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Essays in which, For The Most Part, a Militant Nerd Has Fun

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Essays in which, For The Most Part, a Militant Nerd Has Fun

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Film, Theater, and Communication Arts

By

Erin Grauel

B.A. Coastal Carolina University, 2007

May 2011

For Mom, Nan, Mandy, Megan, Dorothy Zbornak, Julia Sugarbaker, Jesse Spano, and all of the
strong women in my life.

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Preface to Justify a Thesis in Which the Author Writes Essays about Herself

"You should never read just for 'enjoyment.' Read to make yourself smarter! Less judgmental. More apt to understand your friends' insane behavior, or better yet, your own." - John Waters

"The essayist, like his friend the hangman, is expected to apologize for his profession even as he practices it." -Adam Gopnik

I took my first class in creative nonfiction as an undergraduate. My professor had borderline personality disorder and was a lesbian-feminist. She told us this within the first week. I thought she was amazing, not only because she loved to share intimate details of her life—she proclaimed the phrase “too much information” to be an act of violence—but because she did all of this in a small Southern town, at a small Southern university. Adding to her cachet was the fact that she took our class to bars and bought us drinks. The first time we went to the bar next to campus, I ordered what she ordered, whiskey on the rocks, and grimaced my way through the glass. I had never drunk whiskey without a mixer before and didn’t really have a taste for the stuff, but I wanted the professor to like me. Liking the same drink might be a conversation starter, I reasoned. Three whiskeys later she had somehow convinced me to read my work out loud, in front of classmates, in the middle of a bar.

This was our professor’s trick. She became our friend, acted interested in our comings and goings, and, in exchange, forced us to read our work to one another constantly. She confronted me one day before class and said, “I know you have this whole shy act going, but you have to read your amazing writing out loud.” I blushed and figured the compliment was just an enticement to share. Our whole class turned into a little community of wannabe writers who

shared intimate details of our lives that not even our best friends knew. When I look back on that time and all the sharing we did, it makes me a little queasy. I come from a family where “feelings” is a bad word. One of my mom’s favorite songs to sing to me or my sisters when we decide to get emotional about something is Melissa Manchester’s “Don’t Cry Out Loud.” So I was used to doing what Manchester demanded, “keep it inside, learn how to hide your feelings.” Despite cringing now at some of my over-shares (did they really need to know about the time I puked in my girlfriend’s bed?) I still recognize the era of my crazy professor as a great one. No topic was off-limits. The more personal the better. It was the first time in my life that I came out publicly to a class of my peers. The professor had read aloud excerpts of her own work in which she discussed an intense affair she was having. Her personal revelation brought out mine. And so it went in the class, one over-share following another.

To further our exercises in reckless self-exposure, our professor took us to hear an author named Michelle Tea read in front of a small crowd of about twenty. Tea had long hair swept into a messy ponytail, librarian glasses, and was more comfortable in her own skin than I could ever dream of being in mine. She looked everyone in the audience in the eye as she related stories of working for Sister Spit, a lesbian feminist performance art troupe. I remember getting anxious at just the thought of performing radical poetry in front of a crowd. Tea then read an excerpt from a novel she was working on. The scene involved a teenaged girl pulling a tampon out of her vag and throwing it at a boy. Of course, I had no choice but to love this woman—a woman who wrote whatever she thought was funny or exciting, without care for other people’s opinions. Tea seemed to feed off any cringes from her audience.

After the reading, a few of us went with the professor to a local Mexican restaurant where we treated ourselves to more beer than burritos. I remember her bursting with an electric energy

that night, moving us from one topic to the next. She talked about Michelle Tea and the rawness of her writing, but also its beauty. When I later read Tea's memoir *Rent Girl*, it reminded me of that night and of that time, the time when I let myself come out in life and on paper. I remembered how dangerous it felt to hang out with my professor, a woman of fierce and ever-changing feelings. I also remembered how much drinking I had to do to feel even a little bit comfortable sharing so much. *Rent Girl* seemed to validate that time in my life. As Tea said of her own youth, "I wanted to try things, everything, especially things that are illegal and have a faint whiff of glamour." I write nothing like Michelle Tea because I am not as cool as she is, but she is the kind of person who reminds me that it is okay to write what I write. In her experiences I saw my own, and that is what I find important and useful about writing.

In the course of completing this thesis, many fascinating events have occurred in the world. Scientific discoveries, medical breakthroughs, deaths, hurricanes, oil spills, elections, resignations. Birds have fallen inexplicably from the sky, and wars have started and stopped. I have not written about any of those things. Instead, I have written about myself. I'm told I should feel like a hack for doing so. During my three years in an MFA program, several people have told me that nonfiction is easy and that the people who write it are self-obsessed. These people usually write fiction although once it was a fellow nonfiction student who only wrote research-based essays and hated reading about other people's lives. I'm neither the first person, nor probably the last who will have heard the sentiment that nonfiction is artless or self-indulgent. Or that people in non-fiction just take stuff that happened to them and throw a moral on at the end.

When I hear people say things like this, my first reaction is usually is to avert my eyes, more or less my first reaction to any confrontation. It's only later that I allow myself to think

about the implications of those canards. I, myself, like to read everything I can get my hands on. I read the “literary” nonfiction that’s printed in esoteric journals and I read best-sellers. (Oh, the horror!) I can honestly say I enjoy both, because both take real life events that happened to someone else, and convince readers that they are part of that picture. Both types push me to be a better writer and a better reader. When I have a visceral, reaction to a Michelle Tea quote, it is just as important as the intellectual reaction I might have to an essay by Susan Orlean about Midland, Texas. When I sit down to write, the literary stuff usually does not come out of me, and I’ve learned to be okay with that.

I have friends who, after a few cocktails, like to make bold, definitive statements. All female drummers are terrible. All Republicans are rich old white men, or the obedient children and wives of rich old white men. Macs are far superior to PCs. Of all the breads, corn bread is the best. Whenever they make statements like these, I might nod or smile, but often it sends my brain off on a wandering tangent. I don’t know much about drummers, but I’m sure there is a female out there who can keep a beat. I knew a Korean Republican once who actually believed we could keep severely low taxes and limited government because people would willingly give their money to charities and to fix roads. How can Macs be better if nobody can afford them? All bread is delicious; how can a person possibly place one, even one, single crumb of bread over another on the deliciousness scale? This is why, when someone proclaims that fiction has more value, or that nonfiction is only interesting or smart if it’s not about the author writing it, I often lose the capacity for words.

I write what I write because Alison Bechdel and David Sedaris showed me I could. I saw myself in Sedaris’ neuroticism, in his crazy yet close family, in his sense of humor, and in his exaggerations of mundane events. I laugh out loud in public at a Sedaris passage, and I want to

figure out how to make people do the same thing when they read my writing. Allison Bechdel's *Fun Home* impressed me with its intelligence. It could be just another coming-of-age story, a coming-to-terms-with-sexuality memoir. But it's not. The well-read Bechdel makes reference to everyone from the creator of the Addams' Family and Claudette Colbert to Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald. She took her family's story and made it a universal human story. *Fun Home* is poignant and funny and smart, and it's something I want to emulate. For Saul Bellow, that was the very definition of a writer, a reader moved to emulation. When I read authors who write about themselves, I sometimes see myself, and with that recognition often comes validation. My experiences are not so bad after all because someone else has gone through them. I owe my readers the same favor. I write in the hope that they'll see themselves too.

I write what I write because when I was first coming to terms with the fact that I was a nerd and always would be, and also with the secondary fact that I was a lesbian and always would be, facing the stigma of otherness was kind of jarring for me. I didn't want to define myself as the "other," yet I found that my desire to read all day and date girls (if I could find a girl to date who didn't mind my reading all day) did make for "otherness." My coming of age involved realizing how much fun it is to be on the outside looking in. How much less pressure there is in just doing what makes you happy and not worrying about other people. So that's why I write what I write. Because it's what comes out of me naturally. Because it is more fun, but also because it was through writing that I came to see it was okay to be who I am, and it was okay for my friends to be who they are.

Really, in the end, I write about myself because that is the kind of writing I'm best at, and to justify it on more intellectual terms would be a stretch, if not a lie. So here is a collection of factual stories about me, and what a doofus I can be. About my coming to terms with my

awkward personality. About coming to terms with growing up. About coming to terms with the time I threw up on someone's front yard without my pants on. About the time I finally broke off a bad relationship, but not without dragging it into the middle of a street party on Mardi Gras. About the time I faced down several fears at once when I agreed to go surfing in the middle of a tropical storm with a dude I didn't know that well. In my more confident moments, I'm pretty sure you'll enjoy this collection. Maybe you'll even recognize your own inner doofus. We all have one. I know that because I read it in an essay.

Overdressed

Rock Hill, South Carolina, is a small university town about twenty minutes from Charlotte, North Carolina. It looks like most university towns. Strip malls and fast food joints give way to an older section of town replete with oak trees and historic houses. In the midst of the commerce and the trees sprawls Winthrop University, a public liberal arts university, just like any other public liberal arts university (no matter what the website says). I could have gone to the liberal arts college just down the road from my house in Myrtle Beach. Instead I decided to go to this much more expensive school because it appeared to have better credentials and because it appeared somehow nicer, somehow more important than my hometown university. Like most kids just out of high school, I expected college would change my life, and so I picked the school as far away from my old life as I could get.

There wasn't a whole lot to do in Rock Hill when I went there for college in 2002, and I expect it hasn't changed much since then. On weekends, my classmates and I abandoned the school to drive to towns with more to do. This meant that I spent my weekends three hours away from Winthrop in Myrtle Beach wondering if I shouldn't have gone to school there after all. For whatever reason, the idea of transferring schools made me feel like a quitter. Like I couldn't hack it at the "better" school. So I stayed. If my friends and I couldn't scrounge up enough money to leave Rock Hill, weekend activities included: drinking in someone's dorm, driving around back roads smoking pot, going to house parties, and driving around back roads smoking pot. It sounds carefree and maybe, kind of fun, but I had been doing those things since high

school. I was bored with college and ashamed that, having moved away from home to this over-priced institution, I wasn't having the "time of my life."

By the middle of the fall semester sophomore year, I had gone through my summer job savings so I got a job at a coffee shop in the local mall. Dimly lit and dingy, the mall was anchored by a Sears and a store that sold Halloween costumes and Christmas ornaments depending on the season. Nobody went to the mall unless they were in dire need of cheap shoes, or tires, or decorations. The coffee shop was called Café Olé, but because the local customers were so scornful of having to say foreign words when ordering their coffee ("Ventee? What the hell is Ventee? Listen, sweetheart, I just want a medium"), I liked to think of it as Café Ole. Café Ole was owned by the same people who ran the pizza place in the food court. A father and twin sons of Italian descent who had come from New Jersey to seek their fortune selling pizza and coffee in small-town South Carolina. All three men sounded like characters from the TV show, *The Sopranos*, and they had a brisk manner that was a bit off-putting to the slow-paced Southerners they served. It was also a bit off-putting to me, their English major coffee shop employee.

