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# Eight pieces of pie.

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EIGHT PIECES OF PIE

By

Marjorie E Cassaro

B.S.B.A., University of Louisville, 1986

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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In English

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A Thesis Approved on

April 19, 2017

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ABSTRACT

EIGHT PIECES OF PIE

Marjorie E. Cassaro

April 19, 2017

As a studio artist and a creative writer, I contemplated what would happen if I utilized the principles of fine art in the application of the written word. If I became the subject of the written word, could I formulate the telling of my story in such a way that a reader could find themselves sculpted within its pages?

Eight Pieces of Pie tells my story, that as a single woman at the age of forty-three years, eight months and six days, I discovered I was unavailable. I delved back to my first memories to discover how my emotional unavailability formed, how it perpetuated, and how I engaged in unhealthy relationships with unavailable men in the areas of spiritual, geographical, mental, legal, sexual, additive, financial, and emotional unavailability.

Eight Pieces of pie tells the story and how I broke through my sabotaging behavior to a healthy life with healthy relationships.

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# I

Trailers run through my mind as though the season's best breakout movie is on the verge of success. The full-action snippets have me carrying the camera because everything that comes into view is from my perspective. I'm in the middle of all the action. I'm the one who's running because things are moving real fast as I pass - a pole - I'm running towards two women - my mother and Miss Leanna, she's our neighbor. The next snippet pops to my teddy bear flying in the air. In this snippet, fingers enter the scene from the lower right corner, and halfway up the left side of the box in which my mind frames it. The two hands move further into the scene. Arms reach toward my teddy. The further the arms stretch, the wider the distance grows between the bubbled fingers and my teddy's white-tipped feet. In the next snippet, I see nothing but the sky. It is pure blue. Silent. Still. And the borders of my frame box it in just like that.

These trailers are like little movies that run at will. They don't come in any particular order. They don't end in any particular place. They show a long sidewalk, a bright light in a dark room with a lot of people standing around a table, a scab on my private parts the size of a cigarette burn, and waving blades of grass that move as fast I pass by them. In one of the trailers I know it's me on the table because I can feel the cold metal, I can feel its hardness against my body. I can feel that no part of me can move against any part of it. I am scared. The whole place is black as the bottom of a swamp on a night with no moon. Except for me. I am on top of that table under a bright light. It is bigger around than I am. I move my eyes to the side because the light hurts. When I do

the frame changes and I see that there are people surrounding the table. A lot of them. Men wearing hats. I don't know who they are. They're just black men, looking down at me. They're as black as the space behind them.

I hear men's voices. I hear my mother's voice. Everyone whispers. I wonder if people are sleeping. That's why they whisper. They don't want to wake anyone. I try to look around to see who might be sleeping but I can't see into the dark and the light overhead is blinding. I close my eyes. Just like the metal table, my trailers are sterile. There are no sounds except for an occasional voice. There is little color except for the blue clarity of the sky and the brilliance of sun-drenched grass blowing in a wind. Sometimes the trailers are in black and white, sometimes in aged shades of muted colors as though filtered through the passing of time. Sometimes it looks like they've been drenched in spilled coffee and other times they're so crisp and clear that, if they were a knife, they would slaughter everything in sight.

These trailers are void of scents, like the trailers on the movie screens down at the RC Cola Theater where my siblings and I watch a movie for six RC bottle caps a piece the first Saturday of every month. On the first of July of 1972, I learn from my mother that these trailers are my memories. That whatever is in them happened to me. My mother doesn't tell me that, but I start to figure that out while my mother and I are sorting laundry. I am nine years, six months and one day old.

Yuh know, Meggie, yuh fadder and I were always so worried about yuh. On yuhr second birthday Leanna and I were standing on their carport tawhkin' and yuh came running over. When yuh gots to us, their dog ran tawad yuh, but he was next to a pole and

yuh couldn't see him. Yuhr leg caught on the dog's leg and yuh fell. When yuh didn't quit crying I put yuh down for a nap. When yuh woke up and yuh were still crying I knew something was wrong. Because yuh nev-a cried. So, I started feeling around, like yuh do on a baby, and when I squeezed yuh thigh yuh screamed something awful. So, I took yuh down to the hospital and they x-rayed yuh and yuh broke yuhr femur which is very rare for a two-year old to break a bone because they're all still so pliable at that age. It's just cartilage. The doctor put yuh in a body cast and I had to keep it protected in plastic wrap so that when yuh urinated the cast didn't get wet. I had to be so careful. The doctors told me yuh would walk with a limp the rest of yuh life and I was so worried for so long, but yuh nev-a did.

Was I carryin' my black and white teddy when I fell?

Meggie, yuh had that bear with yuh everywhere yuh went.

Did ya carry me into the hospital like this? I pushed my arms out like the images in Sunday School, the way Jesus is carried after they took him off the cross, one hand under his neck, the other under his knees.

Yeah, I was holding yuh out so I didn't hurt yuh anymore. I was afraid I was going to hurt yuh.

Was there a long skinny sidewalk and a one-story brick building with glass doors. It was red brick with two glass doors and trees on a big lawn with a lot of really green grass, but no trees near the sidewalk. Nothing lined the sidewalk, right?

That was the hospital.

Where there lots of doctors looking over me on a table in a real black room?

No, just the one doctor and me. Yuh fadder stayed at home with the udder kids.

And I slept on the chaise lounge in the kitchen looking out the glass doors to the sandbox and there were lots of pillows and blankets?

Yeah, I had to have yuh near me so we set yuh up in the kitchen. I had to tend to yuh all day long and still take care of the udder kids, too.

In my memories, I remember my mother changing my diaper. I remember how she breathed heavy. How she talked to herself. How she got mad. And how, when she was done, she pat me on the cheek and said, Ah, there there yuhs gonna be okay. Then she kissed me on my forehead and headed back into the kitchen, past the white peanut-shaped table and the counter with the telephone on it where my daddy called my momma. Two rings. A hang up. A ring. And then my momma would answer the phone. That was their secret code. Otherwise my momma never answered when it rang.

In another memory, my oldest sister holds a piece of crumpled paper in her hands. It's a memory because I know everything that's going on. There are no borders or frames. It has color and sound and fear and excitement and it is stored in the part of my brain that says this happened to me, this is real, this is my past, this is the beginning of my beginning.

The taste of toothpaste runs a ring around my lips like it does every night after I brush my teeth. It is a secret note, my sister says. It's from Mike. He's calling a kids meetin' in his room. We gotta sneak in one at a time.

She reads the instructions out loud. The three of us are on my sisters' bed because we have to whisper and their bed is bigger than mine. It's prettier too.

We never had a kid's meeting before. It was exciting to listen to my sister read the instructions. I couldn't read, but I could tell she was reading it exactly the way it was written because she kept pausing so she could get it right.

One. Go one at a time. Two. Sneak down the hallway. Three. Don't make any noise. Four. If you get caught, say you have to pee. Five. Use the secret code to knock on the door. Six. The first girl comes ten minutes after daddy turns the lights out.

We can't let Momma and Daddy know we're meetin'. Now, do y'all remember the secret code, tap two times, just a little tap so they can barely hear us, then wait a second and tap one more time. Like this. My sister taps her knuckles on my other sister's arm and then on mine. Not any harder than that. Now do it to me so I make sure ya don't get us in trouble.

We both passed the test.

Now, I'll go first. Katie, you go next. Maggie you go last.

I'm confused. I didn't understand why the youngest kid is going last. I should go first because I would be the one to not get the instructions right, I would be the one to get

caught, I would be the one to get everyone else in trouble if I got caught and everybody else was already in the secret meetin'. It would take me over forty-years to discover I was always confused because I was never surrounded by people with adequate communication skills, except my friend Lisa. She was good, but I didn't meet here until I was in college.

I sat on the bed just like my sister told me. I looked down at the note. The ABCs were in orange crayon. I folded it back up and put it in my pajama pocket. If my momma or my daddy found it, we would all be in big trouble.

A swell of mosquitoes was buzzing around in my belly. I counted to ten real slow just like she told me. One. Two. Three. *Maybe I'm countin' too fast Betta start over* With each number the corner of my sassy blanket scrunched up in the ball of my hand. At ten I peeked out the door. I didn't hear anything so I tip-toed to the boys' room remembering if I got caught I had to claim I needed go to the potty. My teddy was in my left hand. My right hand touched the wall, connecting me to a straight line to the boys' door. Everything was gray in that hall and it was a lot longer and a lot scarier when I was the only one in it. There wasn't a single light on, not a single sound anywhere. I couldn't hear my momma. I couldn't hear my daddy. I couldn't hear voices or the TV or the water running in the kitchen sink or the vacuum on the white round rug in the living room. I couldn't hear myself, I was so quiet going down the hallway. I tiptoed all the way. I was so scared my skin popped out goose bumps. Just like my sister told me, I tapped on the door two times. I waited a second. I tapped again. The door opened. The crack was filled with dark. The door opened wider. It was still dark. I slid through the crack. The door

closed behind me. My oldest brother was standing there. His back to the wall. One finger to his lips the other hand on the door knob. He held it tight until his grip let it click closed. A, Shush, knifed into my fear. *I gotta go potty*

What took ya so long? The forced whisper caused my oldest brother to push out another one of his, Shushes. This time I could tell he was mad. *I made it* I scanned the room. *Two windows The bunk beds The other bed Five kids And me Pillows Blankets* I jumped on my baby brother's bed. A place I used to sleep when my baby brother was too little to be put in with the rough boys. A place I once woke up with my head bubble-gummed to the pillow. It took my mother, a Saturday and a jar of peanut butter to set me free. It rained that whole day.

Listen up, my brother said. I heard Momma and Daddy talkin'. We're movin'. We're goin' to a state called Kentucky. It's in the north.

Every one of my sisters and brothers moved in a different direction. I didn't. I wasn't finished being scared.

Shush. Settle down. Now, listen. Kentucky's got blue grass, y'all. It's everywhere. It's not like what we have here. It's thick and it grows tall. *Blue grass Like the sky It's blue I colored a picture with blue grass in the coloring book yesterdy Knucky Wow The sky was green*

Listen up. There are wild horses everywhere. They'll be in our back yard. Hanging over our fence. We'll probably even have some of our own. They're wild but ya can ride 'em and they'll eat right outta your hands...

My sister interrupted him faster than any of us ever dared. How you know that, Mike?

I told ya. I heard momma and daddy talking about it. At a young age, we knew my brother was smart. I suppose everybody told us so. But we also knew not to question him. We might get hurt if we did. And we would. He'd wallop a mean punch to the arm, a painful sting with the snap of a wound-up towel, or a brutal barrage of insulting words that could cut away courage, and strength, and belief for decades.

From a separate corner of the room my oldest sister chimes in, What she means is how do ya know about the blue grass and the horses?

With the pride of a Sunday morning sunshine, my oldest brother puffed out his chest, I looked it up in the Encyclopedia. They've got huge mountains there, too, and rolling fields and Indians and caves. But the Indians are nice. We don't have to worry about the Indians. They'll be our friends. And the caves are huge. One is called Mammoth Cave and it's the longest cave system in the whole world. *Wow We'll be adventurers*

One of my brothers jumped from the top bunk to the single bed. He missed both my sisters but his foot caught the edge of the curtain and pulled it from the window. A piercing slit of white light filled the crack, cutting through the dark with a sharp and painful slash across my eyeballs.

The second week of school my momma sent a big yellow taxi to pick up the three little kids. I didn't know at the time, wouldn't know for decades, that on our last day in



Gainesville, my mother sent the three little kids to school so we wouldn't get in her hair and she kept the three big kids home to help her pack the car, clean the house and empty out the refrigerator. I felt cheated.

Honey, now listen tuh me. Miss Stansluh's going to come tuh yuhs rooms tuh pick yuhs up this afternoon. After the bell rings, yuh wait in yuhs rooms until she comes to get yuhs. Make sure yuh go poddy before Miss Slansluh gets there. Now, I wantcha tuh hold hands. When yuh all togethuh Miss Stansluh is gonna walk yuhs tuh the front of the school. She's gonna wait wit yuhs there. Your momma's got a taxi that's gonna pick yuhs up. Now in case the taxi drivuh is late, yuhs wait wit Miss Stansluh real quite like. Stand with yuh back against the wall so yuh don't get in anybody's way. Okay. Yuhs hear me? Be real polite.

I was standing in the shade under the canopy when the taxi pulled up the drive. My back against the wall just like my momma told me. It always tasted like sunshine and pine needles at school. Like the heat boiled the sap and filled the school yard with southern syrup deliciousness. Miss Stansler was standing by one of the poles, her arm wrapped around it, when the taxi pulled to the curb. She looked more like a teacher than a principal.

It was one of those big fancy taxis on TV, the ones that movie stars ride in. The taxi rolled to a stop, like a southern drawl rolls off the tongue, and then like all southern gentlemen, that driver came around the bumper, made a little gentleman's bow to Miss Stansler, almost like it was a permission, slip before he opened the back door for us. We stood there, the three of us: my sister, my baby brother, and I. It was like a cave inside that door, carved out in black with streams of light that let us see how big and black it

was. Miss Stansler waved us on. Now-a come on children, y'all hop up on in thayer. This here gentleman is gotta git y'all home before your momma starts to wonderin' what happened to y'all. Ya gotta big trip in front of ya. Now hurry up.

I bent my knees, taking off like Superman, my feet springing me forward and my red cape most certainly flapping past the principal and the thin man holding the door. Like a Shazam I was in that taxi, my feet dangling over the seat's edge, my sight nothing more than black Naugahyde and a cloudless sky. I looked to the open door, the glaring sun bouncing like white streaks of knifing pain off the door, the sidewalk, and Miss Stansler's glasses. I squinted, Come on y'all, it's huge in here.

When the taxi turned onto our street, I was pushing my chin up to the window edge hoping to see if Bobby could see me in the back seat of the taxi. I couldn't see nothing but the top branches of the palm trees and the flat roofs, one after the other. When the taxi stopped in front of our house, my Momma was standing in the street next to our brand-new Dodge station wagon. Momma, Momma, that was cool. We rode in a taxi. Did ya see us? *Did Bobby see me* Momma, does Bobby know I rode in a taxi?

She didn't respond. I don't think my momma even knew I was there. She was busy talking to the taxi driver and pointing her hand at one of the cars every time one of my siblings came out of the house carrying something. Then she'd ask the taxi driver to excuse her, she yelled at my sister, Put the pillows in the station wagon, honey. She yelled at my brother, Put two of the blankets in the back seat of the station wagon and the other three in the tail gate. When my oldest brother came out the front door, the taxi driver was gone. My momma yelled again, Put the cat in the Simca. She can roam around all she wants in there.

