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Chasing Peacocks

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Table of Contents

Chasing Peacocks

This is a story about one woman and her relationships with three different men. No matter what she tells you to the contrary, she started traveling with romantic visions in her head. She wanted to find love. What she would tell you is that she traveled to find adventure, to learn about cultures around the world, to teach. These are all true. She does find all of those and more when she travels. Love, however, was always on her mind. She sized up the men she was attracted to, rated them, then swooned over some and was ignored by others. She rarely admitted to anyone her feelings of attraction. The woman is me. The story starts 7,000 miles from home and twelve years ago.

*

A book of crossword puzzles was open on my lap. I held my hot cup with both hands, battling cold season with French press coffee, beans ground the night before, a necessity with limited electricity. The sun rose over the beautiful rose-colored sand in my yard in Guidimouni, Niger. The yard was coming alive as the cooler weather set in. Abdourahaman, the father of my host family, had found a man with a cart to haul clean, soft sand, the good sand, in from the surrounding desert. My bare feet sunk into the sand when I walked out to the clothesline or just sat and read under the honey locust tree in the far corner of the yard. My new garden surrounded the giant latrine that stood in the corner opposite the tree. The latrine was open to the sky (and to little boys in the neighborhood who wanted to climb the wall and steal my soap) the walls were made of hand-packed mud bricks a shade darker than the sand. The fence around my yard was

made of woven mats with holes just the right size for curious children to catch a glimpse of the *anasaria*, the foreigner.

Still early, the sky was the muted grey of cold season as if the chill in the air hung palpable above the town. I heard the steady beat of women pounding millet all over town. Women pound every morning throughout Niger, dropping the giant wooden pestle into the bowl of the mortar with strength and regularity. Women dance as their pestles hammer out the beat in one mortar, babies tied to their backs with colorful pagnes. If lost in the desert, wait until morning and follow the sound of the pounding to find a town. Sound carries in the desert and women pound every day.

A peahen appeared on the top of my fence, looking into my yard, searching for grubs. I sipped my coffee and stared at her out the door. I needed to get my day going soon: breakfast, splash of cold water on my face, get dressed. I was going to meet my friend Daniel. It was not a school day so he didn't have to teach. We would have tea and talk. The peahen looked right at me before squawking. The sound called the others and soon two brown and sleek peahens were on the fence and one was rooting in the good sand. They poked around in the sand. These hens were part of the bevy of peafowl who lived in the oasis just down the hill from my house. Foreigners here, like me. They flew off, each shrieking goodbye, deciding that the sand was too clean, too good.

*

Peacocks fake it. Peacocks give a copulatory call when mating with peahens, a loud caw followed by a pulsating squeak reminiscent of a dog's toy, a signal of the strength of their masculinity and virility. *Come to me for a good time*. Knowing this, peacocks will give the call when not copulating. To fake it. *Hey, peahens! Good time nearby*. Luxurious plumage,

resplendent in iridescent greens and blues, a tail twice as long as his body, and a peppy crest are not enough for these birds. They need that extra boost of confidence. That, *don't worry, I'm good enough for you.*

*

Peacocking has never been my thing. I have spent much of my adult life avoiding romantic relationships. Was that because Tim, my college love, my best friend, told me when we broke up that those were four years he'd never get back? Did he really believe it would have been better had we not known each other at all? Was he perhaps mad or jealous that I was doing what I loved—acting in my first mainstage production, making friends with the cast, learning how to wield a sword on stage? Was it because I was constantly falling for the "wrong" guy—the one interested in my friend instead, or the one interested in men instead? Somewhere along the way, I protected myself by deciding that I didn't need a relationship. Somewhere along the way, I began judging myself for falling for anyone, and imagined that others were judging me for who I liked/lusted after/wanted. The Independent Woman was born.

The Independent Woman didn't need anyone. She was okay with just sex, as long as both parties agreed that they were "just having fun." She traveled alone. She taught self-defense classes and theatre workshops to teens. She prided herself on being able to bake things wherever she was with whatever tools she could find—peanut butter banana cookies when there were no eggs, buttermilk biscuits when there was no buttermilk and only a toaster for baking, pumpkin pie from whatever squash was available. She closed herself off, not wanting men to see if she was interested. She convinced herself that there were limited choices in the dating pools in these far-off places. Remember: she didn't need anyone.

*

Christians adopted the peacock as a symbol of immortality. The legend said that peacocks had flesh that never died. St. Augustine of Hippo remarked that the flesh of these glorious birds doesn't spoil as fast as meat from other birds. Beautiful and regal, a symbol for the son of God and eternal life. Peacocks lose their feathers each year—gaining them back in the spring, just in time for Easter. The perfect symbol of rebirth. As these newly grown tail feathers rise, they curve inward like a satellite dish, the feathers adorned with rows of blue eyes, all staring out. The peacock is able to focus those many eyes on his target, preening just for the peahen, focusing all his attention on her for that moment. The Christians appreciated the cycle of rebirth, they saw the ever-present eye(s) of God radiating out from the display, they knew the birds were gifts from God. I see the importance of rebirth differently. It is important from time to time to reassess our beliefs, to let go of ideas that are holding us down. There is beauty in that cycle too.

*

Daniel was the only Christian in Guidimouni. This was one of the reasons he was thrown into the job of being my counterpart, that and the fact that he was young and single. He coached the girls' soccer team and taught Science at the middle school. I don't remember meeting him. Those first weeks of this new life in a new place blur together—moving through town, learning names, job titles, and greetings in a new language. Night came quickly and I learned to sleep to the steady rhythm of the town generator parked outside my window. It took months to realize that the reason I woke up at midnight every night was because that was when the generator stuttered to a stop, leaving the whole town quiet. The silence was complete as soon as the generator stopped, but as my ears adjusted, forgot the loud rumble, softer sound filtered in: the murmuring of mating hedgehogs, the distant cry of a hungry baby, the soft movement of sand signaling a creature close, invisible in the dark. Our allotment of electricity, six to midnight, was only for

those who lived close enough. Daniel and the rest of the teachers, placed in small apartments on the edge of town near the middle school, didn't have access to electricity. He teased me about my cushy arrangement.

I see Daniel now, as the coach, sitting at a soccer match. He looks back at me over the top of the chair where he slumps down, hips forward, one arm slung over his head. His eyes squint and he smiles at me. There's a hint of a mustache over his full lips. His forehead crinkles. What is he thinking? He shirt sags to the left and I see a hint of the cigarettes in the pocket of the green button-down. Each time we met, he stuck out his hand for the mandatory greeting, shaking my hand and holding it a little longer than normal before releasing it to touch his heart. This too was traditional, hand to heart, but he held it there a beat longer too. Daniel guided me through life in Guidimouni, our relationship professional at first. I proposed the idea that he teach me Hausa. Officially, because I trusted him. Secretly, because I wanted to spend more time with him.

*

Peacocks do not like to share their territory with another male. They will fight for the right to the harem of peahens in the area, to be the only man around. The peacocks circle one another, their long tail feathers drawing out the ring. They stare at each other out of the side of their eyes until one nods slightly. They both fly up in the air, pecking at each other, on the neck, in the chest, before coming back down to earth. One walks away, briefly, soon wandering back into the circle to do it all over again. The winner honks, his whole body pushing the sound out. Why is it that there can be so many females to one male? How come the peahens are so willing to share while the males will go to such lengths to fight each other off? Is this what polygamous men expect of their wives? I try to go in to each new country with an open mind. On the topic of polygamy, I find it hard not to judge—though more with men than peacocks.

*

A year into my Peace Corps service, my friend Zahara confided in me that her husband was talking about taking on a second wife. She was devastated. Her husband, Abdourahaman, worked for the electric company, ran the generator, an educated man. Zahara was studying to become a teacher. He supported her. I spent a lot of time with Zahara, Abdourahaman, and their three kids. The news that he was thinking of taking another wife surprised me. The practice was allowed in Islam, which was the main religion in Niger, but sometimes couples decided to remain monogamous. I associated this decision with education. I realize that I am making assumptions. I believe the practice is less common among those who have more equal relationships, relationships where the woman is allowed/encouraged to participate in decisions and to be more of a partner. I do think education plays a role in this, gives women the tools they need to participate equally. I am aware, as I write this, that my own relationship biases are at play. The truth is, polygamy makes me uncomfortable and that is mainly because the women don't participate in the decision to take on another wife.

"Can't you tell him that it's not what you want?" I asked Zahara in French one night while I sat with her as she made dinner.

"I cannot decide," she told me. "It is up to him."

Abdourahaman told me once, when Zahara was in school and spending weekdays in the regional capital, six hours away, "I am a bachelor."

"No, you're not," I said, "Zahara's in Zinder, but she's still your wife." I was shocked and knew I had missed something culturally.

"But I am a bachelor now. I have no wife here in Guidimouni. I need a wife here, someone to take care of me."

Bachelor meant something different to me. I knew then that the mindset was different. Abdourahaman had been brought up to know that it was okay to keep looking for another wife even when he was married. Being attracted to a Nigerien man suddenly took on a new meaning. I questioned what that meant in a cross-cultural relationship if one party believed that it was okay to keep looking and the other didn't. What did Daniel believe? He was Nigerien and Christian. Did he see things differently?

*

We met at Daniel's house for Hausa lessons. This was a more intimate space than our normal interactions on the soccer field or at the school. Two of us, man and woman, alone in his apartment, no chaperone. His front room held his small gas stove, two low chairs with seats of bright woven plastic thread, and a woven mat to cover the cement floor. In the back was his bed, a mattress on the floor. We sat in the chairs facing each other, him leaning back his knees poking up higher than the arms of the chair, and me leaning forward with elbows on knees struggling to hear the subtle difference in the sounds. *Gida* (home) instead of *giba* (butterfly). *Koshiya* (cowife) and *kishiya* (spoon). I didn't hear the difference. Daniel laughed every time.

"Mina," he said in Hausa, "you don't have Hausa." He was the only one who called me Mina, a diminutive of Amina, the Hausa name given to me by my host family.

"Maybe a little," I replied, in Hausa. He would nod, giving me that much.

The Hausa portion of the lessons morphed into conversations in French. We wanted to say more to each other than I was able to in my limited Hausa. The lessons became a time for sharing. He served me Nescafé and I brought my French press and made him my coffee. He cooked me rice and sauce over his small camp stove and I baked him banana bread. He told me about growing up in Zinder and how he had fallen in love with a Muslim woman in Guidimouni.

Her father had disapproved of him and would not allow them to marry. He was afraid he would never find a wife in this place where he stood out as so different. I showed him pictures of my family and my home in New Mexico. I told him about my relationship that had just ended, how the man still acted too much like a boy and didn't want me to travel. I confided in him that I didn't know if I would ever marry. Daniel didn't quite understand this, marriage was such an integral part of the culture. Maybe, I didn't quite believe it either. The Independent Woman thought marriage was unnecessary because she was ready to do everything alone. I was afraid to admit that's what I wanted and to look weak.

When I left for Niger, my grandmother, Nona, had said, "maybe, you'll find a husband like Emily did." My sister had met her husband when she was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Panama. I had just turned 30 and Nona was worried about me. She didn't want me to be alone. I had failed, I thought. I hadn't found a man, wasn't getting married. This is what I believed Nona thought. Now, I see it differently. Those were my judgments, my disappointments, my failures. I think she was afraid I was unhappy, that I hadn't found someone, someone like Papa, her partner for almost fifty years. Nona was a traveler herself and loved to see the world through my eyes. She tried to follow me when she could and did so until her body made long-distance travel too painful. I told her I was fine alone. I don't know if she believed me. The Independent Woman roared inside me. And, maybe, like the squawking peacock, that roar would draw in the available men.

*

The peacocks strutted at the edge of the oasis. I watched them from across the street, in a blue plastic chair under a tent set up to block the sun in front of Abdourahaman's house. I came to once or twice a week for dinner with Zahara and Abdourahaman. Rosie, their oldest daughter,

was on the soccer team Daniel and I coached. Abdourahaman offered me sweetened tea in a shot glass, dark and syrupy. The tea was too hot and I held the glass at the lip with two fingers and waited for it to cool. Abdourahaman slurped his right away. Abdourahaman was also staring at the peacocks, the largest one posed on the hill opposite us.

"Did you know that peacocks are very good to eat?" Abdourahaman asked me in French. He wore a blue button-up shirt and loose pants. He loved to sit out in front of the house, by the main road, the best place to greet everyone walking by. "But, they are sacred to the Muslims, symbolizing the angel, so we do not eat them. If you want to buy one though, I think they are better than chicken."

"I don't know if I could eat a peacock," I said, though I was curious. Would it be like turkey or goose? Could I buy one? Maybe for Thanksgiving? "They are so beautiful. Have you tried it?"

"No, of course not," he said and smiled at me. The next words were whispered as he leaned in close to me, "I would never, Amina. They are sacred."

Before coming to Guidimouni, I had never seen peafowl outside of the zoo. The ostentation that lived here were not wild, but belonged to one of the wealthiest men in town, imported from some exotic place. They ran free in the oasis and foraged for food. Two peacocks paraded around, brightly colored, big, feathers trailing out behind them in the tan-red dirt, with many peahens, tail feathers hanging off their backs but not long enough to touch the ground, their breasts speckled brown with spindly crowns shooting up from their heads.

Guidimouni had grown up around the oasis in the desert of eastern Niger. Though my house was up the hill, away from the gardens, Abdourahaman lived across the street from the lush gardens of the oasis. Fed by a natural spring at the center, the oasis consisted of cultivated

gardens of tomatoes, melons, cucumbers, lettuce, sugar cane and small, sweet bananas with yellow flesh. Giant date palms surrounded the gardens and a lake lay at the eastern edge.

The word oasis is often used figuratively, but this was a true oasis. The green of the gardens stuck out from the surrounding sand dunes where the sand spread out in all directions before hitting the matching mesas to the north. Only gnarled acacia trees with their forest-green leaves and needle-like spines broke the monotonous desert landscape. It was only after I left that I truly saw Guidimouni's oasis as sacred.

"Maybe we could find you a husband," Abdourahaman said out of nowhere, though the suggestion was never far from anyone's mind. I had been proposed to just the day before by the man guarding the road at the entrance to Guidimouni. He had asked as if he were doing me a favor. As if he couldn't imagine me turning him down.

"I am okay," I told Abdourahaman. "I don't need a husband."

"Doesn't your family worry about you? Don't they want you to be married, to have love?"

"I don't know. I guess my grandmother wants me to get married. But I am not too worried. I still have time."

"Amina, you are getting older. You need to find a husband. We will help."

"Thank you, but I am not ready."

"When will you be ready?"

"In five years," I told him, picking a random amount of time, far enough in the future that we didn't have to worry about it now, but close enough that I would not lose my chances of having children in Abdourahaman's eyes.

"Five years?" He nodded to himself. "Okay. You will come back and visit then."

"I will."

That was twelve years ago.

*

I loved Daniel, and I think he loved me. I can't be sure because we never talked about it so clearly. The first night I thought he might love me was the night Peace Corps hosted a prom (really a chance to dress up, dance, and drink). I had commissioned a dress from the local tailor, handing over a page clipped from the previous month's *Vogue*. I wore a red dress with thin straps, flared out from the bodice. I had gone to the salon that morning and had an intricate henna tattoo drawn over my right shoulder and down my back. The dress showed it off nicely. Daniel accompanied me and looked uncomfortable dancing in the smoky room full of loud music and loud Americans. He moved to the edge of the dance floor, a Bière Niger in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, and watched me dance. I convinced him to come out for the slow songs. He wrapped his arms around me and we swayed together. Giddy with his touch, I couldn't help but wonder what everyone else thought. There were always whisperings when someone was seeing a local. He looked deep into my eyes before kissing me goodnight that night. I wondered if he had been looking at any of the other women there. I don't think he had. He waved once more before driving off into the dark streets on his motorbike, bareheaded on the cool December evening. We were closer after that night, holding gazes a beat too long, finding ways to touch each other—sitting close on the bench during the tea break or standing shoulder to shoulder at soccer practice. It was a chaste love, but I felt a spark—a spark I continuously snuffed out.

Daniel and I wanted different things and I focused on this fact to a fault. He did not want a totally independent woman. He was also terrified of going anywhere colder than Niger. That is to say, colder than about 60°F. He swore he would just die if he had to be in the snow.

"Mina, I think I would die."

"You wouldn't die. You would wear more clothes and boots and a coat. You would drink cocoa. You would be okay."

"Cocoa? No. Maybe a little vodka would help. But, really, I think I would die."

He wanted a wife who would have lots of children right away. He wanted a house in Zinder, the regional capital, near his parents, near his church. He said he would be okay cooking dinner sometimes, watching the children, helping with the housework. He said that for me. I wanted a partner. I wanted to travel. I thought I wanted children, but wasn't sure and not immediately. I was afraid the cultural divide might be too big.

*

Guidimouni became my home in the two years I lived there, but my contract was up and it was time to move on. I cried as I left town, two dusty suitcases packed to bursting with gifts from this beautiful oasis. Daniel came to Zinder to put me on the bus that would take me twelve hours to the capital city and my flight home. We shook hands the night before I left in front of the Peace Corps office (no kisses in the daylight with so many people around) and wished each other well. The truth was I didn't know what I wanted next, not where I wanted to go, not what I wanted to do, not who I wanted to be. Niger had taught me just how little I knew of the world. I wanted more. Four years later, I stepped off a plane in Myanmar, a country I couldn't have pointed to on a map before I bought my ticket there.

*

When peacocks raise their feathers to do their mating dance, they vibrate the feathers. The raising of their feathers is a breathtaking sight. The feathers are long, sometimes five feet in length, sparkling with iridescent blues and greens and dotted with the signature eyes. It is an

impressive sight to see the tail erect and the peacock strutting. The vibration is what scientists call the peacock's train rattle. It calls the peahens in. Peahens have special sensors in their crests to detect this vibration. They can feel it from far away. He is not shy. He is not small. Like a ballerina assuming perfect posture, opening to second position and calling all eyes to her for her solo, he expands, demanding attention. The bevy of peahens snap their heads in his direction when the dance begins. He is in charge, big and bold and flamboyant. Hear his rattle!

What are the peahens looking for in this ritual? The peacock clearly believes he is putting on the show and she is appreciating his grand performance. She is literally sizing him up. She is not, as it might first appear, hypnotized by the rattle, nor is she mesmerized by the arc of the tail and the gaze of the feathered eyes. Her eyes are tracking the width of the feathers—wider feathers mean an older, more stable male. She might be distracted by a mouse in the brush before coming back to assess that rattle. She takes notes—size, height, strength—then she ignores him and waits. She is not under his spell. She is looking for a good, strong male. Though research into the eye movements of peahens shows this to be true, I also want to believe it. I want to believe that I can't be taken in by charm. I want to believe that I would always make the sound choice, a good, strong male. This is not always the case. Despite contradictions from the Independent Woman, I am just as susceptible to a good rattle.

*

In Myanmar, there are truly wild peacocks. These peacocks have long been sacred symbols. For decades, they adorned the clothing of the kings, representing royalty and longevity. But those are not the peacocks that followed me when I moved to Mandalay to teach. These national birds are far more symbolic today. On the striking red flag of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, the bird, standing out in yellow is long and lean, head stretched forward

in a fighting position. You might not immediately recognize the colorful bird here, but the symbol is not lost on Myanmar citizens, nor the long-time military leaders, I imagine.

