.

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“If the zipper on that bag is broken, you can always cut it open and use it like plastic wrap.”

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I'm well acquainted with the trash along my usual running route. I continue uphill towards a small clearing and see the abandoned treadmill in the woods. I'm sure it was easy enough to back a truck down the small incline and leave it there for someone else to deal with. *There's no way it still works, if it ever did, after sitting out in the rain*, I think, trying to come up with a possibility for rescue.

In fact, there are at least two Instagram accounts – @wingsofatl and @randomchickenbonesofatl – both dedicated to documenting images of fast food trash, mostly chicken bones, that are littered around Atlanta. On Tumblr: chewedupchickenatl.tumblr.com.

A March 2017 article in *Atlanta Magazine* titled “What’s with the chicken bones all over Atlanta?” never answers the titular question. From an interview cited in the article, conducted with one of the Instagram chicken bone documentarians: “People are hustling. That’s the other thing, people have places to be. They don’t have time to lounge around and work on their chicken. We’re always on the go.”

When we pulled in at the county dump, Daniel and I didn’t see any actual trash, just a series of rolling green hills along a wooded path. At the end of the end of the path, which led from the landfill entrance to the disposal area, we came upon a shaded pavilion with several rows of industrial-size metal dumpsters. There was still no visible trash. The smell in the air was faintly sour, but not foul. An employee in an orange vest directed us to back in behind one of the dumpsters. We stepped into the hot sun and strapped on our work gloves.

The wooden beams made a hollow sound when they hit the bottom of the dumpster. *Thud. Boom.* The lady in the next car—the car covered in cartoonish drawings of children, hearts, flowers and a name written in a swooping font—unloaded a trunk-full of old TVs. Even daycare has upgraded to flat screens. *Crash.* The glass shattered but never settled, the sound a chain reaction as she hoisted one TV after another onto the ledge.

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“You can just wrap the vegetables in the tin foil we cooked them on. Why even bother with Tupperware?”

The San Francisco Chronicle reported that, during the 2015 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, a kayaker on a practice run hit a submerged sofa with his boat and capsized. The accompanying photograph shows a discarded sofa on the shore of Guanabara Bay. Is it the same sofa that thwarted the kayaker? If not, how many sofas are in Guanabara Bay? The sofa from the photo is surrounded on all sides by other kinds of trash: bottles, foam containers, the insole of a sneaker, a baby doll (its face streaked with dirt), a cardboard box colored with the pink and orange markings that I associate with Dunkin' Donuts. *Do they even have Dunkin Donuts in Brazil?*

When I was a child my mother threw things out of the car window. Apple cores, orange peels, peach pits, clumps of her own hair. The chicken bones, too, will degrade over time.

"I'm sending it back to the Earth," my mother would say.

"You should be careful. That's illegal, you might get pulled over," I warned, just ten or eleven years old at the time.

"Pulled over *for what?*" she asked, indignant. "For enriching the soil?"

I'm well acquainted with the trash along my usual running route. Around the bend, the green and white striped awning of Northlake Gardens Assisted Living & Memory Care comes into view. Is there really a garden anywhere on the grounds, or is it just the hot asphalt parking lot and line-up of old cat food cans? I sometimes see one of the old women who lives there shuffling around outside. She pops the top and sets the cans in a row around the water fountain. When my father died in a place just like this one, my siblings and I kept the mementos and the

valuables he'd left behind. We hauled his broken shower chair, warped computer desk, and half-used shampoo bottles (he always bought in bulk) to the dumpster out back.

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“I'm going to research whether it's more environmentally friendly to wash Tupperware or throw away plastic.”

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This is what you'll see posted on the accounts: chicken bones, picked cleaner than clean, against gray asphalt. A cockroach atop a bone with a little meat left. A chicken bone covered in so many ants they look like little specks of dirt, with a caption that reads, “We do lemon pepper wings a little differently here in Atlanta.” Chicken bones next to cigarette butts and liquor bottles. A chicken bone at the bottom of a deep puddle. A chicken bone cast aside in a store, atop a shelf, amongst several bottles of men's shaving cream. Chicken drumsticks with one bite taken out. Chicken wings that look untouched: the crispy, brown skin still fully intact. A chicken bone tossed into the center of the fronds of a spiky, palm-tree-looking plant. A chicken bone on the cracked tile floor inside a convenience store. A photo of a large mural on the side of a building that depicts a hummingbird painted in a line-art style in shades of bright teal and purple. In the foreground, a drumstick, with a little bit of meat left at either end.

As we drove away from the county dump, back toward the main road, Daniel and I waved goodbye to the man in the guard booth, who gave us a sideways look as we pulled out of the parking lot. Hauling a trailer with a sports car (the trailer is longer than the car itself) usually draws confused looks from strangers.

“Why would I bother getting a truck? This works just fine, and I own it outright,” Daniel said to no one in particular.

“And the planet appreciates your thriftiness, too,” I said, almost reaching out to pat us both on the back.

The line to get into the dump stretched around the corner, cars and trucks filled to the brim. Toilets, mattresses, shelves, bicycles, a lawnmower, wicker baskets, a treadmill, TV stands, monster truck tires, chain link fence, roofing shingles, plastic sheeting, packing peanuts that weren't held down well and escaped containment, fluttering and swirling around. What's the difference between the ditch outside the landfill and the landfill itself?

Where does everything end up?

Every weekend for the next month, the DeKalb County sanitation department offers curbside collection of bulk items, free of charge. I got a notice about this from our neighborhood association just a few weeks after our trip to the dump. The first line of the email reads, “Get ready to throw out your old mattress, DeKalb.” I wonder how many people have gone out to buy new mattresses, just because getting rid of the old one would be easy.

This morning, the Kelleys to our left put two desktop-size, ancient-looking oscillating fans out on the curb. This afternoon they added a third to the pile. A few houses down, a mattress leans against the long handle of a red vacuum cleaner. The Franklins to our right have set out several slabs of drywall, a charcoal grill, and a water heater with the metal bashed in on one side. The mass of cords and wires on top of the unit, all twisted together, resemble the arteries of a human heart.

I'm well acquainted with the trash along my usual running route. Waffle House is the last thing I pass before turning left across the I-285 overpass. On the ground in the parking lot I see cigarette butts, plastic round lids made for to-go platters, a short length of fiberglass insulation that blocks the sidewalk, a plastic water bottle filled with urine, a wad of greasy paper napkins, a shattered ballpoint pen, a hairnet, some mangled ketchup packets.

Along the freeway overpass: a fully intact car bumper, a pair of blue latex medical examination gloves, a large throw pillow with the image of a jack-o-lantern stitched on the front.

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"I want to start composting the cat litter."

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Good Afternoon,

After requesting to unsubscribe, I still regularly receive AJC Reach publications that litter my driveway and front yard at 3428 Montreal Way. Again, I would like to be entirely unsubscribed from this publication.

No response. More papers.

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"Did you know there are almost a billion cows across the world as of the last cow census? Just drinking all our fresh water and pooping methane up into the ozone layer."

I'm well acquainted with the trash along my usual running route. Most of the houses I pass are tucked into neighborhoods, but three older homes stand just off the main road. The house with the coral-colored front door and shabby wooden exterior walls that need repainting always catches my eye, the color bright and cheery despite its dilapidation.

I wonder how old paint is disposed of. If you took it to the landfill on “free dump day” would they just throw it into the ground?

The house’s days are numbered: increasing property values, development company buyout. A few weeks ago I went and sat in the audience at a rezoning hearing and ate a cookie and didn’t say anything. New town homes will go up in place of the house with the coral-colored front door. I wonder who lives in that house, where they’ll go.

Hello,

There was a paper thrown into my driveway this afternoon, despite the fact that there were two papers still in the driveway and despite the fact that I have emailed twice to unsubscribe my address at 3428 Montreal Way, Tucker, GA 30084.

The deliverer was driving a silver Kia Soul. Please notify all of you drivers immediately that they should not deliver to my home anymore.

I will continue to email you until this issue has been resolved.

I’m well acquainted with the trash along my usual running route. The smell first, then I round the corner and the sign for Southern Seafood comes into view. They must throw away more fish than they sell. Upwind of the odor, I stop along the low stone wall outside the building for a break, turn around, and head home.

It's hard some days to drive, move, breathe, eat, drink, talk, consume. I think of the heat death of the universe and sit in the quiet dark for hours on end. Punishment for my crimes.

On the way home from free dump day, I took out my phone and opened Google as Daniel pulled into a gas station. I typed, “why is there no trash at the landfill” and read from the first

article that came up: “When a section of the landfill is finished, it is covered permanently with a polyethylene cap (40 mil). The cap is then covered with a 2-foot layer of compacted soil. The soil is then planted with vegetation to prevent erosion of the soil by rainfall and wind.”

“What constitutes a ‘finished’ section of a landfill?” I wondered aloud to Daniel.