My oldest brother was holding Pumpernickel, cradling her in his arms. Her ears were peaked for listening and her tail was swinging back and forth under my brother's arm. Pumpernickel loved it when we carried her. The three girls would dress her up in our baby-doll clothes, put her in the stroller on her back and walk her up and down the sidewalk like new mommas do with their new babies. Pumpernickel never tried to run away. My momma said something else, but I didn't hear what it was. I busy thinking about Bobby, *I'm gonna tell 'im about the taxi when I see 'im*

My brother put Pumpernickel in the front seat of my daddy's Simca. She climbed up on the dashboard, sprawled out with her fur pushed up against the glass, and purred her way to Kentucky. My daddy hitched the Simca to the bumper of the station wagon, so my momma didn't have to drive through the mountains. Pumpernickel followed us the whole way.

My momma put me in two different schools that year before we headed back home for summer vacation. My daddy's nose was sticking out over the steering wheel just like it did the day we moved from Northeast Nineteenth lane. His shoulders were hunched, his neck carved out of the space between the seat and the windshield. He steered the station wagon over the concrete curb, up onto Miss Nan's driveway, the place I learned how to make syrup sandwiches and shuck walnuts for their sweet juicy meat. Before my daddy had a chance to park the car, I yelled over the screaming chaos of my five siblings, Momma, may I please go down to Bobby's house? My momma was applying a fresh coat of lipstick in the visor mirror. Her hand traveling in circles around her mouth, over and over, up into the points, down into the corners, and around again. A, Yes, seeped through her shinny pink lips.

Thank ya, Momma.

Before my daddy had a chance to turn the engine off, an elbow was thrown into a rib. A punch was thrown into an arm. An ear lobe was twisted. Before my daddy had a chance to open his door, a set of feet hit the driveway. A brush was pulled through a long strand of hair. A second set of feet hit the driveway chasing after the first. Before my daddy had a chance to push the button for the tailgate, a brush was stowed inside a bag. Another set of feet hit the driveway. A body rolled out of the tailgate, over the back seat, landed on the seat, sat up, and swung its feet out the door. Before my daddy had a chance to put his feet on the driveway, my sister paused to put on her shoes. I wasn't ready for the pause. I kept in rhythm with all her other motions and like her I rolled out of the tailgate, over the back seat. I, too, landed on the seat. Because of her pause, I caught her back with my foot, drawing my toes down the flowers of her four-day old sundress. She threw an elbow into my ribs. Watch it, she yelled. You're always hurtin' me. Another elbow hit yet another rib with her final cry, You're a meanie.

She ran towards the front door. *When she gets in the house everyone's gonna know she's been cryin' Her eyes 'ill be red Go to the backyard I would go to the backyard Play on the swing set Sit on the picnic table* The screen door slammed behind her. I pulled on my red sneakers. Their white soles already in motion for the run to Bobby's house. Around the bumper a spray of sharp white light ricocheted off the chrome cutting into my eyeballs. I scrunched to stop the piercing pain. A trick my daddy taught me when I was a littler. Before I had a chance to get past the car, my daddy stood at the tailgate helping my baby brother crawl through the window. My momma twisted her hand one last time over her lips. Mickey, don't fuhget to lock the doors.

Before I had a chance to reach the end of the driveway I heard my momma's car door shut. The air tasted like salt. The smell of pine and its sticky long needles filled my gasps for air. The sun was past straight up in the sky but it was still hot, really hot like dragon-breath hot. *Fire and flame and heat and hot I gotta get to Bobby's We'll have a tea party The doll The three of us Crumpets The tea set I'll take the doll for a walk I love that doll It's my favorite toy of Bobby's* My arms chugged in circles like a choo choo train. I was trying so hard to go as fast as I could, but it was all in slow motion. I was soaking in sweat, pounding the concrete, my fat was jiggling. The lard-ass, that my brother claimed I was, was hauling ass and not getting to Bobby's anywhere near as fast as I wanted. *I gotta get to Bobby's Faster Run faster I gotta get there*

I ran past Miss Leanna's house, the Garring's house, the twins, Ornchees, and the house with the mean dog that made me think I was going to get eaten every time it got loose. I ran past the point where the sidewalk bent like the road, past where the patch of Saint Augustine grass stretched between the sidewalk and the street. Pockets of heated air heaved into my lungs and pushed out through my lips; rolling them up and flapping them down with each pound on the concrete. At the bend in the sidewalk I tore through the neighbor's lawn. My mother's voice clear in my thoughts. *Meggie always wawhk on the sidewawhk That's the polite thing tuh do Sos yuh don't tear up the grass*

I ran across the Stewart's yard. I ran up the driveway. I ran past the gate. *It's open The gate's open Mr. Stewart's mowing the lawn* I threw my eyes into the garage. *It's empty There's nothin' there No hose The toys The bikes The guns The holsters The nozzle* There was not a single sound in that fenced yard as my eyes shot from garage to fence to house to the rock.

Bobby and my baby brother and I played on that rock. It was the place we went when we needed a boat, when we needed to ride the high seas. It was the place we went when we needed a land ship to battle dinosaurs. Our land ship protected us from the beasts that sprayed us with fire, or knocked us over with their tails or stomped on us with their feet; their feet were bigger than our ship but we knew the exact spot to sting them with our poison-tipped swords, just between their toes, the first two toes, they would fall over dead every time and fire would pour from their mouths and roars and goo that looked like the stuff that flung from the camel's mouth's at the zoo; it was disgusting so we would grab our bellies and bend over like we were going to puke and we would gag and scream and grab for air with our open mouths, like baby birds do when they're hungry.

When we were on the high seas the three of us would climb the rock, circled in fear like a swarm of mosquitos in the Everglades; Bobby always hoisted the sail; Aye eye, mate, he called out as his skinny arms reached for the imaginary pole, his arm holes pooling at his shoulders; we used our hands as binoculars searching the hurricane-infested waters for pirate ships, our bodies swaying back and forth in the rough seas, gripping to hold on, knowing if we fell we would be eaten to death, a gruesome death with lots of blood; Bobby showed us how the sharks bite as he pulled his lips back, his little white teeth blunted, he flailed his head side to side, thrashing back and forth until he fell off; my little brother and I would throw in the life preserver before death pulled him under; the sharks swarming, we were surrounded on every side, my baby brother put out the plank, Bobby would blindfold the bad man who threw him overboard; the stripes on Bobby's shirt stretched across his rounded belly as he forced the dirty ugly pirate to walk,

blind folded, down to the plank's edge; we counted aloud – One, Two, Three – there were ten steps, then a splash, a huge splash, that soaked us as the sharks devoured the pirate and his black ratted hat; we could always see his scary metal hook shine all the way to the bottom of the ocean.

As I stood on the driveway, I ran through my memories of tea parties on rainy days with the doll; me setting the table, metal tea cups painted white with red rims and handles, the Queen of Tarts on their sides, a platter of make-believe crumpets that the boys always devoured while the doll and I sat like princesses on the bed; Bobby and my little brother always took turns feeding the doll, they were good to her. *The front of the house* I turned to see the wooden gate. It was still open. It was a gate that was always closed. When we played in the back yard, it was the end of the world for Bobby and my baby brother and me. When we played pretend it was where the boys pretended their cars were parked when they pretended to drive to work; it was where they pretended the street began when one of the guys walked to work with his pretend briefcase; it was the front of the school room when we pretended I was the school teacher.

I ran like an unleashed dog up the driveway, cut over to the walkway, running on my toes to crane my neck over the porch and into the windows. *No drapes* I rang the doorbell. *There aren't any drapes Where'd they go* I cupped my hands on the window. My face pushed against the glass, my nose pressed to flat. I turned my head to the side. *There's no furniture No rugs Where did it go It's empty.* The afternoon's sun pounded brightness on the wood floor in the hallway, painting it a golden honey. I ran to the next window. I watched as the sunrays entered through the kitchen windows, splashing the counters with its glare. *There's nothing there* The butt of my hand pounded the window

with long drawn syllables, Bob-eee. Bob-eee. The ees echoing off the bricks, the emptiness circling back to me.

There are no words to describe emptiness in a proper fashion. Emily Post simply does not teach us that, neither do first grade teachers or unavailable mothers. On that day, the six-year-old in my body felt a loss that was unexplainable, unrecognizable, undefinable.

My cupped hands slid like spit down the window. At my sides, they hung like dead fish on a dock. The taste of the scales running through my veins as balled-up drops of intensity welled in the corner of my eyes, pooling in an orange abyss that dripped down my sweat drenched cheeks. *I gotta get to Miss Nan's I gotta get to momma She'll call Miss Stewart I'll come back down Maybe we'll have a slumber party They'll give me a T-shirt to sleep in We'll watch the moon and the stars through the window Momma.* The thoughts were racing through my head quicker than the blocks of sidewalk scraped the white-capped tips of my red sneakers. *I gotta get there Everything Is Moving So Slow*

My oldest brother always called me Crisco. Saying I was so fat, that when I had to haul ass it took me two trips. Then, he would laugh. And laugh again. It took me a lot more than two trips to get to Miss Nan's house before the sun went down. Sweating and pounding my way down the street, I was slower than a pot of water trying to boil on my momma's kitchen stove.

*I want to kiss Bobby I want to lay a great big huge gigantic kiss on his cheek just like in the movies* At the age of six years eight months and eight days I knew I loved



Bobby Stewart. I had planned this day forever and I knew Bobby would love me for just as long.

I ran across the Alford's lawn, salt stinging my lips and tongue. Sweat rolled into the corners of my eyes. It burned. My bangs were plastered against my forehead. My hair stuck to my neck. My shirt to my back. All of me was a flash of heat when my hand gripped the knob on the Alford's screen door. It was black. The knob that looped up like a fancy piece of lace dipped in shiny metal. *It's gonna pop open real fast Careful it's gonna slam shut I'm gonna get in trouble I'm gonna get yelled at for slamming the door Get inside Fast Momma's gonna call Miss Stewart I'm gonna have to run all the way back up there Shoot Watch the door*

The screen door pressed against my buttocks as I pushed like a bolt of zigzagging black, against the grains of the front door. It budged. The hinge popped. One foot fell in, the other held its ground on the front porch. The noise inside pushed out in waves of confusion, the voices, the laughs, the yelling, the every sound that was made by the sixteen people inside that five room home. The TV was blaring just inside the front door, a commentator explaining a play.

The screen door slammed behind me. Its sharp slap drawing every face to mine. Back so soon, my mother called out. I followed her voice to the single domed light over the kitchen table. There she stood taller than the others, her blonde bee-hive wig twirled up from her head; an upswing, she called it. She was poised like a model in a magazine with one hand curled around the stem of her martini, a stick of olives held tightly in the other. Her pinky stretched out long like a movie stars, and her pink lips pursed for a sip of her succulent nectar, as she called it. Everything else was a blur.

He's not there. My words running faster than when I hauled ass to get to her.

The surroundings started becoming mine as I adjusted to the dark. Four faces popped into view. They were sitting on the sofa. Two more were in the corner, one holding a framed photograph, a blank space on the wall behind them. Kids slammed through the swinging doors from the kitchen, holding the waist of the one in front, screaming, laughing, running fast. The Alford's had a rich history that ran deep like the South. They had ancestors who fought in the War. In their living room was a painting of a man who stood tall in a black coat that hung down to his knees in the back. His hand rests on the top of a fancy red chair. It looks like the same red chair that's in Miss Nan's living room. Right below where the painting hangs. Julie's brother is sitting in that fancy red chair fiddling with the antenna on the television. He butts in. Who, he wants to know. His neck like a crane's dredging water.

Oh, yuh know, Betty and John Stewart with tuh three kids, Susan, Blaine and Bobby. They lived over on Sixteenth Terrace right aftawh tuh bend in tuh road. Betty's a school teacher over at ...

Bobby Stewart. I yelled it. I yelled it loud. I yelled his name with the force of a barreling locomotive churning down the track so the chaos would end.

They moved.

His words were long in coming out and longer in sitting still, hanging in the hair. Everyone stopped. Everything stopped. Julie's brother's voice churned up my insides until the diarrhea from my bottom crawled onto my tongue.

A wisp of an, Oh, seeped out of my mother's pink lips as though it was an afterthought. A period at the end of an insignificant life. She was gone.

My hand curled around my lip. My mother's around her martini. The other, the hem of my skirt. The other, a stalk of green olives. *I love him I want to kiss him I planned it* She tipped her head back, her glass up. Deep in the bowels of my belly a heave of horror swelled. Snot swung from my nose. Globed streams of humiliation hung to the floor while that great big mean bully sitting under that great big enormous painting of some man who fought in a war and died threw his hand into the air. Level with my face. His finger pointing at me. Fat girl's got a boyfriend. Fat girl's got a boyfriend.

He laughed as I fell apart. The walls pulled away. The floor and the ceiling separated. The distance longer and wider until I stood in a space with nothing, no edges, no borders, no beginnings, no ends, no faces, no sound, no light, no mother, a finger, pointing at my nose.

Oh, her boyfriend left her. Fat girl's got a boyfriend. Fat girl's got a boyfriend. Ain't gonna get no kiss. Boyfriend left ya. Fat girl's got a boyfriend. Fat girl's got a boyfriend. In a sing-songy fashion the bully sitting in that fancy red chair in front of that great big enormous painting of some man who fought in a war and died humiliated me and pounded me down to something of no importance. One word. After. The other.

A part of me stayed in that house that day. In its black. In its meanness. In its emptiness. In its isolation. The other part of me carried on. I carried on after the beatings of my father's belt. From my neck to the crease of my knees. Naked. Splayed. For a beating. With a belt. The metal buckle safe and secure as each flick of my father's hand

whipped my flesh with its strap. I carried on after I was punched in the face at the top of the steps and knocked down to the brick wall at the base of the landing. I was thankful the bricks were there to stop me from my fall. I carried on when my nose was broken. A single blow from a single fist that a single surgery could repair. I was grateful the surgery fixed it. I carried on as I snuck food from the kitchen and the freezer in the garage and the candy in my dad's sock drawer. I carried on as I took the money from my parent's wallets. Punishments for their beatings. A price to each punch. Fifty cents to twenty bucks because that was the largest bill my daddy had. I kept a list in my drawer inside a green tablet. It was lined. Each line had a date. Next to each date was the punishment I received. Sometimes I forgot how bad it was. Sometimes. Then I would get beaten again. Another entry. Another reminder. Another line with a date and a description and the cost of the beating.

The last beating I remember was in the ninth grade. I was fifteen. It was a new semester after Christmas vacation. I was in the locker room. I had to dress into the mandatory blue jumper that every single girl in the school had to wear. All with fear. On that day, it wasn't so bad that I looked like a stuffed cannoli after the first bite the way my fat rolled over the thick bands of elastic that circled my legs and waist. On that day, what I feared more were the looks on the other girls' faces when they saw what I looked like under my white uniform shirt, polyester skirt, and matching cardigan sweater. What I feared was the looks on their faces when they saw the bruises on my upper arms. Bulbous black and purple globules. Patches of pain and shame. Bruises that wrapped around the bones of my upper arm, covering my flesh in humiliation. Nobody would ever know it was an iron. It wasn't hot that day, the iron, in that hotel room, in the state of Georgia,

that day my mother lost her temper and beat me with that iron. Again. And again. It was the only weapon she had. The only thing to hurt me. The only thing in arms reach to beat the shit out of me was an iron that had already cooled down after starching her green floral blouse. In a hotel room. In the south. On the way home from Christmas vacation. It was the second day of January. A Tuesday.