The Father, a short man with slippery black hair, loved to barge into the café to find me idle behind the counter reading from an anthology and not making small talk with the one or two customers who may have wandered in.

"Hey, Erin, how we doin', huh? How are we on Tiramisus? Have you even checked the fridge today?"

I always felt ashamed when The Father caught me sitting around doing nothing, even when there was absolutely nothing to do. My dad and mom, a carpenter and a house painter respectively, instilled in me a toil-until-you-die work ethic. I found myself clutching a dirty rag

at all times just so I would have something to swipe across the counter in case The Father or one of his sons dropped by to check up on me.

I worked with another girl who already had an English degree from my university. She was still working at the coffee shop with no prospects of getting a “real” job. The local community college wouldn’t even hire her to teach Intro to Writing because they said the older students wouldn’t respect a twenty-something professor. This made the coffee shop job all the more depressing.

Like most English majors, I had no idea what I would be doing with my degree once I graduated. I wasn’t even sure I wanted an English degree anymore. I didn’t like any of the literature we were assigned to read and was making C’s on my essays, which my professors knew were bullshit written by someone who had only read the SparkNotes. My creative writing classes were the only ones that I cared about, but writing for fun didn’t seem like a career option. I would be selling coffee-flavored sugar water to mall walkers forever.

My status as a bad employee did not deter the twin sons from hanging out in the shop after it closed to watch me mop the floors. They were compact like their father and both had shiny bald heads and thick dark eyebrows. Vinnie was the nicer of the two brothers, though I would be hard pressed to call either of them nice. Joey just went more out of his way to be mean. He would narrow his eyes at me as I slid an ancient, diseased mop across the linoleum floor.

“You call that a mop job? Look at all tha spots ya missing, girl. Ya gotta pull tha tables out ta get ta all tha cornas.”

Vinnie would always come to my defense.

“Leave her alone, Joey. She’s a college girl. She don’t know nothin’ ’bout workin’.”

That made me cringe. I hated to be stereotyped as some privileged college student. I was going into debt for this damned degree. My parents were back at home, working sixty hours a week, living in a double-wide, and putting a hundred bucks in my bank account when they could. I was blue collar and had been working since I was old enough to use a broom. I didn't feel like proving that to these guys, though. I might be blue collar, but as a college student, I was also kind of lazy. I didn't want to have to work any harder at this job than necessary. When the boys would start in with the privileged college student crap, I would smile enigmatically and start planning what kind of beer I would buy with my pay check.

I figured the boys just hung out to make fun of their employees, but my married co-worker Amy insisted it was because they had a crush on me: "They never came in here when it was just me closing the shop." I didn't believe her until one day, during a lull in customers, Vinnie wandered over from the pizza shop and asked for a cup of coffee and a date. At nineteen, I was unable to say no to anyone, and probably still am at twenty-six—regardless of how bleak the request. So, rather than think up an excuse or just plain turn him down, I agreed to go out with him that Friday night.

It's worth mentioning that at this point in my life, I was a cluelessly closeted lesbian. I knew I had an unhealthy affection for Jess, my best friend and dorm mate, and that I often fantasized about going over to her bunk in the middle of the night and making out with her. I also knew that, despite having had several boyfriends whom I had many things in common with and felt great affection for (including one suitor in high school who chartered an airplane on Valentine's Day to fly me over the Atlantic Ocean), I had yet to fall in love.

But that didn't make me a lesbian did it? Of course not. I was just confused, or hadn't met the right guy yet, or was bi-sexual, or something. I knew Vinnie would not be the right guy,

but I also knew that I needed to start dating a little bit more, lest all the girls—who were supposed to be my friends, but with whom I flirted constantly—started to suspect I was, “A Gay.” As if they didn’t already. Jess was very excited to hear I had a date, probably because I was starting to get a bit clingy with her. Especially when her long distance boyfriend would come into town and I would sulk until he left and I could have her all to myself again.

Jess asked me what I planned to wear.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure where we’re going.”

“Well, you have to dress nice,” Jess insisted.

“What do you mean, nice?” I asked. “Can’t I wear jeans and a clean T-shirt?”

Jess sighed and went to get our suitemates. “Erin has a date. Do you guys have any clothes she could fit in? She’s thinking about wearing jeans and a T-shirt.”

“A nice T-shirt,” I mumbled.

Eyes rolled.

“I don’t even know where he plans on taking me. He just said we would ‘hang out’, whatever that means. What if he ends up just taking me to Jack in the Box, or worse, to Café Ole? I’m going to feel silly all dressed up.”

“Then that’s his fault for being an ass. You won’t feel silly,” Jess said, ending the argument.

My suitemates were both a bit smaller than me, but they insisted I could wear their clothes. They put me in a shirt that was too snug for my liking and showed off way more cleavage than I was comfortable with. It was mermaid blue and made of some sort of sparkly spandex/polyester/toxic chemical combination. Then they gave me stretchy black pants and told me I couldn’t wear flip flops with them. Thankfully, my big lesbian feet wouldn’t fit into any of

their dainty little shoes and the flip flops won out. The girls kept telling me to quit pulling at my shirt and to suck in my gut. I tried to feel comfortable in the outfit. I wanted a normal date.

Vinnie picked me up in front of my dorm, and as I walked to the passenger seat of his car, I saw his eyes through the windshield widen. I hoped it was just because my outfit was so different from the jeans and espresso-stained polo shirt I wore at the coffee shop. As I climbed into his Geo Tracker, he said, “You look nice. I feel bad. We’re just going to my house to watch some wrestling with the family. You’re overdressed.” Heat flushed my face, but I sort of giggled and hoped he would think maybe I just always dressed like a sausage in flip flops when I wasn’t at work. Watching wrestling while wearing clubbin’ clothes (as my suitemates called them) was not exactly the “normal date” scenario I had imagined

Because of my weekend activities, I was used to driving the back roads of Rock Hill, but after a few minutes with Vinnie at the wheel, I started to get nervous. We were travelling farther than I ever had before and making turns on roads I didn’t know even existed.

“So where do you live?” I asked, realizing I really didn’t know all that much about this guy either.

“Oh, way out here in the middle of nowhere,” he said. Then he turned his stereo up real loud. He had installed a light show which flashed neon red, green, and purple lights on the dash and floor boards in sync with the music. I texted my roommate. *Going to the middle of nowhere, listening to techno music, will probably lose signal soon. Call police.* She texted back, *shut up and have a good time.* Then I lost all signal. Twenty minutes of dark roads later, Vinnie interrupted my complex fantasy plans of escape and abruptly hooked a right into a dark driveway. He turned the music down as we pulled in front of a double-wide trailer with an old

above-ground pool hunched in front of it. “We have a lot of fun in that pull in tha summa, man. You’ll have to come out and party with us.”

“That sounds like fun.” I mumbled. I didn’t think I’d actually have enough attitude to fit in with Vinnie and his family. But the pool party part sounded nice.

We walked in the house, which Vinnie shared with Joey and their older brother Christopher. Christopher got up out of his easy chair as we walked in and introduced himself. He gave me a firm handshake and lingering eye contact which, always makes me feel a little uncomfortable. But what made me really uncomfortable about Christopher was the fact that his balls were about to drop from the bottom of his very short athletic shorts. His upper body was also freakishly larger than his lower body. I’m going to go ahead and guess the man was no stranger to the business end of a syringe full of steroids. He was a greasy gorilla in short shorts is what he was. Also, he was a dead ringer for Joey Buttafuoco. But I don’t want to judge the man based solely on his appearance. He also giggled after I shook his hand and said, “Jesus, Vinnie, didn’t ya tell tha girl we was just watching wrestling? She’s dressed to go shake her booty in a club or sumpin.”

“I’m guessing you don’t want a beer, darling,” Christopher said. I guess he was trying to be hospitable by non-offering me a beer.

“I’d love one,” I snapped, glancing around at the trailer which was decorated a la 1980’s cokehead bachelor: all black leather, glass, and gold-rimmed mirrors.

“Well all right then, how about a Smirnoff Ice? We got raspberry or apple.”

I was about to ask if they had regular beer to drink, but then I noticed that Christopher and Joey were both drinking the Smirnoff version. I told myself that this was a new life

experience. That sitting in a trailer drinking sweet malted beverages with the low-rent cast of The Sopranos was what college was all about. “Yes, I’d love one.”

I sat at one end of the couch with Vinnie beside me and Joey at the other end. The wrestling was turned on, and we all stared at the TV as sweaty be-spandexed men began mugging at the camera.

“I didn’t think you drank.” Joey spoke for the first time from his place on the couch.

“Yeah,” I said, smiling a little too widely, “I like to drink.” They all laughed at this. I wasn’t sure why.

Then Joey looked to Vinnie and chastised him once again, “Didn’t ya tell Erin we was just going to watch wrestling?”

Vinnie laughed, “Dude, I know. I feel bad. I thought I made it clear we were just going to be hanging out. She’s overdressed right?”

Had I known it would be short athletic shorts night, I would have adjusted my attire appropriately. I blushed as the three of them looked over at me expecting an explanation for my odd appearance. “Oh, I wasn’t sure what we would be doing,” I sputtered. And then, “My roommates dressed me.”

That sent the room into silence. On the screen, a man shining with sweat and lube, dressed in a tight red Speedo with knee high boots, leapt from the ropes on top of another man equally lubed and spandexed. When a third wrestler came flying into the ring with a folding chair, Christopher added to the nonversation. “You don’t talk much, do you, Erin?”

“Ah, I guess not,” I said, then offered a giggle. I felt bad for not being more entertaining. I considered what a normal girl, a more assertive-type girl, might do in this situation. A normal girl wouldn’t be here in the first place because she would have been able to say no to the very

idea of a date with Vinnie. I noticed that Joey and Christopher were watching Vinnie's every move, probably so they could make fun of him later. On screen, a man feigned fear, with bulging eyes and creased forehead, as the lights dimmed and another man with black hair and black face paint walked from a tunnel. The "scared" dude tried to run but was too slow, and the Goth dude got him with a blow to the head. Twenty minutes and three nervously chugged Smirnoffs later I was still just as uncomfortable as when I walked in the door. My bladder had started to ache, but I knew as soon as I stood up all three of them would stare at me as I walked to the bathroom. I waited until the dark-haired wrestler lifted the fairer wrestler into a pile driver, then I stood, hoping the boys would be distracted by the fight between good and evil. "Bathroom's down the hall, darling." Christopher commented. I felt all three sets of eyes burning into my ass as I walked to the hall. I swore I could smell the testosterone in the house.

In the bathroom I checked to see if I had signal on my phone. I had one bar so I tried to text Jess again. *Help. In the middle of nowhere with three boys. One's balls are hanging out. I'm scared.* The message wouldn't go through. On the way back to the living room, I grabbed another round of Smirnoffs from the fridge for everybody.

That's when Christopher decided to take control of the conversation. He asked the question every English major hates.