“I guess it’s when there’s no more usable space in any direction,” he replied, unscrewing the gas cap.

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“Oh my God, you and the paper towels. You think you’ve got enough?”

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It’s deer season. More than the turning leaves or the cool mornings, the first thing I notice in October is usually a deer carcass on the side of the interstate. Years ago, while driving to high school, I hit a deer in broad daylight on a state highway. I would have sworn it dropped from the sky onto the left fender of my car.

The deer that I hit died. The police notified me of this when I went to the station to report the accident for insurance purposes. I was surprised, because I hadn’t been driving fast, and it seemed to run away after the impact.

“It doesn’t always happen right away,” the officer told me, and I shrank down in misery at the thought: everything slow, the suffering extended.

The easy explanation for this phenomenon comes from a popular saying, “Like a deer in headlights.” Deer have incredible vision, especially at night. But in the face of oncoming traffic, they do nothing. They are blinded, frozen. There are some other explanations—for example, deer also have excellent hearing; when grazing near a busy road, they may hear a predator and be “spooked” into traffic—but paralysis in the face of certain doom is the only explanation I need.

In most places, the sanitation division, or some other offshoot of Public Works, is responsible for collecting roadkill. In my county, the website promises that roadkill collections are made within 48 hours of receiving notice. Sometimes they are incinerated. Sometimes they are taken to the county dump. When I read this, I pictured one of the black strappy sandals I threw away last week hooked over the horns of a buck, an odd composition of human recklessness.

I've not kept up with my email campaign to *AJC Reach* as I threatened. I can't help but laugh at my correspondence: how important I thought I was. I can't bring myself to trash the papers anymore, not entirely. Each week, a few go in the recycling and the rest I stuff into the cabinets above the washing machine. I use the pages to clean glass with Windex and protect Christmas ornaments in the box. I read online that if you wrap a green avocado in paper, it ripens faster. I'm not convinced it makes much of a difference, but still I transfer my avocados from my shopping bag to a few sheets of *AJC Reach* advertisements and fold the bundle up tight.

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I often reach for a square of paper towel even when a cloth rag would do the job just fine. Less laundry. It's just easier.

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I seem to remember reading somewhere about a playground built over top of a "finished" landfill in Florida. The landfill is still there, of course – it always will be – the trash buried just below the monkey bars and jungle gym. One day, a little girl stretched her arms up to the metal bar above the slide, hung on for a moment, then shot down as fast as she could. Before she reached the bottom—the methane in the air, a bit of a spark from the friction of her clothes

against the plastic of the sliding board—she went up in flames. I would swear to the fact of reading this, but I can't find the source anywhere when I look for it now. Maybe I saw it in a nightmare.

Looking for Trouble

I believe it is likely that my marriage will fail. Because what are the chances that I've cracked some kind of special code that evades most everyone else? I'm not some kind of doe-eyed sucker. Marriage is supposed to be hard, and I'd like to find the trouble before it finds me.

As I see it, here are some strikes against me:

My parents divorced when I was eight, but their relationship had been rocky for many years before that. I don't have a single memory of them showing love to one another. My father remarried in short order—it was his third marriage—and was divorced before his first anniversary. He died alone. My mother has been looking for love for 20 years. The parents of all my closest friends growing up had split. Sleepovers and playdates were at one parent or the other's house. I didn't grow up around romantic love. I've been left to figure it out on my own.

I got married too young, at age 24. I didn't take enough time to "find myself," and it's highly unlikely that two people will evolve and change in ways that remain compatible with one another over a lifetime.

I've never been in any other adult relationships. When I was thirteen years old, my now-husband Daniel wrote his email address on a scrap of paper meant for Brittany, another girl in our class. Brittany had told me how much she liked him, and when she accidentally left the piece of paper on a desk at the end of the day, I picked it up and tucked it inside my math textbook. Brittany was a classic middle school best friend: sometimes she was nice and sometimes she was

incredibly cruel. That day, it was the latter, and I wanted to hurt her. I sent a message from my AOL account to Daniel's Hotmail inbox.

My first email to him read simply, "I know who you are, Mwahahaha!" I thought I was funny and mysterious.

Shortly after that, we made a date to see the movie *Mean Girls*, and at the last minute I panicked about going on a date and invited a whole gaggle of my girlfriends to come along. Daniel was cool about it, and chatted easily with all of us, and after the movie he bought nachos for everyone at the Mexican restaurant next door. And that was it. We've been together now (no "offs" and "ons", no petty high school squabbles that pushed us apart - just seriously together) for fifteen years and married for three.

It seems as though this mental preparation, the "this can't possibly last forever" self-talk will make the demise easier to swallow. At least I'll see it coming. And yet somehow, despite all my misgivings, I am happy. We are happy.

But everyone knows that happiness turns to boredom over time. It's why Drew Barrymore's character is only united with the prince in the last five minutes of *Ever After*. I watch this movie often, usually after drinking rum.

"This movie? Again?" Daniel asks.

I most love the parts where the couple *almost* make it work. The prince Henry declares his love, and Danielle demurs. Danielle shows up at the ball, but is outed as a commoner by the evil stepmother, not the member of the nobility she had claimed to be. I hang on the ledge of their sweeping declarations which are, of course, about to go horribly wrong.

In the final shot of the film, Henry and Danielle, the crown prince and princess of France, stand in the castle window, smiling all goony-eyed at each other. They declare their intentions to live happily ever after. And I always think I want more: more happy. To see them live their lives together. But if that part of the film existed, I know that's when I'd look at my phone, or get up to pee, or browse for books online.

I even once tried to get a fight going about the fact that we don't fight enough. It didn't work. Daniel and I were sitting on our couch one morning— together in our isolation, noses against our screens—when I pointed this out.

“There's an article on Oprah.com about how fighting benefits your relationship,” I said.

“Why are you reading Oprah.com?” he asked.

“Someone posted it on Facebook.”

“Who?” he asked.

“I don't remember. I just clicked on it.”

“But doesn't it kind of matter who posted it? What if it's someone who's hopelessly single and has never been in a long-term relationship?” he asked.

“Well that's immaterial because it's not *written by* the person who posted it.”

I read aloud from the article, “Conflict in close relationships is not only inevitable, it's essential. Intimacy connects people who are inevitably different—as the saying goes, if two people agree about everything, one of them is superfluous.”

“We don't agree about everything,” he said. “That's ridiculous, and you know it.”

I kept reading the article and didn't respond.

Daniel and I don't fight about money. We split shared expenses down the middle and charge them monthly to a credit card that accrues airline mileage points. We keep separate bank accounts for our own hobbies: my dresses and books, his car parts and video games. About a year ago I bought a dress online that didn't fit very well, and forgot to return it in the allotted 90-day period. It sat on our dresser with the tags on, underneath a stack of folded pajamas that I never put away in the drawer, and one day the dress was unearthed, because company was coming over and we were trying to tidy up. Daniel pointed out that company never comes to the back of the house, especially not to the bedrooms.

"Still," I said.

When the dress was uncovered, he said, "Didn't you say you were going to return this?"

"Shoot, I totally forgot that was there. It's too tight in the armpits. But I think it's too late to return it now," I replied.

"Why don't you try it on again?" He suggested.

I did, and we agreed that the earth-tone color palette looked nice with my hair and eyes, so on Saturday morning we took it to the alterations place near our house. We ate breakfast in a little café next door and shared a plate with fruit, eggs, sausage, and potatoes. The fruit and eggs were shared equally, while the sausage went to him, and the potatoes to me, but I could taste that the eggs had been cooked in animal fat, (bacon, probably) and he smiled politely and asked the waitress for a couple new ones, cooked in a different pan. I was grateful because he knew I don't like confrontation. She smiled back and said "no problem," and new eggs were brought, glistening with butter. I'd have just eaten the eggs as they were given to me, but Daniel said,

“We’re paying good money, and you should get what you want.” I said, “That’s true. Thank you.”

Daniel and I don’t fight about the little things. The dress was ready in a couple of weeks. I wore it to a party at our friend’s house that Friday night. We were running late because Daniel needed to trim his beard and set something up to run on his computer while we were gone. We had almost made it out the door when he ran back to the bedroom because he’d forgotten his belt. I waited, antsy, by the door.

He called from the back of the house, “I can hear you waiting for me,” and I replied, “If someone paid you \$100 to be on time, you’d have to give the money back,” and he said, “Yeah, that’s true, but I look real good, so...worth it!”

And he did look good—his deep red beard neatly trimmed, his hair styled into a tidy ridge—but I just smirked and said, “Are you ready now?” and he said, “Yes. Probably. Maybe,” pretending to lean back away from the door as if here were going to do one last *last* thing. I laughed in full then, always the audience for his stupid, lovable humor. I opened the door, pushing the little bubble of tension outside into the cold night air, and we left.