I disembarked into Myanmar (formerly Burma) September 2013, not long after the country opened up to foreigners. The dusty streets, crowded with motorbikes and bicycles and lined with shops, felt like they were from a time past. The signs jutting out from the concrete buildings left over from the British rule were printed with elegant, round, and indecipherable Burmese characters. Women on the streets wore long wrap skirts tied at the hip with matching tailored blouses. The men also donned long wrap skirts, tied in the front like codpieces, in muted checkered patterns with pressed white collarless shirts.

I was warned by the school that talking about the government or politics in class was not to be tolerated. We were there to teach not to incite rebellion. I had come to Mandalay, Myanmar's second largest city, to teach preschool in a Montessori classroom. The warning seemed unnecessary at that time. My lesson plans were filled with songs about colors and animals and words that we could spell together—cat, hat, tan, man. I had no reason to talk to these students about military governments, free elections, or repression. I saw something in the politics of the school and in the faces of my local colleagues, a fear of authority, a secrecy, a carefulness in the way people interacted with one another.

My first night in Mandalay, Ceri was just coming home as I was moving in to the teacher apartments behind the school. Ceri, the cute Welsh P.E. teacher, one of the first people I met, offered to take me out for dinner that night. He was tall with crooked teeth, often displayed in a big grin, and full eyebrows shaped nicely around brown eyes. There was something charming and awkward about how he moved. Like he wasn't quite comfortable in his body, didn't quite know where his feet were. We were joined by two other teachers. They filled me in on the school

and Mandalay. I would need a motorbike to get anywhere from the school, situated on the edge of town, though the school ran a shuttle twice weekly to one of the big grocery stores in town. It would run the next day. Ceri was interested in my stories, listened as I spoke, answered all my questions. Was he flirting? I couldn't tell. He told me to watch out for foreign men here, they were often only interested in young, local women. I didn't know what to make of that. Was that him? Was he saying he would never be attracted to me?

I quickly noticed that my local colleagues had a cautious way of talking to me, polite and formal, afraid to say anything wrong. I saw this again and again, with my colleagues and the parents of our students. *Don't say anything wrong*. *Lie if you have to*. Don't let *them* know what you are really thinking. I didn't think I was part of *them.* I was different and American and confident. Once I got in, past the veil of secrecy, concerns were the same. My assistant teachers were young women, two in their first jobs, eager to learn English, to learn about teaching, to gain some spending money, to find a husband. Thingy lived at home with her parents. She wanted to go out, to be independent, to get married. Once that veil lowered, they had so many questions for me.

"Teacher, are you married?"

"Teacher, do you have children?"

"Teacher, will you find someone here?"

In the voice of the Independent Woman, I said, "No, I don't need to get married. I am happy. I will see what happens."

In a different voice, deep in my heart, I looked out the window at Ceri, who still flirted with me sometimes. I pictured him asking me to go away for the weekend, wanting me, needing me. The Independent Woman quashed the voice in my heart, saying, not too kindly, *he would*

never really ask you out. You're imagining the flirting. Be real! He's just calling out to you hoping the other, prettier women would hear and come running.

In a school filled with women, local and foreign, the few men had their pick. The women gathered around them, preening and cawing, hoping to be noticed. Afraid of rejection, I became the friend. We would go out together to one of the many beer stations, me riding on the back of Ceri's motorbike, not holding on to him, but holding on to the handle behind the seat in the way I was taught, touching the driver as little as possible. Myanmar women don't frequent beer stations. These outdoor bars fill with men, both in western dress and traditional wrap skirts, drinking giant bottles of the Tiger beer from Thailand or steins of the cold draft Myanmar beer, some with teeth stained red from years of chewing beetlenut. Barbeque stations ran along the side of the outdoor seating areas, the raw goods displayed in glass cases. Ceri and I would join groups of teachers and point to what we wanted charred and brought to the table with spicy sauces—lotus root, ginko berries, mushrooms, pork in all different forms, whole fish, squid, and some things I couldn't recognize and ate without knowing what they were.

Ceri came over one night, late, with a bottle of something strong and brown. I was in my nightgown, ready for bed. He wanted to talk. He stood close to me when I opened the door, putting his body against mine before moving in to my apartment. He poured drinks and we sat at the table in my little studio. The twin bed one step away in the corner of the room. I wanted him. I wanted someone to hold me, someone to touch me, someone to make me feel beautiful. That is not what happened. He was a little too tipsy and I expected a little too much. After the first kiss, I led him to the bed. I felt myself becoming bolder, guiding his hand between my legs. He wasn't interested in what I needed. He moved his hand to the back of my head, pulling me in for a

sloppy kiss. He pulled me under him. It was over too quickly. He did hold me though and it was better than nothing, I thought. He ignored me the next day until I confronted him.

"What is this that's happening between us?" I asked him when I found him in an empty classroom.

"I don't know," he said, avoiding my eyes. "I just don't want a relationship right now."

"That's fine," I said. "We don't have to have a relationship. We could just have some fun." I thought at the time I was being honest. Now, I don't know. It wasn't all that fun and he wasn't even being a friend at that point. *Where is your pride?* The Independent Woman screamed in my ear. I brushed her aside, *I know what I'm doing.*

"I can't," Ceri replied, looking down at the papers on the desk.

I decided he must not want anyone to know what happened. He must be embarrassed by me. There must be something wrong with me. Better to close myself off. Better to not worry about that happening again. I knew I had been ignoring the Independent Woman. She must've been so ashamed of me, of what I had done. What felt the most shameful was that part of me that hoped it might happen again.

Months later, in a conversation with my sweet assistant teachers, age came up. They were talking about the school administrative assistant, Aye Aye Than. She was not always kind to the young teachers.

"She is so old, Teacher," Thingy said and laughed behind her hand. "She is a spinster. I think she will never be married."

"How old is she?"

"She is 27!" Thingy exclaimed garnering giddy laughter from the surrounding teachers.

"27! Really? I am 36." Their eyes got big and round as they stared at me. They didn't know what to say. Was I really a spinster, an old biddy? *No,* screamed the Independent Woman inside me. *Never.*

*

A group of peafowl is a bevy. But, it can also be referred to as a party, an ostentation, or a muster. The males are peacocks, the females are peahens, and the babies are peachicks, though Flannery O'Connor, the great southern gothic writer and lover of birds, always calls the little ones peabiddies. This may be because of her love for chickens and the fact that she raised chickens before falling for peafowl. Biddy doesn't, however, conjure an image of a tiny chicken for me. I did not want to be the old biddy I thought people saw when they looked at me.

*

I arrived in Milledgeville knowing very little about Georgia and even less about Flannery O'Connor. A vagabond by nature and desert rose by birth, I had been living around the world for the last ten years before deciding on the move to middle Georgia. I had come to write and soon learned that the spirit of Flannery could only be a help in this. I attended mass at the church she had frequented, but it was when I learned of her peacocks that I knew I had come to the right place. It turns out I had been chasing peacocks around the world only to end up down the street from the party at Flannery's house.

I decided to try online dating. I downloaded Tinder and Bumble and started swiping. The Independent Woman was clear, *you're fine*, she told me. And, I was. I felt okay being alone. I wasn't defending my position to anyone. The Tinder dates did not convince me otherwise. I went on a series of truly boring dates—there was the guy who was half an hour late, insisted on dinner and not just drinks, and only wanted to tell me about the flat tire that caused him to be late,

another who kept coming back to the fact that he had seen me before at trivia night and he had been sure it was me, another who I thought was okay but stared a little too intently and never wanted to do anything but get lunch. This was in addition to several who asked immediately for my phone number but only wanted to text, never meet in person. They all talked and talked and never seemed interested in me or what I'd done. Was it me? Was it the selection? Was I being too cautious? Was the Independent Woman driving this boat? *Wouldn't you rather stay home and write, or read, or watch a good movie, or anything else. Wouldn't you rather spend time with your own interesting self, rather than listen to a young guy talk about himself and never once ask about you, or Niger, or Myanmar, or writing?* Maybe she was right.

I met Jason at a pool party. He had bought a new shirt for the occasion and strutted around the pool in swim shorts and a black and white short-sleeved button-up shirt. One half was white spattered with black paint and the other half was black spattered with white. This was bold choice in a group of plain t-shirts. We talked for much of the night, him leaning back in a checker-backed metal chair and me leaning forward, elbows on knees, listening. He had clear blue eyes and deep dimples when he smiled. His long, tangled hair was curly and he pushed it back regularly with the back of his hand, even when it was already tied back in a ponytail at the nape of his neck. He was taller than me and broad. He hugged me, tight and long, unassuming, before he left the party that night. I thought I felt a spark, but he didn't ask for my number. Maybe we would just run into each other again sometime? Maybe he wasn't interested?

A week or two later, he came up on my Tinder screen. My heart jumped a little, but the voice there wondered if it was weird to contact him. This was not how Tinder worked. Tinder was for unknowns. I closed the App, waiting, not knowing if I could save the decision for later. Left or right? Decide now! I came back to him once or twice before deciding that I really wanted

to see him again. The voices, maybe coming together, cried, *just do it, see what happens.* He wrote right back and we decided to meet for coffee.

The coffee date was a Sunday afternoon. Coffee turned into dinner and we talked for hours. He did talk a lot about himself, he is a storyteller and he was nervous. But, he asked about me and he stopped to listen when I talked. There were things I was unsure of, things that would be easy reasons to walk away, he was loud and big in his storytelling, commanding attention in restaurants. I was not used to attracting attention, I often tried to hide, to be quiet. But, there were more reasons to keep getting to know him—he made me laugh, he was kind, he tipped well, even when he didn't know I was watching. At the end of the date, after a kiss on the cheek, I agreed to see him again.

When we first started dating, before we went anywhere together, I told him, "I've been living in very conservative places for a long time, I have a hard time with PDAs. I like to keep that between us. Private."

"Okay," he said. He smiled and then kissed me hard. I was asking a lot of him. He was affectionate. I was scared, worried, uncomfortable, unsure. It wasn't a lie, this was in part because of my travels. It was not okay for men and women to touch in public in Niger. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I was held to a high standard. We were told that the villagers were always watching. We were told to be careful. In Myanmar, it was less serious, but still not done. I was always aware of being watched. I didn't want to do anything inappropriate. Signs around the pagodas and tourists' hotspots warned of the inappropriateness of bared shoulders and knees. It was always women in the drawings. I felt hyper aware.

The Independent Woman was upset at me for not being single anymore. She whispered in my ear, *what will people think? That you can't do it on your own, that you need someone?*

You've let me down. Better to keep him at arm's length. You don't want to let him in too close, do you? She was right. I felt eyes on me when we went out. I was aware of the volume of his voice rising as he told stories, nervous and trying to impress. I felt like we were attracting too much attention. I judged myself for falling for him. I judged myself for wanting another date, for letting him in, little by little. I was scared because my heart beat faster when he called, my skin pickled when he was close, I smiled big when I talked about him. Jason maintained my boundaries, to a point. He wore me down, sneaking kisses and slyly patting me on the butt, until I didn't notice that I was holding hands and acting giddy-in-love in public, for all to see.

I was careful in the beginning. I didn't want to see him every day. He needed to know that I had other things to do. That didn't last long. I was only four months into the relationship before he had moved in with me. This was partly out of necessity. His roommate was leaving and his job was ending soon, maybe two weeks, maybe two months. It just made sense. The move worked for us. We fell easily into a routine and I felt supported. He listened when I had to have quiet to write or study. I stopped what I was doing to watch a football game. We cooked together and had friends over. His laugh, still loud, but always honest and infectious, no longer made me self-conscious. The Independent Woman approved of this man. She was no longer judging me.

Eight months into our relationship, I met my friend Ruby for dinner. Knowing that I had been chasing peacocks around the world, she brought me an enormous bunch of feathers packed in a feed bag. The feathers rested alongside our table while we drank wine and caught up.

"How are things with Jason?" she asked.

"They're going well. So well," I said, "that I don't know what to feel. Actually, I'm scared. I love him and I don't know what to do with these feelings."

"He's a good man. Trust yourself."

I left dinner, excited to get home to Jason. Ruby offered me a ride, but I wanted to walk. I had my arms around the bag of feathers, so long I had to work to keep them from dragging. Tipsy from the wine, I wobbled as I walked through the park on my way home. I didn't care whether anyone around me was judging me for carrying the ridiculous package through the center of town, for wobbling.

A year later, my sister asked me if we had talked about marriage.

"I don't know if we will get married," I told her, "we've talked about it, we've talked about always being together, but maybe being married isn't that important."

Was that true? Was I being honest or was that the Independent Woman asserting herself once more? I didn't want to push him. I didn't want to admit that that's what I wanted. I didn't want to need anyone. I believed it was true, truly I did. Later, when he admitted that he did want to get married, my throat closed up and I whispered, "me too." And, that was true too.

*

Today, twelve years after Niger, four years after Myanmar, and two and a half years into Georgia, I stand in front of the last two peafowl at Andalusia, Flannery O'Connor's last home. I don't know why I haven't visited before now. The sign often beckons but I never feel like there's enough time to stop. It's beautiful and quiet, set back from the main road with giant hickory trees surrounding the white house. Flannery loved birds and kept ducks, quail, and pheasants along with the peafowl. She once started counting her peafowl and stopped at forty thinking it just wasn't worth continuing. They roamed free on the property, enhancing Flannery's life and annoying her mother. These two are in a rectangular pen, a cock and a hen. I don't see them at first. The day is overcast and throws shadows into the pen. Once my eyes adjust, I see them

looking at me from the top of the pen in the corner. I stand and stare, careful to not disturb. He gets up first and jumps down to the roost a few feet from the ground. She preens from the top of the pen, ignoring him. The jade of his chest feathers shines in the dim light, his crown bobs in rhythm with his head. She looks out over to the house, her browns and tans accentuating the green of her neck. I see why Flannery could sit and watch them for so long.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's Jason.

"Hey Baby," he says, an accent on each syllable. This, his normal greeting, makes me smile.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Oh, I'm alright."

He's been living in New Jersey for the last few months and we're still getting used to this long-distance relationship. I tell him about the peacocks and about this essay, that I'm having a hard time opening up and thinking about my relationships with men over the years.

"I think it rests on this idea I have about the Independent Woman," I tell him. "I think, for some reason, I thought that if I was going to listen to her, that I couldn't be with anyone. I don't know if that makes sense. That being independent meant being alone."

"I can see that," he says. "For me, I have a hard time letting anyone know all about me. I don't want to give too much away, but somehow I've let you in."

"Being with you has made me realize that I can still be independent and need you."

"Honestly, I don't think we would work if you weren't."

I had never thought about it that way, that being with someone doesn't mean giving up that independence.

I look back at the two birds in the cage. They are both cleaning themselves. He sticks up his tail as he bends his neck around to preen. The tail is scraggly and short right now, he recently shed his tail feathers for the winter. They will grow back but for now he will have to wait to try to attract her with his display. She is uninterested. She has moved on from her preening to look out toward the house. They are both big and regal with iridescent browns, blues, and greens down graceful necks. I will come back at Easter to see the newly grown tail.

*

The woman's story doesn't end here. She will continue to travel and write. She will continue to, mostly, heed the advice of The Independent Woman and cherish her independence. Though now she hopes to continue her explorations and adventures with Jason in tow, introducing him to all the wonderful experiences that come with travel.

Tea with Abdoulaye

Abdoulaye prepared the tea while I sat with the men in the tea circle. That fall, I lived with Abdoulaye's family in Guinea for almost two months. Most of our afternoons were the same. Abdoulaye sat on a crude wooden stool under a leafy mango tree in the center of the family's compound. The young girls of the house swept the yard clean. The tracks of their reed brooms fanned out in scalloped curves around the tree. A paved and pockmarked road ran along one side of the compound. Two houses and a fence, lined with leafy green potato plants, formed the other boundaries. One house had a covered porch. Two cracked plastic chairs sat empty in front of the door.

As the youngest of the group, it was Abdoulaye's job to make the tea. He was nineteen, tall and thin with an easy smile, still a bit of a boy under the face that was almost a man. That afternoon, men all over West Africa sat under trees to wait for the three cycles to be brewed and drunk in succession. This ceremony would take hours.

When Abdoulaye reached the end of the first brewing cycle. He added sugar to the strong, bitter brew and poured it, back and forth, between two cups in order to dissolve the sugar. A natural performer, he showed off by raising the top cup higher and higher each time he poured. He drizzled the tea from the left cup into the right and then from the right into the left. He spread the cups farther and farther apart until I wondered if his aim would remain true. By the time he finished, his long arms disappeared into the lower branches of the tree. The liquid formed a nice line, perfectly flowing into the aluminum cup he held at the lip by three fingers to avoid burns.

Steam visibly rose over the edge. Abdoulaye, dressed comfortably in a t-shirt, swim shorts and plastic flip flops, frowned with concentration. He would not spill a drop.

Once the tea was poured, the process started again, the ritual continued: first the bitter round, then the mild, and finally the sweet.

*

Years earlier, in another West African village, an oasis in Eastern Niger, I waited for the first round to brew in front of the middle school on the edge of town.

"The tea represents life," Monsieur le Surveillant explained, "the first cup is bitter like death, the second is mild like life, and the third is sweet like love."

We sat side by side on a bench at the entrance to the school. Le Surveillant wore an embroidered boubou, which fell to his ankles. His weathered face and kind eyes danced as he offered this explanation. My long skirt and colorful head scarf did little to blend me into the group of teachers, all men. The afternoon ritual allowed men to sit and catch up on daily news as they took shelter from the sun at its hottest, the concrete administration building providing shade over the small group. The monochromatic palette of the scene; sand, hills, bench, and building, all beige, was set off by the green of the oasis in the distance, at the center of town. As a single, foreign woman, my gender status was ambiguous and I was allowed entrance into this male ceremony. I was not a man, clearly. But, I didn't cook on a fire or carry water, nor was there a man waiting for me at home, so I was not completely a woman in their eyes.

In French, with Arabic peppered through, we discussed the news of the day.

"Did you know that Ali's wife had the baby?"

"No," I answered, "are they both healthy?"

"*Alhamd'lilah*, praise God, they are healthy."

"Monsieur, will we meet tomorrow to talk about the girls' soccer tournament?" I asked the Surveillant. "Maybe at 10:00?"

"*In sha' allah*, if God wills it, I will be there."

"Okay," I said. I wondered if the meeting would take place, if it would be on time. Often my meetings started late or were rescheduled. I had to learn to be more flexible with my time. There was always time to sit and talk and drink tea, time for people, but not always time for meetings.

*

Abdoulaye boiled the rounds on a small, wire brazier filled with charcoal. The three rounds were steeped from the same tea, green tea sold in small boxes covered with Chinese characters. The tiny teapot stuffed with leaves sat directly on the hot coals. The water boiled before sugar was added and the hot, amber liquid transferred back and forth between two cups until it donned a foamy head. Abdoulaye, the proficient barista, poured the tea into shot glasses, one for each member of the circle, and passed them around on a tray.

In this circle of men, still more man than woman, I listened as Radio France Internationale blared the news from the radio in the lap of the man sitting beside me. I strained to follow the conversation, a mix of French and Maninka. In French, I often answered the same questions, *When will you marry?* and *Do you know Barak Obama?* My shirt stuck to my back and sweat ran down my calves from the backs of my knees, the afternoon hot and humid so near the coast. I fought for patience and felt like we were wasting time. I could've been writing or planning or sewing. Now, I miss the tea circle. I miss the sitting and the idle conversation. We greeted the men and women who passed by on the road. Children hid behind their mothers' legs, small hands visible at thigh level as they peeked out, stealing a glance. I waved and smiled which

sent them giggling into hiding again. Abdoulaye grinned at me as he picked a child up and swung her around, ignoring his work for a moment. Her laughs filled the air before he put her down at her mother's feet.