## II

During the winter months, the temperature inside Betsy Lou can go from twenty to ninety-five in less than five. On the night of the twenty-ninth of January in 1982 at half-past eleven it was twenty degrees in the belly of Betsy Lou. It was a fraction of a second that we sat in the driveway after my buttocks hit the Naugahyde and my gloved-hand pulled the door shut, before my fingers started numbing. I fired Betsy Lou up. One turn of the key and she hummed at a decibel lower than any human ear could register.

She was as silent as the winter sky in the middle of nowhere.

Inside Betsy Lou the heat forced its way onto my face, parching my eyes. Long gone was the vent cover and the memory of its demise. By the time I drove to the first traffic light, Betsy Lou was bursting with muted waves of heat. At the red light she idled in a private hum. I smelled the fry vat at McDonald's, its thick heavy air, laden with lard, wafting through the vent. I turned the heat off while the lard filled my pores. I had five minutes and fifteen seconds before my toes would go numb again. I shimmied out of my coat and rolled the window down a couple of inches. When the light turned green I flicked the switch for the heat. The taste of Listerine was still fresh in my mouth.

Long before Betsy Lou had a name or a personality or a reputation, she was the Alford's family station wagon. Pristine inside and out. Her paint was pure green and her insides smelled new like Miss Nan just drove her off the showroom floor. But after their youngest boy, Touch, died from a blow to the head by a baseball, and two years after that

Mr. Al died of a heart attack, and after the two oldest boys got married and were shipped off to Vietnam, and after that big mean bully who sat in that fancy red chair in front of that great big enormous painting of some man who fought in a war and died went away to college, Miss Nan didn't think she needed that big old station wagon for just her and Julie, so she asked my daddy if he wanted to buy it. And he did. My momma drove Betsy Lou all the way back to Louisville following my daddy the whole way.

Betsy Lou didn't have a name back then. She was just my mother's car. It wasn't until my baby brother and I started driving that Betsy Lou earned her name and reputation. My brother had a way of impacting Betsy Lou with permanent alterations to her natural beauty. One time the front quarter panel was pulled from the frame, clinging to the front bumper. My brother tried to hammer it out before my dad got home. When he was done it looked like my thighs, all dimpled and divoted. He duct taped the mess to the frame, but dad noticed. Kids do that kind of shit to a family car.

On the night of the twenty-ninth of January in 1982 at twenty minutes to midnight, it was twenty degrees on the sidewalk leading up to Mario's place. I made my way under the New Year's first New Moon. It was the third day of that new moon. The front door was black. My toes were numb. My fingers cupped under my arms. My coat resting on the passenger seat inside Betsy Lou. She was locked. I didn't want to be bothered with a coat. I didn't want to be bothered with anything. I was going to a party by myself for the sole purpose of meeting new people. All grownups. I was fired up to see the rest of the world and the rest of my life in that one single night.

A slab of light fell on the concrete pad in front of the door. *The door's open Why would anyone leave it open Laziness Pure laziness Think people People live here While I*

was moaning and groaning, I took the full brunt of my weight, in a fit of disgust, and thrust it against the door. Its heaviness inched in. The gray swath of plastic that stretched the length of the door's underside swished along the linoleum. My weight fell in. When he invited me, Mario gave me the building number. He told me his place was on the second floor. It would be easy to find. It would be a great time. He told me to come on over after I got off work. I'd meet lots of people.

I pushed the door closed with my butt. The gray swath of plastic under the door swished along the linoleum, until it came to a stop. Still open about two inches, I pushed it again. It didn't budge. *Oops Guess it doesn't close* My puffs of exhale swirled like smoke, in a lobby that hadn't been updated in a couple of decades, maybe four.

The climb up the stairs was filled with every odor of every dinner ever cooked in every apartment I passed. Twenty-year-old fried fish welled from the walls. Boiled broccoli, sautéed garlic, and braised sauerkraut saturated the plaster, paint, and thread-barred carpet. Spices from the world's ethnic cooking hovered in the black stretched marks along the walls and the chiseled gouges borne in by furniture corners, rails on sleds, and tool bags and buckets that passed up those steps and down on a daily basis with someone needing to fix something somewhere. I climbed up the odors woven in the carpet's bare-threads. I passed over the liquid spatters, some imbedded, some fresh. A trail of drips to lead me to Apartment 201.

A tune from the Stones bolted through the odors... You make a grown man cry... Mick Jagger's raucous voice carried me past army fatigues and combat boots ... Ride like the wind... His raucous voice carried me past drooped heads, eyes at half-mast, and red solo cups held by fingers at the ends of dangling arms ... at double speed. His voice



carried me through the door jamb to Mario's apartment ...I'll take you places that you've never, never seen... I bounced into his living room like a kid on a Pogo Stick. My southern accent pushing past Jagger's ... You start it up.... We-ell, hey thayer, ya'll. Hope thayer's still 'nuff ru-um fo' me-ea. Jagger's drowned out my southern accent.

My eyes zipped through the crowd searching for familiarity. Nothing registered. *Find the keg* I pointed my nose in the direction of the kitchen. My feet followed as I passed the breakfast table, two men and a woman sitting on its roundness, a pair of legs dangling down. *They've got their disgusting butts on Mario's table He eats his breakfast there Cornflakes Slices a banana Eats in the nude No probably sugar Yes sugar* I could taste the moistened cornflakes in my memory, the milk sweetened. A pair of combat boots soiled the seat of one chair and a pair of high-tops the other. *Gross someone's gonna sit on that chair* The mother who raised me on Emily Post would have been livid. Just past the carpet my right foot stuck to the kitchen floor. The left one, too. The foam of the beer, or maybe it was the yeast or the hops, but something made me stick to the linoleum with such a force that I was afraid I was going to lose a shoe. Mario, the boss who hired me for my first job when I was seventeen, the boss who taught me how to use a cash register, fill fry bags and greet customers at the drive-thru window so we could have them in and out in less than thirty seconds, that boss stood at the keg with a red solo cup in one hand and a tap in the other. His galley kitchen smelling like a pub that hadn't closed in twenty-four years of NCAA Tournaments, Olympics, Super Bowls, Riders Cups, World Series and WBA Championships.

Maggie, great ta see ya. Glad ya could make it. Let's get ya a beer. But hey, man, we're all out of cups. Try up there.

Mario gestured with his elbow to a cabinet over the sink. I stretched for the handle. A single chocolate-colored plastic-injection molded coffee cup sat on the shelf. Alone. I wondered if Mario's mother purchased those cups in a factory in southern California in the late 1960's. Because that's when my mother bought hers. We stopped in the heat of the day rummaging through hundreds of cups and saucers to find the perfect ones. My mother bought a set of twenty-four while my father was taking a Finite Element Analysis class at Stanford University. It was the summer of '69.

Mario's red Solo cup was like an eternal vessel of alcoholic consumption compared to my little brown plastic-injection molded coffee cup. Five sips and the cup would be empty. Or three gulps and I'd be back for more. I took two quick sips that reminded me I didn't like beer. Its crass texture felt like shards of cold shrapnel when I swallowed. I turned for the carpet. *Please don't let my shoe stick to the floor It'll come off I'll lose my shoe Oh my gosh how disgusting* The air was saturated with enough cigarette smoke to coat my lungs in black ash.

I hoisted my little brown cup over the crowd's shoulders hoping it wouldn't spill. Except for the breakfast table and two chairs, there was nothing on the floor but wall-to-wall carpet, and people packed in like a bunch of squealing pigs on a rolling box car.

Over rows of shoulders, I spotted JT's head, round bulbous locks of the blackest hair. I drooled over it every time he came into McDonald's. I drooled when he looked at me. I drooled when he smiled at me. I drooled when he stood in front of me ordering a cup of black coffee and an egg McMuffin. Every time I looked at JT, I was zapped into a vacuum. I drooled and dreamed and played make-believe in a mind that had no idea what it was doing. He was my manager's boyfriend.

Across the room JT tipped his cup toward me. I raised mine in return. It was jostled. Two drops landed on my hand, one rolled down my cuff, the other I licked off my knuckle. JT took a gulp. I took the last sip of my liquid sandpaper. *What that man possesses in looks he lacks in intellect and maturity* I waited for him to swallow.

He swayed in his stance. His legs spread like a cattle rancher's after a month's journey on horseback. In his swaying I wondered what would happen if someone knocked into him. *Dominos He goes down they all do* My mind rolled forward to the living room floor filled with bodies. *Legs in the air Hands hoisting red Solo cups Screams Moans What the fuck A lot of What the fucks* As JT held that gulp of beer in his mouth I wondered if he was savoring it. Or, if he had forgotten it was there. *He might be so far gone he doesn't know who I am* I looked around for anyone else I might know. Over JT's shoulder was the creep with the pink-tinted glasses and the piercing stare, with his beady eyes and that wiry patched beard. He was peering at me. Grinning at me. Pangs of poison-tipped spears shot through my pores. I didn't start thinking until after I turned for the door. *I gotta get the hell out of here Go Maggie Go Maybe you can grab someone on your way out See if there's anyone you know Don't leave alone* It was five minutes to midnight on the night of the twenty-ninth of January in 1982.

I was just as repulsed by the sight of that guy with the pink-tinted glasses as I was the last time I saw him, which was the first time I met him, and the one time I was hoping I would never see him again. He didn't do anything to me that night other than freak me out. It was like he was licking my uvula from across the room, stripping my clothes off with a razor blade, peeling my scalp back with his teeth, and stretching my insides out. That was a month ago and here he was, and I felt just as scared, and he was grinning at

me with a knowing grin and I stood there as though he had already unleashed the cage that would cage me. *Get out of here Grab someone and go There's gotta be someone here from McDonald's Just leave* Fear filled the space between me and the door. Acid bubbled in my gut and glands, shooting pricked pangs of fear to all my nerve endings.

At fifteen minutes after midnight I was in Mario's living room. The clock on the wall told me so. It was the same clock that told me it was five minutes to midnight on the night of twenty-ninth of January in 1982, when I was headed out the door alone and afraid. But at fifteen minutes after midnight, I knew I had been outside. *It was cold I was freezing I was kissing JT by the bushes next to the brick wall on the side of the apartment building Oh My God I'm going to get in trouble I'm going to get fired* I remember. *It was cold I was kissing JT* I remember.

I didn't know what time it was when I felt a pain in my back, pushing into me, a ridge, a ledge, a bar. It hurt. I didn't even know time was an element, that the world was round or that the clothes on my back were gifts from Christmas and my birthday.

I was being held up. Pushed hard. The wall was yellow. I was at the end of a counter. The door. I was next to a wooden door. It was closed. The counter hit against my back. I couldn't sit. I couldn't move. I couldn't. I didn't. I didn't know what was going on. The door was shut. A face was moving against me. I rolled my head to the side, to get away, to get rid of it, for it to leave me alone. I couldn't see anything but a yellow wall and a wooden door. It pulled back. It was the creep with the pink-tinted glasses and the piercing stare, with his beady eyes and that wiry, patched beard. He was trying to kiss me. I moved my face. I turned. He found me. The creep with the pink-tinted glasses and the piercing stare, with his beady eyes and that wiry, patched beard was scratching my

face. It was repulsive. It was disgusting. I pleaded, Stop. My words did not come out. I could hear his breath. I could feel it. He was slobbering on me. My face. Stop. Please stop. I rolled my head. Stop. Stop. Don't touch me. Please don't. Leave me alone. Please. Don't. Leave me. Alone. Everything fell out silent.

In the mirror, I could see a closet. A shower curtain. Bathroom. *It's a bathroom I'm in a bathroom Where* His exhales on my cheeks were hot and wet and humid and balmy and gross and *Go away Stop touching me Disgusting It hurts Sick Go away Stop Oh my God Stop Don't touch me Stop kissing me Oh my God Where are my hands Where are my hands Cover your face Stop him Cover your face Where are my fucking hands What happened to my hands Get your hands to your face Cover your face Cover your face He can't kiss you Move Stop him You have to stop him Help me please Help me Help Don't touch me Please stop Where the fuck are my hands*

My body fell. My bottom lip curled in. On its ridges was the salt and the sweat and the beer and the disgusting collection of filth from his face. That creep with the pink-tinted glasses and the piercing stare, with his beady eyes and that wiry, patched beard that scratched my face, stretched my body out on the bathroom floor. He stripped me to my flesh. *Cold It's cold The tile is cold* My mind was racing in slow motion. *Think Maggie Stop 'em Roll over to the tub Hide in the corner Hide where the tub meets the floor Hide in the crevice You can hide there Get there Roll to it Hurry Get there Ya gotta get there Ya have to get help*

He stopped me.

He stretched my body out on the bathroom floor.

There was silence on silence. Fear. I was motionless.

I clawed at the floor. I clawed into those three-inch ceramic tiles with enough force to pull the subfloor through the grout. My fingertips slid across the tiles, past the grout, as though everything was covered in a slick yellow. My hands gathering the air.

He stopped me.

He stretched my body out on the bathroom floor.

There was silence on silence. Fear. I was motionless.

I reached for the tub. *What's wrong Maggie ya gotta get there Yau gotta save yourself There's no sound Scream What happened Oh my God My dad This will kill 'em Help me Please someone Help me My dad is gonna die He'll kill 'em*

I fought that disgusting creep with the pink-tinted glasses and the piercing stare, with his beady eyes and that wiry, patched beard that scratched my face. He didn't stop. *He's gonna rape me Stop 'em Fight 'em Oh God Stop 'em He's gonna kill me He's gonna rape me He's gonna kill me I'm gonna die My dad*

He stopped me.

He stretched my body out on the bathroom floor.

There was silence on silence. Fear. Motionless. Death after rape. Death.

*No* The no was the length of my life. My final call and no one heard it. The silence turned cold, the weight on my body lifted, I had no more fight, it came out in my final, No.

The shift brought the notice of a murmur. My body still flat against the tiles. There was a light, an awareness of light. There was movement. I could hear the

movement. My eyes couldn't focus. I couldn't see who was there. I couldn't see what was there. I couldn't see.

*The bathroom door The locked door The wooden door by the sink it's fallen* Like a ramp to the linen closet. The door stopped but everything on top of it moved. It was a wall of bodies from the door to the ceiling. All fighting. One landed on me. I fought to fend it off, and missed. A black mass came toward me. Her voice. I recognized her voice. JT's girlfriend knelt at my side. She held my head. I fought. She told me it was over. She told me it was a blanket. She told me she wanted to cover me to keep me warm. It's over, she said. I'm going to help you. She told me she was going to get me dressed. She told me she was going to get me home.

Someone yelled, Take this.

Something flew at me. It's shadow crossing my face.

She grabbed it.

Someone said, Oh my God.

Someone said, Go.

Someone said, Don't look.

Someone said, Shit.

Someone said, Leave 'em alone.

Someone said, I got this. It was JT's girlfriend. I'm going to help you get dressed. Work with me okay. It's going to be okay. Let's get your shirt on. Can you sit up? Let me help you.