There’s a popular song on the radio that I always catch (at least once) during my long commutes, my mind wandering deep into the psychological recesses of my marriage. The chorus goes, “Lately, I’ve been, I’ve been thinking, I want you to be happier, I want you to be happier.” A troubled relationship defined by fighting in which one person loves the other one so deeply that they feel it is their duty to cut them loose. “I think that you’ll be happier, I want you to be happier,” the man on the radio sings.

As the song plays, I speculate about the trouble I feel certain is going to befall my relationship: when, I can't say – months? Years? I run through the possible permutations of our demise. Some of the most frequently visited scenarios:

In a few years, we have a child. One of us wanted it more than the other, but neither of us will admit that. The baby is unhappy, colicky. It cries from 2am to 6am every day. I walk the cul-de-sac in front of our house while the baby shrieks. For a while, we walk together. Then, we switch to taking turns. I say that if he held the baby a different way, she would be more comfortable, less irritable. I scrutinize every little thing. That's the tiny wedge that causes the fracture.

An affair. No one ever thinks it will happen in their relationship, or that either party is capable of infidelity.

Or maybe Daniel finally takes a job where traveling is inevitable. On Monday morning, he leaves for the airport before I wake up. On Wednesday night, he comes home after I've gone to sleep.

Yet another possibility is that the inevitable fracture cannot be predicted, or so readily dissected to its root cause. Maybe its circumstances have literally never crossed my mind. Inevitably, though, once it happens, I'll look back and ask myself, "How did you not see this coming?"

We don't fight when one of us fucks up, and the other one would have every reason to climb to the top of the Eiffel Tower and shout, "I told you so!" We took a trip to Ireland, England, and France last year, using the airline miles from our credit card. When we travel, I plan everything down to the last detail, and Daniel is in charge of figuring out what to do when

my plans go to shit for some reason or another. The night before we left London for Paris, I put him in charge of all logistics to get from our B&B to the train station. We had tickets for the 8am departure but he didn't allow enough time to go through security. I'd have made it on my own, but Daniel's bag was selected for additional screening. A languid Frenchman removed and inspected every pouch and parcel from his backpack. The building vibrated a little as the 8am train pulled away above us.

I asked, "Why do you insist on bringing so much weird shit when we travel out of the country?"

He asked, "What does it matter? We'll just catch the next train."

I said, "There'll be an additional fee, I'm sure."

He said, "Nothing we can do about that now."

There was no fee. We were rebooked hassle-free on the next train in a better car than the one we'd paid for.

"And now we have time to eat breakfast," he said, seeming pleased with his gaffe.

"I hate breakfast," I said.

"Great, more for me," he said, pulling the entire chocolate croissant towards him on the table. I felt a grin blooming across my face and tried desperately to stop it, but it was too late.

Daniel and I don't fight about sex, not anymore, because there's nothing left to say. The issue is a fairly straightforward one: Daniel's appetite for physical intimacy is greater than mine. He's wondered, at times, if I even have romantic feelings for him. I do, but struggle to show it as often as he'd like. Sex comes up on most every top three list of reasons that couples fight and break up – I've done a lot of Googling on this topic. These articles are all compiled by different

organizations, but almost all are based on data from couples' therapists. Most times, it makes me feel less alone to read words that make me shake my head in agreement. It feels like there's nothing insurmountable and we're just like everyone else. Sometimes, though, I feel shock waves in my stomach: *we're just like everyone else, and everyone else is divorced.*

Years ago, the topic of sex was more volatile. Now, we're mostly silent on the subject: it's rarely spoken of, and when it is, always in carefully-measured doses. We have defaulted to using the same soft voices to talk about sex that we use to discuss dinner plans or paying taxes. I did six months of cognitive sex therapy with a woman who was so nice to me I wanted to cry as soon as I walked into her office. A few weeks into our sessions, she asked me what "healthy models for intimacy" I had growing up. A laugh escaped before I had time to stifle it – she'd hit the nail on the head. She looked at me with her puppy dog therapist eyes.

"Susan, I've been through *a lot* of therapy in my life, and just for once, I'd love to find an explanation for something other than my fucking parents," I said, and we both laughed, her a little, me more than I probably should have.

Here are a few things I learned from Susan that I still try to practice: Speak calmly and rationally. It takes away the power of this issue to control us. Talk about our problems outside the context of confrontation. This diffuses the situation as a whole. Foster and nurture other parts of the relationship. This helps you realize that not everything is bad, not everything is a struggle.

I also practice the "I" statements Susan taught me:

"I worry that the only kind of intimacy that 'counts' in your book is sex."

--"No, that's not it, I love and value all of our time spent together."

"I feel as though I'm being measured against an invisible weekly intimacy quota."

--"There is no quota, I promise."

“I am not sure what else to say.”

--“I don’t know what else to tell you.”

In the quiet moments after the fights, the ones we had in the earlier years of our relationship—inside a parked car outside a restaurant, in the cereal aisle at Kroger, on a street corner during a ghost tour/pub crawl in St. Augustine, Florida—I cried and wiped my nose into Daniel’s sleeve. Done being angry, he held me under his armpit and took my face into his hands but it was hard to look at him so I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Open your eyes. Look at me,” he said. “Hey. Hey. This is one tiny thing, in our whole big relationship, in all our years. This is *one thing*.”

“Yeah, but for being just one thing, it feels like a hundred things,” I said, and sucked up my snot.

I think of this issue, now, as similar to cancer: diagnosed early, in treatment, then remission, but the long-term prognosis is uncertain. We might defy the odds and make it years and years. But then again, it’s hard to say when things will take a turn for the worse.

Daniel and I do not fight over our conflicting views on appropriate reasons to overthrow the U.S. government. I went to a friend’s house on the one-year anniversary of the 2017 Women’s March and spent several hours writing postcards to every scumbag in power. I poured my dumb, liberal heart out about the Children’s Health Insurance Program, the DREAM Act and the immigration ban, environmental concerns, the repeal of net neutrality, LGBTQ rights, and more. We listened to Nina Simone on Spotify and talked about how we wanted to burn every damn thing to the ground.

A few days later, Daniel read about a new law taking effect in Mississippi, or maybe Missouri (Montana?) It was one of the M states, that much he knew. He loses the details a lot; I bring them into focus. Under the new rules, each household would be allowed a maximum of two vehicles registered to it. Two cars per family, and no more.

“Can you believe how fucking stupid that is?” Daniel asked. “I’d overthrow the government over that shit.”

“So that’s the straw that would break the camel’s back in your mind? An immigrant father was arrested today taking his children to school, but you’ll be damned if the government is going to limit your car collection?”

“Yep. I think that’s my limit,” he said.

I thought of laughing at him. I thought of slapping him. I just smirked and shook my head.

In my marriage, I try to do as much “right” as I can. There are rules that can be followed, and order that can be imposed. The advice written in the guestbook from our wedding is probably as good a place to start as any. Most of it is not hard to remember, because it’s the same stuff everyone tells you, like those old couples on the evening news, the ones who have been together for fifty or sixty years. They always offer the cheesiest marriage advice. “Put your relationship before everything else,” and “Never go to bed angry,” they say. It’s the kind of stuff that makes me want to roll my eyes or pretend to stick my finger down my throat. But I fight the urge. I try to take it all to heart, and learn from Daniel’s Aunt Debbie, and my best friend’s grandparents, and even from that one crazy college friend who seems unlikely to settle, because it’s impossible to know where the needed wisdom will come from, or from whom.

Ours is not a traditional guest book, but a framed poster that hangs on the wall in our guest bedroom. “Leah & Daniel, May 9, 2015” is printed in dark green ink atop a drawing of a tree, the root system underneath larger than the trunk and foliage combined, stringy roots in all directions, which, from certain angles, look like fingers plunged into the dirt. I bought two felt-tipped pens from a craft store so that all the signatures would look the same. As guests were beginning to enter the reception area, my sister-in-law found me to say that the pens didn’t work. The ink came out in spurts, or not at all, leaving the signatures choppy and messy. No one had an extra. Bridesmaids scoured their purses and the caterers searched their van. When Daniel caught word of the situation, he walked over to his backpack and pulled out three ballpoint pens with blue ink. I should have known to ask him. If I had needed a package of flat-head screws and a flamethrower and a loaf of Sourdough bread, he would have produced them from his backpack.

Along the rounded root mass underneath the image of the tree is written the one thing I always come back to, the thing I can make the most sense out of. Denise, a friend older in age and wisdom, drew an arrow to the roots below and wrote, “Always care for these roots and your family tree will flourish.” She doesn’t define what those roots are, and I am freed by the idea that for Daniel and me, it could be anything. We can decide what is needed to sustain us.