"So you go to school, huh, Erin? What you gonna do when you graduate?"

"Eh, I don't know," I said with a shrug.

"Degrees are a dime a dozen nowadays. No point in going to college anymore. It's just a waste of money, if you ask me."

I didn't argue. I could have been back at home working for my parents. I could study English on my own. I didn't need to be in this awful town with these awful people. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"You know, he said, narrowing his eyes at me, a slight smile curving up from his lips, "Vinnie here used to be a cockslinger."

Here is where my English education came in handy. I might not know exactly what a cockslinger was, but I could certainly get a good visual in my head by combining cock (slang, vulgar, noun: Penis) with Slinger (one who slings. Sling: to throw cast, or hurl.) He was a penis thrower is what he was. I looked over at Vinnie, making eye contact with him for probably the first time all night. He laughed surprised. "Thanks a lot, Christopher."

Christopher laughed the laugh you hear old men at a bar give when they've just said something dirty to the waitress. "Yeah, I used to sling the cock around too. We made good money. Spent it all on blow though."

Vinnie shook his head and stared at his lap. At his unslung cock. "Shut up, would ya, Christopher; she doesn't want to hear all this."

Actually, she did. "So um, what exactly does a cock slinger, um, do?" I asked.

Now Joey laughed, "Hahaha she thinks y'all were gigolos. They were strippas, sweetheart."

I thought only gay men did that. I didn't say it out loud.

"Oh, that's funny," is what I did say, without laughing or indicating that it was funny in any real way. I was too distracted with planning how I would tell this story to my roommates when I got back to the dorm. Would I drop the cockslinger bomb as soon as I walked in? No, I

should let it build. The scary road, the light show in the car, the trailer, the balls, the Smirnoff Ice, the wrestling, the cockslinging. “Worst Date Ever,” I could proclaim.

When the wrestling was finally over, Vinnie took me home. He didn’t try to make small talk with me at all, and just let the light show work its magic the whole way. At the dorm parking lot I thanked him for a fun night. He apologized for the wardrobe confusion. I told him not to worry about it and leapt from the car before he could lean over for a kiss. Jess was already asleep when I got to the room, and I didn’t bother waking her up.

Without the lights on, I peeled off the mermaid shirt and black pants and pulled on a pair of flannel pajama pants and a roomy threadbare shirt, exhaling with comfort once redressed. I pulled a beer from the mini-fridge and drank it in the dark on my bed, letting it wash away the lingering taste of the Smirnoff Ice. I wondered if Jess was just pretending to be asleep. I complained to her a lot. Depended on her to listen to my constant worries, and woes. What should I do with my degree? Am I absolutely the ugliest person on the planet? Am I normal enough? She was probably growing weary of being a counselor to someone with such broad, existential questions, without collecting a hundred-dollar-an-hour fee.

I wanted to drop out of school and go home. I wanted to know what the hell I was doing. What my purpose was and all that crap. I wanted to go over to her bed. I wanted to kiss her and have her kiss me back. Sitting in the dark, drinking alone, didn’t seem like the ideal college experience. I grabbed my laptop and went into the hallway, slumping down against the cool brick wall. The flashing cursor began to make its way across the screen, and the night and my feelings went into a file to be saved for later.

Street Party

I could have just gotten out of the car and walked away. Right? Let my girlfriend, Kristen, deal with it. That's what I had her for, wasn't it? To foist embarrassing situations off on, because she could handle them better. I told her we should ride bikes in the first place. But, no, she wanted to bring camp chairs and a cooler of beer.

"We have to take the car," she said.

"We can't carry all this stuff," she said.

"Don't you think Delaney will have chairs and a refrigerator at her house?"

That's what I said but, no, nobody listened to me.

It was late in the New Orleans Carnival season—the two weeks of parades and partying that precede the big Fat Tuesday blowout. Rather than spend my Saturday pedaling happily through the Mid-City streets, waving at all the families preparing for the gigantic Endymion parade, I was stranded in a car smack dab in the middle of the parade route down on Orleans Avenue, a throng of furious party-goers leering at me through the window. It's a scary feeling to be stuck on a road with a band on a huge stage a hundred yards ahead. It reminds you that you may have taken a wrong turn. Stages are not supposed to be on roads. The street party stretched for dozens of blocks. People had kegs set up in their yards and on the neutral ground (For you non-New Orleanians, a neutral ground is what we call a median strip.) More enterprising folks had placed rented Porta-Potties in their yards and charged a buck for passing drunks to do their business. Somehow, my girlfriend and I had missed a barricade and driven our car into the middle of a street party waiting for the parade. And people were *pissed*.

We didn't come down this road on purpose, but no one seemed to care about that. We had intended to drive up City Park Avenue (parallel to Orleans and a block east of it) and then watch the parade when it got close to Delaney's house. But for some reason, Kristen decided she knew a shortcut. I told her our original route was a shortcut and that she was just being silly and needed to go the way I said. She said I was mumbling and she didn't hear my original directions. And anyway, she knew a better way. When we got to thong-choked Orleans, a broad avenue with a large neutral ground, the crowd filled in behind us and there was no turning back. We decided to plow forward to the far side of Orleans and then just get the hell away from the partiers, the parade route, and the whole Carnival crush. No such luck. A helpful citizen standing in the neutral ground wouldn't let us cross. He told us to take a right onto Orleans. I guess he wanted to see us turn a few people into hood ornaments. I don't know why we listened to that evil, evil man. Or, more correctly, why Kristen listened.

Increasingly, Kristen and I had been having our best fights in the car. I nit-picked, faulting her every driving choice. I was convinced she was driving like a sixteen-year-old who just got a license merely to piss me off. She, in turn, would whine about how mean I was to her. Always one to keep arguments on a lofty and rational plane, I would declare her an even bigger bitch than me. And then the gloves would really come off. Eventually one of us would get tired of being mad and offer a backhanded apology along these lines: "Just quit being dumb and admit I was right all along." And somehow, amid smiles, and apologies, the awkward, angry moment would end.

As we pushed through the party on Orleans, I told Kristen to hurry up and make a right onto one of the side streets (probably her plan all along) but they were all blocked off by cops or choked with cars trying to avoid exactly the situation we were in. I redirected my annoyance

away from Kristen and onto the city we shared, wondering for the thousandth time why New Orleans never has proper signage. I mean, just an orange cone or two. Or maybe even a simple sign to say, “Hey, we’re having a fucking block party, don’t bring your car down here.” For awhile we inched along at a pace the speedometer couldn’t even register; then we were forced to a complete halt by the gathering crowd. A soccer mom with frizzy blond hair and a red plastic visor motioned for Kristen to roll down her window.

“What the fuck is your problem,” the woman yelled. “You should know better! What are you doing! What is this, your first Mardi Gras?”

The diplomatic response would have been, “As a matter of fact, ma’am, it is. We just moved to your fair city and know nothing of your get-drunk-and-start-swearing-like-a-sailor street-party traditions; do you think you could help us out of this mess?” Instead Kristen yelled, “Do you think I did this on purpose, you asshole?” And then rolled up the window.

Usually when Kristen reacted in a volatile way (like cussing out the hostess of a restaurant we were trying to find for giving her bad directions over the phone), I would wonder once more how we had managed to stay together for three years. Then I would feel guilty for expecting her to react to things in the same way I did. Then I would scold her some more for not being able to contain her temper. Most of the time, after a few minutes, she would apologize. Sometimes she was really good at sincere-sounding apologies—the kind of apologies that admit fault without offering excuses or reasons. Sometimes the apologies made me even angrier because they meant she had won. I looked at Kristen now, not to scold her but because I was starting to get scared. She stared straight ahead. Everyone was giving us dirty looks. Balding men in Hawaiian shirts, frat guys in flip flops, grandmothers, soccer moms, kids with bowl cuts.

My face turned a bright, splotchy red, and I could feel the heat radiating from it.

“Oh, shit, this sucks,” I offered.

Kristen gripped the wheel with both hands. “I’m just going to go slow and get through this. Why won’t people just move so I can get out of here?”

Instead the crowd got thicker and made no effort whatsoever to step out of our way. Some people slapped our car with the palms of their hands or pushed at Kristen’s door as they yelled, “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” In my mind I saw flashes of riot footage, the kind where people rock cars until they flip over, then set them on fire.

I tried sticking my face close to the window and mouthing, “We’re just trying to get by.” But the angry party-goers didn’t seem to notice. As a neurotically shy person, for me this was doubly a torture. Getting peoples’ attention was hard enough on me. But then to be totally ignored, especially in such an embarrassing circumstance, made me wish I could puddle onto the floorboards. I looked for a stop sign or any indications of an escape route from this hell but saw nothing but people and beer. Most of the crowd was loud and laughing, mocking us as they milled around as close to our car as possible. They all held the sly grin people get when they see a drunk person trip or fall off of a bar stool. It’s the, I’m-so-glad-it’s-you-and-not-me grin. Every free hand was carrying a drink. Surprisingly, it was the middle-aged women who were the most vocal and aggressive. One of them pushed her stroller in front of the car and then snatched it back, screaming:

“My baby! You almost hit my baby!”

Now Kristen was frantic, talking to herself, half to the milling throng who couldn’t hear her through the rolled up windows:

“What am I supposed to do? What do you want me to do?”

I didn't dare say anything to her. She was irrational enough already. I knew whatever plan she came up with would either be really good or really bad and that my input would not affect her going forward with it either way. I didn't want her to get out of the car because I was afraid of what the people might do. I didn't think they would actually attack us, but they were making it extremely clear that we were no longer humans and were instead some sort of idiotic car-driving species of ape. They had progressed from mean looks, to mean words, and I was afraid of what the next progression might be when—Kristen threw the car into park, opened the door and got out. I figured she would just start punching people like a rock'em sock'em robot, but I was wrong. She didn't look back at me as she stomped off into the crowd and nobody said anything to her as she passed. I was relieved for a second. I stared ahead into the crowd trying not to let my eyes focus on any one person. All I could think was, "Omigod, omigod, omigod." The air in the car was hot and stale, but I wasn't about to open the window. I picked at the skin on my thumbs and stared up through the windshield at the sky, wishing I could just fall asleep and wake up when we were out of here. I had had enough of the drama.

A teenaged boy with shaggy hair approached the car and had to fold in my side-view mirror to get past because the crowd had pushed so close to the car. He smiled in at me as he shuffled by in a manner that said, "Oh, man, you're dumb." A family standing on the curb holding red Solo cups scowled and pointed in my direction. Two college guys peered in the back window at our cooler, not realizing I was sitting in the car. It occurred to me that this situation would have to end. I didn't know how it would end, but it would have to end. I couldn't sit in this car forever.

Kristen came back through the crowd, no smile or look of relief on her face, and got back in. I looked at her expectantly.

“Well?”

“I just asked a fucking cop if he could please come help me, and he said it wasn’t his problem, and I just needed to deal with it.”

“What?”

“He said it wasn’t his problem, and I was just going to have to figure it out.”

“What?”