She pulled on my underwear, tucked my breasts in my bra. She buttoned my blouse, pulled on my socks. She called for help. I was lifted. They pulled on my pants, buttoned the button. They zipped the zipper. They slipped on my shoes. My toes drug as they carried me, two men and Maureen. Maureen guiding, one guy under each arm. My muscles and nerve endings still lying flat on the ceramic tiles on Mario's bathroom floor.

In the living room, I rolled my head to the side. My eyes opened. Faces staring at me. *Confused They looked away Voices hushed Hands over mouths.* I glanced at the clock. Ten minutes past four. *Four It was twelve Four hours What happened Four hours* The weight of my head fell. It was the thirtieth of January. A Saturday.

Maureen opened the door to Betsy Lou. She pulled out my coat, put my arms in it. The men placed me on the seat making sure I didn't hit anything as I slid across the Naugahyde. Everything was black inside that car. The cold froze her smell.

Maureen tucked the blanket around me. She shut the door, it didn't make a sound. A man got in. He started the car. *The keys How did he get the keys Four hours* His hand reached up to adjust the rear view mirror. Betsy Lou hummed as silent as winter. As she pulled from the curb, I didn't know that I didn't know what happened. I didn't know that the driver knew my brother, that his sister worked at McDonald's, that he lived down the street, that in two weeks he would leave for the military. I didn't know.

He drove in the direction of home. Slow. I could catch each frame as we passed the high school, the church, the grocery, the McDonald's. The wind was gentle as it crossed my face. *It's cold Must've rolled the window down* My head held straight. I could see the headlights on the blacktop. Halfway home the man's voice broke into the white



line that was running endless under the hood of the car, That guy slipped you a couple of Mickies, he said. You gotta be careful. You gotta know who your friends are.

He walked me to the house, carrying my weight, holding me up against the bricks while he turned the brass knob on the back door.

Until that night, the only pill that had ever passed my lips read, B-A-Y-E-R. After that night I didn't tell anyone what happened in that bathroom with the unpainted wooden door and the grouted yellow tiles. I didn't tell anyone about the counter or the bath tub. I didn't tell anyone about the creep with the pink-tinted glasses and the piercing stare, with his beady eyes and that wiry, patched beard that scratched my face. I didn't tell anyone that he stripped me down. That he laid me out on that cold yellow floor. I didn't tell anyone because it would always be my fault. It would always be me who was the slut. Me who was the whore. Me who was the dirty bitch who teased the boys. It would always be me. It would always be my fault.

Instead, I raised my necklines. Lowered my hemlines. And erected walls so that no one could penetrate them. And I wondered what happened in those four hours of my life that were extinguished from my experiential reality.

### III

It was a June day, a Thursday, when I kissed my parents goodbye. The sun wasn't quite hot enough yet to ripple the air in that one thousandth-nine hundredth and eighty-third year of our Lord, if one is keeping time by the Gregorian Calendar. In Judaism it was a Tamuz day in the five-thousandth-seven hundred and forty-third year. The taste of my mother's face powder was like pink chalk on the roundness of my lips as I watched my father pull my mother's Cadillac out of the driveway, turning right at the mailbox. A mailbox that was run over so many times my father cemented it six feet underground so the black box with its red flag didn't end up a quarter mile down the road every other Saturday or Sunday morning. Even though the back of the box was no longer squared with the front, I could still get the door closed when I lifted it on its hinges and then clasped it down until a jolt shocked my hand. I watched the back chrome bumper and the last speck of the gold corner-panel disappear in the black-topped rolls of state Highway 1441 as my father drove east toward Interstate 71, then north towards Schenectady, New York, for the Catholic wedding of their Godson.

Five days later my father drove my mother's gold Cadillac up the driveway. I was in the house stirring a pot of pasta so the Angel Hair wouldn't stick. The steam from the boiling water administering a mini facial to my thick Estee Lauder face of perfection. The next burner over the garlic and onion were sautéing in olive oil, along with fresh parsley and four cans of clams. It smelled like a kitchen in a remote village of Palermo.

As soon as we sat down, I wanted all the details. Most important, I wanted to know if one of Paul's brothers was still available. There was a long history between our families. One of them I could trust, but I didn't let on, How was the wedding?

Meggie, it was the craziest thing. Your fadda was driving the ca and it started... He says to me... My mother is laughing. She raises her napkin to her lips, grabs my father's arm, and in broken syllables spits out... Honey, why don't you tell the stoie.

Maggie, it was the craziest thing. Your mother and I were half-way to Cincinnati and all of a sudden the car starts making this funny noise, feeling like it's skipping a piston. So, I pull off the road, and just then the whole engine dies.

The taste of smoldering oil filled my thoughts.

It just shut off. So, we're sitting there on the side of the road, and your mother says, So, now what do we do. And I tell her I'm going to check under the hood...

And I tell him, Mickey, don't yuh dare get outa this ca. You'll die out there. You'll get hit by anudder ca. Yuh read about it every day in the paper. Yuh stay right here until a police officuh comes.

My father's eyes close, like he's trying to hold back the memory so it doesn't land on his plate. He turns red. He's not breathing. I think he's choking on a clam, then he spits out a sentence that's broken up like concrete slabs on a demolition site, That's exactly what she said, alright.

Of course it is. He cuda died out there.

I can almost hear my dad's seatbelt click open. I can almost hear the semis as they pass by the car. I can almost hear my mother's voice yelling at my father through the windshield, muted like there's cellophane over her vocal chords.

So I'm looking under the hood and this little red car zips by, you know, one of those little toy ones. The driver pulls onto the shoulder and whips the thing around like it's a Matchbox. This kid gets out. Doesn't even open the door. Just jumps right over it, and I swear he was as tall as the thing was long. I don't know how he fit in the damn car.

And I'm sitting in the ca saying, Mickey, don't yuh dare trust dat guy. Don't yuh tawhk tuh 'em. Yuh hear me?

The aged Romano on the meatballs starts to taste like interstate exhaust when my father adds, So, this kid, he's like six feet tall and weighs a hundred and twenty-five pounds soaking wet, he asks me, Say pop, what seems to be the problem? I look at the guy and I'm thinking, did he just call me pop. I tell him I think it's the timing belt. He looks over my shoulder like this... At the head of the table my father mimics the kid, lifting his torso up to gain a few inches in height. He juts his chin out, hoists his shoulders back, then he turns his chin to the right at a slant like he's looking over his own shoulder as though he's in his own way. Then he moves his chin to the other side...and I tell him I don't know. So this kid pokes his head under the hood and I can tell he has no idea he's looking at an engine.

I'm listening and having a visual of my father and this kid looking under the hood, one semi after the next passing, the turbulence as deafening as an inverted vacuum and the ground is shaking like an 8.5 earthquake, and they're standing on the fault line.

He offers to drive me up to the next exit. I tell him I'm not going anywhere without my girl. So he bends to look in the front seat. He twists one way, then the other. Then without taken his eyes off your mother he says, She looks harmless. She can come, too.

The next thing yuh know, your fadder and I are sitting in this little MG, cuddled up like two little love birds and the kid says tuh us, Hey yuh two, hold it done ovuh there.

I imagine my parents are holding on to one another thinking they're going to die.

There wasn't enough room in that seat for one of us let alone both. Somehow we squeezed into his kiddie car...

An I make sure yuh fadder gets de seat belt round the both of us.

It wasn't easy, but I got us clicked in. He drives us to the next exit. No roof on the car, so it sounds like we were duct taped to the bottom of a semi. It was a rough two miles, but we got the car fixed, and now we're six hours behind schedule. So the kid offers to drive us to New York. It was the craziest thing.

I tell him, look here kid, this ain't a free weekend in New York. We're no rich folk. We'll covuh the cost of yuh otel, but yuh on yuh own for your meals. When we got to the otel they had this little vending machine, where I got him a little overnight bag. with a tute brush and tute paste, a little deodorant and a razo.

My mother turns to my father. I take a bite of twirled up pasta that tastes like the disinfectant at the Holiday Inn, realizing I'm way too far inside my mother's story.

Was there anything else in there? My mother looks at my father as though she's questioning her memory not his. She turns back, focuses on me, I told him, yuh not to be seen or heard. Yuh hear me?

My mother is pointing her finger at me as though I'm the one she's trying to keep in line. The problem is, my mother's finger is crooked at the end. So, instead of its tip facing me, it's at a forty-five-degree angle directed right at my father's robust Italian nose. He takes up where my mother left off, So we check in. The kid gets his room and your mother and I get ours and we make sure we don't have adjoining rooms.

I have a visual of this kid jumping on the bed at the Holiday Inn while my parents are trying to sleep and both thinking, What the hell did we get ourselves into? My fork drops to my dinner plate. There's not enough pasta on the plate to soften the blow. It's a hard hit. Hard enough to crack the plate, but it doesn't. My hands fly in the air.

Now wait a minute. Let me get this straight. The parents who raised me to never pick up a stranger not only picked one up but drove all the way to New York with 'em. Are you kidding me? The entire foundation of my childhood is a scam.

No, no, no, it was quite alright. He's a student at the University. He was on his way up tuh Cincinnati tuh sell a ticket he had for the Jimmy Buffet Concert. We paid for the ticket and he drove us to New York. If we didn't have him drive, we'd a nevuh made it. He runs on the track team, his family owns Mallard's, he's a good kid, he wants tuh meetcha. We gave him the numba. We knew yuh wouldn't mind.

I took in a mouth full of iced tea hoping the freeze would numb the spikes of contradiction. Are you kidding me? Jesus, mom. You pick up a stranger and now you want me to marry him?

Oh, no. Yuh can go on a date first. Then yuh can marry him. He's the funniest guy. Yuh gonna love him.

Does he have a name? I can't believe this. My eyes rolled. Then closed.

Sid. They shouted it out like he was a rock star. *Sid*

We have tuh tell yuh about the rehearsal. It was the craziest thing. We tell Jenny what happened and... My mother is laughing so hard she can't get another word out.

Your mother tells Jenny about this crazy kid and... My father's face turns red. His eyes water. His lips meet in the middle, one over the other like they're melted together. Because neither one could carry on, I share that the story went something like this:

Everyone hears about their crazy adventure, my dad sleeping in the back seat, this kid in a warm up suit driving through the night, my mother making sure he doesn't take a hard left to Mexico. The kid looks in the rear-view mirror and says, Look at that. He's just a little putty tat back there. I never thought any of my professors were human.

When Jenny heard the story, she insisted Sid be at the wedding. My mother was mortified. I could imagine her scowling as the two of them sat at a long clothed table with candles stretched down its center, wine classes scattered like rose petals, a dollop of red wine circling the base of each. I surmised the room was dark. From the pictures, I would later discover, it was.

Jenny, I can't do that. This kid doesn't have anything. He's wearing a warm-up suite, for Heaven's sake. All he has with him are the clothes on his back.

Jenny was one of my mother's dearest friends. They met when my dad and her husband, Lou, were students at RPI in Albany. While the Leonardi's were raising their seven kids in Milwaukee and my parents were raising their six in Louisville, we spent summers together and holidays when times were tough and when times were good.

Six weeks later, Sid called. A week after that he was standing on the front porch wearing the same warm up suit that was in my parents' photos, the one with three black stripes running down his limbs, the garter belt in his hand, the bride and groom to his side. He opened the door on the little red sports car my parents described, hopped over the door and slid in just like my parents said he did when they were on Interstate 71. I was safe with Sid, he knew my parents.

Sid talked through dinner in a dark restaurant, next door to the movie theater. We walked over to see the 9:15 showing of Trading Places. I was thinking Sid would grab my hand, so I left it dangling. Instead my heel got caught between the stones, pulling my shoe off. I struggled like hell to loosen the damn thing and get it back on before he noticed I was an imbecile. I didn't catch up with him until his hand reached for the door.

It was my first blind date. Well, it was my first date ever. On our front porch, I knew Sid was going to ask me out again. I could tell he liked me when he asked, Is it okay if I call you?

Of Course, I told him. I didn't get a kiss. He didn't call.



The smell of summer sweat was replaced by the scent of dried leaves. It was the taste of dung, though, that filled my days after the fall semester started. The kind that sticks in the ruts of shoes, the kind that doesn't wipe off with pressure against grass, or pick out with the tip of a thin stick. My third year at the University I was still entrenched in my educational cycle, one semester on probation, the next off. I was moving along in absolute ignorance, not knowing that I couldn't concentrate, that I couldn't pay attention in class, absorb my homework, comprehend what I was reading, listening, doing, acting, being, knowing, engaging, caring, wanting, needing. I had never moved on from the slick yellow tiles and my inability to escape the nightmare. I turned into the walls I erected, and fell short on the things others expected. I was scared everywhere I went. The ladies room in the library, afraid someone would follow me in and attack me. I looked behind me before I went in. Afraid someone was hiding in a stall, I checked all of them before I locked myself in one of them. Afraid to be in a stairwell. Someone could hold their hand over my mouth, penetrate me and be gone. Afraid to walk, to sit, to stand, to be alone because any man could be just like the guy with the pink-tinted glasses.

My parents were an open-minded couple of intellectuals. They taught me how to think for myself, to question the establishment, and to go to church on Sunday. I looked out onto the landscape as our family station wagon rolled up and down the hills of this nation and across the flat lands that offered up only one color for days. Dirt. On our travels across country, we visited the Baptist Church while touring the Deep South, a Methodist Church in the Midwest and whatever house of worship we could find when we rolled into a town on a Saturday night, our car packed with kids, pillows and a cooler, towing a trailer with tents, suitcases and a Coleman stove. It was a perfect way for me to

learn about religion. I loved the deep Alleluia's in the Baptist Church, the gilded pulpit and spicy incense in the Catholic Church, and that I could drink grape juice in the Methodist church. All those places of worship taught me that pews are hard as hell and my mother's pinch is worse than that. By the time I'd met Sid, I'd been to every type of house of worship except Scientology. It would take a Lutheran and Jew and September eleventh to walk me into that establishment, and the three of us ran out we were so scared. But that story doesn't materialize for another twenty years.

A few weeks into the fall semester I was hanging out in front of the Bingham Humanities building with The Gang. I learned in high school it was much easier to tell my mother I was going out with the gang than to list off two dozen names of kids she entertained most weekends even though she was held up in her bed room watching TV while we were in the basement or back yard listening to music, smoking, drinking, playing volleyball. On that Wednesday afternoon, I caught the thinness of Sid strolling down the walkway. His long limbs passing across the hard concrete shadows. My instincts kicked in and the next thing I knew my hand was up in the air waiving to Sid and the three black stripes that ran down each of his limbs. I got the, Hey, part out, but the, Sid, was silenced. His name got cut right out of the scene the moment he saw me and turned in the opposite direction. He didn't miss a beat. I could hear the sweat shoot through his pores. *Oh my gosh I can't believe he just did that He's ignoring me He's pretending he doesn't know me Typical Louisville I hate that about this place Everybody pretends like they don't know ya*

In the dining room that night, over a platter of Mostaccioli and meatballs, my dad slips into the conversation, Sid came by my office today.