There was a hot spring day a few years back when Daniel and I ripped the dead, scraggly shrubs out of our front yard. They were there when we moved in and we’d been meaning to get rid of them forever. We borrowed his dad’s truck and wrapped a chain around the base of each plant, then draped the chain across the top of an old tire before connecting the other end to the tow hitch. Daniel researched the project before we got started. As with most things, he had a foolproof plan. The sharp angle created by the tire pulls the plant straight up and out, rather than

dragging it sideways. I didn't think it would work. The plants were large and old, and I could only imagine how deep the roots went. He got into the cab and rolled down the window.

“Let me know when I start making progress,” he said.

The truck jerked forward and the dirt around the plant shook. With a great rumbling, ripping noise, the whole thing lifted up and out of the ground. The root clump hung in the air like a mangled fist.

“Okay, that was straight up the most satisfying thing I have ever witnessed,” I said. “Just like that. All those times I'd come up the driveway and think about how ugly these bushes are, and now they're gone.”

In place of the smaller shrubs, we planted double knockout rose bushes that bloom bright pink nearly year round. Their thorny branches wrap around the metal banister on the front porch. We still haven't planted anything in the area vacated by the larger bushes. For starters, we built a short retaining wall made of sand-colored stones to encase the nothing planted there. When it was finally finished, (after more than a year of intermittent work and one partial collapse) we stood in the street and surveyed our work. I thought we should remove one layer of stone to make it shorter; Daniel thought we should add a layer to make it taller. We're still thinking it over, each considering the other's position.

To finish the project, maybe we'll save up some money and consult a landscape architect. She'll draw up plans and provide a quote that will sit in my email, marked unread for months while we hem and haw over whether or not it's worth the cost. Perhaps we'll finally get sick of looking at the gaping hole, do five minutes of internet research, and make a special trip to Home Depot to buy some semi-dwarf Loropetalums.

“Good in full sun, drought hardy, attractive purple foliage,” I’ll read aloud from my Pinterest board.

“Sounds simple enough,” Daniel will say, grabbing his car keys. He says this phrase often, calling things “simple.”

The sun will have nearly set when we get home. “Let’s plant them tomorrow,” we’ll agree, but we’ll forget, and accidentally leave them on the porch until the roots suffocate in the too-small containers. I’ll discover them weeks later— leaves drooping, the soil dry and chalky— when I go out to water the rose bushes.

“We forgot about those plants and now they’re dead. Like really dead.”

And he’ll come up with some stupid pun, something like, “Here today, tarragon tomorrow,” or “I can’t believe they could leaf us like that” and I’ll laugh more than is reasonable, and grab a trash bag, and dump the dead plants inside. He’ll take it to the bin in the carport, and the whole time he’s outside I’ll be thinking of a way to one-up him with a better pun (“pun-up him,”) and as soon as he opens the door I’ll say, “I guess we’re just going to have to dill with it!” He’ll return my too-big laughter, and we’ll eat dinner, silently, in front of the TV. And maybe that will be enough.

My Mother's Breaking Heart

On Saturday nights, after yet another man had broken her heart, my mother would haul her ancient guitar and music stand into the middle of the living room floor. She'd pull a cold Killian's Irish Red from the back of the garage refrigerator—cheap beer was fine, and she wasn't picky—before settling in for the evening. She'd set the bottle next to her feet. It always seemed on the verge of tipping over on the carpet, but never spilled.

No one would write a love song about my parents' marriage, which ended officially when I was eight years old. As an adult, though, I get the sense from my mother that it had been over long before that. "Your father loved himself most of all," I've heard her say. A few years after divorce—nearing fifty and with two young children—my mother hoped to find love once again. And sometimes she did, but never for long.

The men who ended it with her always gave a reason, something to make her feel small and unlovable. Byron had always pictured himself settling down with someone younger. There was Terry from Texas—they met in the early days of online dating—who sent an email to tell my mother that, after much consideration, he had decided she wasn't worth the cost of the airplane ticket to Georgia. Blue (not his given name) from Montana lived with us for a few years before it ended. My mother never shared with me the details of their parting. There were men who didn't like children. There were men who would love their *own* children, of course, if they ever had any. There were men whose names I've forgotten.

Those Saturday nights, though, she didn't always seem sad. Sometimes, she was hopeful that there was something new, something just right, around the corner. She knew what to play, the right words to say to herself—to hold on to hope—and opened her songbook to “Morning Has Broken” by Cat Stevens.

Praise for the singing

Praise for the morning

Praise for them springing fresh from the world.

She didn't practice often enough for her playing to seem effortless. She had to hunt for the chords and try a few before landing on the right one. Her playing was uneven at first, the words out of time with her strumming. But after listening for a while, I stopped hearing the guitar and her voice as separate sounds, even though she still missed notes and hesitated during key changes. Every so often, she paused to rest her hands, which were not rough and callused from regular playing, but tender and soft. At the end of the evening, the pads of her index and middle fingers were red and dented. She took a break every now and then but it never lasted long: just enough of a pause for her to take a sip of beer, shuffle the sheet music to the next song, sit up straight, and start from the beginning.

Some nights she knew I was watching, and did not cry, but allowed her voice to crack. These nights were for Emmylou Harris.

Love hurts, love scars, love wounds and mars.

It's not that she didn't cry in front of me, that she was afraid to show me her broken heart. She often did, sometimes while washing dishes or driving me to ballet practice, always at

odd times that didn't make sense to me as a child. But as an adult I understand it perfectly, how sadness always grabs you by the throat at the most mundane moments. You're staring at a red light and look over at the passenger seat to see nobody riding shotgun. You reach for the dish towel and can't fathom the fact that no one is there to hand it to you.

I always asked a simple question: "Mommy, why are you crying?"

I doubt she knew how to explain it to me, so she'd dab her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse and give the simplest answer: "Babe, I just feel blue."

But when she sang she was powerful. Sometimes she seemed to sing as a means of making a promise to herself of something better to come. Another favorite was "Ramblin' Man" by The Allman Brothers.

And when it's time for leavin'

I hope you'll understand

That I was born a ramblin' man

When she sang those words, she was not the woman left behind. She was the one to never settle. She was the catch who was always just out of reach. When she sang that song, she became the person I saw her as.

I watched her through the open doorway, from the floor of my bedroom, where I worked absentmindedly on whatever handicraft had overtaken my elementary school classroom that week. I never tired of taking in this version of my mother, who was everything she deserved in someone else. It seemed impossible to me that she could be lonely. I hooked a short strand of yarn over my latch hook and made a man for her in my mind. He would be a vegetarian, and would gratefully eat the lentil soup and baked tofu that made my brother and me beg for chicken

nuggets. He wouldn't know the first thing about movies or television or what was "cool"—my mother didn't have time for such frivolities. He would know how to operate a tractor. He would till perfect rows in the garden and help her round the dirt into mounds for her cucumber vines. He would fix things: the garage door, her heart. He wouldn't have to be that special. She wasn't asking for too much. He'd just need to be there, on nights exactly like this one, when she was sad and the world was heavy, and she needed someone to stand with her at the kitchen sink. She'd wash and he would dry.

We waited.

I can't bring myself to ask my mother if she's still holding out hope. She turned 67 a few weeks ago. These days I drive an hour south, from Atlanta to the suburbs, to visit her as often as I can. Sometimes a month goes by between our visits. She cooks—her marinated, baked tofu is now a regular fixture on my own dinner table—or we drive across town to our favorite Mexican restaurant. I can't bring myself to sit back down on the floor of my childhood bedroom and feel her hollowness, her longing, as if it were my own. I ask about other things instead. The new rainwater irrigation tanks keep her flowers going strong without draining the well. She had to harass the gravel company every day for a month but they finally came back to fix their shoddy repair of the ruts in the driveway.

Sometimes, as I drive us to the restaurant for dinner, we don't say anything at all. An old favorite by Alan Jackson comes on the radio and plays quietly in the background until I crank the volume.

It sounds simple, that's what you're thinkin'

But love could walk through fire without blinkin'

It doesn't take much when you get enough

Livin' on love

We sing it together. My mother sings the high harmony of the chorus in a voice I recognize well. I tell myself that another kind of love—that of her children and friends and family—has been enough, is enough. I find myself foolishly wishing that the right man might still find his way to my mother, though I suspect he will not.

All this brings to mind a different song, a song my mother hates. It's a cover of Janice Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" by a country artist named Faith Hill. Hill's cover would sometimes come on the radio while my mother drove me to school—I'd bop along to it in the backseat and butcher the words—and my mother couldn't pass up an opportunity to educate me. "This song is about *pain*. Janice sings it like she's writhing around on the bathroom floor. This lady makes it sound like, 'Oh sure, please do, why don't you just go on ahead and take another piece of my heart!'" She said this in her best high-pitched, sing-songy voice, imitating Hill's cheery tone.

Many years later, even as we sing the upbeat tune of "Livin' on Love," my mother sounds a bit like Janice: she pulls the words out from a place deep inside.