*

Abdoulaye and I are still friends on Facebook. He will often message me when he sees that I have signed on. *Salut, ma sœur, tu es lá? On peut parler?* Today, I message Abdoulaye back, letting him know I am available to talk, *oui, je suis lá.* I ask him what he is doing today. He responds, *we have a new volunteer living with us, John, do you know him?* This is a common question and I give my response, *no, I don't know him, America is very big.* I think of what I should be doing: grading papers, laundry, writing. I imagine that he and I sit in the circle sipping tea. Instead, we talk. It's morning for me and afternoon for him on this Saturday. He tells me that he is almost done with university but the professors are on strike right now, asking for more pay. He can't go back to school until the strike is over. He can't go to work until he finishes school. He is frustrated with the system. Though almost ten years have passed, he still looks the same, with a boyish face and high voice. *When will you come back to Guinea?* he always asks. *Soon, I hope,* I always reply, *but I am so busy.*

Running in Plain Sight

I ran down 12th Street in Mandalay, Myanmar. People were all around me, some running, others crowded on motorbikes, many staring. To my right, the moat drew a huge square in the middle of Mandalay, two miles on each side: a barrier between the bustling city and the old Mandalay Palace hidden behind the high brick walls. The layered roofs of the Palaces' watchtowers poked up over the walls, ornate and temple-like with sharp points reaching up through the lush trees, greener than the surrounding dusty streets. Date palm groves rose up between the towers. Across four lanes of traffic was the Mandalay zoo. I had visited once: had seen two elephants tied to a concrete gazebo, thick chains around their ankles, Bengal tigers pacing in their bleak too-small cage, women selling bananas to feed to the monkeys and melons to throw in the gaping maws of the hippopotami. Back on 12th, two young girls ran with me. They laughed, pointed, and tried to keep up in their black velvet flip flops. Both sported the same shaggy black bob with short bangs, worn t-shirts, and faded wrap skirts, bright and colorful. I took off my bright blue sweat bands and throw them on the sidewalk. When I glanced back they waved the bands, giggling, and yelling, "Bye bye, teacher, bye bye!"

It was 2016. Myanmar had only opened to foreigners a few years before. Most foreigners in Mandalay taught and I had been doing just that for two years. On this chilly January morning, I was running in the Mandalay Mayor's Mini Marathon. I usually reveled in running the most innocuous route, winding through unused forest paths in the mountains of Arizona or taking the empty sidewalks through my sister's neighborhood in New Mexico, knowing no one would notice me. That was not the case in Mandalay. Though my height was more average in Myanmar

than in the U.S., my short curly hair and tanned, freckled skin gave me away. Already, at mile three, I was attracting even more attention than usual. I vacillated between a love of the attention and a wish to be invisible. The runners who passed me almost all turned around to say hi, to wave or just to stare. I smiled and waved back. The crowd thinned and I found my pace.

Winter, 1984. Thoreau, New Mexico. I wait in Ms. Slaven's second grade class for the announcement of roles in the Christmas pageant. I am given the role of Mary. This is just what I want, one of the leads. Each year, when I have watched the second grade play out the story of Jesus' birth, I envied the girl who played Mary. She rode onto stage in a wagon decorated with donkey cutouts on each side, pulled by Joseph. She sits regally on stage holding the baby in her lap. What I didn't realize was how boring this role would be. The truth is Mary just sits there regally. That's it. She doesn't sing. She doesn't dance. She doesn't even have lines. Joseph pulls her in, asks for a room several times, greets the wise men, and she decorates the stage. The night of the performance, I watch the donkeys with their furry headpieces, the angel with her halo and wings, and the wise men with their gifts, all create the scene around me. I chose wrong. I should have been a donkey.

At mile four, I was joined by an older Japanese man. He ran up to me, slowing to meet my pace, and asked what this is all about.

"Why so many runners this morning?"

"This is the Mandalay half marathon," I told him.

"I run this way and up to the top of Mandalay Hill every morning. I did not know about this marathon."

He stayed with me until he made the left and I crossed 66th Street. Mandalay Hill stood tall on my left and Kuthodaw Pagoda was just ahead. The world's largest book was housed on

the grounds of the Kuthodaw Pagoda and consisted of giant stone slab pages inscribed with Buddhist teachings. Each "page" was housed in its own small white structure, 730 tiny pagodas spread over the grounds. These smaller temples marched off in neat rows to my left with the Pagoda itself rising up in tiered golden towers in the middle, keeping watch over the precious document. A book so important it deserved its own temple. At 62nd Street, where I will make a right, a man in a race shirt stepped out in front of me and aimed a bottle of spray paint at my chest. Before I can react, he sprayed a large, wet red mark on my right shoulder. I felt it soaking through to my skin.

"What?" I said, surprised, covering my face a second too late.

"To mark the path," he explained, worried at my reaction. I had wondered how they would know that we had completed the race without the electronic GPS chips I had worn for races in the past. Spray paint worked just as well and now I know to hold my breath at the next turn. My graffitied shirt would be the proof that I finished.

The right side of the street ahead was lined with onlookers. Men, women, and children sat in front of the pastel-colored houses. Like sentinels, the houses stood tall and thin, lined up along the street. The ground floor of each house was open to the street, like a garage letting the air flow through on hot days. Decorative iron fences and gates, topped with spikes guarded each short driveway. The gates were open and families sat in their driveways. A young boy, barefoot and wearing soccer shorts, ran out to me and handed me an orange slice. I smiled down at him. His round face was decorated with thanaka, a fragrant yellow paste used to beautify and protect from the sun. I palmed the orange, waved at the family and ran on. Though I felt bad, I would throw it away when I got farther down the road. The boy was brave to approach a stranger, but his grubby hands kept me from eating the orange. I had learned when it was okay to just say no thank you

and when it better to take an orange slice with a polite thank you and throw it away out of sight—always in an effort to not offend. I always asked myself two questions: How much will it offend this person if I say no? and, Is it worth it to be sick over this? Perhaps, I needed to ask myself something else, who will notice if I don't eat this? Or, do I want to cause a scene by declining? I waited until I was out of sight of the boy before tossing the orange in a low and wide woven basket filled with trash in front of a house with an empty driveway.

Spring, 1994. Thoreau, New Mexico. My best friend Carrie and I struggle to run to Castle Rock. We complain all the way. We fight to keep behind the long-distance runners who move out front easily. The Castle Rock run is their easy run, the short one, only a few miles. Carrie and I are both on the track team. She is a sprinter, an award-winning sprinter. I compete in the 200-meter race and the 400-meter relay. I throw shot put and discus. I am the shortest one at the throwing events, the other girls taller and stronger than me. At my small school, I know I made the team because they need a body. They need a relay place holder, they have an extra spot in the 200 meter, they think it can't hurt to have a shot putter when we won't have anyone otherwise. I serve as a place holder. I perform my duties well. I attend meets, hang out with my friends, have something to do in the spring. Then, the coach replaces me in the relay during the state qualifying meet. Rachel, the star sprinter, has an extra opening. She is faster than me. I am not asked if this is okay. I am told to do my part for the good of the team. They don't need the placeholder if the star is available.

At mile eight, a man reached out and sprayed my chest with blue paint. I turned from 62nd Street onto Theik Pan Street. The runners had spread out by this point. We were more than halfway through and I was now running on a sidewalk. There weren't many sidewalks in Mandalay. It felt indulgent to be off the road. There were less people out on the street in this

neighborhood. The wider boulevards were lined with high concrete walls, trees stretched out along the path in front of me. Beyond the walls, I pictured the grand houses with high ceilings and heavy, ornate furniture. Gold-framed pictures decorated the spacious rooms. The airy rooms contrasted with the heavy gilded nature of the furnishings. These were the houses of the students at the private school where I teach. They were less likely than me to accept an orange from a strange child on the street.

Fall, 2007. Guidimouni, Niger. I move to a town surrounding an oasis in eastern Niger. It is impossible for me to blend in in Guidimouni. I am the foreigner: Anasaria*. Everyone knows of me. Everyone knows I am different. I am a woman living alone: Does no one love me? I am "old" and not married: Are my parents okay with this? I am American and still unmarried: Can't they find me a husband? I speak French, wear glasses, am chubby, and white.*

*The kids yell greetings in my direction, scared to interact and thrilled with a response. Rather than Amina, they start with Anasaria, sometimes in a singsongy chant, An-a-sar-ia, An-a-sar-ia. The clever ones run up to me with both arms crossed in front of their chests. They bow quickly forward and say, "Bonjour Madame." The gesture must have come from old French school rules, but these kids do it so fast that they seem to be on springs, jumping over to me, bobbing their heads and bounding away. The brave ones run up with one hand jutting forward. They yell, "*Bani bonbon*" or "*Donne-moi bic*." Give me candy. Give me a pen. The phrases blend French and Hausa, still left over from another time.*

At first this attention thrills me. I have never known fame and in Guidimouni, I can't go anywhere without being noticed or talked about or commented on. Little eyes pop up over the window sill in the morning, the owners giggle as I attempt a vinyasa flow in my small apartment.

The thrill of fame only lasts so long, soon replaced by old anxieties at being laughed at. Is it me they laugh at? Or, is it the foreigner who I represented? Is there a difference? Does it matter?

And then, in the home stretch, I made the last turn onto 30th Street when Warren joined me. Warren, his English name, was a young Burmese man—tall, fit, and handsome with smooth skin and wide, dark eyes. He breathed harder than it seemed he should and introduced himself through gasps.

"Hello," he said in good English. "I am Warren. What is your name?"

"My name is Jennifer," I told him. "Are you doing okay?"

"Yes, I am okay. Just, I cannot breathe and have hurt here." He pointed to his side.

Though an athlete at the local sports school, long-distance running was not his sport. He specialized in throwing, javelin and shot put. He had come out to the mini marathon with the school but was finding himself struggling in these last miles. He developed a cramp and all his friends left him, running ahead to finish. We agreed to finish together. He could stick with my pace. Warren told me about wanting to learn English. He loved American movies and music and wants to practice more. He moved to Mandalay from a village and loved the city.

Warren and I rounded the corner together and found the gate into the stadium. The finish line waited for us on the far side of the field. With his long legs and athlete's lungs, having recovered from the side cramp, he found a kick as we entered the stadium. I encouraged him to go for it as I tried to find my own kick. He flew out ahead of me, but I felt strong approaching the finish line.

Winter, 2011. Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. It is my first day at one of the biggest high schools in the city. I am here to teach math. Math is not my subject. I applied to teach middle-school math. I know I can teach 8th grade math. In Bobo Dioulasso, they expect me to teach

upper level math. I am unsure. Monsieur Kabore teaches this class now. He meets me in the teacher's lounge and asks if he can help. I let out the breath I've been holding.

"Yes, I would appreciate that," I tell him, in French.

He sits with me for a time, but it is clear he is not ready to help now. He asks me if I am married, what kind of math I have studied, whether or not I have children. I admit that my background is in theatre, that I am nervous about teaching this class. I regret divulging this when the next question comes.

"Can I come later, to your apartment, to help?" He asks.

"No, we can work here."

"I cannot work now as I don't have my things. It will have to be later, at your apartment."

"We can meet here tomorrow, can't we?"

He fumes, clearly expecting to be invited. I know it is not proper for a single woman to be alone with a man she doesn't know. I don't trust him and don't want him in my space. What is it he wants? An American wife, an easy western, to see what the rich American owns? Whatever it is, I feel exposed.

My white face was probably bright red and sweaty as I came into the final stretch. The stadium seats were filled with spectators and the grass on the field was packed with small white tents. Runners crossed the finish line and sweaty people milled about on the field in paint-speckled t-shirts. In the center of the field, a small stage faced the crowd with flowers on either side and a background painted with the colorful faceless runners. I passed the finish line hoping to congratulate Warren but was immediately set upon by eight or nine women in white t-shirts

offering me towels and energy drinks and sodas and stickers and more. There were others crossing with me or close behind but I got all the attention.

The 100-Plus lady grabbed my arm and led me to her tent. She pushed two cans of their signature fizzy sports drink into my arms.

"Here, lady, please sit down," she said. She pointed to a white plastic chair.

"Thank you," I took the sodas and set them on the chair. "But, I would like to walk for a minute."

"Okay, okay. Please come and sit here when you are done."

"I will, thank you."

I set off for the far end of the field where some runners stretched. A man with a camera and a smile stepped in front of me and handed me a white t-shirt printed with the logo of another energy drink.

"Come please, lady, come sit over here. We have a nice chair."

"Thank you," I said, again, "but I need to walk now."

"No, lady," he said, eyes wide, "you are so tired, you must sit."

"Yes, thank you, I will sit later."

After three more encounters like this, including a conversation with the local newspaper reporter, I made it to the far corner of the roped-in area and stopped to stretch. I was used to this kind of worried attention. *You cannot walk there, Madame, it is too far. You must rest now, it is very hot outside. Are you sure you are okay? We know foreigners must ride.* Comments like this set off my defenses. *I am fine*, always said through clenched teeth.

Summer, 2015, Myanmar. I go with a group of women for a relaxing day at the spa. Each neighborhood in Mandalay boasts several spas. This one is housed in a hotel. The masseurs

show our group into a room carpeted with mattresses. We are each to strip to our underwear and lay face down on the mattress, all in a line. The masseurs, young Burmese women, leave while we undress. We lay uncovered and exposed, several bodies, not small, soft around the edges. I compare myself to the other women instinctively. They are all beautiful, I am flawed. My masseur, petit with fine features, cannot stop giggling and chatting in Burmese while rubbing the oil into my naked skin. I know it's about me. I cannot relax, instead tense up, aware of the imperfections I spend countless hours documenting in the mirror: too much belly fat, small sagging breasts, dark, unshaved hair everywhere. I am overwhelmed by shame and embarrassment and start to cry. Face down, I hide it, but when I turn over, it's obvious. The masseur is shocked, thinking what, that she hurt me, I don't know. I grab my clothes and leave, crying in the bathroom until the other massages are over. Am I too sensitive? Is she talking about her nephew's antics or the date she had the night before? I know it is me and want to disappear.

I saw Ceri, my ride and the athletic director at the school where I worked, heading my way. He congratulated me with a high five.

"You did great," he said. "I'm so impressed that you finished. And, not a bad time either. Not at all what I expected. I'm going to use you as an example for those lazy eighth-grade boys." He put on his teacher voice, shaking a finger at an imaginary boy. "What? You can't run to the end of the field? Do you know Teacher Jennifer ran a marathon?"

We both laughed. "Half marathon," I corrected.

"Not in my story." He winked at me. "They'll be shocked."

"Okay, I'm ready for breakfast." What I didn't say was that no one needed to know that I ran the mini marathon. No one needed to know my time. No one needed to congratulate me, to notice me.

"I'm parked out behind the stadium."

We stopped by the 100-Plus booth to get my goodies and headed toward the back gate. The 100-Plus woman who had tried to make me sit ran after us.

"Excuse me, lady, they are looking for you."

"Who is looking for me?"

"Over there, they need you." She pointed to the stage area.

"Why?"

"You have to get your prize."

As she said this, a race official ran up with a card. She pushed it into my hand and pointed me in the direction of the stage. "You go there, miss."

Not for the first time that day, I wished I spoke better Burmese. It was easy to rely on English and there were so many people who wanted to practice their English with me. I was ashamed. My simple grasp of the language would never serve me in this situation.

Ceri shrugged at me and we followed the official. The card said something in Burmese. I recognized the number four. As we got closer, a young man came up to us and explained, in English, that I had won fourth place in the foreigner category.

The prizewinners milled about in their lanes, forced into rough lines by the ribbon dividers. In the stands, onlookers gazed at the stage over the finish line. Though it was a chilly day in Myanmar, I saw teenagers in skinny jeans and trendy t-shirts, hair gelled and spiked, posing for selfies next to old men in traditional Burmese wrap skirts, teeth orange from chewing

betelnut. I stood with the prizewinners, fourth in line, waiting to see what my prize could be. Us foreigners occupied the final lane, the farthest from the decorated stage. Mandalay's mayor stood in the center facing the photographer situated in the grass, pointing a huge camera at him. This was his race. Two helpers posed next to the extravagant floral arrangements at either end of the stage. The helpers wore matching tailored longyi outfits in brilliant patterned fabric and were dolled up with intricate hairdos and lots of makeup.

The mayor began with the men's prizes, the lane closest to him. A line of slight men stood waiting to be called up. They looked like marathoners, thin and strong with lithe muscles. Some wore shoes and shorts while others wore thin flip flops and muted wrap skirts with white tank tops. The mayor's prizes, one of the foreigners whispered, were good, generous, worth the long trip from places all around Myanmar. These runners posed with the mayor on stage and were offered envelops. They smiled and took their cash off to the left. There were ten runners in the men's line and ten in the women's. Then there was us, the foreigners.

I was the only woman in the foreigner line and was wholly unaccustomed to winning anything in a race. I ran for fun, or that was what I told myself. In truth, I was excited to be here and happy to be in fourth. The man in third, standing next to me, was tall and handsome. He had dark smooth skin and his black hair was cut short and appeared artfully disheveled even after the long run. I was sure I didn't look good. I imagined my short hair, too far on top of my head in an elastic, had wisps sticking straight out on either side, the back matted to my head with sweat, cold now with the chill in the air. My face was red, I was sure and I giggled nervously as the handsome man looked down at me to asked my name. Along with nervousness—maybe he lived here too, maybe he was single, maybe he needed a running partner—I felt miffed—he had been just ahead of me at the end, we had passed each other several times over the course of the race.

Had I known I was in the running, I could've been the third foreigner, looking back at him instead. I ignored the jealous judger and asked where he was from, why he was here.

He was from Indonesia, here in Mandalay on business and leaving, he looked at his watch, in just two hours. He hoped this ceremony wasn't too long—the airport was small but a good drive out of town. Damn! The mayor had reached our group. He switched to English and called up the first foreigner, a man in his sixties from Singapore. The mayor presented him with a huge, gold-framed picture of a faceless runner running along the moat with The Palace in the background, Mandalay Mayor's Mini Marathon spelled out across the bottom. The picture, an iconic Mandalay scene save the runners, was "painted" with tiny colored stones in the fashion of the popular souvenirs from the city. The pictures decreased in size with each subsequent runner. The handsome Indonesian took his and ran, waving as he passed our group. Maybe he would miss his flight?

Spring, 1999. Las Cruces, New Mexico. I wait in the lobby of the theatre on campus for my name to be called to audition for Cabaret*, my favorite musical. I worked for months with a voice coach on my song for the audition, "Nothing" from* A Chorus Line*. It is the perfect song for me, spoken and sung. I practiced my monologue, Li'l Bit from* How I Learned to Drive*, both in acting class and all weekend. I sang in choir in high school always surrounded by friends. Auditioning makes me nervous, singing alone on stage makes me more nervous. But, I prepared, I know I am ready. I want a role in this production. I want to work with Professor Dillon. My name is called and I walk down the steps to the stage. Standing alone on stage, I perform. The production staff takes a break after my audition so we all walk out to the lobby together. Professor Dillon stops me at the top of the stairs. She is backlit by the stage lights. "Let me tell*

you, Jennifer," she says, "that was the best audition I've seen you do. It's just too bad you can't sing." My heart sank.

I would take my prize and put it under the bed in my apartment, not telling many about my fourth place. I would pull it out sometimes at parties and show it off, not sure how to frame it. Was it a win to be proud of? Was it a souvenir meant to elicit oohs and ahs? Did I just want to brag that I had done a half marathon in Myanmar?