Really? The word popped out hard, my eyebrows dipped towards my nose, my mouth hung open after its sound ended. I picked my bottom jaw out of the pasta. Then, I lifted my tone, About what time was that, pop? Do you remember?

I was trying to be cautious and casual and unaffected, but I was burning on the inside. The visual of his turn on the sidewalk tasted bitter, like fermented acid.

Sometime in the afternoon.

Well, pop, was it right after you ate lunch, before your one o'clock class. Was it closer to when you got out of class? Was it an hour after that? Do you remember specifically when he stopped by? *Cool it Too many questions Back off* I put my fork on my dinner plate, the tines facing down. Things were bubbling, I clasped my hands under the table so I wouldn't throw them in the air.

He was thinking. His cheeks pushed out and his lips formed a tight bind, a configuration he held as he looked over my head as if the clock in his office hung there. He was examining its white face, focused on the black numbers and the two hands as they told him the time, *Sir it was at exactly three forty-five a quarter to four when that young man entered your office Sir you looked at the clock when he knocked You weren't expecting anyone I remember for you Go ahead and tell the young lady what I told you*

While my father was reading his memory I took the last bite of my meatball. Its Italian herb saturating my father's pause.

It was three-forty-five, a quarter to four. He knocked on the door and asked if he could come in. He said he wanted to talk to me. That he felt really bad. That he saw you on campus today but didn't stop. *Wow Shit That's a surprise*

Pop, I saw him about forty minutes before that. He pretended he didn't know me.

I know. He told me all about it. He felt bad, that's why he came to see me. I explained to him that you're a nice girl, very understanding and approachable, that the next time he sees you, he ought to say hello, that you'll be nice and respectful.

His words were paced, as though fixed in an order. The muscles on his face held the same pose. Then his head tilted back, he came forward with a laugh that pushed the wafting of the Romano across the table. My insides softened. My pop was asking me to give Sid another chance. So, I did.

The next time I had that class I was in the exact same place afterwards, at the exact same time, and exactly the same way as the week before, Sid came walking down that sidewalk. The shadows were still hard, laying their lines on the concrete. I raised my hand exactly the same way as the week before, Hello, Sid. He turned toward me.

That was the beginning. We studied in the dorm study hall face to face, our feet touching under the table. My toes twirled around his, hot lava flowing through the rest of me. We'd watch movies in the dorm theater. I wanted to kiss the top layer of his skin until it twirled under my tongue. We went out on Friday nights where the Happy Hour had free food and the drinks were a dollar. That's when I felt like a grownup, on a real date, even though Sid never touched me in public.

Come March Sid took me to the First Round of the Men's NCAA Basketball Tournament down Interstate 64. Tickets his uncle gave him. We stopped in a fast-food joint for a couple of sandwiches and fries and two Coca-Colas. I was shocked when he ordered a hot ham and cheese. The cheese was opaque even where it puddled on the paper.

Sid, I thought Jewish people didn't eat ham.

It's okay here.

What do you mean here?

We're not in Louisville. *He can eat ham when no one's watching Oh my gosh What a farce I don't believe it The Jewish kid is eating a ham sandwich 'cause no one's watching*

You're not supposed to eat meat with cheese either, I thought. My words were slow, exiting with caution, like they were thinking about his ruse and a way he couldn't escape the truth or think I was stupid enough to accept his sham.

A few weeks after the tournament, Sid had a culminating paper due for a class that had just one assignment. He needed an A on the paper, to get an A in the class, in order to graduate. That's what his athletic scholarship dictated: four years of running, four years of tuition. Instead of writing the damn thing, he put it off until he got an extension.

My professor gave me until Monday. Can you help me? I have no idea what to do.

Well, what's the paper on?

Sid handed me a text book with three hundred and thirty-eight pages. All of it?

No, just one point, like one chapter with outside resources and stuff like that. I have to say why I think what I think.

Look, Sid, I can't think for you, but I can write something, and then you put in what you need to make it yours.

I got us a B. Sid was spitfire mad. He scolded me like my daddy used to; my bottom lip quivering in uncontrollable beats. That little girl inside me was so scared. All I ever wanted was to please my daddy, and now my daddy was Sid. And I failed him.

I'm sorry. I never took this course. I didn't know what I was doing. At least I got us a B. *That's more than you got Shit Why are you yelling at me I'm only a sophomore* The conversation in my head felt like sandpaper, its grit causing friction in my thoughts. Ask your professor if you can resubmit, then you can add some stuff from your notes.

What? You're kidding me. I can't write. His voice was curt. His eyes popped as he looked down at me. In scorn. He was angry. And tight and turned and walked away.

The semester ended. Summer school started. Sid was still on campus, still living in the dorm, still parking his red MG in the lot. Sometimes I would see it and swear it hadn't moved in weeks. Sometimes it was gone and when I saw it again, it looked like it hadn't moved since summer started. But every time I saw it, the sun's glare on its red body forced me to shut my eyes so it wouldn't slice and dice and make julienne fries out of my sight.

Half way through summer school I got this hair-brained idea to profess my love for that Jewish boy. I missed him. Thoughts of him poked holes in my memory bank, like I was withdrawing the memories I didn't want and redepositing the ones I did. I wasn't waiting for the phone to ring two times before picking it up, Sid wasn't calling. It was all my fault he didn't graduate. I was lonely. Despondent. I needed to fill the space that Sid used to fill. One weekend when my family was out of town, I schemed to make enough chocolate chip cookies to fill Sid's little MG. He would taste my love in each bite and would be crazy about me because of it. I knew that to be true. My thoughts shot a million pulses of electricity through my insides like a million sparklers on the Fourth of July.

One of my character defects that plagued me for decades was my inability to recognize someone with bad character. Another was not knowing how to do things in moderation. On that day I failed miserably at both.

That Friday afternoon I heated the oven, mixed the white and brown sugars with butter, watching for the moment the butter whipped into cream and the sugar granules disappeared. I added a couple of eggs and an over-flowing teaspoon of vanilla, it was more like two. I threw in a couple of cups of flour, the baking soda and mixed it into a sweet concoction of brown sugar decadence. I ate a handful of the chips before pouring the rest in, because that's what I do. It's like sneaking without having to worry about getting caught. The chips were soft and melted in my mouth before my teeth broke them apart. I poured the rest in, my ears absorbing the hollowed echo as the chips fell one a top the other. I reached in and ate three more, they were sitting on the top.

At three minutes to five I popped the first tray in the oven. I didn't stop mixing batches, and popping trays of balled-up dough in the oven, for the next fifty-nine hours with the exception of two brief trips to the grocery, multiple trips to the bathroom, and a couple of short naps in my bed. Like most things I do, I had no idea what baking a carload of cookies entailed. After each batch cooled, I stacked six cookies on a clear piece of wrap, gathered the edges together, and tied them tight with a red ribbon. I placed them in a black yard-waste bag as though they were precious living beings that couldn't get bruised, couldn't break, couldn't suffocate. The air was sweet. Jesus resided over my baking from his stance in The Last Supper. A rendition my brother painted by numbers when he was seven. Jesus resided over all the happenings in our kitchen, including bearing witness to my consumption of nothing but chocolate chip cookies all weekend.

With each one, the richness of chocolate flowed through my senses like I was naked in an endless stream of melted bliss.

Monday morning I drove Betsy Lou to campus, her right corner panel flapping on the interstate from the time my brother took her airborne and dislodged it. He tried to beat it into place so my dad wouldn't notice, but that only made it look like my buttocks and the back side of my thighs. Betsy Lou's army-green metal was screeching for help when the semis passed, the wind shear pulling her from herself, forcing the connected end to dig into the rest of her. She was screaming for help as I drove along, the window down, and the car filled with love for a Jewish boy, in shapes of homemade chocolate chip cookies, all two bites a piece.

The campus was quiet when I parked Betsy Lou's behemoth mass next to Sid's little MG. I was alone in the dark, filling the MG by the handfuls of bagged cookies. *Seven hundred and fifty strands of red ribbon That was a lot of cutting* The bags started falling out of the car, so I rolled the window down a few inches, closed the door and plopped the rest through the slit until the last bag hugged the window with no place else to drop. I giggled. Oh, my God, look at that, It's an overstuffed cookie jar on wheels.

I wondered how long it would take Sid to notice, would he circle the car, scratch his head, try to figure out what to do next. *I hope he's not gonna be in a hurry*

Wednesday evening the phone rang. Like my sister taught me, I didn't answer until the second ring. She always said, Ya gotta keep 'em waiting. Don't make it look like you're sitting by the phone.

Hey, Maggie, how ya doin'?

Good evening, Sid. It's great to hear from you.



Hey, if you're not doin' anything I thought I'd drop by and we could go for a ride.

What do you have in mind?

What time is it now?

Sid, it's eight o'clock.

In the nine months that I knew him, Sid never had a sense of time, or direction, or responsibility or purpose. But out of desperation I wanted to be with him.

Okay how 'bout if I swing by in an hour?

Okay. Hey, how'd your week go?

He never mentioned the cookies.

He pulled into the driveway with the top down. I didn't feel an awkward moment because I hadn't discovered them yet. Sid was wearing the same bleached-out puke green running suite he was wearing the day I met him. The same one he wore every time I saw him, the one with the three black stripes running down the outside of his arms and legs. We tooted around town, drove through the park to watch the sun set, meandered through the highlands then headed to the river. The way the summer wind bounced off the windshield, I felt like I was receiving a suspended facial massage all the way down River Road. The engine was quiet enough that I could hear the katydids. At The Boat Club, Sid pulled off the road. We watched as the moon crisped-up the waves, licking their peaks with silver. It felt as though it was the first day of summer vacation.

I was in my own private world of lollygag when Sid chimed in, We're really close to my grandmother's house. I'm going to stop by to drop something off.

I glanced at the dash. Are you sure? It's eleven-thirty. Isn't she going to be asleep?

Not my grandma. She's up all night. I won't be botherin' her.

It was a long driveway up a steep hill, lined with evergreens that shot up to the stars. And nothing else. Sid, are you sure this is okay? I don't want someone coming out and shooting us for trespassing. *Ya read about it every day in the paper*

His head tilted back, but not a sound came from his mouth.

At the top of the driveway, Sid turned off the engine. The car rolled to its own stop. There was enough room for a few more cars, a sidewalk that bent into a line of bushes, and rows of pines that reached up to Heaven. I couldn't see a house or a light, didn't know how far we were from anything. *Can anybody see us* I was imagining what it would be like in the daytime when Sid pulled the long black handle on the emergency brake. The grinding of the metal shaft between us, moving its valve closed, restricting its brake fluid to the rear drum, broke through my imagination and cut out the sounds of the katydids.

Looking through the windshield, like there was a person sitting on the hood, Sid spoke as though he was talking to them, I'll be right back. You wait here.

He hopped over the door. When his feet landed on the driveway I clicked the handle on my door. It popped open.

Oh, I'll only be a minute. You stay here.

You don't want me to go in with you?

No. You wait here. I'll only be a minute. Just droppin' somethin' off. I have a few things back here I need to put in my grandma's freezer.

Sid bent over the back of the car and rustled up an orchestra of plastic cacophony. I wasn't sure what he was doing, maybe getting a bunch of cookies for me. By the sounds

of his frustration, it was more like every time he picked one bag up another fell from his grasp. In all the commotion, I turned hoping he would offer me a bag of cookies. *Where's all the cookies There's hardly any here What did he do with 'em all*

I'll be right back. I'm gonna put these in her freezer. She might be in her night gown. You wait here. I can't bring you in just in case.

My mind shot to an old lady weighing in at a hundred pounds, wearing a pink floral robe, tied at the waist, and a head full of rollers wrapped in a matching scarf, tied in front.

*It has to be them* I couldn't see any cookies, couldn't smell chocolate or brown sugar or butter. If I did, I would have asked what smelled so good. Then I would have asked if I could have one. And I would have eaten everything he gave me.

Sid, why don't you tell your grandmother I'm out here, and see if it's okay with her to bring me inside? *She's gonna say yes She'll throw a hissy fit You get that girl in here right now Ya don't ever leave a young lady in the car Boy I raised you better than that* Her imagined voice was high pitched, crackly, and punched with conviction.

You wait in the car. I'll be right back. His tone told me, Don't you dare cross this line or the threshold to my grandmother's house. My fingers wrapped around the seat's edge, my nails clawing into the leather.

What's in the bags?

A few things I need to put in her freezer. Just give a minute. Wait here.

I watched as Sid turned into the bushes, four white plastic bags hanging from each of his arms like clothes on a line, evenly spaced, unwavering. Then he disappeared. *I*

*made those damn cookies and he's not even gonna admit he has them Didn't even offer me one He doesn't know who they're from How many options does he have*

The depth of my seething pierced my skull. I looked out the windshield, to the hood and the person who Sid talked to who still wasn't there. *Shoulda never done it* And I sat. I sat in the dark with my head full of chaos. I wanted to follow the sidewalk, open the door and introduce myself to his grandmother. It was that moment, when those thoughts bubbled over, that my mother's voice took command. *Yuh need tuh be a lady Yuh can't just bawge into someone's house Even though he's being an ass yuh need tuh be polite and sit here*

I turned my mind into a wiped eraser board and looked up into the black span of the night's sky. I wished upon a star. I entertained myself with its brilliance. *There must be million stars up there No light from the city Must be a new moon night* I searched for constellations, made up a few, and then committed to being famous for my discoveries.

The quiet pulled me into its awareness. There were no sounds of cars, or barges on the river. *I didn't hear the back door close Did he get in the house Is he okay I haven't heard a thing Should I go check on him* The crickets rubbed their little legs together, the sounds pulling me back into my surroundings. *Do the worms and fireflies here 'em I bet it's louder down there Does it bother 'em Do they like it Is it like music I wonder what it's like*

The scent of the night air was prickly, pure like the pines that lined the drive. *Could I hear someone if they tried to sneak up on me* I unfastened the seatbelt so I could escape. Its loud click sent a message to whoever was out there that I was free to fight back. *It's pitch black out there Someone could be on top of me before I ever see 'em I*

kept my head still, trying to fake out whoever was out there while my eyes ran reconnaissance like a scope on a submerged submarine. My eyes caught every ounce of blackness from the north to the south and as far east as I could see. I listened for sound. Rustling of the leaves. The grass. A step on the driveway. I looked for the movement of a branch. I sat poised for a thud on the car. *How the hell am I gonna escape Anyone can get me right now can If they want to rape me or kill me they can get me right now Why the hell did he leave me in the middle of nowhere with the roof down I'm a sitting duck*

I dared not look for him. I was afraid. I would get in trouble, yelled at, blamed, punished, beaten with a belt. It would be years before I would discover that I had granted permission to all males to have the same power over me that my father did. Crippled in fear, I sat in that open car, alone, prey for a sick man and a sick act. *I'm gonna die I should've never given him those damn cookies He didn't deserve 'em Someone's gonna jump on the hood*

Sid came through the trees, alongside the bushes, his empty hands at his side. *Thank God* He walked around the back of the car. Hopped over the door. Slid into his seat. Put the keys in the ignition. Started the car. I was numb.