“I know. I said, ‘Can’t you just guide me out of here, people are hitting my car and freaking out.’ And he still said that he couldn’t help me.”

Sometimes I refuse to go to the grocery store so I won’t have to make eye contact or small talk with the cashier. Being hungry is a better option than social interaction. Or I pay for gas with a credit card because I don’t want to go in the store and have to make small talk with the clerk. Or I sit with an empty drink because I don’t want to bug the surly bartender. Now I knew our only option was for me to get out of the car, look at all these irate jerks in the eye, and tell them to move out of the way.

“I guess I’ll just guide us,” I said.

“Are you sure? I can guide and you can drive,” Kristen responded.

I definitely didn’t want the responsibility of being behind the wheel. I took a deep breath, opened the door, and walked to the front of the car. It was actually a small two-door SUV that resembled a chunky teal turtle, but the way people were regarding it you’d think it was a monster truck with spikes coming out of the rims.

The Solo cup family had moseyed to the middle of the street right in front of the car.

“Can you please move?” I asked in my nicest I’m-about-to-panic voice.

They glared at me, but moved. As mean as people were being, they obviously enjoyed our being there. Otherwise they would have already parted and let us off their road. We were free entertainment. Whipping girls for all. I was a lady Moses, but rather than be the Red Sea waters that parted, the crowd was going to be the desert that kept me trapped for forty years. Not to be overdramatic about it.

Kristen inched forward.

Other families began to drift away from the car, pulling their chairs and babies out of the road so we could pass. I held my arm out and waved Kristen forward, hoping it would make me look more official. I felt like I should make announcements in an important sounding voice: “Nothing to see here folks, just driving through your street party on special street-party business.” Words were beyond me at this point though, so instead I just let my eyes glaze over and walked. I could see an open side street forty steps ahead. How could escape have been this close the whole time? Why didn’t anyone tell us that? People moved to the curb but still stayed close to the car so they could dramatically lift their arms as though to avoid getting “crushed” as Kristen snailed forward. They would stare at me as they held their arms aloft, as if to say, “Look at how much you’re inconveniencing my arms.” I heard another woman yelling about how close we came to her child. I gave her a look that I hope expressed a complete lack of concern for her little moron’s life. Move your brats, ladies, move your brats. Another woman left her foot in front of the tire so she could snatch it away at the very last second and give me the death stare. Kristen’s face through the windshield still looked angry; her brow furrowed as she sucked her teeth, gestures oddly comforting for being so familiar. I knew it was our fault for ending up on this road, but at that moment I could not have hated humanity more. I just wanted to be back in the car with her. Finally we were at the side street and Kristen quickly made the turn before a

crowd could gather and keep us on Orleans forever. I jumped in the car, and we drove away exhausted. Kristen was shaking with anger and fear as she pulled back onto the main road. I started to laugh.

“We made it, oh my God, thank God, we made it. Can you believe that lady screaming about her baby? And you just got out of the car without even telling me where you were going! God, I just wanted to disappear. I was considering just leaving the damn car there.”

Kristen forced half a smile and said, “I was scared you’d just leave the car, too. I’m filing a report about that fucking cop.”

“Oh, come on. It’s Mardi Gras. I’m sure the police have more important things to worry about than two dumbasses turning onto a closed-off street.”

“That’s not the fucking point. He should have helped us! He wasn’t doing a fucking thing but standing around. And the street wasn’t even blocked off! How were we supposed to know?”

“Uh, the stage? The huge crowd?” I said.

Kristen was getting angrier.

“God, Erin why are you always so afraid of complaining about *anything*. It’s okay to be mad that this city is so fucking unorganized. It’s okay to draw attention to yourself if stuff is going wrong. Jesus, you won’t even speak up if a bill is wrong and you have proof. You’d rather just pay it to avoid drawing attention to yourself.”

I could see this might turn into one of those arguments when every unresolved issue boils to the surface. Normally, I’m all about that kind of argument. Normally, I’m the one who starts them. But this time I tried to avoid it. I had expected her to be more comforting when I got back in the car. I expected her to ask if I was okay and rehash all of the gory details of the previous

fifteen minutes with me. Instead she was gripping the wheel tightly, staring ahead, and ignoring me.

“Oh, just let it go,” I said. “Take a deep breath. It’s a huge, city-wide party, mistakes are going to happen. Seriously, take a breath. Let’s just breathe for a second.” I breathed in and out dramatically and felt my adrenaline begin to slow.

The fact that I was so quick to write the situation off irritated Kristen even more. She grudgingly took a deep breath, if just to shut me up about the importance of breathing. I knew she wasn’t going to talk about it with me anymore, and that she was going to file a report.

We drove on in silence and miraculously found a route to Delaney’s house that was relatively traffic-free. I tried to make small talk, using Kristen’s response to trivial questions to gauge how mad she was. It’s a tactic Kristen often used on me when I got moody. Somehow if we could get the other into a conversation about how hard it would be to learn to play the washboard, or how the weather might be in a few days, it would mean everything could be fine. Her responses to my questions were short. Ten minutes after our escape from Orleans Avenue, we were sitting on Delaney’s porch drinking beer, people-watching, and eating gumbo. We felt soothed, even if Delaney’s reaction to our story wasn’t as sympathetic as we had hoped.

“Man, that’s crazy, I didn’t know there was a concert going on over there. What kind of band was it?” And then, “Yeah, you shouldn’t expect the cops to be any help.”

An hour later and we were in the middle of a much friendlier crowd, watching massive floats drive by. Floats bigger than yachts. Floats fifty feet long and eighteen feet tall with Porta-Potties and bead storage hidden in their colorful facades. Some floats had mermaid heads or lions adorning their bows like pirate ships and there were two-story floats that resembled French Quarter balconies. Kristen and I lined up with the crowd to catch beads thrown by, among

others, Kid Rock. Marching bands kept time and played and danced even as the floats stalled every few minutes because the parade route was so large and so long. Even when a float stopped, the action never did. Masked men leaned over the edges and whipped beads out into the night, pointing to people in the crowd and encouraging cheering and jumping. Children sat on their fathers' shoulders or stood on home-made ladders, reaching for coveted stuffed animals and foam footballs. Slowly the street-party fiasco faded from our minds. We accepted the previous bad crowd as payment for this good one. A woman with too many beads around her neck to fit any more handed me a coveted set with a glow-in-the-dark dragon and said, "Happy Mardi Gras, dawlin'."

Two days later at another, even more fun, parade on Napoleon, in the uptown section of New Orleans, (one that we got to by bike) a car tried to pull out from the road into the crowd we were part of. It was quickly waved back by amused onlookers who said, "God, where are they from? How can they not know?"

Smiling, I looked at Kristen. "Yeah, what are they *thinking*."

"It's too soon for that joke," she replied

Kristen used to jump at the chance to make fun of the embarrassing situations we got ourselves into. Like the time we snuck into an empty bedroom at a family reunion, only to learn that there was a baby monitor in that room and the whole family heard our giggly canoodling. But that was at the beginning, three years ago. Things were changing between us now. We couldn't laugh anymore at being trapped together.

Blow Stuff Up

1. Explosions

I don't blow enough shit up. In fact, I've never blown up any shit. I sometimes wonder if it's just because I'm a girl. As a kid, I was one of those girls climbing trees, catching lizards, and scraping off layer after layer of knee skin in failed attempts to do tricks on my bike. Why did it never occur to me to get cherry bombs and blow up a mailbox? Why did it occur to the neighborhood boys to do such a thing? If I had blown up a mailbox, I'm sure I would have felt guilty. Guilty enough to turn myself in. That would have been no fun at all.

My friend's older brother once threw a can of spray paint into a fire. It blew up, and a chunk of the can hit her little brother. Her dad responded by beating up the older brother. It was not the first or last time she would see her dad punch a kid in the face. Her whole childhood sounds like a series of explosions. My friend never felt compelled to turn herself in for anything that she did wrong. She could make herself believe all sorts of lies that expunged her guilt.

2. Fights

I once made a New Year's resolution to get into a fist fight. It was after I was asked to leave a party because my presence was upsetting my ex-boyfriend's new girlfriend. I left that party and went to another one. After downing a shot, I looked to my best friend and told her my resolution to kick someone's ass. She laughed in my face and said it sounded like something I would do. She meant the crazy resolution, not the actual act of fighting. That was almost ten years ago, and I'm still waiting to punch someone in the face. Or to have someone punch me.

I was walking through the French Quarter in New Orleans a while ago when a man, a stranger, reared his leg back and horse-kicked me in the hip. I looked up at him bewildered. Rather than say, "Excuse me," or "Sorry I kicked you," he said, "I didn't want to touch your

stinky ass anyway.” All I could muster was a high pitched, “You can’t just kick people!” Then I walked away embarrassed.

3. Guns

I don’t shoot real guns. For a couple of weeks a man was going through my neighborhood breaking into houses and trying to rape people. He was really bad at it and kept getting scared off when his potential victims fought back. One woman bit him on the thumb. My ex-girlfriend bought a BB gun that looked like a real gun in case he decided to try to get us. We shot it at a two-liter coke bottle in the back yard. Once, a badly aimed BB ricocheted off the fence into a gas can. Nothing blew up, and it was kind of disappointing. Later, I shot the gun off in the house. I don’t know what came over me. It wasn’t an accident. I pointed the gun at the floor and just shot it. I wanted to know what would happen. The BB ricocheted off the floor into my ex-girlfriend’s wrist. It didn’t hurt her, just a minor sting. But she blew up a little bit, and it was kind of disappointing. If she had shot me, I think I would have laughed. But I don’t know. Sometimes it’s easy to yell at people we live with over small things, such as getting shot.

I have no desire to shoot real guns. The thought of a weapon in my not-so-skilled hands feels like a crime waiting to happen. I get instant guilt just imagining the weight of it in my hands. One time I did shoot a gun, though. At a small outdoor shooting range in Amite, Louisiana. My hands shook the whole time. I fucking hated it. I went with a girl I had a crush on. It was a first date of sorts. We went with her dad. He tried to get me to fire a really big gun. I picked the smaller one and prayed the bullets wouldn’t ricochet and kill somebody. That would be embarrassing. The range was full of men wearing jeans and work boots shooting huge automatic weapons at a large hill. These were the type of guy who stockpile guns all over the house “just in case.” Before the shooting commenced the guys in line would shout, “We’re going

hot!” I would smile and look over at the girl I had a crush on. She would smile back and then shoot. There was a tiny white piece of paper resting on the hill. She got off a good shot and turned the paper into confetti. I’m still terrified of guns, but first dates aren’t so scary anymore.

3. Fire

My family has a Christmas day tradition: drag the tree out into the yard and set it on fire. Happy birthday, Jesus. We cover the tree with crappy ornaments and leave it in our living room for a few weeks. Then once Christmas finally arrives, we strip the tree and light it on fire.

The tree is usually a mass of ash in minutes. It’s the only time I ever see my dad look giddy. Usually he just looks cranky. It seems dangerous to keep those things in the house. They burn up so fast.