*

Three years later, I became a writer because it is the perfect way to be seen and not seen at the same time. I struggle to finish writing this essay and still don't know where it should end. I realize that I have come to the right place, in this place, studying to be a writer. Writing my first book of essays, wanting to be heard and seen.

Brain Day

The first time I saw Rick, it was in a photo on his application for the Beginnings Workshop. Rick's face stared up at me with a big grin. In the space where small square photos were meant to be pasted in to show the face of the applicant, Rick had cut around his face from a much bigger print, pasting his black and white face over the small box. The photo said, *Look at me, I am here, I am ready*. My photo fit into the box. My photo said, *I am organized, I follow rules, I am ready*.

Four years after I saw his application, Rick and I left New Jersey eastbound to start a six-month road trip to see the United States. *Our goal is to hit all fifty states*, I told people. *Our goal is to find the best dessert in America*, Rick told people. *This is the 2005 Cross Country Extravaganza*. We worked multiple jobs and saved for nine months and took off, first east, then west, south, then north, zigzagging our way across the country. We had crossed thirty-six states off our list after five months when we decided to spend a few days in Seattle. I spent the night with an old friend after a new attraction sparked at dinner. Rick went out with someone he had met online.

The next morning, it was late before I found my phone, flung across the room, forgotten. I did not expect the voicemails when I finally found my phone. Rick: *I'm at the hospital but am fine, don't worry*. Rick's mom: *What's going on? Is Rick okay? He's at the hospital, where are you?* When I arrived at the hospital still in my clothes from the night before, a tiny shirt, no bra, smeared mascara, heels, Rick was no longer fine. He writhed on a gurney, in so much pain he needed morphine. The nurse came, stuck him with a needle and there, right before me, he visibly

relaxed. Later, from a different nurse or doctor, *Who gave him morphine?* Another nurse yelled: *He shouldn't have morphine*. I stood next to him in the teeming emergency room, terrified.

I learned what had happened. he had a seizure. His skull was cracked. His brain was bleeding. I felt guilty, guilty for my night, my amazing night. I should have been there with him.

To see if the bleed was worsening, the nurses asked the same questions over and over and over. They told me, *if he can't answer, we will cut open his skull. Where are you?* they asked him. *Which hospital?* I was angry: *don't ask that, he doesn't know where we are, we've only been in Seattle for two days*; *you need to ask something else, something he can answer.* They started again, *What happened to you?* They were kind, but rushed. *I had a seizure*, he said, *I had a seizure*, *I hit my head, hard*. Again, minutes, hours later, *what happened to you?* Again and again, he said, *I had a seizure, a seizure, a seizure…* It was okay, he knew, he was aware. And then, *What happened to you?* And, this time, he laughed, *e…e…it starts with an e.* His brow furrowed. *Seizure,* the nurse said, *you had a seizure*. He laughed again. *Seizure? Well, that doesn't start with e…* Just as quick, he was gone, down the hall. *Sit here, wait*, the nurse said. She guided me to another room, on another floor. With compassion she said*, wait, please*, *it will be many hours*. *Be calm, don't worry*. Don't worry? It was just his brain, just brain surgery. What could go wrong? What could change?

Rick changed. He lets the bugs in. I need the reminder every year, on Brain Day. The reminder to let bugs into my life. I have become the one who needs to be in control. The one who wants order. The one worried about adventure. Rick is the one who knows all about me and loves me.

Catch Me if I Fall

1. I-17 between Phoenix and Flagstaff, AZ (1982)

I was five. We were in the back seat of Nona's burgundy Cadillac. Papa was driving. My sister Emily and I had celebrated Easter with Nona and Papa in Phoneix and now we were driving back to Gallup, New Mexico. We had stayed in a hotel and visited cousins, enjoying the heat of Arizona. Our parents waited in Gallup with our baby sister Cathy.

The yellow balloon hovering in the back window popped. It was loud and sudden and I started crying. Emily's eyes were wide when she looked at me. She cried too.

"It's because of the altitude," Papa said. "We're going up the mountain and that's what makes the balloon pop."

Papa wore big glasses that covered most of his face. He always wanted us to understand why things happened, the science behind the balloon popping. But he was funny, too. His expressions were elastic, his cheeks seemed to pull up at the corners of his mouth or push them down in an exaggerated frown. He made faces to make us laugh, pulling on his ears and patting his head.

"Stop crying," Nona said. "Stop crying or we'll stop the car and leave you on the side of the road."

My cheeks were still wet. I strained to look out the window. I saw the tops of the straggly junipers and sage-colored rabbit brush. I saw myself standing on the side, watching cars go by, holding my little sister's hand. I would never see Mom and Dad again, never play with baby Cathy. Would Nona really leave us?

2. Paris, France (1997)

When I left the U.S. for the first time, I felt small. I stood in line at the airport next to that ridiculous suitcase. The new green suitcase. The huge suitcase. It was emerald green with gold edging and it rolled. It came up to my hip, was deeper than it was wide, and sat back, angling up. There were fabric-covered pieces inside that could be used as dividers or manipulated to make shelves. That suitcase sat in the corner of my room in France that year, holding folded clothes.

The trunk and I flew across the Atlantic, one in the cold underbelly of the plane and one curled up in an empty row of seats sniffling under a small gray blanket. We left the airport for the Gare du Nord. All of the French I had learned in the two years before must have bailed into the ocean. I was tongue-tied and weighed down by the green trunk. I couldn't remember a single word. I saw myself as the French must have seen me. The unsophisticated American struggling to haul the trunk over the slim turnstiles in the Metro. Or maybe this was how I saw myself.

3. Agawam, MA (2005)

When I was five, my cousin forced me onto a small roller-coaster at our local theme park. Roller-coasters terrified me. She took me away from my mom and thought it would be fun to see my reaction. I have forgotten what my reaction was that day, but I have kept the fear of roller-coasters.

In June 2005, Rick and I left on our cross-country adventure. The goal was to cross all fifty states in six months, doing something substantial in each state—rock

climbing in Wyoming, rafting in New Mexico, mountain climbing in Maine, to name a few. We first headed east from New Jersey and spent our third night in Massachusetts. Rick loved roller-coasters and was determined to stop at Six Flags New England. This stop wasn't on my list.

We arrived early and it was already hot. The lines weren't too long yet.

"It's fine," I said. "I'll sit over here and have an ice cream while you ride the roller-coaster."

Rick can be very convincing. He questioned me about my fear. Where does it come from? What, exactly, are you scared of? What do you think will happen? I couldn't articulate why, couldn't answer the questions. Rick persuaded me to join him. To see what it was like then, so many years later.

"Maybe you'll like it now," he suggested. "Maybe you'll have fun."

I wanted to be a person who liked roller-coasters, someone who wanted that thrill, someone up for an adventure. The tracks wove up and around above us, the wood creaked, and the people screamed. Were they screaming with delight or because they too believed the whole thing will come tumbling down? The heat of the day explained the sweating but not the shaking. Why did I need to do this? I wanted to prove that I was brave, an adventurer.

4. Marrakesh, Morocco (2009)

The alarm woke me at 3 am, no one beside me to hurry me along. My bags were packed by the door. I had spent a week alone in Morocco and now was flying to Tunisia to visit

family. I would spend two weeks there. I looked forward to my time in Tunisia, looked forward to visiting with family, to no longer standing out as a woman traveling alone.

Backpack on, roller bag in one hand, carved walking stick in the other, I set off to the airport for my early flight. The hotel owner assured me that there would be plenty of taxis just over that way on the edge of the square. I find calm in walking through sleeping cities. A few lights glowed in the windows of bakeries and bars. The streets were empty and dark. The few streetlights projected glowing circles onto the cobblestone streets. But there is another side to sleeping cities, the side that makes me nervous, makes me hyperaware of my surroundings. It was only when I crossed through the small street that opened onto the square that the taxi drivers came alive. The men came at me fast, speaking Arabic, French, and English in a jumble, vying for my business. They opened doors and grabbed at my bags. I chose one and sat clutching my backpack while they fought outside over who had been first in line.

5. Outside of Pyin Oo Lwin, Myanmar (2017)

I sat on the side of a mountain far from any of the popular tourist spots of Myanmar. I needed a break and didn't care that my khaki hiking shorts were already streaked with mud. I was hiking with my friend Ei Ei Khaing. She was used to hiking straight down without a path and fearless in attempting the sheer rock faces. I had spent the morning terrified that I would actually fall to my death. The stands of bamboo were far apart. Between them were tall trees, willowy and thin, not suitable for stopping a grown woman from tumbling down the side of the mountain. The guide in front of me bounded down through the trees. His longyi was wrapped around his waist and tied up between his legs

like shorts. He wore cheap plastic flip-flops and a thin white tank top. A simple woven bag slung across his shoulder. There were colorful pompoms along the bottom of his bag. My heart pounded and I struggled not to cry.

Ei Ei Khaing looked back at me and smiled. She continued, following the group. I was slow, the mountain was steep, and all I wanted was to be okay. Okay with not knowing where we were going or how long we would be gone. Okay with the trail that wasn't a trail. Okay with being the awkward foreigner. Okay with the guide staring at me, prepared to catch me if I fell. I feared he would not catch me.

On Judgement

Judge not, that you be not judged.
For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged,
and the measure you give will be the measure you get.
(Matthew 7: 1-2)

I stand next to the bed, holding her hand. This is a new room, a new place, but we have done our best to make it feel like home. We, the grandchildren, hang up all the pictures that we can on three walls. Black and white photos of the family decorate the west wall and, on the opposite wall, colorful photos representing everyone down to the great-grandkids cover the wall above the dresser. On the fourth wall, above her head where she lies in a hospital bed, a large television and two crosses dominate. We don't talk about the fact that she has been in hospice care for a few days. The beautiful building, stuccoed beige in the southwestern style, looks over the Manzano Mountains that mark Albuquerque to the southeast.

She is my grandmother, Nona, and she is dying. It's Labor Day weekend and the whole family has come to see Nona for the last time. There are six of us on duty now, keeping vigil. She won't be alone this weekend. My cousin Melinda sits in a chair by the window. My mom, Louise, digs in the closet, pulling photo albums out of a box. I stand on Nona's right side and hold her hand in mine. Aunt Cheza comes into the room with Uncle Ben and goes to the other side of the bed. She sits down and picks up her other hand.

"She wants us to pray," Cheza announces. Cheza has long, red hair styled around her face, her sunglasses holding her hair back on her head. She has a wide face, pretty with the small lines of a life-long smoker around her mouth. With a serious look of concentration, she starts,

"Our Father who art in heaven…" She continues on and everyone joins in. We all know the prayer. I think about how much Cheza has always annoyed Nona. She was often hyper-critical of her two daughters-in-law, though my dad, the only son-in-law, could do no wrong. As we come to the end, Cheza starts up again, "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be…" Everyone mumbles on this one, though we know it as well. Cheza pauses for a moment before starting up again, "Hail Mary, full of grace…" We're quiet for a brief moment before joining in. Is it out of habit?

The truth is Nona probably does want us to pray.

*

Growing up in the Catholic church, I was constantly told what was right and wrong. When you sin, you go to confession. To make up for the sin, say prayers and God forgives you. Deceptively simple, right?

The first time I thought the church was wrong, I was seven years old. It was a Wednesday. We always had CCD (our religious education) on Wednesdays after school. My favorite part was when we sang at the end of class. That Wednesday we learned about how to get to heaven. We would not go to heaven if we did not go to mass every week. Well, that can't be true, I thought. My best friend Carrie doesn't go to mass. She's a good person and could never go to hell. It didn't add up. I didn't sing that day, but sat with the group, listening to the guitar. Everyone sang "This Little Light of Mine." I mimed the bushel covering my little light while pondering the church's mistake. I decided that day, without talking to anyone, that Carrie was going to heaven and the church was wrong.

*

When my cousins and I organized this impromptu reunion, we didn't realize that we would be saying our goodbyes to Nona. That realization hit each of us as we came into the room and saw her. She looked so small in the bed, a sheet covering her flowered nightdress. Not the formidable matriarch we all knew so well. Though she is 95, the last time I saw her was just a month ago and we had gone out for lunch. The deterioration has been blessedly fast. She didn't want to be bedridden. Nona has always been religious and for that I've come to associate the church with family, regardless of the criticisms I have of the Catholic church and the judgements that I internalized my whole life. Mass, rituals, prayer all comfort me.

Nona responds to the prayer. She turns her head and though her eyes don't open, she hears us. I try to push away my own judgements. I find Cheza's variety of see-how-absolutely-perfectly-religious-I-am spirituality fake and off-putting. I feel affronted by whatever she says and doubt her intentions.

She doesn't know what's best here. She doesn't care about Nona like I do. She only wants us to look at her, to see her holiness. I judge her for quietly judging me.

*

Growing up in the church, I knew what I was supposed to do to be a *good* Catholic—go to mass every week and on holy days of obligation, go to confession regularly, pray for those who are in purgatory. But, there were more rules than that—don't lie to your parents, don't cuss, don't have sex before marriage, don't masturbate, and on and on. So much to feel guilty about, so much fuel for judgement.

The church uses the beginning of Matthew, Chapter 7, as a guide for what Jesus thought about judgement. It is not the beginning, "Judge not, that you be not judged" *(Matthew 7:1),* that we should focus on but, instead, verse 3, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye,

but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" It's not that we can't or even shouldn't judge others, just that we must first be able to see our own mistakes for what they are before looking so closely at others.

This interpretation is compelling. Whether or not I agree with the church, here is something I can strive for—to look at myself and my own mistakes before judging others. Do I do this? No. But I find it a worthy goal.

*

When I was a senior in high school I was taking classes to be confirmed in the church. My younger sister, Emily, was taking classes at the same time. We lived in a rural area, so we drove the forty minutes to the bigger town to attend confirmation classes. The church near us had lost its priest in a money laundering scandal a few years before, necessitating the drive. Mrs. Kozeliski taught the class. She was, and still is, a stern-looking woman with short, curly, brown hair, set perfectly and framing a face set permanently in a fake smile, as though she's always deciding what to think of you.

The bigger town was Gallup, New Mexico, where Nona had grown up and my mom and two uncles as well. Gallup is a small city on the border of the Navajo reservation in the northeastern part of the state. Surrounded by mesas and rocks in colors from tan to brick red, the high-desert landscape is covered with sage brush and scraggly juniper pines. Coal mines and the railroad brought immigrants to the area in the early 1900s, including my mother's grandparents who came from Italy and settled in this town because of its already healthy Italian population. Nona spent her life praising Gallup and was well-known in the community, especially at the church.

Busy with senior year classes and activities and not interested in prioritizing confirmation classes, I didn't memorize the proper prayers and was labeled delinquent by Mrs. K. She seemed to see a devil riding on my left shoulder, cackling in my ear and leading me astray. She sat me down in her office, staring down at me.

"You were not prepared today," she said. "Why did you not learn your prayers?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've been busy with school and just wasn't able to learn the prayers."

"You will have to learn them before the confirmation mass."

"I know, I will do my best." I knew I failed to meet her expectations. I started to cry.

"Why are you crying? There's no reason to cry." Mrs. K said.

"I don't know. I feel bad."

She brought my mom in.

"I think Jennifer may have a learning disability," Mrs. K said to my mom, "she's just not doing what she needs to do. I wonder if she's even capable."

"She's going to be the valedictorian of her class next month and is very involved at school. Maybe she is just overwhelmed with work right now," my mom said in my defense, clearly surprised by the question.

"Well, perhaps, but she must understand just how *very* important Confirmation is to a young Catholic."

"She does know that it's important."

Mrs. K scoffed at this and filed away the accusation. Years later, she would bring this incident up to my young niece and nephew, telling them that I was a troublemaker, the same strange smile on her face. They didn't know how to react to this woman they had just met who

was judging their auntie. I wish I would have been there to respond to her, defending myself so many years later.

*

The whole family rented a big house in Albuquerque for Labor Day weekend (aunts, uncles, cousins, spouses, kids, all together) to be closer to Nona and able to make our own meals. My cousin, Ben and Cheza's second son, Christopher, stands in the corner of the kitchen. He looks out of place and uncomfortable. Newly ordained, he wears a long, black cassock and could have stepped out of a Catholic school picture from the 1950s. He is tall and slim with neatly trimmed strawberry blond hair and a full, well-groomed beard. The cassock is floor-length and buttons up the front, all the way to the stiff white collar. Christopher is missing a button somewhere in the middle. This is the only thing that seems off as he stands stiffly watching over the scene. Nothing else about the scene seems remotely ordered.

The kitchen opens out into the rest of the house. There's a huge, concrete island in the middle with metal stools along one side and an immense wooden table running the length of the room. Around the giant table in the kitchen, laid out with spicy New Mexico salsa and a huge bowl of corn chips, aunts, uncles, and cousins sit with a soda or beer in front of them telling stories about Gallup in the old days. The rest of us are standing around the island, washing dishes at the sink or manning the grill outside, watching the kids run in circles, screaming with laughter. Voices rise up, one overtaking the next; it's a fight to make sure each voice is heard. I'm opening a bottle of wine while Melinda gets us some glasses. Danielle, another cousin, is in charge of dinner and chops vegetables for a salad. My sister, Emily, grills chicken outside. I take my glass of wine around the island to help chop vegetables. Danielle is beautiful, tall and slim with dark skin and a short and stylish haircut. She wears a white shirt and loose black pants, the outfit suits

her well and, as always, she looks very put together. Her insecurities come through only in the way she chews on the edge of her lip and crosses one arm over the other in conversation. She loves being in charge of the food and expertly chops an onion while overseeing the preparations.

"Christopher, I'm so glad you came," I stop on my way to give him a hug. I set down the wine glass and wrap my arms around his waist. He puts one arm over my shoulders and squeezes.

"How are you, cousin number one?" I'm the oldest of the cousins and Christopher dubbed me 'cousin number one' years ago.

"I'm okay, so glad everyone is here."

I move behind the cutting board and reach across to toast with Melinda. "To Nona." I say.

"To Nona," she replies, meeting my eyes. We both have tears brimming but we drink before they spill over.

Most of us don't live in New Mexico and we came together to spend time with Nona. Father Christopher, as Cheza insists on calling him, joins us this evening (Sunday) now that his masses for the weekend are done. I find Christopher, as I insist on calling him, harder to talk to since he started in the seminary.

"We weren't sure how to do a rosary," Danielle tells a story about this morning. I can understand, though I've said hundreds of rosaries in my life, there is usually someone leading. I never have to think about what comes next. "Thank God for the Internet. We found a guide. I think it's good that we missed church to stay with Nona and say a rosary."

"I agree," I say. "I'm glad you guys thought of it."

"You went to church later though, right?" Christopher approaches the group to ask.

"No, we didn't," Danielle says.

"Well, there are at least four other masses during the day at Prince of Peace."

"Christopher, they stayed to be with Nona," I say. "It was the right thing to do."

"Going to mass is part of what we have to do as Catholics," he insists.

We move on, but Danielle is clearly upset. Our eyes meet and she shakes her head, telling me to let it go. We talk later and assure each other that regularly missing mass is not damning us. Father Christopher needs to find the balance between preaching and listening and being *Cousin* Christopher.

*

Later in the weekend, I ask Father Christopher what judgement means to him.

"What kind of judgement? From the perspective of the judge? The accused? Legal or personal? Secular or ecclesiastical?"

"I'm thinking more on a person-to-person level."

"From a moral perspective then?"

"Yes."