Speaking through the windshield to that invisible person still perched on the hood, Sid broke the song of the katydids, he sliced gashes in my fear, his pithy little voice put me in my place, Hey, look, my grandmother was still awake. She caught my ear. And needed me to help her with a drawer in her dresser. It was stuck. It was the bottom one.

Not a fraction of a second split the difference between our voices, And it never occurred to you to say, Hey Granny I've got a friend in the car give me a minute while I go get her. Sid you've been gone an hour and a half.

I wanted to rip the keys out of the ignition, pretend they were drills, and excavate his skull, so I could pour acid into the gray bulbous matter of his brain.

The look on his face was one of serious contemplation. As though he was trying to formulate how to explain to me, so I could understand how he got to the place, that he eats his buggers because he likes their salty flavor.

I'm not going to introduce you to my grandmother.

Why not?

Maggie, you're not Jewish.

His face was red. I was hot. His words pushed through the spaces in his perfectly aligned front teeth.

You're not the same as a Jewish girl. You are not one of us. You're a Gentile. You'll never be good enough.

I was forced to change. I left that relationship. I graduated from the University. I landed a job in the Marketing Department at the Louisville Chamber of Commerce. I etched an image in that male-dominated world, one of power, sophistication, and fortitude. I learned that what was important was not who I was, but who they thought I was. I flew to Dallas to shop at Neiman Marcus, drove to Chicago to hit the sale racks at Bergdorf Goodman and I Magnin, Cincinnati for Saks Fifth Avenue. And I was powerful in my silks and suedes and guarded armor in that world of hate and fear, and inferiority.

My fifth month on the job, I closed a deal downtown in a building dating back to the 1800's, one of Louisville's most majestic contributions to architecture. I walked out with a check for five thousand dollars, convincing the CEO that my success was his success. I exited with my face to the receptionist, an edict of posh I learned from an

executive secretary in Manhattan, Back out so the last image they have is your face and not your derrière.

The door closed, bellowing out the grunt of a centuries-old geezer thanking me for stopping by. The solid wooden thud reached out and reached up taking my eyes with it. Up past the marble walls and the intricate crown molding, twenty-feet up. My black patent leathers clicked with success down the corridor, white marble worn with age. Ahead a man leaned into a pay phone. The professional in me hoped the sound of my heels wouldn't disturb him. I didn't hear a voice, just saw a body hunched over a pay phone. He's hiding his face from me. The frightened little girl in me knew he was there to take me down. He'd pull out a knife. Pull me in a dark space – a corner, an office, a bathroom. He'd kill me.

It was a quarter to four.

Halfway to his back I recognized the stance. It was Seth. My belly fell to the gray veins in the marbled tiles. My lunch lurched in the opposite direction. I swallowed hard. And squeezed my gut hoping nothing would fly out. *Pass by Don't breathe Hold your head down He'll never know Quiet He's using the phone He's busy He'll never notice Keep going* As I passed him, he was holding his hunched pose. I was holding my breath.

I heard the receiver. *He hung up the phone Keep going* I looked up. *Where's the elevator I'll never make it* I heard the quarter drop in the slot. I heard his finger slide it out. *Where's the lady's room* I heard his voice, Maggie, in a tone as though he questioned his own memory or maybe it was that he questioned how I might respond. The thinness of my black patents echoed off the white marble. *Please let him go the other way*

Maggie. His voice was louder, his word faster, he knew it was me. I stopped. I don't know why. Maybe it was because I thought I was in trouble. Maybe it was because that's what I do when someone calls my name. Maybe it's because I needed to do what I did next.

His footsteps pushed toward me. I turned. I didn't want him any closer.

Maggie, I thought that was you. How ya doing? Good to see ya. I've really missed you. I think about ya all the time. Would it be okay if I called ya up to go out some time?

If you ever see me again, I want you to turn around and walk the other way and pretend we never met. *The guy's got a wedding band on and he misses me He thinks about me He wants to go out with me I feel sorry for his wife Probably not even Jewish*

The elevator dinged. The door opened. I stepped in.



#### IV

Weighted down with every beauty aide I use to reach perfection, the rounded leather straps of my carry-on tote dented my flesh, forming two perfect trenches, with a mound of skin on either side. My forearm was numb. My fingers too. *I've got twenty-eight minutes to find the bathroom Pee Primp Hair spray Lipstick I wish these people would get out of my way Move*

When you get off the plane ask anyone you see for George Garring, that's what Pat told me over a platter of prosciutto-wrapped asparagus. They all know him, she said.

I tried to bury the conversation. *I'll tell her my flight was late I didn't have enough time I didn't pass anybody I couldn't...* The formation of my lies was cut short when a woman with a gold name tag came through the crowd. I searched for an excuse to run from my commitment. She dug her heels into the tiles, powering up a degree of angst. Her tiled dings reminded me of the sound of pellets popping off our old treehouse door, when my brothers had the BB gun out.

Excuse me, Eileen, I'm looking for George Garring.

She didn't pause. She didn't look up. She didn't insinuate in any way she heard a word I said. *She's ignoring me* Eileen kept digging her heels, pushing deep, moving fast. Her head and shoulders poised like a heated beast on attack. *I'll get her*

I shot my arm in the air, so I could make a huge splash in her wake. It cut like a dagger through the sweetness from the cinnamon roll stand. I spread my fingers as wide as they could reach and danced my nails up and down like Eileen's eyelashes were a piano. Through the spiced sugary air, down the shaft of my arm, I called out, Excuse me, Eileen, I'm looking for George Garring I was told to ask for him when I got off the plane. My words fell one on top the other so that I could get them all out before she passed. She didn't pause. She didn't look up. She didn't insinuate in any way that she heard a single word I said. Her lips must have parted though, because from her back I heard, Follow me. So I did. She didn't break her pace. It was obvious she was still hunting down that beast. In her pursuit, she had no way of knowing if I was behind her or not. *This woman could care less if I keep up with her Don't lose her Maggie* I could taste the competition in my mouth, such a bitch bath it was.

Eileen heeled her way past gates with angry passengers, and stone-faced agents standing behind counters and monitors and gold name tags. I struggled to keep up. She heeled her way through an overhead page, Passenger Walt Werrington please return to Gate 32. I pushed forward, hoping to move faster. I trailed her through the announcement, This is the final boarding call for Flight 4651 to New York LaGuardia. I jostled my tote. She heeled her way through a page asking a Jonathan Klineman to please go to the nearest security phone for a message. I moved my tote to my left side. I followed her into a room. The floor was white. The ceiling. The walls. Nothing touched anything, except a man's polished shoes on the buffed white tiles. If the moment had a taste it would have been sharp and as clear and clean as an unfettered bath in the Chilean waters of Puerto Williams.

Eileen's voice broke the white silence, George, this lady is looking for you.

My eyes stretched the full length of his shoulders. I was looking for familiarity. Or maybe it was promise. I don't know, but I was looking. Lord knows, I was looking. His shoulders were broad and I remembered he was a swimmer in high school and college. Maybe even a scholarship. His jacket hung long and his height was high and I figured he was a good foot taller than me. When he turned, looking down at me was a young-looking Lou Garring, but with a head full of red hair and a face dappled in shaded freckles that lay one upon the next. The gold name tag on his blue polyester blazer read, Dick. *George Dick What*

Pat and Lou Garring lived across the street from us in Gainesville. Pat shared with me over that platter of prosciutto-wrapped asparagus, that when we were babies, George and I sat side by side in our highchairs trying to feed one another lunch. Growing up, there was only one thing I knew about the Garrings, and that was the image of Pat in our home movies. She was holding a bundle of white blankets that draped down her front. Her sleeves were short. The hem line of her dress was long. My mother's voice narrated her silent moves with a New York accent, Luka der, kids, dat's Pa Gerrin. She's holin George. See um. Ah. Dey was da best neighbors. Dey lived across da steet from us. She was such a sweet lady. It's a shame we ev-a lost touch wit hum.

The Garrings moved when I was two. When I was twenty, my mother phoned a company in Lexington, Lou Garring answered. From that day, our parents carried on as though no time had passed in the birthing of their babies and the growing of their careers.

Eileen heeled her way out. George and I stood in all that quiet white with twenty-three years between us. Hello George Maggie Cassaro from Louisville your mother told me to look you up while I was passing through today. My nervousness pushed out like a sprinter with zero seconds to waste. I shot my hand out, straight out, like I was the first one to get any part of me across a finish line. Schwang, through the air. A gold medal win. The committee in my head took over: *Unbelievable You're a buffoon A handshake Shit Maggie it's not a business deal* The truth was I had no idea how to approach a male except with a wall of professionalism and a handshake so I didn't have to be personal. The committee took over, *Wipe your hand Wipe it on your dress Wipe it away so it never happened* I didn't. Because I knew if I did, George might think I was trying to wipe off whatever his hand transferred to me and that might include his respect. I kept my embarrassment shackled to my brain cells while the unsavory taste of humiliation ran full-speed in the trenches of my mouth. *Twenty-eight minutes*

How long are you in town?

Feigning innocence or ignorance, or three-quarters of each, I reached into my tote. *Gotta pee Gotta primp* The feathery papers of my ticket flapped in my twisted fingers. I glanced at the text. Let's see. According to this, I have twenty-eight minutes.

Well, that's not very long. When will you return? *I'm not coming back dude I'm returnin' through Philly Today's all ya got I promised Pat and I executed This is it*

George plucked the papers from my grip and took off. His long legs forced me into another sprint. *How on earth do these people expect me to keep up with 'em* The air was heavy as I hustled past the Bridges Café, George two paces ahead of me. A fresh

platter of burgers and fries was dished out at a three-top. It smelled like summer vacation at the Dixie Twirl. At the sight of the shimmer on the buns, I was sure fourteen of my pores clogged with grease, seven on each side of my nose. At the first vacant gate, George punched the keys on the monitor. The scent of his right cheek pulled me in and tucked me under his collar. The swirling scents of lime zest and basil infused with an aromatic root from East India never affected me in such a fashion. I scarfed it up, as he clicked away my twenty-eight minutes in Pittsburgh.

Okay, looks like I've got ya returning through Pittsburgh on Sunday. You'll fly out of Atlantic City at 8:10 AM and arrive here at 9:07 AM. Just in time for breakfast. His words kept coming, but my mind switched gears to a plate of scrambled eggs and sausage with a biscuit slathered in butter. Its taste slithered down my throat. You can fly out anytime on Sunday. All the flights have available seating. *Wow He feels obligated Nice kid His mom 'ill be proud*

On the way to Gate 32, the salted air from the cashew roaster puckered my veins. Things were rippled when I flicked the red of my manicured nail against George's name tag. What's with the Dick? A resounding ding from my nail lingered in the air mingling with his East Indian spices. George looked down at his Dick. He laughed. That was the moment the spices in his Polo aftershave were planted in my memory bank, a place they were imbedded for years.

We get bitched at all day by passengers who are pissed off about stuff that we have nothing to do with. His arms took a wide swath through the air, contouring the intricacies of the horizon line. They bitch and complain and cuss at us, treat us like trash,

and we're the cause of all their problems. When someone is yelling at us, we can't stand when they say our names. So, the guys wear nametags with, Dick, and the girls, Eileen.

He carried on as though each word he spit out was a flavored Fruit Loop skipping through air, Dick, you need to... Dick, you're the one who... Dick, it's your fault that... Dick, you need to solve this problem because you caused it. Or, I lean... I lean... I lean... It gives us a chance to find humor in all those obnoxious passengers. It's kinda fun in a sick kinda way.

Before he laughed again my boxed mind could see the little round Fruit Loops tossing along his horizon line in pastel shades of green, orange, and yellow. I wondered if the frequent fliers ever caught on.

I took forty-seven free-flowing steps through the skycap tunnel before I was stopped. Standing in front of me was a mop of solid platinum hair, one I recognized from photos and news coverage. My thoughts whirled in motion with the raucous rotations of the jet's turbos. *Well well well It's John Y Brown Jr Turn it on Maggie* I threw my shoulders back, pushed my hips forward, plastered a smile across my face and moved my tote to my left hand.

Governor Brown, what a pleasure to see you this evening. The man with the baby face turned. His platinum bangs swung over the tip of his brows. When he smiled, I took every second I could gather before extending my hand for a casual, howdy, you-know-me and I-know-you and I-will-impress-you, kind of handshake. He returned it. *One-one thousand* Maggie Cassaro with the Chamber of Commerce in Louisville. My words paused when necessary, lifted in tone as needed and then drew back into a subtle ending

of a peaceful flow of perfection. *Wow That was professional* In The Governor's smile I was searching the airwaves for hints of my Beautiful perfume, hoping the dabs behind my ears, or the ones under my chin, or the spritz between my breasts was reaching more of his senses than the jet fuel was reaching mine.

Good evening. How are you doing? His words paused when necessary, lifted in tone as needed, and then drew back into a subtle ending. He smiled as though he knew me.

It is a pleasure to see you this afternoon. Are you traveling alone?

Yes, sir, I am.

Well, then, please be seated with me.

My mind filled with fear. I didn't want The Governor to know I had a seventy-nine-dollar economy ticket. I didn't want The Governor to know there was no way my paltry insignificant self could settle into the luxury of first class leather. A drop of sweat formed at the base of my neck. I wanted anything in the world not to have to admit I wasn't good enough, I wasn't rich enough, I wasn't famous enough. That I couldn't sit with him. That I was relegated to the back of the Boeing. I was the last person on board.

Because the Governor couldn't see the chaos in my head, it had no way of stopping him. With one hand in the center of my back, he walked me past the flight attendants as though it was a private jet. My sweat soaked into my silk. The Governor offered me the window seat. As he sat down, his fresh scent of clean, void of flowers and spices and herbs, came down with him.

No one asked to see my ticket. No one told me I needed to move. No one knew we never met, not even The Governor. He didn't even know I existed before we boarded the flight that night, but there he was treating me as though we shared a past, a good past. My mind was dinging new memories. The ping in my head never stooped pinging.

The Governor and I started a conversation before the seatbelts were fastened. The fifty-two minutes of flight time were filled with insights, facts and projections on the state's economic development initiatives, and my input on the focus of the Chamber's initiative to improve the city's economic development endeavors by turning Louisville into a medical hub for the nation. I knew my shit. I could taste the success of my competency. Down at 601 East Main Street, I listened. I read. I paid attention to everything that happened inside those four walls on those two floors overlooking the city and the great Ohio River. It was my job. And there I was holding my own and sweating like a chilled cucumber on a hot August day.

When the sign lit up, I could hear the seatbelts in the cabin click. The Governor was up before my hand ever reached my buckle. His fresh scent of clean, pure clean void of distraction and identification, eased into my consciousness. In his three-piece, pin-striped suit, he looked down at me, Peggy, thank you for traveling with me and sharing your insight. I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation. I wish you much success in Atlantic City.