I take my eyes from the road for just a moment and look over at my mother in the passenger seat. I try to read her mind, but her face is matter-of-fact, concentrated. The song isn't finished yet; a few bars remain. As "Livin' on Love" comes to a close, we each land on a note in the G major chord. It sounds nice enough, but still incomplete: one part missing, unsung.

Unpacking My Father

In an antique steamer trunk at the foot of my bed, I store a small collection of the things my father left behind. I sit with my back against the wall, sorting through each item one-by-one, certain that I've missed something in the past: the key to his secrets right before my eyes, but as yet undiscovered. I study his childhood drawings of the correct vs. incorrect way to drink from a water fountain, which is folded inside a pre-flight procedures checklist for an F-89 aircraft. I run my fingers around the framed edges of plaques for high school agriculture and debate and music. I thumb through a small album containing photos of Christmas 1964: two sons on my father's lap; his first wife Pixie's stomach round with another boy on the way. Looking through the boxes of my father's belongings makes me question and agonize over what I'll leave behind one day, what story my things will tell about the life I lived.

In 1996, when he was 63 years old, a major stroke left my father partially paralyzed. After it, he spent six weeks at an in-patient rehabilitation center, re-learning how to cut open an avocado (he loved avocado sandwiches) and get dressed in the morning. The toll on his body was one thing. The toll on his mind, which was gradual, was another. In the early days of his illness, it was believed he suffered from Alzheimer's disease, but the more probable explanation is that his dementia had been brought on by multiple strokes and seizures. The first and most severe of these attacks was in 1996, but there were an untold number of others.

My parents' divorce was final in 1998, two years after the first stroke. I turned eight years old that year. I saw my father at least once a week as a child and teenager. He lived a few different places after my parents divorced, but in 2002, he opted for an assisted living facility just a few towns over from where I lived with my mother. He was sharp, then, and determined. He swam every morning. He seemed too young and healthy to live in a place with a nursing station, but there were many different levels of care offered. In those years, he got help with his laundry and ate the meals provided in the dining room, but still took care of himself for the most part.

That all changed in 2006 when an "episode" left my father confused by his surroundings. He didn't know his favorite nurse's name. He asked if the cows had been milked already that day (he'd been born on a working dairy farm but hadn't worked or lived there in decades.) My older half-brothers rushed to town and moved our father from the assisted living facility in Georgia to a nursing home in Wisconsin. There, just down the street from where two of my brothers lived, they could keep an eye on things.

My father's personal items came to me by way of my mother, who was my father's second wife. With all our father's things in boxes, my brothers realized there was nowhere to put his armoire or office filing cabinet. My mom wanted to help however she could, and offered to store his shower chair and bed frame in her garage. It turns out she got some smaller items as well, such as the few boxes of memorabilia she gave me a few years ago. My father never needed any of it back. He died at the Good Samaritan Society Nursing Home in Lodi, Wisconsin on October 5, 2014, six days before my 24th birthday.

His disparate collection of personal items gives shape to my wondering about his life, but offers few answers. In a news clipping dated September 24, 1948, my father stands between his high school agriculture instructor and a classmate, Carl Schoeni, who is being awarded a first

place ribbon for his barley exhibit. He cuts his eyes toward Carl, who smiles broadly. I feel I'm on the cusp of reading my father's mind: the first time he fell just shy of something important, something he really wanted but didn't get? In the photo, his lips are a thin, dark line.

Perusing a stack of birthday cards from his family, I wonder why he kept only the ones from 1956. He turned twenty-three that year. He was away from his home in Wisconsin, completing basic training at Spence Air Force Base in Moultrie, Georgia. In letter after letter, aunts and uncles write to him about the cold. Eleven inches of snow on the ground. Eight degrees below zero when they woke up yesterday morning. His parents did not send a gift, as they were anticipating his return "soon." Did their words make him long for home, or turn his face upward towards the south Georgia sun?

My father disappeared when my parents divorced. I saw him but I did not know him. I was so young. He disappeared again in 2006 when he moved to Wisconsin. I visited him at the nursing home three times in the eight years that he lived there. I might have visited more, but the first visit had cracked me open. There's nothing like seeing a parent who has deteriorated so completely in mind and body. On the second visit, I had a panic attack at the entrance to the facility and waited outside for thirty minutes while I tried to calm down. It was easy to stay away. During those few visits, my father saw me but he did not know me.

We have so few stories together. I imagine his life as a blank map upon which each of his items might serve as markers, and if only I can arrange them in the correct way, I'll be able to write another story with both of us in it. A story that I can read and ponder over and over, in the same way I do with my precious few memories of the time we spent together. My father did not prepare adequately for his demise, not in the way I most needed him to. He did not leave clear

directions for how to uncover the little insights about him that I never learned while he was alive. He didn't leave a note. His collection is a museum exhibit devoid of explanatory placards.

My father was a member of the "Slinger Happy Workers" 4-H Club in high school. In his record book, which documents his activities from 1948 to 1950, he wrote the following account of 1949:

And now the records are all completed, the rest of the stories are finished, and I have before me the task of writing the story of what I consider a very successful club year...I'll devote this story to some of the biggest joys and disappointments...I couldn't show my pigs because they had contracted a contagious disease...Along with the sorrow came many joys...I showed my cattle and was very thrilled to get in the blue ribbon group with a bull of mine...to participate in activities at the state fair have been one of the high spots of my year.

The 4-H record book represents the biggest "theme" for his belongings, that is, items related to my father's life as an agricultural prodigy: state fair brochures, blue ribbons, photos of the pigs, cows, corn, and barley that he cultivated, write-ups in the newspaper about his leadership of the Future Farmers of America chapter at his high school. The record book is one of few things in the collection that contains his words— descriptions of his thoughts, fears, joys, and experiences—yet it keeps me out. His writing is vague and disinterested. If a student in my composition class submitted an essay like his, I would lecture them about building scenes that "show" rather than "tell," about character, dialogue, emotional complexity on the page, on and on. I would tell them, "You are the only one who sees the world in the particular way that you do. Show me things through your filter."

But no one ever gave him this advice, or he didn't listen to it. His responses are perfunctory. He writes the way my students do when they think they are writing what I want to hear: "I was a little scared, but I was also thankful for the privilege because I felt the experience was very helpful." In reporting on his health project, my father writes the following goals: "1. Get into the habit of drinking more water daily, especially during school. 2. Keep a better check on my posture at all times. 3. Learn to stay home when I have a bad cold." Like the charts that track the financial gains and losses of his animals, he writes to check the right boxes, to say all the right things, trying to conform to the narrow pathway set out for his life.

I consider what I'd like to have in place of his sterile notetaking and objective observations: a diary of his teenage years, complete with every innermost thought? Could I even bring myself to read such a document? To try to learn about a person—after their death and through a trivial collection of the random stuff they left behind—suddenly seems insane and perverse, like poking at a corpse with a stick.

I kept a proper diary from March 7, 2001 to November 10, 2001. I was ten years old that year; my father was fifteen at the time he made his journal entries. My diary is the polar opposite of my father's journal: mine includes rambling, play-by-play accounts of each day — ("Dear Diary, This turned out to be an okay vacation. We are heading home. Right now we are in the parking lot of the North Carolina Folk Art Center. We saw some cool drums and sculptures. Time to go now. Bye.") — hardly ever go without a full report of which boy I had a crush on at the time. ("Cooper keeps telling me he likes me and I need to give him an answer. Please help me with this decision god. Thank you and bye for today.") It is contrived drama from absolutely no substance. It makes me cringe, of course. When I first came back across the little pink felt-

covered notebook after it was in storage for many years, I thought of tossing it. But it's still in my own memory box, part of my story.

The Official Souvenir Program of the Rose Bowl—January 1, 1953, University of Wisconsin vs. University of Southern California—documents my father's participation in the event as a member of the UW Madison marching band.

He played French horn. My father took a train back from Pasadena to Santa Fe. I know that, because he saved a menu from the Santa Fe Dining Car—Fred Harvey Service, featuring spiced watermelon cubes and grilled salmon steak with parsley butter, dated January 2, 1953. It is folded inside a colorful painting of the Grand Canyon. Wisconsin lost the game, *but I imagine that it was hard to feel sad when the world felt so large: the farthest away from home he'd ever been. He pictured the colorful maps they drew in grade school, how everything around Wisconsin seemed gray and unfathomable. But now he was aboard a train, slicing through the outer fringes of his imagination. He sat in the window and went a bit dizzy as the unfamiliar landscape sprawled out before him: desert trees, red clay, buildings and homes in a style so different they must exist in another language.*

A friend in the next seat said, "It sure is weird out here. Makes you miss home, doesn't it?"

But my father did not share the feeling. "No," he said, "I just want to see it all."