"Judge not lest ye be judged," he quotes. "But it is often misunderstood. We must not judge the interior dispositions or believe that we can accurately gauge the intentions of a stranger. We must judge actions. That is why we can say that we hate the sin, which we can judge, and love the sinner for whom we can only pray and seek to understand."

Christopher's view on judgment fails to consider that log in one's own eye. Loving the sinner doesn't presuppose that the judge has first done the necessary self-inspection.

*

Monday morning, we all crowd into Nona's room. She breaths with her mouth open, her shoulders shake occasionally. She hasn't opened her eyes or eaten or drank for two days. Michelle, one of the younger cousins and a nurse in a psychiatric emergency room in New York City, researched end-of-life processes and tells us that Nona is going through the work of dying.

"She's not in pain," Michelle says. "She's on her way to a peaceful death."

"She's dying?" my mom's cousin Regina says, surprised. "You think she's dying?"

"Yes," Michelle says. The rest of us are not surprised.

"I was still hoping she would get up soon," Regina says.

"No," Michelle replies, kindly. "This is the best way to go. She's not in pain. She's at peace."

Regina takes this in. "The last of the Mohicans, Aunt Elsie," she whispers in Nona's ear. "You're the last one."

Regina's mom, Nona's sister, had been the first of their siblings to die. Nona, though the oldest, will be the last. Regina is a psychologist in California. She works with prisoners. She has very strong opinions on everything, from politics to career advice, and a way of speaking that can be harsh and didactic. It puts me off. She, like her mother, isn't always good with recognizing reality. When her mother's health was failing, it took many calls to Regina in California before she accepted that her mother needed help, that she couldn't be alone anymore. It was hard to watch. It has been hard this weekend to hear her insist that Nona is going to be fine, while we are trying to help her die peacefully. Relax, I tell myself, everyone deals with this in their own way.

*

My second cousin Hena and I talked about Nona over coffee a month before the Labor Day gathering. We talked about family, the older generation.

"I always admired your grandma," she said, "she's such a great judge of character."

Nona, though one of my favorite people, was not a good judge of character. She was a harsh judge if she decided she didn't like you. I was never on that list but I saw it happen many times. She loved Dr. Oz because he was handsome. That may have been the only reason. She was clear about doctors in general. Once her eyesight started to go, the first thing she would ask the nurse on meeting a new doctor was, "is he handsome?" Nurses were often thrown by this inappropriate question from a 95-year-old lady. She couldn't stand Al Roker of the Today show because he once said something she disagreed with. From then on, he was on the bad list, along with Angelina Jolie, my aunt Cheza, my great-grandma (her mom) and Uncle Henry (her brother-in-law, by all accounts not a very nice person). On the good list, along with Dr. Oz, was Diane Sawyer, my dad (her only son-in-law, by all accounts a nice person), my great-grandpa (her dad) and Vic Albera (her nephew-in-law, by all accounts a terrible person). These judgements all seemed arbitrary, but held the test of time. She never wavered.

*

I drive home from the airport on Monday evening. My phone rings and I see that it's my parents. I know immediately that Nona has died. I pull the car over. My dad confirms my suspicion. Family members were with her all day, leaving one by one. It was Christopher and Uncle Ben who were the last to leave. They hadn't been gone five minutes when the attendant went in to check on her and found that she was no longer breathing. She waited to be alone.

*

Two years later, on what would have been Nona's 97th birthday, I will go to mass for the first time in months. I will feel comfort in the ritual. I will light a candle for Nona and say the "Hail Mary" for her. I will not judge myself for using the mass to comfort myself. I will not share this with Christopher.

Stalled

Carrie told me that the spitballs on the bathroom ceiling could be fatal if they hit you on the head. Carrie was my best friend and she knew things. She walked like a ballerina, tall and straight, with long, brown hair. I was little, pudgy, and uncoordinated, and walked on my toes as if to escape the ground. I cried easily and invited teasing. I felt uncool. Even though the bathroom held dangers, it was quiet and I could process the world alone.

In the bathroom stall—the one with the least number of spitballs above it—I went into another world. One I knew not to talk about with anyone else. I knew my friends would think I was weird. The bathrooms were new, painted burnt orange like much of this new wing of the school. The doors were hollow and metal, the gap underneath coming up to my knees, the wall on the right held a double metal toilet paper holder lap-high when sitting on the toilet. The top of this toilet paper holder was long and flat, a stage for my imagination.

In the stall, there existed a tiny world of friends. Friends who understood my feelings. They listened and sympathized. I see them now, standing on the toilet paper holder, looking up at me, small and yellow (akin to the Fraggle Rock doozers), dressed in brightly colored clothes and always there when I needed them. They would tell me it wasn't stupid to want to suck my thumb if I was sad even though I was too old. They would cheer me on if I did well on a test and tell me it was all okay if I thought Carrie was mad at me. These conversations were sometimes whispered, my face close to the small world on the toilet paper holder, sometimes they happened in my mind if I was not alone in the bathroom. I knew better than to let others hear me talk.

I have not had a conversation with these bathroom friends for a long time. I don't know if they disappeared when I left first grade or if they slowly faded back into the particle board of the stalls, the place they lived when I wasn't there. What I do know is that the need for them has not lessened. I am still little and nervous and in need of comfort. Now, the feelings are internalized. They come in the incessant questions that plague me after uncomfortable situations. What could I have said to my colleague who yelled at me in front of students because she was mad at the students? How could I have better responded to an email from the school principal asking me to take on an extra after-school club with no compensation?

Now there's no one to answer the questions, no one to assuage my insecurities. Now I have to stop myself. Alone in the bathroom, this one beige and metal with a giant round plastic toilet paper holder high on the right. There are no spitballs but impertinent remarks penned on the back of the door and shoulder-high on the left—a silly column of critiques starting with, "que the nasty remarks" and followed by those sure it should be "queue" and then, finally, "cue." Insults abound in each comment. I remind myself to breathe deeply. I tell myself the things I used to get from the yellow people.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to call on them again, to summon the little creatures in the colorful clothing, to let them calm me down. They could've calmed me when I failed to respond to a 16-year-old student who commented on my appearance. He, walking with a group of boys all a foot taller than me, told me I was pretty, and laughed with his friends. It was an inappropriate comment to a teacher, but I walked on, ignoring them, pretending not to hear. They could've calmed me when I felt the anger directed at me by my roommate and friend. She refused to speak to me when my caramel boiled over, staining the stove, assuming I had done

this on purpose to spite her. Perhaps they will appear again, waving to me from the toilet paper holder. No one needs to know.

Playing with Fate

Outside of Mandalay, on the side of a mountain, far from anything, I sit, shaking with fear and exertion, on a shelf of rock. The boulder curls up behind me, like a giant's grey straight-backed couch with cushions of brown leaves. Expecting a nice, relaxing hike, I wasn't ready for this. The path continues down, steeper than I would like in front of me and behind me the damp, dark soil stretches up. Stands of bamboo, tall, thin pine trees, and willows dot the mountainside. My heart pounds, my breathing quick and shallow; I try not to cry.

Ei Ei Khaing stands next to me, looking down, smiling. I am glad she is here, this is her country, she does not look worried. Ei Ei Khaing is Tr. Ei to me (Teacher or Tr. is an honorific in Myanmar held in great esteem). She is also my assistant teacher, my good friend, and a skilled hiker. Tr. Ei and I planned to take our 11th grade students hiking on this Full Moon Day since we had the day off of school, but the plan fell through. We decided to join her hiking crew instead. Having hiked with them before, I know that bouldering or rock climbing was often closer to what they did than hiking. Envisioning a relaxing day out, I told Ei that hiking would be nice, but only if it would be an easy day. It will be, she assured me. It is not!

"Teacher Jennifer, are you okay?" she asks.

"No, not really," I say, trying to hide my tears.

"It's okay Teacher. We will stay with you until you are okay."

In addition to Tr. Ei, our guide stands to the side, his longyi, a traditional wrap skirt, pulled up between his legs and tied to make shorts. He wears a white tank top and cheap, rubber

flip-flops, a small, woven bag slung around his shoulder. He chews beetlenut and spits out a stream of red juice, smiling at me with teeth red from years of chewing beetlenut.

"Tr. Ei, I will stay here. I will wait for you to come back. It's no problem. I have my book. I don't want you to wait. I don't mind waiting for you."

"Are you sure, Teacher?"

I've asked Ei to call me Jennifer or Jenn many times. We are friends, I told her, you don't need to call me Teacher. She tries and sometimes does, but it is too engrained in her to use the honorifics. Because of this, I do the same. She relays my message to the guide in Burmese and he answers back, gesturing to his left to the trail where the rest of the party descended, going ahead so they could start lunch at the bottom.

We spent the last hour and a half dropping straight down the mountain. Straight down. I negotiated wet soil and wet leaves, broken up only by solid faces of rock. Building for a while, I am now in full-on panic mode. I can see myself falling straight off the mountain, but cannot see the bottom. My legs are shaking and I am out of my league. Also, I am slowing everyone else down. I feel like I should be… braver, stronger, better, everything… I'm not doing well.

"Teacher, he says we will not come back the same way, you must continue down with us. It is okay if we wait for some time. But, we must go down. Will you be okay?"

"I don't know, Tr. Ei, I can't breathe, I'm sorry."

"It's okay, we will wait." She comes over and puts her arm around me.

"Tr. Ei, you told me this would be an easy hike," I say. I try to laugh through my panic. "I don't think I can go hiking with you guys anymore."

"I am sorry, Teacher, I had never seen this place before. The guys told me it was an easy one."

"I guess my idea of easy is too different."

"Yes, Teacher," she says. "We will help you down. We can go slow. Don't worry."

She did not seem worried. I wish I felt the same.

*

Three years before, as the plane descended into the Mandalay airport, the gold and white pagodas stood out against the red dirt and bright green foliage. Hundreds spread over the area surrounding the city. This was the end of a long plane ride which had started in Albuquerque, New Mexico with stops in New York City and Bangkok.

Before I got a job and moved there, Myanmar was not on my radar. Hired to teach preschool for five months there, I promptly searched in the Atlas to see where I was going. Having never been to Asia, the chance to explore a new place was too much to pass up. Five months would fly by, I assured myself. Excitement built as I rushed around, buying button-down shirts as outlined in the school's dress code, and updating my vaccinations.

It's September, the end of the rainy season, as evidenced by the large brown lakes. Roofs of houses float on the water at the edge of these lakes. Early flooding in the low-lying areas means these houses are apt to be underwater at this time every year. I spent my first evening unpacking and setting up my small studio apartment as best I could with limited decorations. I toured the school, which was in the same compound as the teacher's apartments. I joined some of the other teachers for dinner at a local beer station for my first taste of Myanmar cuisine—barbequed meat, ginko beans, mushrooms, and onions, topped off with a cold glass of Myanmar beer.

The next day, I borrow a school bicycle eager to explore on my own. At the advice of another teacher, I set off to find a nearby Buddhist temple or pagoda. The school grounds were

on the edge of town, I headed east towards the mountains. Immediately out of the city, there were flooded rice paddies on either side of the road. After twenty minutes, beyond the trees at the edge of the last rice paddy, was a small town. I stopped at a roadside stand to ask for directions.

A small man sat behind the table. He was old, with a kind, weathered face, crinkles around his eyes, and short hair, still dark and standing out from his head a little in the humidity. I approached the table piled high with eggs; large, brown chicken eggs and small, speckled quail eggs. Behind him, a rusty bicycle was parked at the end of a stately line of motorbikes.

I didn't remember the name of the pagoda so I asked, pathetically, "Pagoda?" I gestured with my hands miming a strange sort of cone shape.

He seemed to know what I was talking about and pointed down the street.

"How will I know where to turn?" I asked him, gesturing with my whole body, turning my palms upside down and raising shoulders in an exaggerated shrug, pointing to indicate a turn.

"That way, walk ten minutes." He gestured as well and indicated a turn to the right.

"Jesu temoore." My attempt at thank you in Myanmar. He stared at me quizzically and I knew I missed the mark. "Thank you," I said and bowed a little with my hands together in front of my heart, awkward.

I walked in the indicated direction not at all sure that I was headed the right way, I trudged on. The ground was wet from days of rain. My flip flops sprayed water and mud up the backs of my legs. How did he know it would take me ten minutes?

I passed many opportunities to turn, but continued, hoping that something would look different eventually. All along the street, vendors sold flowers, fruits, vegetables, plastic wares, teak carvings. Ladies sat in front of the stalls with pots and pans cooking over fires, selling fried

rice flour balls filled with quail eggs, noodle soups pungent with fish paste and rice, white and purple, wrapped in bamboo or banana leaves. They displayed fruits and veggies in large, flat baskets on the ground; custard apples, a knobby fruit that resembles an avocado-sized pineapple, long yellow and green gourds and bunches of green leaves in all shapes and sizes. I recognized dragon fruit, persimmon, apples, cucumbers, string beans as long as my arm, and bunches of oyster mushrooms.

After squelching through the puddles for more than ten minutes, the top of the pagoda poked out from the tall wall lining the side of the road. A gold arch spanned a small side street to my right. Beautiful, looping Myanmar script followed the arch in bright red. This was it. A woman sold bouquets of flowers to the right just under the arch; red, yellow, and purple daisies in bunches and a basket of individual lavender lotus flowers. I spent 1000 kyats, about a dollar, for a bouquet and headed down the road. The dirt road quickly became a tiled path and no one wore shoes passed this point. I removed my shoes and carried them with me. People milled about, some here to pray or give offerings, some who looked like they were always here, begging or socializing. A woman sat off to the side of the path, under a large tree with two cages full of birds. The birds sold for 1000 kyats each to be released with a prayer. Not all the birds looked healthy. She called out to me as I passed and I gave her only a smile and a nod.

The pagoda stood in front of me, large and bright, wide at the base, with rounded tiers that wind up gradually to a high point. The whole thing covered in gold with light-colored, shiny tiles covering the ground and pillars in the surrounding structures. Some of the pillars were mosaicked with tiny fragments of glass and mirrors, making them sparkle from every angle. It was gaudy but the milling people and tourists radiated peace. The westerners wore khaki pants and breathable, quick-dry tops, with large cameras around their necks. In contrast, the locals

dressed in traditional longyi, wrap skirts made with a tube of material folded and tied, to the side for women and with a big knot in the front for men. Men's fabric patterned in muted plaid colors, navy blue and army green with subtle red accents. Women had more of a choice in their fabric; bright colors, streaked with metallic thread or patterned with flowers. Teenagers wandered around, some in couples, walking close together without touching and wearing bright-colored skinny jeans with fashionable t-shirts and cool haircuts, dyed blonde at the tips.

I headed into the temple and saw the Buddha, large and gold, sitting on a platform, surrounded by offerings. A small, intricately carved fence encircled the platform, marking the boundary for women, who could not get too close. Men applied gold leaf to the statue, deliberately, a prayer. Women knelt on a carpet before the fence, bowing and praying. Huge vases framed the side of the carpet in front of huge pillars leading up to the platform. I placed my bouquet in one of the vases and headed to the women's carpet as a guard gestured to me as a reminder to not go beyond the pillar. I knelt down and took a deep breath. Voices echoed all around but I felt calm. Not knowing what else to do I said a quick "Our Father" in my head, bowing in time with the woman in front of me, conscious of my breath, the flow in and out. I had no idea this would be the start of four years in Myanmar.

*

Tr. Ei and I started working in the same classroom my third year in Myanmar. After teaching preschool for my first year, I had been offered a position as the high school English teacher. This position suited me. Tr. Ei came to my classroom in my second year with the high school. We already knew each other because she had attended the improvisation acting class I had offered for the local teachers the year before. Tr. Ei was about my height, just over 5', and her dark hair was short, just growing back after she had shaved it for a stay in a monastery a couple months

before. Tr. Ei regularly spent time meditating and taking the vows of a Buddhist nun for weeks at a time. She had dark-rimmed glasses and smiled often. We were well matched both in the classroom and out. We both liked hiking and the outdoors and agreed on the best ways to keep order in the classroom—a blend of strict rules and engaging assignments.

We became close in the two years we shared a classroom. Our prep period often turned into a sharing session with one or both of us opening up about our lives. I described where I was from, telling her she would love the mesas and trails of New Mexico. She told me about growing up as the youngest and only girl in her family, now expected to take care of her mother into old age. On field trips with our classes to pagodas, she would recount the stories of the Buddha often depicted in painted panels around the edges of the big rooms in the temples. I would tell her about growing up Catholic. We saw similarities in some of our stories—virgin births, babies floating down rivers, periods of fasting.

On a rainy fall day in my fourth year, Tr. Ei came into the classroom laughing. She told me that all the girls in the copy room were talking about one of the new American teachers, how cute he was.

"Teacher, they are saying he looks just like a K-Pop star," Tr. Ei told me. It was true, this new teacher, who was half Korean, could've easily passed for a Korean pop star.

"What do you think, Tr. Ei?"

"He's okay," she said.

"Do you like anyone?"

This led to a conversation about men and marriage. Tr. Ei, was older than the other local teachers, most of whom were in their early twenties. She was thirty-two. She told me about a man in her hiking group who clearly liked her and often flirted with her.

"We are just friends," she said. "He is okay, but I am not interested in him more than friends."

"Are you interested in marriage?" We had never talked about this.

"I don't know. If I get married, I will have to do what my husband says. Right now, I don't have anyone telling me what to do, except my mother a little. I don't want to stop working, or hiking, or traveling. I am happy like this."

I thought about this. I also was not sure if I wanted to get married, but I was sure if I did, I wouldn't have to do what my husband said or stop working or stop traveling.

*

It was the Fall of 2015, the start of my third year in Myanmar, and the elections would happen in a couple of weeks. Excitement permeated the streets in Mandalay. Motorbikes loaded with three or even four young men went through the streets gang-like, waving flags and yelling slogans. They sported the distinctive red shirts of the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD (National League for Democracy) party. These red-shirted hooligans were accused of raising a ruckus all around town. Rumor had it that it was not really the NLD. The rumors claimed the opposition party purchased the red shirts and flags to raise hell and discredit the popular party. The American Embassy sent out a notice telling Americans to lay low on election day, stay away from polling places.

Every time I hear a story about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi an iconic image of her enters my mind. Poised and beautiful, every bit The Lady, her longtime nickname, she rises above the steel gate in front of her house, blue with red curving metal spikes lining the top. The video, grainy and shaky, is shot with a handheld camera. She stands on something behind the gate so that her head pokes up above it, hands on either side, each holding a spike. It is 2007 and she is under

house arrest. First seized by the military government in 1989, she was released for the last time in 2010, spending fifteen of those twenty-one years under house arrest. She wears a light pink long-sleeved blouse. She smiles at the people crowded outside the gate. They cheer as she appears and continue to make noise even as she gestures for them to quiet. The Myanmar people are her people. Myanmar is her country.

Daw is an honorific for an older woman and she is never referred to in Myanmar without the Daw. Loved and highly respected in Myanmar, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been an international figure for most of the last three decades. Though she spent much of her early life living and studying abroad, she moved back to Myanmar in 1988. She returned amidst violent protests against the military junta who had taken over the rule when the dictator U Ne Win stepped down. Speaking out against the ruling government for democracy led to her first house arrest in 1989. She went on to win the 1991 Nobel Prize for Peace, solidifying her international fame.

Fascinated with the upcoming elections, I cornered Tr. Ei after school. How did voting work? When would we know who won? Did you vote for a candidate or a party? Finally, she stopped me.

"I don't know, Tr. Jennifer," she said. "This has never really happened before. I don't really know how it works."