My little sister set part of my mom’s kitchen on fire while making popcorn. The oil splattered onto the burner and within seconds the whole stove area was swallowed in flames. She did it two days after I got arrested for driving while intoxicated. My mom didn’t blow up. She used the fire as an excuse to get new appliances and paint her cabinets. Her only response to my arrest was to say, “You should have known better.” Her jaw clenched. I grind my teeth when something annoys me. Now my jaw clicks. I could just tell people when I’m annoyed. That would maybe stop me from clenching my jaw. But dragging things out until they explode, or slowly fizzle out into nothing, is somehow the most comfortable option for me.

One year I went to a Christmas tree bonfire on New Year’s Eve. Everyone from the neighborhood brought their trees out to be burned. In past years responsible adults from the neighborhood placed the trees in a heap and lit the fire. This time police and firefighters set up a barrier around the discarded Christmas trees and controlled the proceedings. It was disappointing to have them there making sure everything went safely. The fire should have been

a chance for people to feel like they were breaking rules and being dangerous, but the night was just too safe. There was an air of boredom despite the twenty foot flames licking into the night.

This was a time right before several of my friends were about to break up with their partners. One relationship would go up and then, like a fire leaping from rooftop to rooftop, we all began to ignite what we had. Now, at the Christmas tree bonfire, we stood still, watching things get reduced to ash, but with authority figures around to make sure everything went according to plan. There was no spontaneity, only a grim procedure, which is how the relationships were looking as well.

Then a lady took off her clothes, jumped over the barricade and streaked around the perimeter. She was the first attractive streaker I'd ever seen. A pale body lit by orange flames. Everyone screamed and cheered her on. She was smiling as she jumped back over the barricade straight into the arms of a cop. The crowd groaned. Our hero, the one who broke the rules, was caught. We stood in the cold, wishing we could be that brave.

4. A Side Note On Water

Nobody in New Orleans swims in Lake Ponchartrain. It's full of street runoff, cars, dead bodies, who-knows-what (a local sanitation company has even been caught pumping Porta-Potty waste into drains that lead straight into the lake). It's not the cleansing water of myth. I baptized myself in it anyway after a break-up. One spring day, my belly full of beer, cheered on by two friends with just as much beer in them, I waded in and tried to keep my mouth shut to keep the water out. I swam out a few hundred yards and turned to see my friends laughing and pointing. I felt okay though. I was alone out there, doing something I knew they would never do. And I felt okay being alone even if I was dirty as hell. Even if it would take a thirty minute shower to feel clean again. I rode my bike home alone after I got out of the lake. A spring storm came in

fast on a strong wind and big fat drops of cool rain began to fall. If I hadn't already been drenched I would have maybe been more concerned. But as it was, the rain was what I needed to rinse off that lake. I rode by myself, soaked to the bone, grinning like a skeleton and ready to start over again.

Summer of the Jell-O Wrestler

I'm lying on a blue and white striped sheet in the sand. Waves are breaking in slow soft drifts a few yards from me, and the sun shines warm on my face. I look to my left and Shelley is there smiling. A breeze pushes strands of her ocean-curved hair over one eye. She laces her arm around mine. I smile.

I wake in the fetal position with a stomach ache. My mouth is glued shut with its own scum, and the room smells like a backed up toilet in a smoky bar. I groan and roll over to see Casey's bare, too-tanned back. Her crunchy over-gelled curls fall by her shoulders next to a faded butterfly tattoo. She is breathing heavily, almost snoring. I roll the other way and see a half-empty beer from the night before. A cigarette butt floats in it. I have to pee. I try to get up slowly so as not to wake Casey. She groans a bit as I step out of bed but does not open her eyes. I scan the floor for my clothes. Nope, no underwear or bra anywhere to be found, but I find my jeans and one of Casey's T-shirts which hangs loose after I slip it over my head. I put on my flip-flops. This is a house with a lot of roaches.

I open the bathroom door and am barely able to stifle a gag. The avocado colored toilet is full to the brim with shit, toilet paper, and piss. Casey warned me last night, when I was too drunk to care, that the toilet was broken. Sometimes they have to turn on the washing machine to make the water drain out of it. I walk through the kitchen and out the front door. It's 7:30 in the morning and already hot. The buzzing cicadas make the air pulse; humidity swirls around my damp face. I stumble down the porch's two rickety steps and walk through overgrown grass to the bushes. I'm horrible at outdoor peeing, always managing to pee on my pants, so I take

them completely off. My desperation for relief has trumped my usually reserved nature, and I don't even bother to look around to check if anyone can see me. The only sounds are the cicadas and an occasional mocking bird screech or a woodpecker tap tap tapping on a tree. The house is surrounded by a pine forest and the closest neighbor is miles away. How did I end up way out here, pants-less and pissing in front of a thirty-year-old trailer?

When I'm done peeing a wave of nausea surges through me and I double over in the bushes to throw up. Too many shots last night. A wasp circles my head and grass pokes at my legs. I really hope Casey or her roommate doesn't come outside and find me, with my bare ass in the air, puking in the bushes. I'm supposed to be the one judging them, not the other way around. They live in a dilapidated trailer. They have bad Southern accents and worse tattoos. They don't read, and they own every single one of Tyler Perry's movies for God's sake. I am better than this.

I step back inside, careful to breathe through my mouth, and tip-toe into the bedroom where Casey is still sleeping. I remember that she made me dance with her to a bumping hip hop song at the bar last night. I cringe at the memory of my spastic dancing, like the tin man before he was oiled, or maybe the tin man with just a little too much oil. She made me sit down when I stepped on her toes. We laughed about it. I guess we had a fun time. Now I get to search for my underwear. My bra is draped across the headboard, and my underwear is on the floor beside Casey's nightstand. I find my T-shirt crumpled on the floor of Casey's doorless closet. With a vague attempt at stealth I maneuver into my clothes at the foot of the bed. As I lift my keys from the dresser Casey opens her eyes.

"Hey, Girl," she croaks, her voice thick with sleep.

“Hey, Case. I have to go to work,” I whisper. “Thanks for taking me to the bar last night. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Oh, okay, babe. See you later.” I see her reach over to grab the cigarette pack on her nightstand.

I have to stop my car and throw up again as I am pulling out of her yard.

I check my text messages compulsively as I make the forty-five minute drive back home to civilization. I want to see Shelley’s name pop up, though it hasn’t for two weeks. Halfway home my phone lets out its familiar beep, the one that used to make my heart jump because I knew it would be Shelley. It’s Casey. “Be careful driving home.” I set the phone back in the cup holder, trying not to feel pathetic, trying to be happy that at least someone is concerned for me. Even if it’s the wrong person. Someone I have nothing in common with.

Casey doesn’t read. Shelley does. Casey listens to Insane Clown Posse and top 40 radio. Shelley listens to indie rock and our iTunes accounts are practically identical. Casey cares nothing for politics and, on the religion front, turns out to be blindly devoted to Jesus. Shelley and I have the wariness of religion that’s usual with people of our sexual orientation and age, and we get animated discussing political matters that affect us. We’ve thought about things. The same things. This is not to say Casey is bad. She’s just different. She’s just not Shelley.

I tell myself to let Shelley go. I try to convince myself she was just a post break-up rebound girl, and that she isn’t that important to me. I replay the situation in my head. The situation is this: I move to New Orleans from South Carolina with my girlfriend of three years, Kristen, a girl I’m not really in love with anymore. After nine months in New Orleans, I break up with Kristen, yet continue to live with her, because it’s easier, because we’re still best friends,

because I can just wait until our lease is up to move out. Then Kristen, whom I'm still living with, starts to sleep with our neighbor. Our neighbor is Shelley. I like Shelley. I find out about Kristen and Shelley and decide to move back home to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I am not sure if I will come back. I reveal to Shelley that I like her the night before I leave. It's her birthday, we are both drunk, and we stay up all night talking, holding hands. Shelley says she likes me over Kristen. Says she'll come visit me at the beach. I get in the car after staying up all night and drive the twelve hours home texting with Shelley the whole way. These are dangerous times.

Shelley flies to see me a few weeks later. She stays for a whole week. Kristen knows. Kristen texts Shelley while she's with me. I don't know why it doesn't occur to me to be angry or worried about this. There is a problem among lesbian women when they break up with each other. Most of them try to remain friends. This sometimes works out okay, but in many cases it just leads to these twisted co-dependent relationships where the broken-up couple refers to each other as "best friends" while ordering each other around, and getting upset when one person tries to move on with life. So I wasn't worried about Kristen, even though she had a thing with Shelley. Kristen was my friend. Her thing with Shelley wasn't a relationship, right? Right?

Shelley and I laugh a lot while she's at the beach with me. We spend our days swimming and lying in the sun listening to music. At night we go to bars with my friends, who do not hesitate to tell me, whenever Shelley leaves for the bathroom, that she is beautiful, charming, and funny. Before she leaves to go back to New Orleans, Shelley promises to wait for me. Then she returns home to Kristen and stops talking to me. I can't really blame her for this. Kristen is very persuasive. Shelley just got out of a long relationship herself. She probably just wants to have fun this summer. Still, I get hurt.

I tell myself that I'm okay. That I can do better. That I can find someone who will like me and only me. Who won't involve me in love triangles and soap opera scenarios. I am above that sort of thing. But these are just things I am telling myself. I know I want Shelley more than anything and being with Casey is not doing better than Shelley. Casey with her trucker mud-flap-girl tattoos on each clavicle. One with a halo and one with devil horns. Casey, whose obsessive roommate/landlord is in love with her, thus explaining why she does not pay rent (though I would think the shit-filled toilet would be reason enough not to pay rent). Casey with bi-polar disorder and the abused childhood. Casey who Jell-O-wrestled competitively for years in order to pay for her car insurance. Casey with the learning disability that makes it extremely difficult for her to read or write. Casey, who told me all of this in a flurry of information overload within the first few hours of my meeting her.

If Shelley met Casey, she would make fun of her right away. I can imagine us meeting her in a bar together. Casey would walk up to us, completely confident despite the fact that people like us think she shouldn't be. Her dress would be too short and tight for her large frame, and she would have glitter eye makeup on. She would hit on me first because my short hair would make her think I am butch, and she likes butch girls. She likes to be the one and only femme in a relationship. Shelley would stand beside me trying not to laugh as Casey told us about Jell-O-wrestling or the time she hit a girl in the head with a bottle "because she was being a trick-ass ho." Shelley is not a rude person, though. She would listen to Casey talk, maybe even ask her a question or two to seem interested. But as soon as Casey moved on, she would nudge me and pull me away to a corner so we could laugh about the encounter. Casey would not care though. Casey does not care what anyone thinks of her. And most of all that's what makes

us different. Shelley and I are trying to be liked, trying to be normal, trying to be cool. Casey is just Casey. And she'll hit you in the head with a bottle if you think otherwise.