I, too, collect snippets from my travels, like a ten-cent cashout voucher from Casino Niagara, March 15, 2011. During my junior year spring break from college, we crossed the border into Canada from my friend's hometown in upstate New York just to say we'd done it. It

was the first time I'd been out of the United States. In the car on the way home, I wrote a short journal entry of sorts about our trip on the back side of the voucher: "I played \$10 on the slot machine. At one point, I was up \$30 but thought I could get even more. That's when my luck bottomed out. I guess that's why gambling can turn into an addiction. It felt so...cool! to be on a trip with my friends instead of my parents. I could picture myself being on my own. I was broke from the trip but splurged on a \$10 cocktail at dinner, because twenty-year-olds can drink in Canada, woohoo! It was something with coffee, and tasted dreadful alongside pizza and salad. Oh well!"

I can't imagine what occasion I'd have to share, with anyone, such an inconsequential snippet from my life: so many little moments swallowed up in the larger story of a person. But it's the little stories I crave, the inner churning of my father's mind. I'll never know for sure what my father was thinking on the train home, on the cusp of the rest of his life, a young man about to start living.

A stack of programs and accolades for band and choir performances, including, "The Junior Class of Hartford High School Presents *We Shook the Family Tree*, A Comedy in Three Acts, by Hildegard Dolson, Directed by Miss Shirley Rogers, Hartford High School Auditorium, Dec. 7-8, 1949. 6:00pm.

My father played Mr. Shermer, the father of the main character's friend. *I imagine him backstage, the energy and anticipation of his classmates buzzing in his ear like a mosquito that he tried to swat away. He pictured everything that might go wrong. He thought of the dress rehearsal, how everything had seemed a little off, the funny lines landing flat, the pacing all wrong. When it seemed as though Ann was forgetting her line, he delivered it to her*

telepathically, and willed her to remember. When his fake eyeglasses were not on the prop table, he went on stage without them, and so could not do the part of the scene where he takes a dramatic pause—removing the glasses from his face and wiping them on his shirt before moving on. He knew that no one noticed or cared as much as he did. He told himself not to care so much about the little things.

I model my father's experience on stage after the night that I sat—jittery, nauseated—in the corner backstage, my high school acting troupe moments away from our production of a 10-minute play, "The League of Semi-Superheroes," my knees shaking, a bit of water staining the front of my blouse after I absentmindedly tipped my cup too far. I played the role of Carol, the office and talent manager for the zany and charismatic, but blindly optimistic, superhero group. Carol held everything together. She did not mince words or care about anyone's feelings. I had memorized every line of the play, not just my own. When one of my fellow actors paused too long during rehearsal, I raised my arm to cover my mouth and whisper-shouted the next word at them. When I had trouble sleeping the night before our premiere, I recited the play in my head from start to end, then from end to start.

My performance as Carol in "The League of Semi-Superheroes" was captured on a shaking personal camcorder by one of the other parents. They gave each of us a copy on a CD. My copy is in my memory box.

In inventing the story of my father's high school play, I make him the source of my incessant need for control, as though it were passed down in my DNA to sweat the small stuff. It feels less lonely that way, almost pleasant, to think of the little ways, both good and bad, that our stories may have overlapped.

Dozens of black and white snapshots, scalloped edges, 3.5 x 5 inches, including headshots of perfectly-permed young women with pearl necklaces. My young father—swim trunks, wet hair—sitting on a lawn in front of a row of bicycles. My father perched on the table part of an old-school student chair/desk combo, legs crossed, talking to a woman beside him. A wide-view shot of a parking lot; a sign on the command tower reads, “Base Operations, Williams A.F.B.” A group of students hold a dramatic tableau: three men on the ground, four leaning down with concerned care on their faces, another boy and girl standing to the side, the girl pointing her finger towards the audience, the boy looking on.

Amidst the unknown faces, I think I see those of people I know. Is one of the women my mother? I reason that the eyes are similar, and it could be a yearbook photo I’ve never seen. I deduce, from the one or two names listed on the back, (Marilyn, Hannah) that some of them are his cousins. The photographs are one of the few at least partially-solvable mysteries in the box. I could call my Aunt Sharon, my father’s sister, and schedule a time to bring the box to her house and sit together with our legs crossed on her living room floor. She would smile fondly at some of the long-forgotten faces of her youth and tell me a story or two about their cousins from Seattle who made the long journey to Wisconsin for a visit every few years. If I asked her to, she would put my father into those stories as a character and tell me about meeting his prom date or watching him play the piano in preparation for a concert, what his face looked like when he accidentally struck the wrong note. She would guess and approximate and misremember and get all the details wrong, just as I have been doing. I could patch the holes in my own narrative with the scrap pieces of hers. Together, they could form a man, but that man would not be my father.

One day I'll probably add some photos to my memory box, maybe shots of my father and me together. There are not many to choose from; I've discovered about thirty in total. The earliest was taken the day after my birth on the back deck of our hold house. His beard is neatly trimmed and his mustache is wild and stringy, a bit silver on the edges. He is not smiling or frowning, but just looking at the camera plainly. After his death, I went to my mother's house and scoured every plastic sleeve of the old family photo albums, stored on a shelf in the den, hoping for images I hadn't seen before or ones that I'd forgotten about. There were some blank spaces from where I'd stolen a few for myself over the years. But what remained were all the old favorites, and there was nothing new to consider.

*

Several blank, unsent postcards including three that feature artistic renderings of San Antonio landmarks. "Nix Professional Building," "Mission San Jose," and "Moonlight on the San Antonio River."

I think of my father wandering around San Antonio with no particular destination in mind. He had a camera strapped around his neck. In the early days of his career as an airline pilot, when traveling was an adventure and not a job, he allowed himself this small luxury. He took cues from his body; his mind was quiet. When he felt hungry he wandered into a café for a sandwich. When his feet were sore he paused along the winding riverside path and sat atop a stone ledge. Young lovers rode by on their bicycles. A child begged his mother for a piece of candy outside a sweet shop. He observed it all, the hustle and bustle of the city, and felt grateful for his solitude. He barely spoke at all during his two-day stay in the city, except to ask for directions. When he stopped to capture the glinting city lights against the smooth surface of the water, he feared it would not do justice to what he saw. Whatever photo he took would not bring

him back to this brief moment in time when he owed nothing to anyone, where no one knew his face or his name. The next day, before heading to the airport, he stopped at a newsstand outside his hotel and he saw an image of the river captured in just the way he'd seen it the previous evening. The sky was the exact shade of blue black, with wavy scraps of clouds hanging underneath the full moon. He thought the artist must have stood at the exact spot where he had. He bought it and two others. He would keep the one of the river for himself, but as for the other two, he didn't know what to say, or who to say it to. He shoved them in the pocket of his suitcase and wrote nothing.

My own collection of postcards comes from everywhere. Each different natural wonder and cityscape is like a time capsule. When I look at one, I am immediately transported back. On a trip to Yellowstone National Park during my early teenage years, my mother scolded me for complaining about our hike, constantly asking how much farther we had to go. I ran ahead from the group to pout and shortly came upon Kepler Falls, so loud it drowned out all other sound, the water moving so fast it looked fake. I fell silent. In comparison, everything else felt so small. I asked for a post card in the gift shop of the ranger station. When I look at it now, I feel that same smallness, which lifts my earthly worries.

When I bought a brightly-colored, impressionistic rendering of a snow-capped mountain in Switzerland, I had been without my father for one month. I had jumped at the chance to travel with a friend to my father's ancestral homeland, where his father was born and immigrated from, and bought the airline ticket on an impulse before I could overthink it and change my mind. Inside a small chapel, built in the shadow of the Matterhorn, I stared at a brightly-burning candle and named it in my father's honor. On the train ride back to Lucerne that evening, I used the

back of my mountain postcard as a journal and wrote the following entry: “My mother told me that when she was in Switzerland with my father many years ago, she was laughed at if she asked for a drink of water. The Swiss drank beer and coffee. Water was for the cows. On a hike through the mountains, she came across a stream of cold, clear blue water. She was so happy she could have cried. Since I am seeing ghosts already in this country, I stared out the train window as we wound through the mountains and picked a spot. I could see the them there, down on their knees, scooping the water into their mouths with cupped hands, as if in prayer.” I grieved during that trip, but was also at peace.

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There are many objects of mine for which my father never told a story, and there are objects of his for which I can’t invent stories. Try as I might, I can’t always position us both into the same basic narrative.

For instance, I’ve kept 100+ movie ticket stubs, one for every film I’ve seen in theaters since 2004. Other tickets, too: public lectures, plays, concerts (including my first-ever, the Backstreet Boys *Millennium Tour*, in February 2000); tickets to museums and baseball games, my ticket to The World of Coca-Cola from the time I played tourist in my own city with my best friend in high school who was moving away and wanted to see everything again before she left. Numbers from all the races I’ve run. I leave one-sentence notes on the backs of some stubs to remind myself of a particular memory from that day, like the time I begrudgingly saw *Casanova* with a friend who loved the actor Heath Ledger and how, in the bathroom on the way out of the theater, the hand dryers weren’t working so we left our hands to drip-dry, forgetting that it was an unusually cold night in Fayetteville, Georgia, and we laughed and shrieked at our bad decision until our sides hurt and a thin layer of ice froze on our hands. Or so the story goes.