I felt silly for asking but it made sense. This would be the first truly democratic election since the military took over the country fifty years ago.

Voting day arrived. Sunday. With several other expats, a book and sunscreen, I headed to the big hotel near the school to *lay low* by the pool, though there weren't many people out. The streets were deserted. My Facebook feed filled with pictures of my Myanmar friends voting.

Lines snaked out and around the polling stations. Excitement was in the air. Every once in a while, the unnatural quiet was broken by the red-shirted gangs, roaring through the streets. Other times, police trucks sped by, police in riot gear crowded in the back.

The next morning, those who voted show off their ink-stained fingers. Voters dipped a finger in purple ink after the vote was cast, more permanent than an "I Voted" sticker, the ink remained for a week or longer. Those who did not or could not vote (often because you had to return to the village where you were born to vote), hid their hands at work that day. Facebook was again inundated with election posts, friends raised ink-stained fingers in selfies.

The wait for the final results took several weeks.

When the results came in, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's party had won. They would take office in February 2016. She would become the de facto leader, blocked from the presidency by a clause in the constitution stating that anyone with children holding a foreign passport could not be president. Her children are British citizens, so she would not be allowed to be president. Almost immediately, she would take on the role of minister over several different offices. This seemed strange to the foreigners in Myanmar, but the country would be happy, hoping this meant they would have moved on from the strict hold of the military government. In the end, the military would still hold a fourth of the seats in parliament and would retain much of their control of the country.

*

In my second year teaching in Myanmar, for International Women's Day, I challenged my students to make a short documentary film highlighting women in Myanmar. We would choose the best films to show at our International Women's Day Film Festival on March 8th.

"What about men's day, Tr. Jennifer, when is men's day?" Vince, one of my 10th graders, asked.

"Every day is men's day, Vince," I said, almost joking.

"In Myanmar, everyone's equal, Teacher. We don't need a women's day," Sherrol said.

"Really, you can do everything your brother can do then, right?"

"Oh, I see."

March 8th arrived and the films were set to be shown to all of the secondary school. I was proud of the students and their filming and editing skills. In one film, the students interviewed women who ran food stalls in the market. Another told the story of the women who worked at construction sites, carrying baskets of rocks on their heads for $3 a day. A third followed a business woman through her weaving shop. The school crammed into the conference room, students straining to see the screen. But first, we had a special speaker.

Daw Yee Yee Khaing owned a bed and breakfast in Mandalay and talked about her experience as a female business owner in Mandalay. She struggled to keep her bed and breakfast going for the last 10 years. When she had first opened, it was illegal for tourists to stay outside of the government-owned hotels. These luxury hotels served guests on state-run tours. To this day, these tours showed only the parts of Myanmar that the government wanted tourists to see. Daw Yee Yee Khaing worked hard and kept her bed and breakfast going. Years later, it was now a free and legal business. She encouraged the students to work hard and believe in their dreams. She told me later how grateful she was to speak at the school, to share her story.

*

The next year, Tr. Ei and I showed the documentary *Human* to a class of 10th graders. We watched it in sections throughout the semester. The filmmaker interviewed people from around

the world, asking questions about what it is to be human. He divided the film into sections on family, religion, love, and more. On this day, an Australian woman talked about leaving her abusive husband and starting her life over. Class ended and the students moved on, some, like me, wiping their eyes.

Tr. Ei stood silently in the back of the classroom, deep in thought. I blew my nose. Tr. Ei came to my desk.

"I didn't know that could happen," she said.

"What?"

"That woman, she talked about changing her life."

"Yes, it was a moving story, wasn't it?" I wasn't sure where this was going. "What about it surprised you?"

"She changed her life. We don't think of that. We think that if someone is in a bad situation, like her, it is because of a past life. They have no choice to change it. I never thought about it that way, like what that woman said."

I hadn't ever considered that someone couldn't change their life if they wanted to.

*

Back on the side of the mountain, the guide stares at me, trying to figure out what to do with the sniveling foreigner. We are way off the tourist trail and I am clearly a bit of a mystery. He skips up and down the mountain in flip flops, while I struggle to hold on in my hiking pants and sneakers, mud streaking the side of my leg where I slid a few feet down the mountain earlier before catching hold of a tree.

I trust Ei. I don't know if I trust myself. I haven't decided about the guide. Am I destined to make it off this mountain? I think back to what Ei has told me about fate. That she has always

believed that our fate was set out, the events of this life determined by the deeds we performed in our former lives. Was I good enough in my last life? I did not believe that my life was set in stone, that I didn't have control over where it would go, but for this moment it would be nice to be so certain that it would turn out okay, that I could let go and just enjoy the hike.

We do make it down. It's not far, but takes longer than the ten minutes the guide promised me. At the bottom, beyond a pile of boulders, more than five feet high, is a beautiful waterfall, secluded with a nice, big pond at the base. The sound of the water crashing offers a calming soundtrack to the spot. The pond is fifty feet in diameter and surrounded on three sides with stark rock walls. A stream flows out the fourth side, swirling around the large boulders to flow down the steep valley. The sun can't reach us on the boulders, but sparkles in the rippling water close to the waterfall. Lunch cooks on a small camp stove set on one of the rocks, rice and curry with canned fish. It smells delicious.

"Teacher, you made it." Ei congratulates me with a high five.

"I did. Do you think they would let me live here?"

Are You Wearing the Right Bra?

I stand in front of the mirror naked from the waist up and analyze my breasts. Breasts, not boobs or tits. *Which breast shape(s) most resemble yours? Select all that may apply.* The website claims it will find me the perfect bra. In order to get it, I must first figure out the shape. I look back and forth between the screen and the mirror. Are they bell-shaped, athletic, relaxed, slender, side set, teardrop? Do my nipples point slightly downward, straight out, or in opposite directions? I hold them, one in each hand, feeling the weight. Are they asymmetrical? Which illustration best represents me? It's not easy to say. I eliminate instead. No, they are not bell-shaped. Nope, the nipples don't point east and west. Yes, they do feel lighter than they did ten years ago.

*

Ten years ago, I walked into the Peace Corps office in Niamey, Niger for my annual checkup. Dr. F was on duty. That was good. The other option was Nurse Practitioner B. Both men. Nurse B was known for being rough. The kind of medical professional who has seen too many naked bodies, who has prodded too many bellies and poked the speculum up too many vaginas. He has forgotten that those bodies and bellies and vaginas were attached to women, to people, to humans with feelings and emotions. He was too rough. Dr. F was not rough. He was uncomfortable. He was the kind of medical professional who was uncomfortable with the naked bodies, bellies, and vaginas. He worried too much. Women embarrassed him. The last thing I wanted was a doctor who was uncomfortable when I am the one laid out, exposed on the table.

The last thing I wanted to feel at that moment was concern for him, worry about his feelings. Suck it up!

While I lay there on the cold table the flimsy cotton tunic tied in the front and a paper skirt draped over my bottom half, Dr. F opened the tunic to perform the breast exam.

"How old are you?" he asked, maybe filling out the form in his head. *Focus,* I willed him.

"Thirty," I said. I focused hard on the ceiling.

"You have very nice breasts for a 30-year-old."

Still staring, not looking at him, I said nothing.

*

Seven years later, I lay face down on a different table wearing nothing. It was Christmas break. I was traveling through Vietnam with some friends and we treated ourselves to a massage in De Nang. The table was soft and covered in a sheet. White curtains surrounded the table and Rialda and Gretchen were in the cubicles on either side of me. The room was colder than it should have been and I felt goosebumps under the thin white sheet that covered me. Soft, plucky music played quietly in the background, lights dimmed, candles glowed behind the privacy curtains. The woman with the warm hands stood at my head rubbing my shoulders. I breathed deeply, tried too hard to relax. The woman tapped me on the shoulder and signaled that I should turn over. I did so and closed my eyes to focus on my breathing. She pulled the sheet down, exposing my breasts and, before I knew what was happening, she grabbed both breasts and began rubbing them. She turned them in circles and pinched and squeezed, like a teenaged boy in the back seat of a car. I tried not to laugh. My eyebrows furrowed and I held my breath. That was not where I kept my stress.

*

Every time he holds my breasts, I feel no stress. They don't feel light, but heavy and full. They feel loved and cared for. I don't think about whether they are round or athletic or side set. I don't think about what aging does to them. I don't think about the long, dark hairs that pop up around my nipples. In fact, I don't think. They are beautiful and alive.

*

After too long in front of the mirror, I choose two shapes to describe my breasts to the website. I stare at my breasts in the mirror, the muscles behind them that makes them "athletic" and the droop of them as they fall in "slender" lines down the front of my chest. *Don't worry*, the pink screen assures me, *your breasts may be overlooked by other bra manufacturers, but we are here for you*. *You may need one of our unique styles to show your breasts the love they deserve*.

Biking with Javier

Poised at the top of a hill, I look down at the rocky and unstable ground. The mountain bike feels big and unruly. One foot down and careful to avoid the small cactus to the side of the path, I ready myself. My heart pounds. Already on the top of the next hill, Javier peddles fast. I check my helmet one more time and readjust the pedal. Here goes nothing. I ease up on the brake and let gravity take over.

Javier has been my brother-in-law for only a few years but he and my sister Cathy have been together for close to fifteen. When they first got together, Cathy and I attended college together in Las Cruces, a city in southern New Mexico. Though four years older than her, I was still in school for another year and a half after she started. What I remember from those days is a Javier who was jealous and controlling. He teased Cathy when she worked out in their apartment using a workout video, pushing her to only workout alone when he wasn't there or avoid it all together. He refused to come to events to meet Cathy's friends. Cathy and I were studying martial arts together and would often have parties with our dojo, inviting partners. He never came, claiming it wasn't interesting or important to him. He berated Cathy when she studied with the guys in her classes. Cathy, a mechanical engineer, was often one of the only women in her classes. I spent much of that time hating him, convinced he wasn't good for Cathy and hoping he wouldn't be around for too long. A lot has happened in these last fifteen years. Cathy's relationship with Javier is not the only thing to have changed.

I now stare out at rough paths strewn through the southern deserts of New Mexico. Straggly trees dot the surrounding landscape interspersed with creosote bushes, majestic yucca

plants, and low-to-the-ground cacti, all in a muted palate of earthy tones. The sky, big and a beautiful, is an ideal shade of blue with just a few fluffy clouds hovering over the Organ Mountains just east of us. Striking against the sky, the Organs shoot up at the edge of the desert, each peak slicing, knife-sharp, toward the clouds. The range runs north/south. The peaks catch the setting sun and glow red in the evenings. I'm on Cathy's bike, black with thick tires. The brand means nothing to me but, knowing Javier, it's the best. There's a digital speedometer attached to the handlebars. Throughout the day, no matter how breakneck the speed feels, I don't surpass 10 mph.

Javier rides in front of me, on his blue bike with thinner tires. He wears a Camelback and is going fast, fearlessly diving down the hills to propel himself up the other side. I watch carefully as he negotiates the rocks and pebbles in the path, sliding and righting himself, with a confidence elusive to me. A deep breath and I'm off. My hands clad in the special, black biking gloves and already cramping a bit as I struggle for the happy medium between letting go and white-knuckling the brakes. I keep hitting rocks, almost going over the top of each one before sliding off. I feel like I'm whipping the bike around, trying to turn into each small curve, out of control.

Javier waits for me at the top of the next hill. A sand pit at the bottom of the hill slows me down and there's not enough momentum to get up the next hill. I try once, twice before getting off and walking up to meet Javier at the top.

"How's it going?" he asks.

"Fine, I guess. I definitely don't have the hang of it yet." My hands shake.

“Don’t worry, it takes a while to get used to it. Be careful of holding the brakes. If you squeeze the right brake more than the left, you might engage the front brake too much and the back wheel will go up, flipping you. If you can, don’t hold the brakes.”

I laugh. “I’ll try, but that sounds super scary.”

He laughs with me or at me. “You’re like Cathy. She got used to it, but still goes slow.”

“Thanks for waiting for me.”

“Sure, I’ll go ahead a bit and wait again.”

“Okay, here I go.” I clench my teeth, feeling gritty sand between them.

Javier is not tall, 5’5” or 6”, maybe, built solidly; muscular with dark hair and, currently, a goatee. His family is Mexican-American and he is tied to southern New Mexico. Though he complains about his family, he will never leave. A macho guy in college, he hunted, drove too fast, drank too hard, smoked too much, and badgered Cathy. I was suspicious of him at that point and he didn’t put much effort into changing that image.

Javier loves toys and they always have new, fun, cool cars. The last time Cathy let me drive, it was a blue, souped-up Mazda 3, the front bumper modified to be extra low. I parked too close to the sidewalk and heard the bumper hit the ground. Jumping out of the car, Cathy and I saw that the bumper lay on the sidewalk, seemingly uninjured. I felt awful, but Cathy refused to tell Javier that it was me, claiming he would never get as mad at her as he would at me. I vowed never to driver Javier’s car again.

Here in the desert, I see a new Javier. Patient and kind, he takes time to teach me something that would go faster without the lessons. He stops to wait for me again and gives thoughtful advice, “we’ll just go a bit farther,” he says. “Up to the fence over there.”

The fence looms in the distance, but I can make it. Also, this bit looks flatter than it has been. Javier takes off and I follow, trying to be brave and go a little faster, taking my hands off the brakes for brief periods. It's thrilling, a real mountain biker, flying down the hills, jumping over the rocks, skidding through the sand, awesome. My dream is broken by a sharp drop down into an arroyo. It comes up fast and I squeeze harder on one side of the brakes than the other, the wrong side. The front wheel stops and the back wheel jumps, coming several inches off the ground. Jumping off the bike, I fling it away, slipping a little on a pebble and coming close to stepping in a sad-looking prickly pear cactus. Legs spread wide, I stare down at the bike, my breath comes in quick gasps. No one around, I straighten and try not to look like an idiot.

Hands shaking, I pick up the bike and get back on, holding both brakes again and clearing my mind of crazy fantasies. The brakes are released in increments to go down the hill just fast enough to make it back up the other side and speed up a bit on the flat path, avoiding rocks and pretending to be comfortable. Javier watches in the distance.

After spending time in the Peace Corps, unsure of where my life was to go next, Cathy said she could get me a job. Her company, Jacobs, contracts with NASA and was hiring for a year-long program to organize their records surrounding the recently retired Space Shuttle program. Cathy and Javier had recently broken up and Cathy was living on her own for the first time in ten years and we found a house to rent together. The breakup had come after Cathy found that Javier was cheating on her throughout their relationship. She was devastated. The rest of the family was not, this was good for Cathy, she should move on. A people-pleaser myself, I refrained from outright saying what I thought, or everything I thought, but I seethed. This man hurt my little sister and I wanted him out of her life. Cathy knew I was happy about the breakup.

It soon became clear he was still in her life. They often talked and he was angling to repair the relationship.

Tensions came to a head on a weekend when my sister Emily and her family were visiting. Emily and I took Cathy into her room and confronted her. We explained that we thought it best if she left him. She disagreed and accused us of never listening to her and not taking her feelings into account, being judgmental. If we didn't support her, maybe she would not see us anymore. The night ended with the three of us wrapped together on Cathy's bed, in tears. I didn't know what to do, truly, how to protect her. I did not want to lose her.

I finally reach Javier at the fence at the end of the path. Closer to the foot of the Organs now, the scrubby brush army green with beige underneath. A tall yucca stands inside the fence, the sharp leaves in a clump atop a thick dry stalk. One stem shoots out of the top, seed pods rattle at the end where white flowers crowned it just a month or two before. We take a break, drinking water and eating granola bars. It is time to head back. I'm feeling, if only slightly, more comfortable on the bike and marginally less scared.

Javier takes off ahead of me, after making sure I am ready to go. Bravely taking more chances on the way back, I walk the bike uphill less. Releasing the brakes a couple of times, when there are no steep hills, though not setting any speed records, I feel brave. The end comes fast. Hadn't we just left the fence?

The thought of losing Cathy made me think about my priorities. Could I live with Javier if that was what Cathy wanted? I decided to actively try. She trusted that he wanted to change, to be a good husband, I would make sure I could spend time with him. As much as I hate to admit it, I like him. We have common interests—the science of cooking, cocktails, politics—and have fun debating. I want to believe he has changed.

Later that evening, we sit down for a drink; a nice, local beer. We head to a new place in Mesilla, an old town attached to Las Cruces near the Rio Grande. Mesilla is full of tiny adobe houses, stuccoed in deep reds and browns. The town center boasts a beautiful old church where you can attend Spanish mass on Sundays. The restaurants in Mesilla are usually high quality and The Spotted Dog Brewery doesn't disappoint. The milk stout, which Javier assures me I'll like, is good, dark with a nice, creamy head.

"I've been listening to this great album that I think you'll like," Javier tells me after I make a toast to our biking adventure. Javier drinks the Brown Ale and Cathy the Hefewiezen. Out on the patio facing the parking lot, the evening is warm and the weather perfect with a light breeze.

"What is it?" I ask. "I'm always up for something new to listen to."

"Chris Stapleton, *Traveller*. I'll play you "Tennessee Whiskey." It's a great song. Not country, but with a definite country flavor. I've been listening to it a lot lately."

"Sure, I'd love to hear it."

We go into politics a bit, not always agreeing, though both liberal in our views. Cathy has told me Javier likes hanging out with me because we can talk (and sometimes argue politics). She doesn't always have such strong views. We move to food talk.

"Have you ever been to Silverton?" Javier asks. They recently went to Colorado to do some four-wheeling in the mountains around Silverton.

"No, I haven't."

"We loved it. The food was great, especially this little bar downtown where we had the best drink I've ever had."

“Really, the best?” I ask. Cathy nods, rubbing Javier on the back before moving in closer to hold his hand.

“It was very good,” she says, “we’re trying to figure out the recipe so we can make it ourselves.”

“The bar had all rum drinks,” Javier continues after he and I order another beer, Cathy not quite halfway through hers. “The best one, the Maharaja, was amazing. It had lime, cardamom, black peppercorn, cloves, cinnamon and ginger. We went back every night for one.”

“It sounds good, but I guess I’m indifferent about rum. It’s not what I would order first.”

“Me either,” Javier says, “but all their drinks were great.”

“Hopefully, you’ll know how to make it next time I come to visit.”

“For sure.”

As we start that second beer, the sun sets. The sky lights up in pinks, purples and reds. The Organs take on those colors as well, purples at the base to magenta at the spires. I offer up one more toast, “to family.”

Things I Have Lost

Red Scarf

The beautiful, soft red one that went with the hat that I bought at the fancy boutique in Manhattan with money I didn't have to spend at the time. They were both warm and light, knitted with tiny needles. The hat shrank when I washed it. The scarf made me feel like a New Yorker. The scarf hung on my suitcase handle as I rolled it through the terminal, late for the flight back to New Mexico. After I had to miss Aunt Nellie's funeral because I couldn't fly back. It was unexpected, her death. I wanted to comfort, to be comforted, to not always be the one that missed the funerals.

At Cards

I lost often to Mark. Mark who was very good at gin rummy and cornhole, but terrible at relationships. Mark, who sent me the article one day about one of the best restaurants in the world. Number three was in Bangkok and we were going there to get our visas renewed the next weekend. We ate so many courses of tiny colorful dishes—one quail egg set in green foam, tiny chocolates lined up on a rectangular white plate, webs of caramel hiding sweet rice balls. We ate too many things off minuscule plates and drank too much wine. He laughed at my stories and held the door open for me in the cab. We went back to separate beds in separate rooms with separate ideas of what the dinner meant. It went on like this for a year. A year with no passion, a reservation at a famous restaurant, lots of vodka and one good round at the driving range.