Lesbians in Myrtle Beach are few and far between, especially when compared to New Orleans. I was introduced to Casey through a mutual friend, Tim, who worked with her. He said, "I have the perfect girl for you."

I said, "What makes her perfect?"

Tim said, "She's gay. And crazy. But in a fun way."

And that was it. The only requirement. A vagina and a predilection for dating other people with vaginas. Oh, and being crazy in a good way.

Tim gave Casey my phone number, and she met me at a bar one night and bought me a drink. I was nervous about meeting her because from the little information Tim was able to give me about her, one of the key points was that she was from Fayetteville, North Carolina. Fayetteville is a military town about two hours inland from Myrtle Beach. It has an infamous intersection with constantly packed Waffle Houses on three of its four corners. That is the cultural hub of the city. Fayetteville churns out rough necks, and because it is only two hours from the beach, I had met plenty of those people in my life. They pile into their cars and rent cheap motel rooms, packing in as many people as will fit. Once I was confronted by a group of large linebacker-looking girls in the bathroom at a bar. As I walked up to the sink to wash my hands, they asked me what county I was reppin'. My meek, no-eye-contact reply of "um, this one" sent them all into hysterics. "She wouldn't last a second in Robeson County," the biggest linebacker said as they exited, leaving me feeling confused and dumb with my wet hands still dangling over the sink.

I warned my friends that a girl was coming to meet me for a drink and that she was from Fayetteville. They all laughed and nodded knowingly. When Casey came in, they introduced themselves politely and then meandered over to the pool table, leaving Casey and me alone. She was wearing a dress that she called her “no-no” dress, and three-inch black heels. It certainly made me think *no, no* when I saw it. It was a black tube-top dress that came up so high on her thighs I was constantly scared of being exposed to her “no-no” areas. But Casey thought she looked hot, and I guess that’s all that matters when choosing an outfit. I certainly would not have been comfortable. I was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and flip-flops. But if that’s what she liked then I was willing to overlook a tube-top dress up to her waist. For a night anyway. Upon first seeing her, I knew I would not ever want to talk to her again after that evening. But then we ended up talking until the bar closed. Or more accurately, Casey talked until the bar closed. She told me her life story, and I listened while drinking beer after beer. As crazy as the things she was telling me were—“Yeah, I once broke a girl’s arm while Jell-O-wrestling.” “Salsa really burns to wrestle in, I’ll never do that one again, coleslaw was okay though.”—I was fascinated. I kept picturing her sliding across a ring full of Jell-O in full attack mode, lunging violently at any poor girl who decided to engage in a gelatinous battle with her. I could barely imagine what it was like to wrestle another person seriously, let alone what it would be like to wrestle another person while covered in lime-green Jell-O. Even if I had absolutely nothing in common with this girl, she could at least entertain me. That was something. As we parted in the parking lot, Casey said, “Well, I guess I’ll see you around, girl.” And I, drunk, able to feel connected to anyone at that moment, said, “Yeah, definitely, we should hang out again.”

Casey and I went to the beach together a few days later. She wore a white bikini top that was two sizes too small, long-board shorts, and some sort of glitter lotion. I learned more about

her. As a child she played only with boys and would make them do weird things like put their penises in holes she dug into the ground. When I asked her why, she answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world: “Cuz! Boys are dumb; they’ll do anything.” Her dad couldn’t handle her hyperactivity and learning disabilities and often kicked her out of the house when she was a teenager. Once he hit her; she hit back; he had her arrested. After high school she got engaged to an army guy who had PTSD and couldn’t hold a job. She moved to California with him but left when he cheated on her. She told me I was quiet and asked if I was afraid of her. I told her I was a little bit afraid of her breaking my arm or something. She laughed and said she wouldn’t do that to a girl she likes. As we sat in our beach chairs watching the sun go down, drinking cold beer, she smiled and said hello to anyone who walked past. She got into genuine conversations with a few people who strolled by about their sun-tanned, tow-headed children and how cute they were. The ocean reflected the light blue sky which grayed as the sun dipped to the horizon. The clouds streaked across the scene in orange, pink, and red. It was a beautiful evening, and I couldn’t help but think that it would be even more beautiful if it was Shelley sitting next to me.

On our third encounter, the one that led to my pants-less pukefest, we went to our town’s one and only gay bar. It’s a little hole in the wall called Time Out that is usually populated solely by surly middle-aged men and women whose purpose in life is to give any young gays who wander in a glimpse of the grim future that awaits them if they stay in this small town. Casey drank vodka sunrises, and I had beer and Jaeger bombs. Casey told me stories about girls she met in bars and crazy things she did in high school. She made friends with an old gay couple sitting next to us. The conversation never lagged because Casey never stopped speaking. She was not Shelley, we had nothing in common, but we were doing fine. By the time the bar was

closing, we were making out on our bar stools. I did not think about Shelley. Not much, anyway.

My mom is standing in the yard as I pull into the driveway, finally ending my long drive back from Casey's house out in the woods. Staying with my parents after a break-up at 25 years old makes me feel pathetic, but I tell myself I'm only here for the beach and some time away from the ex. She smiles and shakes her head as I step out of the car. I remember that I'm wearing the same clothes as yesterday and my once faux hawked hair is now sticking out all over like a porcupine.

"Ooooh, staying out all night, are we?" Mom chimes.

"Shut it," I say.

"Who were you with, huh? What's her name?"

"Her name is Casey. She's a Jell-O wrestler. She lives in a trailer with bad plumbing in the middle of nowhere. She's kind of odd."

"Sounds like fun."

"It was," I say. And I believe it. Sort of.

I go inside and text Casey back. "I'm home. Last night was fun. We should do it again sometime."

Haunting Oaks

I get out of the car and start my walk to the tree, uncertain that it is the right one. An almost full moon, framed by leaves, beams above me. Behind me I hear the drum of a high-school marching band starting up at a night football game. To the left is a brightly lit tennis court where people are still out playing. It is around 8:30 on one of those perfect, cool, autumn nights in New Orleans, and I think of how hard it will be to get scared with the sound of tennis shoes squeaking and drums beating in the background. Then, in an attempt to give me a better view than my Maglite can offer, my girlfriend Shelley aims the car toward me and turns the bright lights on. She does this just as I get within a few feet of the tree. The trunk glowers down at me, a large, open, twisted mouth and two swollen eyes. This is definitely the Suicide Oak, and I'll admit it, a chill comes over me.

According to a recent poll conducted by CBS News, forty-eight percent of Americans believe in ghosts, and twenty-two percent of Americans are convinced they have seen or felt the presence of ghosts. I am not a member of either group. This does not prevent me from being a firm, if only momentary, believer in ghost stories. I'm an excellent suspender of disbelief. In fact, the part of my brain that is supposed to disbelieve the stories people tell me is often wandering far off in left field somewhere while the rest of my brain is getting the willies. I know I will never encounter a real ghost in my life. I know a demon will not pull me from my bed, or open a door in my house and hiss in a disembodied voice to "get out!" This does not stop me

from throwing the popcorn into the air, and spilling wine all over the couch when I see that happen in a movie. I'm a good audience.

Because I'm such a good audience, I avoid amusement park-type haunted houses. They cause me to let out a guttural, primal scream, a "man scream" unbecoming of my sex, and lose control of my limbs so that I flail and fall all over the place. Letting out a roar-scream and falling to the ground makes it hard to escape the costumed person with the chainsaw next to my ear. I've never been to a "real" haunted house either. That kind of place always seems like a tourist trap. Living in New Orleans for the past few years I've been told my share of places to go visit—Marie Laveau's grave, or the swamp, to see the monster that keeps bayou kids in line, known as The Rougarou—but they all just seem like things to do when you're a bored teenager. Excuses to bump against the person walking next to you in the dark and hold hands out of fear. Like urban legends, there are no real ghosts behind the stories. Just cautionary tales or lurid yarns spun from boring realities. Nothing I need to see physically. Despite all this, when I hear about two eerie oak trees in New Orleans's vast City Park, I feel the urge to visit them. Because the park sprawls from the mid-city neighborhood (where I live) almost all the way out to Lake Pontchartrain a few miles away, it retains an unknowable aspect. I have explored the park many times on foot and by bike, but I know there are secret places in it I have yet to discover. Going to these trees seems like a way to drum up some mystery in my life. To maybe see something I haven't come across before.

The book *Weird Louisiana* warns people going to see the Suicide Oak not to bring objects with them that they could use to harm themselves. The point being that the tree is so

creepy a person might be driven to suicide beneath its spreading boughs. As I stand under the tree, gripping a heavy, foot-long flashlight in one hand, I'm more worried about muggers than suicidal impulses. My dog, Buddy, a scrappy terrier mix, sniffs around the base of the tree and cocks his leg before trotting off into an adjacent field. My girlfriend walks up behind me. "Yeah, this tree is creepy. It looks like a grim reaper grabbing someone from behind," she says, pointing at the large twisted knots that give the tree a face.

"Huh?" I say. "It looks like two eyes and a giant creepy open mouth."

"No," Shelley insists. "Come over here look at it from this angle." She pulls me to the right a little bit.

"Huh. It kind of does look like someone grabbing someone else from behind. Creepy,"

"Yep, Creepy."

I'm not really convinced that the tree looks like "death dragging someone to hell" as Shelley will later describe it, but I can, when I cock my head at a certain angle, see what she's seeing. Shelley's always a little more alert to danger than I am. It may be genetic. Her dad, even though he has always lived in fairly rural and safe places, is obsessed with criminals. His house is like an armory, and guns are hidden in ceiling tiles and behind bathtubs. For awhile, one of his hobbies was loading his own bullets with gunpowder. He parks his car across the street from work so he can keep a gun in his truck without getting hassled by security. If we return to our house late at night, Shelley won't talk to me and instead looks around, staying alert. Her father taught his daughters to always be on the look-out like that. While I search for a ghost in the trees, Shelley scans the bushes for rapists.

We stand and look at the tree a little longer, then decide we're bored and need to see the other tree. The Hangman's Tree.

I am not afraid of trees even though they do have certain sinister aspects. The oak trees that proliferate all over the South can look excessively macabre as they twist and wind across a horizon, grasping at the sky with their gnarled, arthritic branches. They scratch against window panes at night and cause the wind to howl as it blows through their leaves. Even scarier, in the spring and summer, the oak trees of New Orleans drop these fat caterpillars with stinging fur down the collars of unsuspecting pedestrians. But aside from appearances and the occasional stinging bug, trees are not particularly menacing. Oak trees have been revered and even worshiped since the time of the ancient Druids. Still, hundreds of people are rumored to have killed themselves on and around the ancient Suicide Oak, especially during war-times and economic downturns. People going to visit this tree, to get a scare or see a ghost, are not thinking about the despair of the people desperate enough to end their lives there. They are thinking about pictures from books and movies of people hanging from trees. They simply want a scare, not the moral dilemma of finding it where people died.