It took every degree of decorum I possessed not to respond, Likewise Steve. The permeating stench of a humiliating correction backlogged in my brain. Governor John Y. Brown, Jr., was gone before I had the chance to even crack a smile.



The airport in Atlantic City isn't in Atlantic City. It's ten miles northwest of the city nestled in between the Atlantic City Expressway and the Garden State Parkway on Amelia Earhart Boulevard. The only transportation on the Boulevard is limousines and busses. The busses come and go from a corner in the city, and from that corner passengers take taxis, private cars, or other buses to the brightest lights and the winningest slots in the city that never sleeps.

I had a ticket for the bus, cash for the taxi, and an address for the hotel, 2100 Pacific Avenue. The airport was quiet. My pumps pushed me forward. *I hope the bus stop is right outside With my luck I'm gonna have to run to the end of the building How much time do I have* While flecks of anxiety were erupting, the Governor caught me laden with four pieces of Louis Vuitton luggage. A man in a tuxedo stood at his side. As the man reached down for The Governor's bag, The Governor reached out to me in a voice erupting with pleasure, Peggy, do you have someone meeting you? His smile was big and his eyes were round and his arm cupped my elbow as if he was the one who was sent to gather me up. Behind him the trunk of a glossy black limo was wide open. I wanted anything in the world not to have to admit I wasn't good enough, I wasn't rich enough, I wasn't famous enough to have a limo waiting for me. I didn't want to have to admit that I was relegated to the pauper's bus. I took a moment. I held myself in a degree of sophistication as though a limo wasn't even considered. That I had something even better waiting for me, like a helicopter. In that moment, my words roamed around my mouth until I was sure I had the right ones in the right order, No, sir, I do not. I cringed at the politeness of my tone and the mediocrity of my stature in life. And I didn't dare think of correcting The Governor. In less than one-tenth of one second I would be out of his life.

What would it matter if I was a Peggy, a Maggie, a Sue or an elephant with two trunks, seven heads, and forty-three tails? I sucked my insides in, hoping they would disappear and take my outsides with them.

The Governor waved his hand and burst forth a rich command, Lucas, please collect the lady's bags, she'll be travelling with me. *Is anyone watching Does anyone I know see this This is happening Holy shit I'm riding with The Governor Please let someone I know see this* The Governor's southern drawl filled a barrage of New Jersey moments.

The air flooding through the doors tasted like an electrified ticker-tape parade. The man who bought KFC for two million dollars in 1964 and sold his share for 284 million in 1971 was treating me like he coveted my presence. Lucas collected my bags. The Governor escorted me to his limo. He held my hand. I dipped into the black leather and oh-my-God opulence. My thighs didn't squeak as they crossed the seat. *Holy cow Look at this Does anyone see me Oh my God Lisa and Kyle are gonna love this* I wanted to turn around and plaster my face to the back windshield in case we passed anyone I might know. But The Governor didn't know that. He didn't know that on the inside of the sophisticated lady sitting next to him was a little girl out of control. Prince Charming wasn't on the movie screen anymore. He was in the limo with me.

I sat like a lady. My legs crossed at the ankles. My knees pointed toward The Governor. My hands clasped in my lap. A thin tennis bracelet wrapped around my wrist. The Governor was unconcerned in the black of his limo. It was as though it was ordinary for him, as ordinary as the landscape's terrain as we rode into town. Inside me, things were popping and cracking and buzzing and nothing could stay calm or quite or sane. The

Governor had no idea this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Every fiber of my tissue, every ounce of blood, and every bit of calcium fortified bone in my body was firing off spikes of energy that could ignite a city on a Boardwalk in an eternal flow of electrical bliss. I sunk into the creamy leather. *I am here*

The Governor had no idea I knew he was going to Atlantic City to be with his wife. That his wife was one of the judges for the Miss America Pageant. He had no idea I had tickets and that I too would be under the same roof, attending the same parties, and engaging in the same events as he on our four-day weekend in America's Playground. He had no idea that I knew we were both running late. Through the tinted windows, the city's energy grew. Dancing neon lights. Flashing signs. Broad banners of round golden balls turning the night into day. Somewhere beyond all of that was the Boardwalk and on it was a homeless man who had a view he was not willing to relinquish. The Governor turned to me, Would it be acceptable if Lucas drops me off at my hotel first? I am running a few minutes late. *Oh my God he is a perfect gentleman Polished Knows Emily Post for sure*

Oh, please, yes. That will be fine. I felt like a fresh swirled cone of cotton candy on the first day of the county fair. Thank you, sir *for the greatest experience I'm here I'm really here Thank you Governor Brown Wow This is happening To me*

The Governor lowered the privacy panel. Excuse me, Lucas. After you drop me off at the hotel, please take the lady to wherever she pleases. His undulation was perfect.

I had never been in the presence of a man who treated me with such reverence. I listened to his words with love and lust and awe and gratitude. Before the door closed,

my hand drifted to the seat. My longest finger swirling around in circles on its leather. The scent of a forging memory was solidifying in my mind as the tone of my awe slid across that leather and seeped into the seams, I am here. My whisper to the Universe.

Alone in the limo, I was thankful I asked my mother for a copy of Emily Post for my eighteenth birthday. I was thankful I read it from cover to cover. So, when I met someone like The Governor, they would know I was a lady. It had been five years since The Governor last governed but he was still The Governor.

Lisa and Kyle were already seated with a half-a-dozen gin and tonics lubricating their thoughts as I made my way to the Boardwalk Hall. They were old college buddies of mine, even though we never went to college together. At the entrance a man in a tuxedo with a protruding belly opened the door. An oversized woman in a black gown cut between us. The man whispered as I passed, That's what I look like in drag.

As though she heard the compliment, the woman turned. He was right. His name was Tom, and Tom joined us for the weekend. He and Kyle were advisors to a couple of the contestants on stage.

Saturday night from my elevated seats at the Hall, I watched as the Former Miss America, Phyllis George Brown, helped choose the next Miss America, Kaye Lani Rae Rafko of Michigan. I could see The Governor from my seat in what was the largest clear-span covered space in the world when it was built in 1929. He was two rows behind the judges. I watched every move. It gave me something to talk about, if I ran into him again.

Lisa and Kyle and Tom and I ate food I knew nothing about, drank beverages with which I was well acquainted. We gambled in the casinos and partied in private

suites. We ate lavish dinners in restaurants and devoured buttermilk pancakes in bed. Our room smelled like Sunday morning breakfast and melted butter every time I ventured out to the city where nothing is real.

Three hours after ending my Saturday night my body was blown into a standup position. My eyes popped into a place of black. The bedsheets plastered to my body. *Siren Black hole Flashing red light Run Nuclear fallout Run I'm in a black hole I'm gonna die A power plant Flashing red light The exit Siren's blaring Cover ears Everyone's dead I'm the last one I'm gonna fucking die They're all dead The phone The phone Get the phone Shit Lisa and Kyle*

Hello. My five letters whimpered out like ash flitting from a failed explosion. Depleted, my voice was hoarse from the nuclear residue, the toxicity coating my tongue.

Good morning, Ms. Cassaro, this is your wakeup call. It is six o'clock in the morning on Sunday, September eighteenth. The temperature in Atlantic City is fifty-five degrees. Have a great day. *Six o'clock in the morning Julie Andrews is at the front desk God that was close I thought I was gonna die* I sat on the bed. Not a single crack of light illuminated anything while the electrical charge from the fallout siren was pumping my blood all the way to Pluto.

I heard their shallow snores. *How the hell did they sleep through that Fucking nuclear fallout Shit* Lisa and Kyle never heard the phone. They didn't smell the scent of my apricot shampoo. Didn't hear me whisper, I love you. Didn't feel my lips kiss them goodbye Didn't know the heavy metal door clicked behind me. On the way down the hall

my lack of sleep tasted the same as an acidic astringent missing a couple of key ingredients.

I slept on the way to the airport. I slept on the plane. I was hoping George wouldn't show up so I could sleep in the airport. Good morning. How was your flight? He sounded like a tour guide. My eyes shot to his chest. *No name tag Thank God I don't have to spend the day with a Dick I am not up for that*

My thoughts were flowing in a present past tense; they were that slow. In the baggage claim, George gathered my luggage. He insisted. Outside he threw them in the trunk. Then leaned down to open my door. I could see the outstretched lines from his pillow rippling the flesh from his ear to his chin. *Guy's been up twenty minutes Got as much sleep as me Poor thing He's gonna be miserable today Go easy on him Laugh*

I watched George finagle his six-foot-three self into a car that was no more than three-feet tall. There wasn't a roof. Most of his length disappeared under the steering wheel. My nose picked up the scent of a tropical beach. I twisted for a view of the back seat. *Sand Beach towels Cooler No toys Nothing* What are you interested in doing, he asked me? *Dude you're the one who changed my ticket* The morning's sun stretched its tentacles to the flavor of heated octopus.

My response was slow to materialize. The stretched syllables were just waking up for the day, Well, what are my choices? *Put a lot of thought into this uh*

Well, let's see here. It's kinda early. *I know Would've been nice to sleep longer I wonder when this place wakes up*

The streets were quiet as George shifted through the narrow turns and uphill climbs. We never passed another car, not a jogger or dog walker, no one pushing a stroller. Silence and stillness and hills and curves and a gray that hung low at each blinding turn. *Why did you fly me in so early What the hell do I talk about with this guy* George pulled the car to a stop at a pub etched into the mountain. The door knob wouldn't turn. The morning's moisture was rubbing pine into my inhales while George pondered his second move. Over the change from gray to bright to failing light, George drove a total of fifty-three miles encompassing one pub, one restaurant, two sandwiches, two walking tours, four gin and tonics, six beers, and seven hours of rolling conversations decorated with boisterous laughter and a reminder that we ate lunch together in our diapers when we were two. At six, George suggested I stay the night so we could spend more time together, otherwise I needed to head to the airport.

That's a brilliant idea, Mr. Garring. And where shall we begin the next adventure?

The day was decorated in laughter. From failing light to less than an hour before midnight, George drove another twenty-three miles to one more pub, two different appetizers, and five more beverages before we walked up the stone steps to his cottage. A chimney stuck up from the roof, the brick painted white, ivy covered most of it.

An antique lamp cast a glow across the living room. Long dark shadows hid most of the details, but there was warmth and age and a respect for beauty. Solid wooden furniture with decades of history filled the space without consuming it. Under the lamp was a desk with a single drawer. It marked the gateway to a hallway. I followed in George's footsteps, his one-foot-shorter shadow, reaching the end before I had a chance to lag behind. George flipped on the switch. At the door jamb, my consumed gin spilled

forth in an exuberant southern drawl, Well, well, well, look at that, His and Hers and a bathroom for both.

George pushed me aside, darting into the Hers room. In a seamless disturbance of athleticism, he bent over the bed and flung his arms, spanning the length of it. *The butterfly stroke Sure enough He was a swimmer* He gathered up a pile of laundry that could fill a couple of standalone closets. I watched his every move. In a room with lilac coated wallpaper and cupped drapes made of lace and chiffon, I imagined his Speedo and his body inside it. His cap and his wet goggles. I could smell the chlorine until he turned to face me. Gathered in his arms was a four-foot pile of laundry covering him and half the distance to the ceiling. *It's the laundry closet* So, now what? I laughed. Ya gonna put those on the other bed? The laundry's odor washed out the chlorine, saturating my taste buds with a spice from stale cologne.

George's collection fell to the floor. The expression on his face fell to his jaw. In a hushed voice, he fessed-up, I haven't been to the cleaners in a while. Guess it's past time. *What a mess. Should've left them on the bed numskull*

I felt the introduction of an awkward moment.

I tried to miss the mess George left, but the slit in my skirt wasn't high enough for my legs to hurdle it. I left my imprint on a cotton button-down in a hue of blue.

I'll sleep on the couch. You can sleep in here. George's head tilted to the His bedroom. My eyes followed his lead. *Bed's made King size Organized Suite tree Blazer Tie Uniform Dick tag* I laughed at the tag and the fact that I was no math major but I knew there was no way he could fit on the settee in the living room. Even if he folded



himself up like an accordion, there was but enough room on its thick stripes for two ladies in pencil-cut skirts to sip tea.

I spit out a delightful combination of saliva wrapped loose around my words, Are ya kidding me? One third of you can't fit on that sofa. What are you going to do with the other two-thirds? I come from a big family, George. We can share the bed. It's okay.

When George tossed me a white T-shirt, my mind darted back to Bobby's house and our sleep-overs. *Same thing just all grown up* I giggled. There was no fear in that room that night.

The bathroom smelled of Crest when I added my own toothpaste to the mixture. I brushed away the parched spice of the nuclear fallout and replaced it with spearmint. It was dark in that cottage on the top of that hill. That's what happens when you're in a state molded by mountains. No silhouette, no tinge of light on any of George's facial points. No freckles in the dark. The two of us carried on like senseless drunks, repeating ourselves, laughing, asking each other questions to fill in the blanks when our gin and ale-flooded memories failed us. Did you see that guy's face when I said... My laughter came so fast it forced its way into George's sentence, cutting him off until his laughed bellowed over mine. The bed shook.

In a final sentence my lids slid shut. George rolled over, wrapping his swimmer's limbs around me. Nothing tensed. His lips met my neck, my cheek, my lips. *Please don't less this end Please don't stop Thank you God Oh thank you Time hold still Please don't go anywhere* The memory still tastes like the gooey warmth of chocolate chip cookies right out of the oven.

Two hours after George set the alarm, he released his hold on me. He slipped into his own sleep. Minutes before the alarm went off, George introduced me to my newest morning. He kissed me. And he didn't stop. I was twenty-five years, eight-months, and nineteen days old.

I slept on the flight home.

Fourteen days passed. All three hundred and thirty-six hours in those fourteen days passed. One at a time. The taste of the dried yellows and the wilting reds blew in the wind. I wanted to see that freckled guy from Pennsylvania. In those fourteen days, the phone didn't ring. The mailman didn't bring me an envelope or a card or a package or a pink slip with a hand-written address. After fourteen days, I reached out to George since he hadn't reach out to me.

I hunted for the perfect card. In four stores, a floral shop, and the gedunk in the office tower across the street from the Chamber. That's where I found it, at the gedunk, a blank card shaped like a fortune cookie. It was a dollar-thirty-seven. *I can write a fortune for him* I also found two single dollops of milk chocolate in clear plastic tied in a thin white ribbon. When I popped the top off, there wasn't a single scent that held court over the chocolates. I took a bite, the chocolate crumpled into thin jagged shreds that caught in my throat, gagging my reflexes. I tossed both in the trash and wrote George's fortune on a strip of paper. Pressed the crease with my nail, and stuffed it inside the cookie. I sealed the envelope with a kiss. Inside, George's fortune read, Someone out there wants to be your friend, they just don't know how.

The post office mark from Louisville was enough to know it was from me. And the spray of my Beautiful perfume with its reminiscing moments was enough to get a response. Two days later the phone rang. The clock on my nightstand beamed a red nine-o-one.

Good evening, Maggie. It's George. How ya doin'?