There's ample evidence of all the stupid, random fun I've had with everyone I know and love, from childhood through to last week.

In my father's items, it's hard to find traces of him outside his professional and academic life. Programs for every band and choir concert in high school? Yes. Plaques and certificates commending his work in the Air Force and commercial airline industry are plentiful. There are even a few book reports and speech outlines from college courses in Political Science and Public Speaking respectively. But nothing suggests where he spent a Saturday night after work and school was over, and he just wanted a little dumb fun. An item in his obituary, written by one of my brothers, reads, "Maurice was a longtime member of the Hartford City Band and Hartford Community Chorus. His other life-long passions were gardening and reading novels."

After his first stroke, my father's French horn stayed inside its felt-lined case. It was always around: in the corner of his bedroom, next to the Christmas decorations in the attic. I once remember him taking it out to clean the pipes with a long felt-tipped brush. But after his first stroke, I never heard him play.

I can recall standing with my mother in her garden many times — though before my parents divorced, I suppose the garden was tended by them both. My mother enlisted me to pull carrots and form the dirt into mounds for the cucumber vines. I held the watering can and squished aphids on the pole beans. Under her careful supervision, I used a sharp kitchen knife to harvest asparagus stalks. But I cannot see my father there, not once.

Novels: It's hard not to think of this a "something nice" description to write in an obituary. Everyone likes to read, right? Even in his retirement years, disabled from his strokes, with hours a day of free time on his hands, I can remember my father partaking in just one

“hobby” – watching TV, flipping back and forth between golf games, episodes of *Frasier*, and The Weather Channel while lying in bed. I have no memory of him reading.

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It never takes long before my back grows sore against the wall, all my father’s artifacts stacked into a few neat piles between the “V” shape of my outstretched legs. My tailbone tingles and throbs. I pull myself up using the footboard of the bed as leverage and take a final look inside the trunk. Nothing. I stack everything back inside. The lid of the trunk doesn’t close right, the wood and metal warped from moisture and time. It’s always open a crack, a sliver of light shining inside.

My first “memory box” was a pink plastic container made for pencils and markers with a goldfish sticker on the top. In first grade, my teacher sent me home with a copy of our class photo in my homework folder, and that evening, I held the photo in my hands and pressed my nose to the glossy surface: my friend Brittney Neskey’s cat-eye glasses with the sparkly “diamonds” on the corners, Jared’s Donald Duck t-shirt (he often imitated Donald Duck during lunch and our whole class would try to prevent milk from spraying out our noses). I was struck by a sharp fear that I’d lose track of the photo—and along with it, the memory of the elaborate friendship handshake that Courtney Shelnit and I made up on the playground—if I didn’t take care to put it somewhere special. So I put it in the box, and the collection grew from there.

The farther away my father got, both in mind and in body, the more I filled up my memory box (now a 12 x 10 letter box with an elastic band holding it together), foolishly clinging to the impossible idea that I could hold onto a part of myself through my things. That my items would outlive me and, just by the nature of their existence, keep my story alive. That I can somehow escape my father’s fate. But of course they cannot. And I will not.

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There's only one "thing" passed down from my father that doesn't live in a box inside a trunk: a diecast model of a 1957 Studebaker Hawk, trimmed with gold and white accents. Studebaker is the only make my father drove until the company went out of business. He must have bought the model after my parents got divorced; I first remember seeing it on the mantel in the condo where he lived for a few years right after they split. It now lives on an end table in my living room.

A scene from one of the many road trips I took with my father and my brother Hans, from Georgia to Wisconsin, to visit my father's family: We were somewhere in Illinois (all the Studebakers were long dead; my father drove a Dodge Caravan with an automated wheelchair ramp) when he pulled over at a small farmhouse on the side of the road. I'd been asleep in the car when we stopped; the whole thing felt a bit like a dream. He knocked on the door. A man about my father's age answered and took us out back to a large garage.

Inside were rows of cars hidden under covers. I can't hear the conversation now. I just remember standing in the corner, rubbing my eyes, watching as the two men walked slowly down the row, pulling the covers as they went, smoothing their hands over the shiny paint jobs, opening the doors, kneeling down to look at the details on the front bumper: doing what all men who love cars have done forever. When I look over at the Studebaker model on my table, I am grateful for the memory of a simple truth about my father.

When I Clean My House I Disappear

When my house starts looking a little dirty, I stop whatever I'm doing and clean it. In the morning, for instance, I sometimes reach for the lint trap in the dryer before I've brushed my teeth. I clean my house in the small hours of the morning before family is expected for dinner the next day. I strain my neck and contort my arms to reach the skinniest vacuum cleaner attachment into the space behind the refrigerator. Rationally, I understand that no one can even see what's back there, but when I've been following and wiping out a trail of cat hair and dust and bits of stray food from the bar cart to the porch door to the trash can, why stop short? I clean my house the way my mother's sister cleans hers, with the same absurd attention to detail that once prompted my mother to say, when we visited Aunt Judy during the summers of my childhood, "I feel like we're staying in a museum."

When I clean, I push every uncertainty and every trouble from my mind. I don't know what will make my best friend stop trying to drink herself to death. I do know that if I soak orange peels in vinegar for a few weeks and use the solution on the side of the refrigerator, it will remove every trace of congealed trash juice that has splashed up from the bin next to it. I've never come up with a satisfactory answer—for myself or others—to the question of what I want to "do with my life." But I've got the timer set for thirty minutes while the baking soda paste dissolves the grease on the inside of my oven, and when that's finished, nothing will seem as bad. My father is dead. The wood floors are shining with Murphy's soap. A vague and

paralyzing feeling of ennui strikes on a Saturday morning and commands me: *vacuum under the couch cushions or this will go on for days*. I erase the line of fuzz with the scrubby attachment on the shop-vac but the listless feeling stays anyway, for days, sometimes weeks. It goes away, then finds its way back.

When the granite countertops in my kitchen lose their shine, I use a dry rag to knock all the larger particles—bread crumbs and avocado stems and bits of onion skin—onto the floor to be swept up at the very end of the process. The smell of my plant-derived, over-priced, over-marketed, lemon-basil countertop spray—a few spritzes, but not too much, or it leaves a filmy residue—awakens fully the demon inside of me. I soak the rag under the faucet in water so hot it makes my hands sting, and work fast, because steam helps loosen the more stubborn substances. Lots of elbow grease. When the heat kicks on, a thin layer of sweat forms on my forehead. I stoop down to get on eye-level with the stone slab, which is the only way to properly survey my work. I can see that the job is close to done. A dousing of rubbing alcohol leaves the surface smooth as glass and just as shiny. I wring the rag out and lay it to dry under the sink.

When my house is clean enough, I will be a different person than I am now. A friend will call while I'm hopping around the large tiles in my kitchen, being careful not to land on one that has already been sprayed and scrubbed, and I'll drop everything to go sit on a porch somewhere, maybe that Mexican restaurant overlooking the Chattahoochee River on the other side of town that my friend Katie really likes but where I never agree to go because it's always rush hour in Atlanta, and if you don't get stuck on the way there you'll get double-snagged on the way home: road work first, followed by an accident that blocks every lane but one. We will drink margaritas. I'll get tipsy and welcome the light buzzing sound in my ear, because it will drown

everything else out. I will not wonder if I'm walking the line between tipsy and drunk. I won't worry about upsetting my stomach or feeling sleepy for the rest of the day.

When my house is clean enough, I will go outside and ride my bike on the kind of cloudless blue day that, in my past life, I'd have spent scrubbing spaghetti sauce from the threads of the little screw that holds the handle of my frying pan to the base. The pollen will be thick in the air and I will sneeze. My nose will run and I won't have remembered to bring a tissue. I'll think of turning back, but keep going instead. I'll wonder how far I can go. My feet will do all the work. My mind will go slack. When I am pulled back to the physical realm by the clicking sound of the bicycle changing gears, I will realize I've been thinking of nothing in particular.

When I clean my bedroom, I embrace the chaos of my mind, then banish it. The process begins with hauling everything to the center of the room. I performed this ritual for the first time several years ago, the day I turned down an offer to become a third grade teaching assistant. I had spent the better part of the morning staring at my offer letter. The words I'd repeated in my interview ("called to teach") rang in my head, mocking me. After months of hemming and hawing and self-analyzing (often while loading the dishwasher) I had decided that this would be my next career move. The final decision upon me, I wavered, then wobbled, then collapsed entirely. *As if I am called to teach*, I tormented myself. *As if I feel called to do anything in particular*.