300 Dollars

The ones separated from the cash roll I took on vacation. The ones I placed in an envelope, in the front of my hiking backpack. The ones I separated because, I thought, not all the money should be together. It should be hidden for the overnight bus ride. Keep it separate so that it doesn't all get stolen at once. The envelope hid in the side of my bag. The bag left on the sidewalk to be thrown under the bus with the other baggage. I didn't want it all on me. What if someone robbed me, on the bus, while I was sleeping? The question I didn't ask myself, the one that mattered more: What if someone takes it out of the bag under the bus? I knew better. The dollars meant to get me through the last week of the trip.

My Temper

Though it is not totally gone, not completely lost, it is so rare that I only lose it occasionally. The one that surprises me when it does come and causes me to shake and stutter. The one that saw the 11th grade class' boorish manners during the 3rd grade performance and needed to come out. I taught them since they were 9th graders. I watched each student negotiate what it meant to live in a Myanmar that was opening itself to the world, to navigate a world that had just gotten much bigger with parents who were still scared of messing up while the government watched. One student explained to me the differences between the Chinese school he attended in the mornings, this, the American school, he attended during the day, and the Myanamar tutor he worked with on the weekends. One student with a lisp grew from the shiest in the class to the one most likely to study acting. I forgot sometimes that they could be spoiled brats. The temper came out quieter than I imagined it would, my voice shook, tears threatened to fall, fists balled up at my side. I

wanted to yell, but instead said, looking each student in the eye, *I am disappointed in you. You must do better*. What I felt was, *I am disappointed in me. I must do better.*

A Friend

The Welsh one who first welcomed me to the teaching community. The one who was charming and funny. The one I spent nights drinking and talking, sharing secrets and travel dreams. The friend who refused to acknowledge that he was wrong and that there are boundaries in life. The one who entered my apartment without knocking and judged me for walking around naked and trusting that people would knock before entering. The one who broke into his ex-girlfriend's apartment in a desperate effort to get her back. The friend who crossed too many boundaries.

One Earring

The long, thin silver one that I bought at the artisan market in Niamey, Niger. The one that made a long triangle and almost touched my shoulder. It had ebony inlaid to make a simple, elegant design down the length of the silver. Its partner sits in my jewelry box waiting to be made into a necklace or put to some use, maybe. The earring, the lost one, dulled in the humidity of Mandalay. I lost it even though I knew it slipped out when I wore a scarf. I needed the scarf though the temperature topped 100ºF outside, the air was artic inside the Air Asia shuttle from Mandalay to Bangkok. The air conditioners poured mist into the body of the plane so entering felt like attending a concert.

Nona

The one who was always there until she wasn't. The one who swore she would never be on life support. The one who decided it was time to go, invited the family to say goodbye, and died calm and quiet as soon as everyone left. Wise Nona who knew every use of baking soda, from baking to stain removal to teeth cleaning. The one whose magical power was that she found lost things. She connected directly with St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost things. No matter where in the world the thing was lost, she said a prayer and it would appear, right there where I had already looked. My cousin Barbie lost the bracelet her mother had given her before she died, wooden beads painted with saints strung together. She wore it every day and then it was gone.

We spent more than an hour going through the car, looking under seats, taking out each piece of paper, each gum wrapper. It was not there. We were on our way to see Nona and Barbie asked her pray to St. Anthony. Nona did. She loved talking to old St. Tony, who had the same name as Nona's father. Was that why they got along so well? I don't know. When we left Nona's that day, I opened the passenger door of Barbie's car and the bracelet was right there, staring up at me from the side of the seat. It had not been there before.

Jennifer Watkins

Creative Nonfiction

Professor McKenzie

19 March 2019

It Wasn't Me, It Was Him, Right?

What was it about his brown hair, on end, spiky and always only a few days from the last trim? What was it that made him irresistible? Was it his light blue eyes, crinkled at the edges and ready to tease? It couldn't have been the ostentatious golf pants he actually wore golfing, could it? Was it the three polo shirts he rotated through the week – blue, dark blue and light blue? Was it that he remembered my stories, filed away what I said? Was he listening to me or merely repeating stories? What was it that made my heart skip when I walked by his apartment and saw the light under the door, telling me he was home? Was it the sensible midwestern, science teacher side of him, smiling calmly as students buzz around him making noise? Or, was it the texts he would send late at night, telling me to look out the window at the full moon or telling me that the Aggies, my alma mater, had lost that night? Was it this attention that made me feel wanted, needed, seen?

Those eyes of his looked at me deeply, but how did they see me? As I saw him (attractive, available, sexy) or as a little sister or a nun? Each night, when he came to play cards, didn't I already know that I would lose? Wouldn't he reach 500 always before me? Didn't I know that he would leave and I would be frustrated? Would I be frustrated to lose, again? Would I be frustrated that he didn't touch me? Would I look across the table and see him eye me, winking, when he tried to quote *Rounders* or *The Americans* or *The Wire*? Would I tease him and tell him that no matter who he was imitating it sounded like a bad Russian accent? I would ask,

Commented [MD1]: Do you really believe this?

Commented [MOU2R1]: Believe it? I don't know. I want it to be true.

Commented [MD3]: What first drew you to him?

Commented [MOU4R3]: He was cute. When I first met him, he reminded me of Jason Bateman or Jeremy Renner and, weirdly, of Scott the cute Peace Corps Volunteer who stole my heart in Niger. I do always fall for those goofy midwestern boys.

Commented [MD5]: Where? Where were you?

Commented [MOU6R5]: It was the teacher apartments behind the school in Mandalay. There was that moment, the moment coming up the stairs to the first floor. All our apartments had that little gap under the door. I could see if the light was on in his apartment, see if he was home, hope then he would call me. It sounds creepy now to say it like this. It was creepy. I was keeping track of him. I wanted to know if he was out. I wondered what he was doing if he was out. Wondered if he would tell me.

Commented [MD7]: Again, where? This makes it seem like you were in the Midwest. Where were you? Give us a place.

Commented [MOU8R7]: We were teaching in Mandalay, Myanmar at an American school. We both lived on campus in the teacher's apartments. He lived on the second floor, in a choice apartment, his windows looking out on the empty fields behind the school. The fields that flooded in the rainy season starting in June. The flooded fields were crowded with wildlife, grey herons, kingfishers, and herds of water buffalo. Beyond these marshes were miles of rice paddies and the stark mountains that bordered the Mandalay basin to the north. My apartment on the fourth floor had huge windows that looked over the school and the soccer field. Not nearly as beautiful but I could always see him walking to school early in the mornings as I enjoyed my coffee still clad in pajamas.

Commented [MD9]: Did he see all women this way?

Commented [MOU10R9]: I did ask myself that. Really, I worried that I could never be sexy enough. Secretly, I worried that he was one of *those* men, the creepy ones who came to Thailand or Myanmar for the young, beautiful women. *Those* men who were only attracted to the local women. Was he? Did he see me as a sister (his or the religious kind)? Or, was I just not sexy enough? Was there something wrong with me?

laughing, *why Russian*? He would exclaim, *what*, also laughing, *why would you think that was Russian*?

There was something that first night, right? The night of the birthday party? Where were we when I felt the fire spark? Weren't we at the shabby, outdoor bar, the one with the petrified wood table and stone stools? Weren't there lizards croaking in that tree that shed leaves on the bar and motorcycle taxis speeding by on 27th Street just outside? Was he sober? Wasn't I slightly more sober than the others? Where was he looking when everyone was toasting the birthday girl? Was he looking at her? Wasn't he looking at me? Wasn't he buying me a drink and toasting, holding my eyes while we clinked glasses? Wasn't he holding me up, arm around my waist? Was he trying to keep me from falling? Didn't I fall anyway?

Was it Guns & Roses? Or, Poison? Wasn't that the bet we made – who sang that song? Didn't I lose? Didn't he hold me to the bet? Didn't I have to take him out to dinner? Did he know that I was flirting? Did he know that I saw him looking at me that night and later? Wasn't it that look that made me believe he wanted me? Didn't I make it up that he was just celibate? Didn't I decide I could change him? Was he leading me on? What did he get from me? Why wouldn't he touch me? Who *did* he want to touch?

Was he scared? Was I scared? What was it that made it so hard? I want to ask him why he played me? But would he see it the same way? I was open to something, wasn't I? Wasn't I open to something real, something lasting? Wasn't he the bad guy?

Was it me? Was it him? It had to be me, right?

Commented [MD11]: Well, who was it? Where was he looking?

Commented [MOU12R11]: He was looking at me, though I knew my friend Gretchen liked him. She said they were only friends. He sat next to me at her party. He stared at me with those blue eyes. He asked me about me. He listened when I told him. That's what I felt. I felt that he wanted to know me. I felt that he wanted to touch me. I was wrong. He did want to know me. He didn't want to touch me.

Commented [MD13]: Why does this matter?

Commented [MOU14R13]: This bet happened on the same night as the birthday party. I was a drunk and he was holding me up. I swore it was Guns & Roses when "Every Rose Has its Thorn" came on at the bar. He assured me it was Poison. I knew I didn't know but fought/flirted with him about it anyway. I lost the bet and that was our first date. He came after me, reminding me that I owed him dinner. I saw that as flirting. It was flirting.

Commented [MD15]: What did this celibate relationship look like?

Commented [MOU16R15]: It only made me look bad, desperate. I wanted him and kept pushing. There was the time in Bangkok at his hotel room. We met for dinner and I was flying out early the next morning. His hotel room was big, opulent. There was an open pack of condoms on the counter in the kitchen. We were on the bed, rolling around before he pushed me off. That was the last straw. Then, I knew it was me. I knew the condoms were for someone and not for me. I sat on the plane in the early morning hours, looking at the dark, wet tarmac and listed all the reason why I wasn't good enough.

Commented [MD17]: Were you? What did you want?

Commented [MOU18R17]: Maybe I wasn't. There weren't many options for dating in Mandalay. I would tell myself, *it's not that bad* and *it does hurt to keep this up, what are my other options?* It did hurt. I needed more than he was giving and should have seen that. Maybe I wasn't open for something more. Maybe I saw this as my only option and decided I could change him.

Commented [MD19]: You say it had to be you, but is that what you're really thinking.

Commented [MOU20R19]: Maybe. Maybe, I pushed him too hard. Maybe, I talked him into a relationship he didn't want. Maybe that makes me sad and desperate.

Fighting Cadets

Last week I fought with Cadet James over the novel he was supposed to be reading. Cadet James is tall and thin. He is sixteen years old, has homemade tattoos carved into his arms, and a jewel pierced into the skin beneath his right eye. He wears his standard-issue gray sweatpants as low on his hips as he can get away with. He jokes often with whoever will listen, asks to go to the bathroom as often as anyone will listen, both in order to get out of doing his work. His face turns quickly serious if not scary when he feels insulted. He, like all the students here at the Youth Challenge Academy, is at-risk.

Cadet James called me over last Wednesday. "Ms. Watkins, I'm ready to write my literary analysis."

"Have you read the book?"

"Some of it."

"James, you have to read all of it. What book are you reading?" He pulls out a copy of *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls.

"What have you read?" I think this is probably not the book for him.

"Well, you know, I kinda flipped through. I read a little."

"Where does she see her mom in the beginning?" The opening scene where Walls finds her mom homeless and digging through a dumpster in New York City stands out and usually students don't forget it. I always want to believe that students have read the book but if I'm in doubt, asking for specifics is far more effective than accusations.

"Um, at the grocery store?"

"No. You have to read the whole book to write the literary analysis."

"Really?" He looks me right in the eye, challenging me to give in.

"Yes, really. Why don't you pick a different book? I think you might like a different better."

"Ms. Watkins, I just hate reading. I don't want to read."

"I understand, but this is the last assignment to finish this course. Let me get you a different book. I think I have one you might like."

Cadet James gives an exaggerated sigh and agrees to look at another book. Our small library, much to my chagrin, doesn't have many books with characters of color. I bring him a copy of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. I flip through to show him to drawings that go throughout and tell him it is about a young Native American boy struggling with fitting in. He agrees to *try* reading it, reminding me that he just doesn't read.

Cadet James is in the fourth class I've worked with at the YCA. Students/Cadets spend six months focused on personal development including physical fitness, community service, work-readiness certification, anger management and education. I teach writing in the credit recovery program. The students work individually online completing lesson, quizzes, tests, and writing assignments. Though students are working individually, subject teachers explain lessons, answer questions, offer support, and mitigate stress (sometimes the most important). Though the students sometimes drive me crazy, sometimes piss me off, and I don't always like them all, I care for each one.

*

My first time at the YCA, I parked in back of the brick building as instructed and went up to the metal door on the right-hand side of the building. There was no sign marking it as the correct

door as I had been told there would be in the email granting me an interview. The door was locked. I knocked and stood on tiptoe to look in through the small window. There was no one in the hallway. I moved on to the other doors and still saw no one. I had not been early enough for the interview to search too long and was getting nervous that I was in the wrong place. I came back to the original door and there were now people talking at the far end of the hallway. I knocked and then banged before they heard me. It was a heavy door. A tall man in a green uniform opened the door and smiled at me. He showed me where I should go and headed back down the hall to join a group of boys also dressed in green uniforms but wearing orange caps. I would later learned that the caps marked them as Bravo company. Alpha company (the only female company) wore blue caps and Delta wore purple. They all wore green uniforms with black boots, a pistol belt with no pistol but a canteen strapped on it, and a black mesh backpack. Their last names were embroidered on a strip and Velcroed above their right chest pocket and "Challenge" was Velcroed on the left.

As I sat in the hallway, just outside the classrooms two students in purple caps walked by and one said, "hello ma'am," and tipped his cap just a little.

"Cadet, where are you supposed be," a man called from one of the rooms farther down the hall.

Both students turned quickly and the one who had spoken to me yelled, "we're going to the nurse." The man called them back asking for a hall pass. They disappeared into the room with him and I didn't see them again that day. It was these students—some mandated by the state to come to the program, some there voluntarily, and all not in high school for one reason or another. I would learn that I didn't ever want to know why the students were there.

*

Cadet James catches me as soon as I come in the next week. He tells me he finished reading the book and wants to start writing his analysis today. He smiles in what I assume to be an attempt to con me. I look him in the eye and ask if he read the whole book. He frowns and adopts a serious tone.

"Ms. Watkins, I promise, I read the whole book. It was good."

"What did you think of Junior and Rowdy?"

"They are great. I loved the basketball part at the end."

I am suspicious of the quick jump to the end. But, he answers every question I throw at him. He expounds on the characters and describes the plot. He talks freely for several minutes, without more questions. His gestures are animated and he tells me he is ready to write about the character of Junior.

"I know what I'm going to write. Can I have the worksheet?"

"Yes, of course."

He hunches down over the worksheet, the novel open beside him and writes. I walk away to help someone else. He has a plan.

*

Cadet Davis is tall and lanky. He wears a goofy smile and his eyes twinkle with mischief even when he sits working on a lesson, by himself, in the corner. He waves me over from the other side of the room.

"I'm almost ready to write my myth," he says, clearly excited and bouncing a little in his seat.

"Really?" I was curious. Excitement about writing assignments is not common.

"Yes, I know just what I want to write about. There will be bears and old men and stars."

"Wonderful. Let me know if you need help. Have you read the sample myths?"

Many of the writing assignments in the online courses set up by an outside company for our students, are essays. The myth assignment is one of the few narrative assignments that asks the students to use their imaginations. Cadet Davis has a good imagination. He enjoys storytelling and is always looking for an audience.

I move on to help another student and I don't think of the myth again until after lunch when the English teacher pulls me aside. "Have you read Cadet Davis's myth?" she asked.

"No, not yet, but he was really excited about it this morning."

"You need to read it," she tells me, bringing it up on her computer, "it's very… interesting…actually, it doesn't make any sense."

I look at the story, one big block of writing in the tiny assignment box on the screen. She is right. It makes no sense. There are bears and stars and an old man and some colorful descriptions of trees. Two periods and a comma punctuate the whole long, rambling paragraph. It is unclear what was happening. I read it again and see some elements of myth—the old man seems to be looking at the stars for something, the stars hold some magic maybe, the bears don't seem to fit but are connected to the snow and trees.

"I don't know what to tell him," the English teacher says.

"Well, it definitely needs revising. We could say that. We could say he needs to work with one of us. He's a wonderful storyteller maybe he needs to tell someone what he was picturing. He needs help sorting through all the ideas."

"I have time to work with him now." She goes to work with him in the quiet hallway.

An hour or so later, Cadet Davis enters the room, a smile lights his face.

"You need to read it again," the other teacher tells me, "it's really good."

The story is transformed. The bear became the old man. The tree is where he goes to contact his gods, to ask for help. The snow glitters as it falls before transforming into the sparkling stars that guide the people on earth.

"He really just needed to tell it. To have someone help him make sense of the story he had created in his head. He told the story and I wrote it down, guided him."

I put a hand on Cadet Davis's shoulder. "Your myth is really good," I tell him.

"I know," he says.

*

Cadet Everett is strange. I am assigned to mentor her. Mentoring involves taking a student aside, talking to her, looking over her transcript, and making sure she knows what classes she is taking and what she still needs to graduate. I hold a sheet with the requirements for a high school diploma in Georgia, Cadet Everett's credits marked, and the classes she is working on at the time starred. My director took me aside earlier and asked if I would like her to sit in on my first mentoring meeting. I said yes and we pulled Cadet Everett. She is short, with wild strawberry blond hair and a look on her face that discourages anyone from making small talk.

My only experience with Cadet Everett before this was watching her daily interactions with the parapro, those in charge of the day-to-day running of the classroom. Every morning, Cadet Everett would ask for her test to be reset. Each time, the parapro would ask to see her notes. Because the classes are online, students need to have taken adequate notes on the lessons and studied their notes before given permission to take the test. During a test, students are allowed only one window to help eliminate cheating. A teacher or parapro must sign off on the notes before giving the student permission (entering a password) to take the test.

Cadet Everett would say, "I don't need notes, I already know it all."

The parapro would say, “Everyone needs notes, you know the rules. Go back and take some notes.”

Cadet Everett would counter with, “Just reset it this time. I can do it, I don’t need notes.”

The parapro would repeat the demand for notes and this would go back and forth several times before Cadet Everett would huff, slump her shoulders, and head back to her desk. Two minutes later she would be back asking for the test to be reset with two new lines of notes in her notebook, insisting that that was enough. She would do this over and over and over and over. I had come to admire the parapro for her tenacity. She had unlimited patience to go through this so many times a day. Cadet Everett would only go to this parapro as, in her words, she would have to hit the other one if she had to deal with her anymore. I was not sure how to mentor Cadet Everett. My patience didn’t always run that deep.

We pull Cadet Everett out and take her to the conference room. The director asks how she’s doing. Cadet Everett blossoms at this question. Her eyes light up and she spends the next ten minutes telling us that there were so many boys after her that she couldn’t keep track.

“I don’t know why they want me,” she says. “I don’t even try. I never do my hair and don’t wear makeup, but I keep getting love letters. One of them saw a letter from the other and is now mad at the first one.”

“Who do you like?” the director asks.

“I don’t know. They’re all just boys.”

“Well, I’m glad you feel you can be yourself,” I say. “That’s a good thing.”

“Yeah.” She waves me off.

“Do you miss anything about being home?”

"I know they miss me at home. No one else knows how to feed the ducks. My aunt and uncle, who I live with, say I'm the only one the ducks respond to."