The Hangman's Tree is located near Lake Pontchartrain next to a canal-like stream called Bayou St. John. It's on a levee in the ruins of a place called Spanish Fort. The fort changed from a protection for the Bayou trade route in the 1700's, to an amusement park and resort in the late 1800's, to a collection of falling brick walls next to a suburban neighborhood today. The ghost story associated with the tree is a predictable one for the South, I suppose: an unfortunate slave was hanged from its branches. A person walking by late at night is likely to hear a rope snap and look up to see a man swinging. If she walks closer, the man will turn his head and stare. The reason for the hanging changes depending on who's telling the story. The slave was either disobedient, or he was having an affair with a white woman. I guess the version told depends on the teller's own particular bias, whether he's big on obedience or racial and sexual

purity. I couldn't find any information to confirm whether anyone was actually hanged from the Hangman's Tree, and I had no hope of seeing an actual ghost at the tree because the story seemed so blatantly made up. The legend was clearly a cautionary tale for black men from what we should hope is a bygone era.

My girlfriend and I park our car on the side of the road in front of a sprawling brick ranch-style house and then walk across the street to Spanish Fort. I'm jealous of the kids who get to live across the street from a "haunted" fort. The first thing we come across is a pile of rocks about as tall as we are, stacked in a pyramid shape. They have an ominous appearance, but only because of the movie *The Blair Witch Project*, in which piles of rocks signified that the witch was near. Near the rocks is a six-by-four wrought-iron fence surrounding a cross. This elicits an "okay, that's weird" from Shelley. The fence guards an unmarked grave of some sort, and it's a surprising find. We've both driven past this place numerous times, but neither of us has ever noticed a grave.

We're not sure which tree is supposed to be The Hangman's Tree so we just wander around listening for a rope snap. I decide Buddy is my liaison to the ghost-world (since, um, in movies animals can see dead people) and let him lead me where he wants to go. We are on top of a levee looking down at the field below when I spot something white, with black spots, huddled in the grass. It's a cat. It stares up at Buddy and me in that superior way that cats have. It thinks we are stupid tourists. I'm surprised Buddy doesn't growl or try to give chase because as a terrier he is not a fan of small rodent-like animals. Maybe he's embarrassed to be here looking for ghosts as cars drive by only fifty feet away, and street lamps illuminate the shadows. Shelley walks up beside us and says, "Aww, kitty."

We leave the fort and drive down Robert E. Lee Boulevard (maybe the era of racism isn't as bygone as we hope) to get Theraflu at a Walgreens just up the road. Shelley hasn't been feeling well. It's a mundane night in a haunted city.

Two days later, after three twenty-two ounce Paulaner Hefe-Weizens at a local Oktoberfest celebration, I feel a need for us to return to the trees, so we leave the festival early and end up back in the park. The Suicide Oak is huge. One of its branches extends from its base for at least sixty feet. It dips down and touches the ground before reaching back up into the moonlight. Shelley and I sit on this branch and sip beer smuggled from the festival. We start talking about family. There is a football game, or something, going on at the adjacent stadium, and so again we can hear drums and tubas and the occasional collective cheer.

Like most people, Shelley and I have dysfunction in our families, which sometimes we feel compelled to discuss while drunk. For the most part we are both well adjusted people, but sometimes emotions we think aren't there anymore come to the surface. My family is close, but we struggle with various members' dependence on illicit substances, and other members' inability to cut off the addicts financially. Shelley is actually jealous of my family because, through our struggles, we stay in touch and constantly affirm our love for each other. We still like to eat family dinners together and maybe play a board game, or a drinking game, depending on the holiday. We can enjoy each other's company and pretend that the dysfunction doesn't exist. Shelley's family has a harder time pushing the dysfunction to the side.

When Shelley was four, her mother realized she was a lesbian and left the family to have an affair with another woman. Shelley's father, a well-meaning but conservative man, raised her away from New Orleans, away from her mother, across the lake in Hammond. It was probably because he didn't want Shelley to be around a lesbian influence. Her mother became

the ghost story, the cautionary tale, to be visited only on weekends and holidays. Shelley and her mom are close now, but some things are hard to move beyond. Beside a tree where people come to give up, we fight to get away from the specters of the past. We don't expect to see a ghost come walking over from the tennis courts or flit from out of the top of the tree. We just want to fix what's wrong with us in the here and now.

When we've had enough Suicide Oak musings, we decide to go back to Spanish Fort. I think we both still want to see something otherworldly. We both want a distraction. Shelley gets paranoid as we walk the grounds of the fort.

"Erin, I think we should go now," she says as I walk away from the street and toward the Bayou.

"We just got here," I say, continuing up the hill.

Shelley's voice takes on a tone of panic and she runs to catch up to me. "Look, I just don't feel safe. Let's go. I have a bad feeling."

Even though I humor Shelley when she gets these waves of paranoia, I don't often feel danger myself. Tonight is different though, and I feel a chill as Shelley urges me to head for the car.

A guidebook solves the mystery of the grave at Spanish Fort. It's for an unknown Spanish soldier who probably worked as a guard. There is a legend that he fell in love with the daughter of an Indian chief and was murdered when the affair was found out. This, like most legends, is probably an embellishment of the truth, or an outright lie. It's another cautionary tale of love and lust gone wrong as a result of the races being wrong.

As Shelley and I walk back to the car I scan the landscape, alert for an attack. I don't want to be made into a cautionary tale either. Headlines and stories flash in my head. *Drunken*

lesbians attacked while wandering historic sight at night: strung up in the same tree as disobedient slave. Their ghosts now haunt the grounds, warning other girls against the love that dares not speak its name. Okay, so it's overdramatic, but still, almost tangible. Most ghost stories are.

We have some pictures from our first night at the Suicide Oak. In one, I'm running toward the camera with the dog. Because of the glow from the tennis courts it looks like a wall of light is streaming up from behind me. Shelley didn't snap the picture until I was a few feet from her. I'm just a ghost in the picture, with a smear of red for a shirt and a haze of peach for a face. I'm smiling wide; a person looking at the picture would know that I am happy and comfortable with the person behind the camera. That there is a chemistry between us, an unseen force that keeps us running toward one another. The trees behind are visible, but blurry afterthoughts. The haunted one doesn't even make it into the picture.

About Nan

2008

My grandmother Nan smoked cigarettes from the time she was fifteen until she turned sixty. She quit cold turkey when she almost died of pneumonia. Nan is seventy-three now and suffering the consequences of a life full of smoke. She has an oxygen machine. She can't laugh without coughing. She falls a lot, and because of all the medicine she's on, she bleeds a lot too. She looks old. Her hair, which has always been dyed red or blonde, looks duller and thinner than it used to. She doesn't smile as much as she did when I was a kid. Her hands are gnarled with arthritis and spotted with purple and brown.

She still laughs despite all the coughing. She starts slow then gets louder and faster and then coughs for a long time, with tears welling up in her eyes. She's always coughed and laughed. Now it is mostly cough and very little laugh. But still, she laughs.

1989

"God damn it, sonofabitch!" Nan screams at Mario as he falls into a pit of lava. She is sitting on her bed, legs crossed, and a cigarette with a precariously long ash dangles between her pink painted lips. The smoke streams from the cigarette and collects in a cloud around her dyed red hair. The blanket is dotted with small burn holes from when she gets too excited about her Nintendo game and the cigarette drops from her mouth. If my cousins and I are playing with her, normally when she cusses, she tries to say "son of a gun" and "dern it." She's on the last level today though, and she just can't seem to kill King Kupp.

"God dammit!" she rasps. "Why can't I get that son of a bitch?"

She puts extra emphasis on *bitch* as she throws the controller onto the bed.

“C’mon, Nan, just let me kill Kuppa, we all want to play Paper Boy,” my cousin Joey whines.

Joey is twelve and has a subscription to *Nintendo Magazine*. He has beat Mario Brothers more times than he can count. If I try to play Nintendo with Joey, he gets frustrated because I’m five and can barely beat the first level. He makes me sit back and watch him. I’m supposed to act like I’m in awe just because he knows every cheat code there is.

“Don’t you kids want to go out and play in the pool or something?” Nan asks.

“Nooooo,” we all chime.

Our fingers are still pruned up from being in the pool all day. When we come to Nan’s house, our parents don’t let us hang out with them in the cool, air-conditioned living room. They make us stay outside by the pool. Not that staying by a pool all day is a bad deal; it just gets frustrating to get yelled at every time you sneak inside for a pee or a bag of chips. Now our parents have left though, and it’s just us and Nan for a sleepover. Her king-sized bed is covered with eight of her eleven grandchildren, all of whom want a turn on her beloved Nintendo. Nan puts the game on pause and lifts her gold-rimmed bifocals to rub her pale blue eyes.

“Just let me try one more time, and then I’ll let you all play. Somebody go get me a Bud Light, please.”

1993

Nan almost gets arrested driving from Maryland to visit us in South Carolina. She is pulled over in North Carolina for driving her Cadillac Eldorado a hundred miles an hour on the Interstate. She also littered when she flicked a cigarette butt out the window. The cop told her he was taking her to jail.

“But what about my dog?” Nan asked pointing to Princess Priscilla Pugness, also known as Prissy, the juicy-eyed, panting dog, in the back seat.

“She can’t go in my car,” the cop answered.

“Well, I can’t just leave her here, fa gawsakes.”

When Nan says “fa gawsakes” her eyes get wide, her voice rises and deepens, and everything on her seems to shake. Sensing an uppity rant, the likes of which he has never had to deal with, the cop relents. He writes a speeding ticket with an ungodly fine and leaves her with the words, “I don’t ever want to catch you driving through this state again.”

My teacher tells us her rule is never to say or do anything we would be embarrassed to do in front of our grandmother. Last night, before the teacher told us that little rule for a proper life, my grandmother was walking Prissy in the front yard and let out a loud burp and an equally sonorous fart. When she realized our neighbor was also in his front yard, she stage whispered to me, “Erin, did you hear that bullfrog? Did you step on a bullfrog, honey?” When we were safely back inside she said, “Last night that dumb neighbor gave me a dirty look because when I was calling Prissy it sounded like I was yelling that other ‘P’ word.”

1994

Nan lives with us now. I love Nan. I don’t love living with Nan. As soon as my mother comes home from work in the afternoons Nan comes out from her side of the house and lets out her nasal afternoon call. “Kathyyyy,” she screeches, and Mom does her daily eye-roll and walks toward the sound. My mom is laid-back, patient, and calm. She’s never smoked; she rarely drinks. Mom doesn’t pay attention to gardening, fashion, or interior design (all of which Nan

loves). Sometimes it is hard to believe Nan is her mother. But Nan is, and so my mom puts up with her as best she can.

“Oh, Kathy, I was just looking at this floor in here, and it is really starting to look dingy. We need to tear it up and get new carpet. Oh, or maybe tile.”

Nan’s favorite word for getting things done is “we.” Last weekend she recommended that “we go out and do some yard work.” That meant she sat on the porch drinking a Bud Light while the rest of us mowed and weeded. Now she’s on to interior concerns.