George. What a delight to hear from you. I'm doing great. Thanks for calling. How'r ya doing on this fine Wednesday evenin'?

There was no hesitation in his response. It was a natural flow that I would have had to rehearse for days. Doing well. I'm flying into Lexington this weekend to visit with my folks. If ya don't have any plans on Sunday, I thought I'd drive over to Louisville to spend the afternoon.

I could taste the freckles on each of his words, little jewels of southern pleasure. That'd be great. Do you have any specific plans for the day? What time do ya think you'll be arriving? How about if I plan something for lunch? Will that work for ya?

Sure. Lunch would be great.

I had a date with the world's most desirable man. *Oh my gosh, he likes me He's coming for lunch What'll I cook It's got to be good Holy shit George is drivin' into town* The day's sunshine tasted like yellow lollipops with green swirls of sweetness emanating from the centers.

At one o'clock George pulled his dad's car into the driveway. A glare bounced off the windshield, blinding my view of his face. Over the next nine months George called

me. I called George. He flew into town. He flew out of town. I flew up to Pittsburgh for Halloween. George dressed as a Girl Scout. I was his chocolate chip cookie. In December, I flew up for his company Christmas party. A foot of snow fell. The hall smelled of mulled wine. Orange citrus zinged past my nose; cloves and cinnamon met me at every introduction. By a lit tree I met a man who had two wives and two families in two different states. The sounds of chaos erupted in my head. Yet, no one seemed to be much bothered by him. The next week George flew into town for the Chamber's party. I hailed a cab to pick him up at the airport. George hopped in to a kiss and the magic of the juniper berry. He flew out the next morning.

He flew back in for New Year's Eve. Kyle and Lisa joined us for dinner and dancing on the Star's Midnight Moonlight Cruise. The final two songs of the night were slow. George and I made out through both while Kyle and Lisa managed to do their thing in the one bathroom on the boat. George flew out the next morning. Valentine's weekend he had to work. A bouquet of red artificial flowers arrived on the door step. So, you'll always have them, he said.

There was no delicate scent in the red silk. No way to pull my nose through the petals, to take in the purity of the velvet, the taste of love, or the essence of a natural beauty. Nothing to ignite my glands, to make me lust over him, or them, or anything else. The memory attached to that bouquet is the sound of the rain. It poured that day.

In March, we drove to Florida to listen to the ocean waves pound the beach. On our way down we kissed in every carwash at the end of every exit before we pulled into the driveway at George's grandmother's house. She lived two blocks from the beach.

Interspersed in the comings and goings, we spent time with his parents, sipping on gin and tonics, laughing. George and I were on vacation every time we got together. That's how it felt. My other time was spent reminiscing over the last visit we shared or planning and projecting onto the next one. I was emotionally unavailable; clueless that George's geographical unavailability made him appear to be the perfect man. The fact was, I didn't know what it was like to live in George's world, and he had no idea what it was like to live in mine. I didn't know what it was like to live in mine. I was always conjuring up other places with other people and conversations that never took place. All the time.

George and I spent the first Saturday in May at Churchill Downs betting on horses, sipping on mint julips and trying to stay warm. In the paddock, the steam floating from the dung froze in the air, quieting its stench. It was the one time in recorded history that frozen precipitation decorated the first Saturday in May. And we were there listening to the horseshoes as they scraped against the centuries-old bricks and pounded on the frozen track.

Because George had to fly when a seat was available, on Derby day that meant at fifteen minutes past post time. We left before the 115<sup>th</sup> Running of the Kentucky Derby, never heard the announcer claim Sunday Silence as winner.

At Gate 7B I cried. I didn't want George to leave. Wrapped in his arms, shivering, tears flowing, Flight 3228 to Pittsburgh was called, and I wanted to be George Garring's wife.

He kissed away my tears. His jaw was clenched, his face tense. I began the conversation in my head that George and I were moving toward marriage. I knew I would have to make sacrifices. I conjured up the belief that George would never make enough money for me to maintain the life my mother taught me to live. He loved me. Our parents were best friends. It would work. The Dick name tag would have to go. He could call himself Bob or Walter or Jerimiah. But not Dick. Our kiss goodbye tasted of mint and bourbon and bitter-cold ignorance.

A month later George flew into town for a four-hour dinner date. It started with a couple of glasses of white wine so we could saturate our palates with a sensual hello. The aromas in the house turned Italian. Onions and garlic sizzled on the stove - parsley, too. George broke the capellini in half, dropping in both handfuls. In the dining room the rosemary and basil on the grilled vegetables screamed out, Three-D celebration in here, guys. When my teeth excavated the red peppers, I could hear the crispy sound of hollowness. Bursts of sweet juicy red popped.

The distance between our visits was lengthening, forcing me out of the planning, out of the dreaming, out of the projecting, and into my own reality. I was lonely.

We were pushing the time, spending our last minutes in a forced calm and the last of our trailing words in an insignificant conversation. George's fork tapped his plate as he swirled his final strand of pasta around the tines. The sound hung like drops of acapella marking time. The garlic hung like an offense. I popped a mint in our mouths so I could pop George a kiss before we left the house. I loved kissing him. How I balanced on the tips of my toes, my heels extending up as far as they could reach so George didn't have to bend down as far as he could reach. I loved when he kissed me, how he devoured me in

his arms. I loved when my feet met the floor again, or the asphalt, the inside of an airport terminal, or the concrete in Box 121 at Churchill Downs, a warmth floated through me with an understanding among my cells that love was safe and sure and mine. I tucked the mint in the side of my cheek. The cool tantalizing spike saturated my words. George, I wish we could spend more time together. I don't get to see you enough. We used to spend every couple of weeks together, now it's every couple of months.

My sandals clipped along the bricks. We're always running and rushing. I want to spend time with you, so we can relax and not have to worry about getting you on a plane.

I pushed the mint back on my tongue.

I know it's not easy for ya. But, Dana, you've got... *Dana ...* to understand, I have to be at work. I don't have the same flexibility you do. *Dana Oh my God he's seeing someone else*

George kept talking. I was trying to think a million thoughts with a million solutions in a second. Things turned red. They felt red. They were hot and heavy and balls of black iron filled my passage-ways and I couldn't breathe and I couldn't think and I didn't know.

When the car doors closed, there was enough silence in the front seat to fill an empty arena. *Dana Who the fuck is Dana* I could taste her four letters in my mouth, choking on the n and the a's. The D was solid in front of my uvula, straddling my tonsils.

Her name ran like a ticker-tape machine through my ears. Battling it, my mind kept screaming, *I gotta get to the airport* I put the car in reverse, looked over my right shoulder ,and I knew, in that moment, I knew I had the perfect opportunity to ask George

one simple, little, critical, not-so-insignificant question. My eyes beamed in on his left eye. He was solid in his stature. I pierced his isolated pupil, Who's Dana?

I could see his face under the garage light. I could see him grow tense. I could see the day's stubble pushing through his pores as if all his energy was focused on holding everything else back. I did not get a response. In that mille-fraction of a second, I watched as he dug himself into a hole, one long fucking second after the next.

George, you just called me Dana.

No I did not. *Holy fucking shit He didn't move Nothing moved He's not moving He can't even look at me Oh my God he's fucking lying to me Why the fuck is he lying What the fuck does he think he's gonna cover up You deny it* His words were terse.

George, you just called me, Dana. After we left the house. On the sidewalk. You called me Dana. My mint was radiating heat. I flared my nostrils to ease the sting.

I did not. *You idiot Why are ya lying You're caught* I don't know any Danas. *Holy shit*

I was seething and spewing and boiling, ready to erupt with diarrhea I wanted to toss into his shit-filled diaper. *You're fucking lying to me What the hell do I do now*

I landed George at the curb right on time. He had four minutes to catch his flight. As usual, he called to let me know he arrived home. I didn't want to answer the phone. I wanted to punish him. To make him suffer. Like I was. I waited until the fourth ring.

Hello. My five letters whimpered out like ash flitting in the air.



At the end of the month a co-worker was driving up to Pittsburgh for the weekend. She needed a driving companion. I called George. He told me to come up. He missed me. He sounded ashamed and stupid and fucked-up. I arrived late on Friday. Saturday morning he professed his love. I wasn't anyone but Maggie. All weekend long.

Sunday George had to work a double shift. I was alone in his cottage waiting for my co-worker to return. As I sat, I fell deeper in love with the kid who lived across the street from me in Gainesville. My energy was building. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't control it. I had to feed the compulsion to it with George. My eyes locked on his desk. I pulled open the drawer. It slid with ease. *Oh good Post-its* I grabbed a pen so I could decorate his home with love. The first note was placed on his stereo. It read, I love this song and I love listening to it with you. Hit play and we can share this moment together.

On the top of that mountain there wasn't a sound. I stuck the second note on the cabinet over the dishwasher. Inside George kept the ingredients for Rattlesnakes: Kahlua, Cacao and Bailey's. As I wrote the note I thought of how thick the Baileys was, and how smooth it was going down, the tail of each of those tiered rattlesnakes. I wrote, I love the memories inside this cabinet but not as much as I love you.

Inside, I put a note on the Cacao, When these are layered in proportion, it is perfect. Thank you for harmonizing my life. I love you. The drips on the label were fresh.

In between the open spaces of the toaster, I smelled the softness of the morning's toast. I wrote the next note. This morning's toast was perfect, crispy on the crusts. The butter melted, and softened it for the eggs. It was sensational. I loved sharing it with you!

When I popped open the freezer, the air turned white. I put a yellow note on the deer meat. Cooking this beast with you was a delightful experience. Thank you for introducing me to its sweetness. I love you with all my heart. As the motor whirled, I could hear George's voice, Yeah, it's the only meat I'm going to eat this winter.

Around the house I penned my love so he would know how crazy I was about him: the light switch, the toothbrush holder, the wall next to his bed. I ran out of Post-its. I broke the silence with my immature innocence, Shoot-a, I still have a degree of splatterin' ta do in this fine little establishment. I need to get my flavorful essence in every little nook and cranny of this here abode. I saturated my words in that divine southern accent that I worked so hard to lose when I started working at the Chamber.

*There's got to be something else in the desk I can use Index cards Scrap paper  
Something I just need a few more* Even in my thoughts, my accent was southern-drawl deep. A stack of photos met my eyes where the Post-it notes used to be. *What's this I didn't see these before Who's this Old photos Must be old Why's he holding onto 'em Doesn't use this desk often Huh How old are these* My eyes shot to the corner. They hovered in a mess of haze and a set of fuzzy red numbers, 02 14 1989. Reality punched me into pain. *Valentine's Day Valentine's Day He had to work Valentine's Day. Maggie I'm tryin' to help a friend out He's desperate to spend time with his wife I agreed to take his shifts so they can go to Florida for the weekend without the kids It's been a rough year for 'em I'm sorry babe I need to help my buddy* I remembered the call. The conversation. I remembered. *George you're a good friend I understand You're doin' the right thing We can spend Valentine's Day together next year* I looked at the image paying detail to every pixel in it. And every single space between them.

George was propped up on an elbow and a woman in a string bikini... *Bitch...*  
reclining on half of him. *Sand A towel An umbrella Flip flops Beer cans upside down in  
the sand A bag His bag His black bag that he took to the beach with us In March* I could  
hear their laughter in the frame, in the way their mouths held in a steady state of  
openness. *Who took the photo His timer He used his timer They're in love Dana This is  
Dana* I could smell the coconut oil. It was the same scent inside George's Trans Am. His  
body was slithering against hers. Dana didn't look anything like me. *No wonder he  
picked her over me She's got the perfect body*

I checked the fuzzy red letters again, 02 14 1989. *Valentine's Day. He called me  
at nine At nine I was in my bedroom Happy Valentine's Day sweetie Did you get the  
flowers I sent the silk so you'll always have them*

*Oh George they're beautiful Thank you so much I love them and I love you too I wish  
you were here so I could smother you with kisses I miss you so much How was your day*

*It's been light Everyone's happy today Tomorrow all hell is gonna break loose*

*Babe how many times were you called Dick today*

*Once But it was a compliment Not a complaint*

*Oh lucky you I wish I was there with you I could have made it a better day*

*Me to babe We'll be together soon*

*Do you have your schedule yet*

*Not yet*

I cried. The tears bubbling the images and the little red fuzzy numbers in each of their corners. Once the tears started there was nothing to stop them. I cried at the lie, at not knowing for how long George had two different lives. *Just like the pilot And Dana And who else Does everybody here live two fucking lives. What Did he ask his friends not to tell Dana about me at Halloween Did he ask Dana to be patient with me when I was up here in her territory attending their company Christmas party I bet he made up a story about an old friend coming through town Did he tell Dana the good son was visiting his parents when he was visiting me*

I left the notes where I posted them. And the photos, all twenty-four, strewn across his bed. *I fucking hope it was worth it*

The horn honked. I picked up my bag, pulled the door closed. The trail of yellow squares told a story that wasn't real any more, but I wanted him to know what he lost. Down the stone steps, the rambling roses reached out to me, caressing my memory maker with a scent of delicacy and a reminder that for every rose there are a dozen thorns.

The drive back to Louisville was two interstates of puffy eyes. After three days of numb, I bought a blank card with a pretty picture on the front. Pastels. A girl in a garden. A basket in one hand. Picking flowers with the other. The flowers in the basket were raised. It was ninety-eight cents at the same gedunk where I bought the fortune cookie. Inside its white blankness, I wrote, I have loved you with all my heart and I will continue to do so. Thank you for igniting the love within me. I shall look for you in heaven. Until then, may your life and your love be filled with the joys in which you filled mine.

I signed it, As Always, Maggie.

Eighteen days later I filled my pockets with my life savings. Some bills were crumpled. Others rolled up. I spread my bounty over a display case down at Davis Jewelers. It was a pathetic lot of aged, and rumped, and unspent potential. Worthless, as it was. Under the glass, the facets on the diamond wedding sets were shooting rays of beauty and magic and dreams, and hope. All things I left in Pittsburgh.

I told Hank, I wanted to purchase an amethyst ring, Something big, the most beautiful one you have. I'd like a cushion cut for the center stone, diamonds inset on the band, in a channel, and the cage to be ornate like an antique ring. Opulent, Hank. That's what I want. Opulence and beauty and richness and nothing gaudy. Do you have a piece of paper and a pencil? I'll show you exactly what I want.

Twenty-three days later I spread my fingers over the display case. Exactly what I wanted was slid over the fresh coat of red that glossed my nail. Exactly what I wanted slid down the length of my finger stirring up the lavender oil I massaged in my knuckles. Exactly what I wanted rested at the end of my ring finger on my left hand. *This is my constant reminder that we are all replaceable*

And I was.

George taught me that.

## CURRICULUM VITA

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University of Louisville  
2013-2015

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PUBLICATIONS: Editor/Publisher, Kentucky Engineer, 1991-1993  
This I Believe, LEO, March 7, 2007  
This Believe, National Library of Congress, 2007  
Story Corps, National Library of Congress, 2008

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St. Francis High School, Art Instruction, 2011-2012  
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