To get the dresser moving, I had to wiggle it back and forth. The nightstands, laundry baskets, waste basket, and steamer trunk all followed, heaped together in no particular way. This left the edges of the room exposed, all the dust and stray bits of paper and other lost but unimportant things. There was nowhere left to hide. I thought of how satisfying it would be to

empty the room entirely, so that my voice echoed and my footsteps made an empty, hollow sound. How good it might have felt to be a stranger there, to erase all traces of myself. The vacuum hummed to life. I'm always astonished by how full the plastic canister gets after just one room. I tossed the dirty socks, which had fallen around the outside of the hamper, back inside before dragging a load to the laundry room. When everything was put back together, I stood in the doorway and looked it all over. It was hard to look away from this 12 x 14 box where everything was in order. I admired the neat creases of the sheets. I felt jealous of the things in the room: that they could be easily arranged just so. I tried to feel as whole, as settled.

When I'm not able to sleep at night, I sometimes think of my mother's description of my aunt's ultra-clean home, and think that maybe I am working towards making my house a museum. *A museum of what?* I wonder. I used to work as an administrator at an arts organization that included a prestigious museum. I spent many lunchbreaks wandering the corridors of that museum; the photography wing was my favorite. At an exhibition of civil rights-era shots, I spent hours with my nose pressed close to the frames. I studied the small lines of the subjects' facial expressions. I squinted to try and make out the words on the buildings in the background or to read the price of an ice cream cone as advertised on a storefront window. I craved the nuance of the stories. The little things told me everything. There were also exhibits that I did not understand, could not make sense of. One gallery showcased a study in shadows: the artist used (or made his own) deceptively plain-looking three-dimensional objects that were hung on the wall. Lights were positioned behind each object in order to cast a shadow of it on the opposite side of the gallery. I cynically wondered, *this is considered art?* The longer I looked at the pieces, the deeper I grew in my conviction that none of it mattered, and could not teach me

anything. But even still, a small spark alighted in me: conflict, tension, struggle, curiosity, intrigue. I felt something.

No, my house is not a museum.

While cleaning my bathroom last week, I thought of my friend Kelly, who had, just days before, begun a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail, a journey of 6 months and 2,200 miles. As I worked the brush under the upper lip of the toilet bowl, I wondered, *What is she looking at right this minute?* I pictured myself in her shoes—far away from bathmats that needed to be washed and the hand towel that needed to be replaced with a fresh one from the linen closet and the soap dispenser covered in dust and the toothbrush holder flecked with baking soda—and thought of what my life would be like in another place so far removed from this one. I thought of a childhood camping trip with my homeschool group, how I woke up before everyone else, gathered the bits of dirt tracked into the tent from our shoes, opened the zipper a little, and scooped it all back out onto the ground where it belonged.

Sometimes, I cannot justify cleaning my house – for instance when my husband and I are in the middle of a project, and it's only going to get dirtier. When we removed the attic fan in the hallway and patched the drywall, grit fell from the ceiling for days: bits of pink insulation and bug carcasses and things I didn't recognize. I accidentally stepped in the little piles of debris and dragged the mess into the kitchen and the living room. We screwed in a piece of sheetrock to cover the hole. Then, we filled and sanded the gaps. The sander buzzed and my anger threatened to bubble over. I wanted to scream at someone to clean it up *right this instant*, but at whom could I direct this rage? White powder formed a haze around the can lights in the hallway, then settled

in thin lines on the door frames on top of the television and the coffee table and anywhere it could find. The dust clung to my hair and made my eyes water. My throat felt chalky and I choked on nothing. There was nothing to do but let it go.

I still want to believe that when everything is clean enough, I will become who I am supposed to be. I will apply for a job at StoryCorps, even if the only way to get my foot in the door is by exploiting my background in fundraising. I'll start a web series in which I interview and discuss with different people a significant object in their lives—my brother and his antique microscope, my best friend (a competitive equestrienne) and her first saddle. *Like "Humans of New York" but stories about our stuff. People will love it, I think.* I'll spend my Saturdays discovering the "hidden gem" hiking trails in my state, the kinds that lead to waterfalls which, in the magazine photographs that I perused at the dentist's office, look so crystalline blue it makes me angry. I'll volunteer for political campaigns that inspire me. I'll make pie crusts from scratch and get a sourdough starter going. I'll take my husband Daniel up on his offer to teach me how to use power tools and build a hanging swing for the backyard, masterfully smoothing down the perfect shape on a lathe, the wood dust coating me, covering me. I won't wipe it away. I store these and other possibilities in note on my phone called "Big Ideas." Alternatively, this note might be titled "Maybe these things will make me happy." Many of the notes are rambling and rough, probably typed while I stood next to the dryer—two minutes left on the timer—waiting for a load of laundry to finish.

I scan my list while sitting outside on my front step, waiting for the inside of the trash can—which had to be scrubbed and hosed down to remove the odor—to drip-dry in the

afternoon sun. Next week, I think, I'll sketch out the first set of interview questions. I'll watch an online tutorial about basic video editing, and get this thing off the ground.

I scan the list while the battery for the vacuum cleaner sits on the charger, hovering near 90%, almost ready to go. Once the thin layer of dust under the bed is wiped out, I'll sit right down at my computer, and do something. I'll get started.

No one I know cleans their house the way I clean mine. People have commented on this before. How do we keep it so clean? They ask. My husband and I met a new couple last year, and before having them over for dinner, I went on an all-out cleaning bender. When they returned the invitation and had us over to their place a month later, our new friends apologized profusely for "the mess." The woman later told me that she feared my judgement of the dog hair on the sofa and the dirty dishes on the table and the toothpaste splatters on the bathroom mirror. I had trouble convincing her of my sincere indifference to these things. I said, "My cleaning insanity extends only to my own house, I swear," and "Please, your house isn't even dirty!" and both were true. But what I wanted to do was pull her aside, and look her right in the eye, enough to make her uncomfortable, and tell her that I hoped she would never become like me. Not even for a minute.

If my house were a museum, there would be an explanatory placard above the vanity in the bathroom. It would read:

"The artist digresses"

Leah Kuenzi, American, b. 1990

Granite on painted particle board

Note, here, the incredible attention to the absurd: how even the lip where the counter meets the sink basin has been scrubbed free of residue. When the artist was happy, sad, too tired to do anything else, bored, or ornery; when she was too hot or too cold; found herself wishing that she had more time to herself, or perhaps longing for more to do on a Saturday night; when she felt trapped, and likewise, when every door was open, she cleaned.

When I clean, I am no one. I disappear from myself for a time. When I come back, nothing is different, but the floor of my prison is scrubbed to shining and sparkles in the afternoon sunlight.

It takes a while, usually hours, but sometimes I can get my house clean enough. Prior to being “clean enough,” it is never all that dirty, not dirty at all by most people’s standards. But for me, there is acceptably clean and magnificently clean. Magnificently clean takes more time than I have most days, so I usually settle for acceptably clean. Anything less than that is likely to put me in a state of panic or brooding angst. There’s nothing like running out for a quick errand just after I’ve achieved magnificent cleanliness. I usually schedule a trip to the grocery store or the post office right after I’ve finished. Just so that I can open the door upon my return, and, having all but forgotten the hours I’ve just spent cleaning, take it all in as if for the first time.

The first thing I notice when I walk in are the stainless steel doors of the microwave and oven across the room, from the foyer to the kitchen. The faces of each are usually speckled with bits of food and grime, but the special cleaning wipes have erased all traces of mess. I then look at the ground to my left, where we keep our shoes tucked into a corner next to the couch. All the usual leaves and debris are gone. The laces of my tennis shoes are tucked neatly inside each shoe. From there, I wander from room to room, taking it all in. In the living room, the wood floor

feels a bit tacky on my feet from leftover bits of polish. In the bathroom, the stringy fibers of the bathmat stand upright from the suction of the vacuum. I then return to the living room and sit on my couch, trying not to move for as long as possible. It will all be over soon enough: when I go get the mail, I'll track leaves in on my shoes; when I get a snack I'll smear some peanut butter on the counter; as soon as my cat jumps down from the chair, a plume of hair will follow. But I am still, and everything is in order. I pull out my phone and add a few more Big Ideas to my list.

It sounds like an objectively miserable process, but despite it all, I actually like cleaning my house. I enjoy basking in my productivity and patting myself on the back for a job well done. I don't listen to music while I'm cleaning or make a game out of it. I ignore my phone when it dings. I am methodical and move with purpose. No ambling. Before one task ends, I've planned for the next one.

When I clean, the usual self-loathing ticker tape—*I don't know how to spend my time. I'm not sure what will bring me joy. I'm in too deep to change now. Maybe all I'll ever be is someone with a really clean house*—goes quiet, if only for a little while.