She then moves on to her old school. She did fine in school, she wants us to know, but the teachers are just so stupid and she struggled not to hit anyone.

"Are you working on controlling your anger here," the director asks.

"I haven't even hit anyone here," she says with pride.

"You know you can't hit anyone, right?"

"I know, I know, but sometimes I want to."

"Well, it's good you're learning how to control that."

This is a Cadet Everett I haven't seen before. Though she focuses on her anger, she is in her element. As our meeting goes on, I suspect that the stories are made up. They don't feel true and she always has a ready answer no matter the question.

Her dad descended from Romanian kings and left her a million dollars that she can't access until she's twenty-one. Her mom's British (so she would obviously do really well at British Literature, she assures me, though she has yet to do any work in the subject) and her parents met when her dad was on a diplomatic trip to London. When I ask if her aunt here is also British, she answers quickly. Her aunt was born here and is American while her mom was born in England. They have different fathers. Cadet Everett was an A student at her high school but just couldn't handle the teachers. They were all asses. This goes on until I stop her and say she needs to go back to work for now. We can talk more later. Her eyes darken and she sighs. Everything could be true. However, it is the story about her father that seemed to go over the top.

Later that week, when reading and commenting on the students' daily journals, I come to Cadet Everett's. She is more real in the journal than I had ever seen her be in life. One boy's

name is written in the margins of the journal and then scratched through with another's written above the scratches in sparkling orange pen. She writes often of the search for her father. She has never met him but is close to finding him. The journal tells a story of a lost girl with much less bravado than the one who sat across from me in the conference room.

A week later, Cadet Everett's seat is empty. She was either sent away or taken home. It was unclear to us. I know the parapro is glad to not be having that same argument every morning. I can't help but wonder what will happen to Cadet Everett. Where does she really live? Who is her father? Does she really get comfort from the ducks? It is so easy to laugh at her stories and scoff at this student who excelled at making life unpleasant for all, told outrageous lies, knew that everyone was against her, and took solace in the fact that she was always right and always perfect at everything. She fought everyone until asked to tell her story. At that point, she lit up and couldn't stop. I hope that someone will get her the help she seemed to be fighting for.

*

I was at the YCA for almost a year before I took the mandatory introductory course. It happened one morning about a week before the students graduated from the program. I planned on helping a student with an essay. My director called me in. She had just been informed that I needed to be there in ten minutes. I wouldn't be teaching that morning. I would be learning about the place where I had been working (albeit part time) for nearly a year.

The tactical officer (TAC) who ran the course was a young woman, Sergeant Fowler, who had been in the Army and was now here in charge of one of the companies. She clearly had affection for the cadets under her care. She knew that more than half of the employees gathered in the room already knew a lot of what she had to present.

Sergeant Fowler opened the class with a question, "What had you heard about the YCA before coming to work here?" She addressed those of us who were already employees and said, "You guys don't need to answer. I want to hear what these guys think." She pointed to the two sitting in the front row. They were the true new hires.

They gave standard responses, what many people might think. "I heard it was a place for bad kids." "I heard it was a military academy for kids so they wouldn't go to prison." My honest response a year ago would have been that I had never heard of it. That I knew nothing. Much of what they are saying is half-true. I don't think most of the people who work here would ever make such a blanket characterization of our students as *bad*. The term the YCA uses in their documentation is *at risk*. Some of the students are mandated by the state to attend the YCA. If those students don't attend or fail to complete any of the requirements or are sent home, they risk going to jail or a detention center. Some come because they have dropped out of school and they want to complete their GED or as a way into the military. Others are here because they need a different way to deal with school and/or life in general. Maybe school wasn't working for them. Maybe they were bullied and stopped going to school. Maybe they were bullied and fought back. Maybe they were in a gang and didn't know how to get out. They have different stories. But, are they *bad*?

*

Cadet Phillips sits against the back wall almost in the corner of the classroom. She is beautiful with smooth dark skin and bright eyes. However, she scowls often and this brings a darkness to her corner of the room. I only see Cadet Phillips in her uniform. I wonder what her style is outside the YCA. What would she rather be wearing? Or, is it nice to not have to choose?

I don't like working with Cadet Phillips, and, as she tells me in no uncertain terms, she doesn't like working with me. I make her work. I challenge her. That is what I told myself, but inside I think, *maybe, I'm a terrible teacher*. Cadet Phillips sits in her corner, feet up on the chair, and tries to get out of doing as much work as she can. I watch her ask the math teacher to reset her American Literature test.

"You need notes," he tells her. "Can I see your notes?" He looks at the notes and sees that she hasn't taken any more since failing—failing is a strong word and often not accurate. Our students must get an 80% to pass and move on—the last attempt.

Earlier, during the morning announcements, she tried to catch my eye. She waved at me and pointed at her computer. I held up one finger and pointed at the parapro who was giving information about having good notes before taking a test to all students. She gave a sigh and hung her head, feeling wronged. She came to me at the end of the announcements and asked me to reset the test. I asked to see her notes and she gave me a dirty look, the beautiful eyes becoming slivers before she handed me her notebook. I saw that she was missing some poetic vocabulary words. The words themselves were neatly written and beautifully highlighted in yellow but no definitions. Foot, Iambic Pentameter, and Meter sat lonely on the page surrounded by useless information about Walt Whitman's birthplace and the specific perch of the raven in Poe's poem.

"Why don't you find the definitions to these and I'll reset your test? It looks like you have a lot of notes but I know these definitions will come up on the test."

Another monumental sigh, "I know what they are, that's why I didn't write it down." I refrained from stating the obvious, if she already knew it, wouldn't she have passed that test the first time.

I smiled and said, “The definitions will help.”

She slumped back to her desk and minutes later was raising her hand again, looking pointedly at me. I walked over and saw that the definitions were unfinished, one and two words, not getting to the true meanings of the words.

“This isn’t enough,” I told her.

While I stood over her, she struggled to find “foot” in the dictionary by her side, staying so long on the page topped with “foam” that I had wanted to just find it for her. I had waited. She pointed to the definition and I pointed out that her “stressed/unstressed” was not the complete definition. I explained that Iambic Pentameter was more than “rhythm.”

“This is why I hate working with you,” she spat at me, hate in her eyes.

I was taken aback. At 8:30 in the morning I didn’t expect such a reaction. I felt the tingle in my nose and thought, *don’t cry*. “Fine,” I said, perhaps unprofessionally, “you don’t have to,” and I walked away.

I watched the math teacher walk away. I resumed the grading of an essay outlining the benefits of legalizing marijuana and tried to keep my face neutral. I knew she was watching me. Her hand shot up and she called over the parapro asking for another English teacher. I should tell him. I should go out and intercept. I should give him, give the parapro, an idea of the situation. Cadet Phillips was going for the old, “mom said no, I’ll ask dad” trick. I seethed but did nothing. How could I be so angry at this teenager? I watched it happen. I watched the English teacher glance over her notes, not knowing the whole story, much like I would’ve done in a similar situation, and reset the test. I fumed quietly. Why had I not acted?

*

Cadet Harrison stood out from day one as the only redhead in the classroom. His pale skin glows under the harsh fluorescent lights. He scowls over the screen of his laptop, waiting for the day to be over. He is the first to vocalize the countdown to graduation from the program, when everyone could go home. Cadet Harrison always has a book next to the computer. He sneaks it open throughout the day, reading snippets until someone tells him to get back to work. I can't make myself scold him for reading. It is exciting to see students eager to read.

"Ms. Watkins, I'm trying to read *Hamlet*," he tells me one afternoon. "I just don't get it, though. It doesn't make sense."

"That's very cool, but why *Hamlet*?" I ask.

"I don't know, I just feel like I should read it."

"Okay, finish your test and we can look at it together. Sometimes it helps to read Shakespeare out loud. It's a play and was meant to be heard." He can't know how my heart is warmed by his interest in *Hamlet*. He asks for help on something not required. When does that happen?

We read slowly through the text, looking at the scene where Horatio meets the ghost of Hamlet's father. At the end of the scene, Cadet Harrison looks at me, eyes wide. "I still don't get it."

I print Cadet Harrison a brief summary of each act. I send him back to the barracks with the play and the summaries. He starts to leave, but turns back.

"Thanks," he says. He runs back give me a big hug. There's nothing like a genuine hug from a scowling teenager.

*

Cadet Jones is sitting next to me. She towers over me if standing. Her hair braided into a small ponytail at the back of her head. She is a hard worker and is often happy, always quick to offer a *hello Ms. Watkins* and *how are you today*? This week she is more reserved, thoughtful. She works on an essay next to me, but is distracted.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"I got a letter from my mom yesterday," she says. "She said she loved me. It's the first time she's ever said that."

"That can't be true," the parapro on the other side of the desk says with disbelief.

"It is true," Cadet Jones insists, "she's never said it. She also said she was proud of me. Proud of me for being here. Proud of me for doing well. Proud of me for succeeding. I just want to make her proud. I just want to do well. I have the letter here in my pocket. I carry it with me all the time now. I keep reading it. It makes me cry."

I don't know what to say, how to react. I put a hand on her back and wait to start the lesson.

*

Cadet Rogers is tall and lanky and over-confident. I haven't had much interaction with him because he is not taking any English classes. The head parapro is gone that afternoon when he comes in from lunch, puts his feet up on the chair next to him, leans back and, with one hand, searches online for the music he *needs* to work with. I tell him to take his feet off the chair and he looks at me with distain.

"What? Ms. B. is gone and you gonna tell me what to do now? Ms. B. and Ms. C. always let me have my feet up here." He jerks his head back toward the parapros' desks.

I find this hard to believe but try to avoid saying that or *I don't care what they tell you*. Instead, I say, "I am telling you now to put them down."

He stares at me, challenging my authority. How much do I really care that his feet are on a chair? Not enough to argue about it, but I have been challenged and know I have to stand my ground.

"Do it now, please," I say, not yelling, not angry (yet), and with a false bravado and a false smile. I feel my cheeks heating up. I don't know what my next move will be. He takes his feet down, staring at me the whole time.

"Nobody's sitting there," he wants me to know.

"It doesn't matter," I say. I move the chair away from him, awkwardly, trying not to look at him. My cheeks redden. His eyes are on the back of my head as I move down the line, watching the other students get settled into their spots, computers opened in front of them and folders lying in wait behind each computer.

Cadet Rogers is rude but he is also big and brawny and may be here because he was in trouble at his school or had trouble with the law. It is easy to forget where most of these students came from. Forget is not the right word. I don't know where they come from. I don't know what they have been through. I don't know what it's like to fight. They do. There is already a bandaged hand, a cast on an arm and Band-Aids on a face in this room. There are several students missing this afternoon because they were fighting or because they had been jumped. There was, apparently, a feud happening right now between the two boys' companies. The cadets from Bravo and Delta, assigned to each group specifically to try and separate those who may have been in gangs together. The cadets decided that the companies should be in competition.

They wanted to fight. Was this proclivity ingrained in these kids who had grown up with gangs and violence? I don't know.

I don't know what Cadet Rogers has been through, but I do know that, right at this moment, he is being an ass and that is not okay. I always feel strange, wrong, when I don't like a student. I remind myself that students are people and I don't like all people. The truth is that sometimes my favorite students are the misfits, the ones who are acting out to get attention or playing the class clown to hide an insecurity. Cadet Rogers isn't doing that. He is acting like a spoiled brat. The parapro tells me later that she confronted him with this. She told him, *you're acting like a spoiled, rich kid*. *Don't tell anyone*, he said to her, with a cocky grin.

*

Cadet Thomas stands defiant on the other side of the table from me. His arms stiff at his side, chin jutted out. He looks down at me. I have a hand firmly on the essay on the desk written neatly in pencil.

I say, with more confidence than I feel, "I told you not to write this essay in the barracks. I told you that you needed to write it here, in the classroom."

He looks above my head, at the calendar behind me. "I wrote it," he insists. "It's my essay."

"I realize that," I say, holding back a sigh. "I'm not saying you didn't write it. But, I told you it needed to be written here. Why didn't you wait?"

Students have been plagiarizing other students' essays and the essays must be written in the classroom to avoid any suspicion. Cadet Thomas probably did write his essay, but when he asked to take it to the barracks, he was a little too insistent, a little too focused on not writing it in the classroom, too focused on the fact that it *had* to be written in the barracks. My radar went off.

I made a quick decision. To eliminate all suspicion, all essays must be written in the classroom. The students are in the classroom many hours a day. This shouldn't be a problem. But, it is.

Another English teacher is listening in. She sits next to me and chimes in, "what did you write about? Tell us what your first paragraph is."

"It's about whether or not to pay student athletes," he says, looking right at her and summarizing the title of the article that supports the essay.

"Okay," she says, "so, what did you write about? Do you think they should be paid?"

"Yes," he says, throwing me a dirty look. *See, I wrote it*, he seems to say, *how could you doubt me*.

"Just give us the first paragraph," I say. "I know that you are a good writer, but you were told not to work on it outside the class and we have to stand by that."

"I don't need to tell you what I wrote. I wrote the whole thing."

He grabs for the essay, but I keep my hand on it. He is mad but holding his anger. He has not acted out. He has not yelled. He has not cursed. I have seen students do that and more over much less. I give him a choice: to write out the basics of the first paragraph or redo the essay. He refuses to give any information. I want to believe him but he is being defensive. The defensiveness might be from truly feeling wronged. It is also possible that he didn't write it. I don't want to believe that. I stand my ground. That's what teachers are supposed to do, right?

"Take some time to think about it," I tell Cadet Thomas. "Do you want to write the one paragraph or start the essay over? You don't need to decide now."

"I don't want to work with you," the cadet spits out. "I want to work with Mr. D." Mr. D is the male English teacher.

"That's okay. You can work with Mr. D."

Later, I pull Mr. D aside to fill him in on the situation. I explain what had happened and that Cadet Thomas only wants to work with him. Mr. D tells me that he just found out that Cadet Thomas' brother died the week before. He was shot. Cadet Thomas' mother didn't tell him about the shooting. He learned about it from a news report. His mother still hasn't talked to him about it. She didn't want to upset him, he told Mr. D.

I start crying, there in the hallway, talking to Mr. D. There's so much I don't know about these students. Is standing my ground the best way to handle this situation? Should I just be happy that Cadet Thomas wants to work with someone?

*

Cadet Williams cheated. I hate catching students cheating. I hate knowing that work is not the student's own. I hate the smirk on the face of the student caught cheating. The look of, *what are you going to do about it?* The look of, *so what? I'll just do it again.*

Cadet Williams copied, word for word, the essay of another student. An essay that I helped the student revise the first time. I read the essay and immediately knew that I had read the exact same essay before. There were other signs, however, before I read the essay. Yesterday, Cadet Williams hadn't finished the book on which the literary analysis—the essay in question—was to be based. Somehow, I am to believe that this student finished the book, wrote an essay, typed it up, and revised it, all before 10:00 am. A student, who, when he had last written an essay, with me guiding him, could barely write one paragraph in 20 minutes, so painful was the writing process. It was difficult at the time to tell if there was a lack of ability or a sheer lack of will that had made the process so painful for both of us. Said paragraph only came with much prodding and cajoling from me. I made a note to ask the special education teacher if Cadet Williams was on her list, if he needed extra help in any area. He is not on her list.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't suspicious when I got the message that the essay was done. But, I read it, hopeful that the muses had smiled down on Cadet Williams, that the book had so inspired him that he came in this morning and whipped it out. I was optimistic. Was I foolish? What really got me was the lack of effort even in the cheating. He didn't change anything. He didn't try to cover it up.

I believe Cadet Williams might be a bully. He is a tough-looking kid, not tall but well-built and confident. He slouches in his seat most days, headphones in and shoulders high, legs stretched out past the end of the desk, challenging a teacher to tell him to pull his legs in, sit up straight, turn down the music. He sits like this as the director and I confront him, a maddening half smile on his lips, refusing to acknowledge his crime.

Cadet Carter, the true author of the essay, does not respond in the same way. He is tall and wiry, his limbs flaying a bit as if they just didn't know where to go. He looks younger than many of the other boys and often has a goofy grin on his face. Cadet Carter does his work, but needs validation. He wants to work with a teacher, to be told he is doing well, to be told he is right. He never reacts well to being wrong, wanting instead to move on with the lesson, to get it done. Cadet Carter does need extra help. He does better talking things out and reading questions out loud. He reads the book, but the special ed teacher wonders if he would do better listening to the audiobook while reading. He got into the book, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, and was ready to write his literary analysis.

When questioned about whether or not he had given Cadet Williams his essay, Cadet Carter first says, with eyes a little too wide, "What? I don't know what you're talking about."

He breaks only after the director and myself stare at him for several minutes. He bends his long body in half with a giant sigh, hitting himself on the head, saying, "I should have never told him [Cadet Williams] that I had read the book."

He admits to have handed over the essay. It is his statement that makes me think bullying was involved.

*

Cadet James calls me over to tell me he finished his essay. "Can you grade it now?"

"I will look at it at lunch," I tell him. "Remember, you will have to revise it." I am used to getting pushback from students over revisions. I work hard to make it clear that this is a part of the writing process. *You must revise*, I tell them over and over. This does not mean it's wrong, it just is the next step. They still think it's wrong. They still think they've done badly. They still complain.

"It's okay," Cadet James tells me, "I'm ready to revise. I want you to read it."

His reaction throws me. On his last essay, I had to prod him for weeks to look at the revision.

At lunch I print off the essay to write my notes on it. The essay is not great. The grammar is off and there are comma splices throughout, some of the thoughts break off in the middle, and there are too many "I" statements. But, that's not the first thing I see. This essay belongs to Cadet James. He makes it his own and cares about what he is saying. Something about this book, about Junior, connected with Cadet James and that comes through. I want to give him a hug.

The importance of friendship is the theme that connects each paragraph in this essay. This is something that Cadet James feels deeply. In the conclusion, he writes, "Even when success comes friendship remains strong to the end." I see Cadet James differently now. I hope

he found comfort in the fact that Junior and Rowdy come back together, rediscover their friendship, at the end of the book.

*

It is three days before the YCA graduation. I started a Creative Writing Club two months ago and our last two meetings were cancelled. I carried all of the writing around in my bag for the last two weeks, hoping to have a chance to give the cadets their work back. I carry ten envelopes around thinking if I don't see them I can have the writing put in their graduation packets.

This morning, there are no students in the classroom. They finished their normal school hours and are just waiting for graduation. Cadet Jones told me the day before that they were cleaning and watching movies in the barracks.

The director pats me on the back and says, "Let's just go get them."

We walk out into the courtyard, a place I rarely go as I am confined to the classroom. There are three cadets playing basketball at a small court in the middle of the courtyard, several more sit with their TAC officer, she is on a chair and the cadets surround her on the ground. The cadets all wear sweats the same green as their uniforms.

We go to each of the barracks, calling out for the creative writing students. We have a list of names broken down by company. It takes about ten minutes to gather everyone up and get back to the classroom. I'm sure I am taking them away from their free time and just know they will want to get back to the sitting and the basketball. I stand awkwardly in front of the twelve students.

"I just wanted to give you back your writing. I left you some notes." I call them up one at a time to collect their poems and stories. They all stare at me expectantly. "Does anyone want to stay and write? Otherwise, you can go back to the barracks." Two cadets stand up cautiously to

leave. They look at me, uncertain if they can really go. “It’s okay,” I say, “go on. Everyone else wants to write?”

“Yes,” Cadet Jones says from the back. Everyone else is nodding.

“Okay,” I pull out some notebook paper, thrilled. “Let’s get started.”