When Nan first asked to move in, I could see the worry on both my parents’ faces as they discussed it. I couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t want Nan to live with us; she was a blast. Now, as she screams at me to “pick up your damn Legos and get off the goddamned floor before you smell like horse shit,” I’m regretting my enthusiasm for having her move in.

I like going through Nan’s things: her photo albums, her jewelry boxes, her closets full of trendy old-lady clothes. Nan collects elephants and has figurines in many shapes and sizes on her nightstand. Their trunks have to face the door or it is bad luck. My favorite elephant fits in my palm and is a light, almost translucent, green. My older sister Mandy’s favorite is gold and heavy and covered in jewels. My little sister Megan’s has a lid on the back that opens up to reveal a red velvet interior.

In the photo albums are pictures of Bubby, our grandfather, who died on Easter when we were little. It was Megan’s fourth birthday. Bubby was mostly Cherokee. He was tall and tan and could fit all his grandkids in his lap.

Sometimes I wish I had been there the day Bubby died. I know I couldn’t have helped. I couldn’t have thought of anything true or beautiful or comforting to say, but at least Nan wouldn’t have been alone. Bubby died of cancer. Nan found him on the floor in the middle of

the night. The hospice told her to wait thirty minutes before she called an ambulance because they would try to revive him if they got there too early. How could she have handled waiting by her dead husband for half an hour? Bubby was the one who always kept Nan calm. He would put up with her when she refused to be calm. And then there he was, unable to help her anymore. She had to commit to one last act of calm for him, so he could die in peace. So he could leave her.

1997

Dad has had a Coors Light in his hand all day, and Nan hasn't been without her Bud Light. They sit on our back porch smoking in the evening air and one-upping each others' stories. It's the Fourth of July, and now that it's dark enough, we're setting off fireworks in the back yard. I hate fireworks. Our old black mutt shakes, drools, and whines. After fireworks, I go to the kitchen to get a snack. The cabinet has a broken hinge that my dad, a skilled carpenter, has put off fixing for some reason. When Nan sees me close the door slowly so as not to make the hinge slip any farther, she says,

“Cliff, when are we gonna fix that door?”

My dad says, “Fuck,” and I look up, straight into his eyes. They are glazed over; unfocused. I run upstairs. I hear both of them yelling, Nan and Dad. Dad calls Nan a bitch and a nag. Nan calls Dad a lazy, mean, sonofabitch, then tries to end the fight. Tries to say she's sorry and forget about the goddamned door she doesn't give a shit about it anyway. My dad won't shut up. He keeps screaming at Nan, asking her why she doesn't move out already, nobody wants her here, she's a bitch, she's driving the family apart, and on and on. I hear Mom yelling, crying. She's screaming at my dad to just shut up and get out. But he still won't shut up.

I hear Nan and Dad's screams bouncing off each other, I know they are right in each other's faces.

I hear loud stomping sounds and look down the stairs. In order to shut my dad up my hundred-pound mother has decided to jump on his back. He is spinning, trying to fling her off. If this were a family dysfunction movie, this scene would be comical. It would end with everyone on the floor laughing. It's real life, though, and ends with my father storming out the door. Nan and Mom are crying in the living room. Nan's normally strong, raspy voice sounds weak and tired.

"Oh, Kathy, I wish this never happened."

A month later Nan has moved out. Her room still smells like her: perfume, hairspray, and cinnamon potpourri. Sometimes I go in there and lie down on her bed.

1999

I've been drunk before. On beers stolen from my Dad's cooler to bring to sleepovers or Boone's Farm stolen from my sister's trunk to drink alone in my bedroom while I listen to No Doubt and feel rebellious. This is the first time I've been drunk enough for the room spinning that inevitably leads to puking. I guess peach schnapps, Kool-Aid, and whatever the hell else is in the cabinet will do that. I am visiting Nan in Maryland and sneak the drinks with my cousins after she goes out to a bar with our parents. When Nan finds my crumpled up T-shirt covered in bright red puke the next morning, she doesn't yell at me. This is odd because Nan is a laundry freak, and I know she's fretting about getting the stain out; wondering if Martha Stewart has a guide for removing schnapps and Kool-Aid stains from the T-shirt of a dumb adolescent. She just throws the shirt away though and asks me if I had fun. She gives me aspirin, water, and

toast. I still can't smell peach schnapps without feeling queasy. I still think aspirin, water, and toast is the most comforting meal in the world.

2002

It's my high school graduation and my parents have thrown a party at the house for me. Nan drove down from Maryland. She has spent all day in the kitchen preparing potato salad, crab dip, and parmesan-breaded chicken wings. Now that all my friends are here, she is the life of the party. She plays the card game asshole with them. The only purpose of asshole is to get people drunk and make them do silly tasks. If a person loses a game, that person is designated "asshole." If a person wins, they are "president." The president gets to tell everybody what to do and the asshole has to do anything anybody says. Nan keeps winning and my friends delight in being called an asshole by her. She's bad at coming up with embarrassing things for people to do, so we mostly skip that part. It's not just that being an old person makes her a novelty, though; she's also telling crazy stories and laughing loud at my friends' stories. I learn that she once pushed my Uncle Joe through a sliding glass door when she found out the tomato plants he was growing in his closet were not tomato plants at all. As "live and let live" as Nan can be, she still has a classic grandmother's distrust of any drug not made by Pfizer or Anheuser-Busch.

Nan has met everyone in the room, learned names and one interesting fact about each guest. My friend John dances to Motown music with her, and I have to remind him she's sixty-something and he can't keep spinning her like that. Even my dad seems to be okay with her, and toward the end of the night they get into a long conversation about politics and unions which, luckily, they both agree on. They both think Dubya can go to hell and the South could benefit from a union or two.

2007

It's my college graduation, and I can't help feeling déjà vu from my high school party five years earlier. We're in the same house, with the same people, and the same food. Nan isn't as lively as usual though. She has several white bandages dotting her arms and legs where she has fallen or scraped her paper-thin skin on the edges of counters or doorways. She doesn't play any drinking games, but she does keep a Bud Light handy throughout the night. She has to ask me what people's names are and how I know them. The more the night wears on, the more nervous I get about her. My friend Candice, who was at the high school party, asks how Nan has been as we watch her make slow, careful, steps from the bathroom to the kitchen table. Yesterday Nan fell while walking across the deck. My aunt Kim wonders if she's having strokes. When Nan goes to sleep at one in the morning, I am relieved. When she wakes back up at two, I want to force her to go back to bed.

"What are you doing up?" I ask.

"You know I can't sleep if I know people are up partying," she says with a smile. "Why don't you go get me a Bud Light, honey?"

I consider not bringing her one, but I know she'll just find someone else to do it if I don't, so I grab a can from the cooler and hand it to her. My sister takes a picture of us with her digital camera, and I look at it when she's done. Even though Nan's smiling, she looks sad in the picture. Her smile is self-conscious, and barely lifts the corners of her mouth. Her eyes are dull and don't make contact with the camera.

"Did I ever tell you about the time my friend Barb and I almost got arrested for having a cooler of beer and six kids in the back seat of my old convertible? I guess going the wrong way on a one-way street also pissed off the little bugger cop, too."

She has told me this story. About a hundred times. I just shake my head no, though, and listen as she tells it. I watch as the people around stop talking so they can listen and be a part of Nan's life, if only for a minute or two.

Nan now lives in northern Virginia with her best friend, Jean. They bicker a lot about how things should be cleaned, or fixed, or done. Sometimes they accidentally take each other's medicine or buy the same household doo-dad. They also laugh a lot. They both enjoy shopping and both are falling apart as they age. This means many of their stories involve trying to get to the mall but failing due to a walker, cane, or air-tank malfunction. They both like gardening but can't really get outside and take care of the yard much anymore, so every weekend some member of the family, usually my Aunt Melanie, who looks like a butch Michael Douglas, comes over to help them with it. By "help," I mean Melanie hops around as two old ladies sit on the porch, cussing and directing her every movement.

Nan stays with my parents in South Carolina for a few months every winter because the weather in Virginia is a bit too harsh. And also so Jean won't kill her for complaining "one more goddamned time about your fuckin' medicine."

Nan drives everyone crazy. If it is just Nan and me at my parents' house, a typical conversation goes like this:

"Erin, has Megan left that sonofabitch she's dating? This house is a mess, your mother just collects all these goddamned animals and they bark and meow all damned day long. Look at what that huge dog did to my arm! Jumped right up and scratched off a chunk of skin. We need to clean this house; the yard needs mowing too; maybe we could pressure wash the house one day when the weather gets better. Is Mandy still with that asshole

she's been dating? How is your mother? She looks skinny, you know. What do you think of your father, honey? Here I bought this new floor scrubber; let's try it out."

Nan has gotten naggier with age, and none of us is sure why. I think she's just trying to stay active, and nagging is what she's always done best. But she does force everyone to be together. My sisters and I often go for months without being at our parents' house at the same time. Both of my sisters recently had children, and while I often babysit my nephews, I rarely make the time to hang out with my sisters. When Nan is in town, she makes food and buys cheap wine, then invites us all over. If we don't come, we get phone calls all night yelling at us "to get your asses the hell over here fa gawsakes." She forces my dad to turn the news off and talk at the dinner table, forces my mom to laugh, my sisters and me to be together. Forces us to eat dessert and sit down and watch *Jeopardy* and, yell at Alex for being a pompous shit-head.

Veins and Sharp Objects

My ex-girlfriend almost accidentally killed herself with a pair of fingernail clippers. Or, at least, she hurt herself badly enough that on the ride to the hospital I was imagining how I could eulogize her in a dignified way. I would laud all of her positive attributes: her humor, her go-get-'em attitude, her devotion to close friends, and her ability to entertain guests and cook at the same time. I would also avoid the fact that her death was caused by the business end of a pair of nail trimmers. It's amazing how much information can course through a brain while driving in a sweaty, panic to the hospital.

Kristen had varicose veins. Large twisted blue knots of vein winding their way up the backs of her calves. In normal veins there are valves that open and close as blood is pumped to the heart. In varicose veins the valves don't function properly and the blood gets trapped and pools, causing the veins to bulge. Varicose veins are genetic and, contrary to popular belief, have nothing to do with how much the owner of them crosses her legs or stays standing. (Though it's true that, if a person already has varicose veins, excessive standing can make them worse.) I can't imagine having a condition where even standing can not be done in excess. Kristen couldn't either. She did everything in excess. Drinking, moving, schmoozing, working, cooking, and much later in our relationship, manipulating and lying.

In any case I tried not to be vain about the veins. If Kristen ever brought them up, I told her they were fine and changed the subject. They weren't fine. She had the face of a twenty-eight-year-old and the legs of my grandmother. But I loved her and so was able for the most part to ignore her physical flaws. I think this made Kristen able to ignore them too, for the most part.

She never wore shorts in public until she met me and I assured her that her veins didn't matter. But then one day, one of the veins began to get this odd bubble of skin on it.

Kristen was stubborn. Not about everything. Just about things that would annoy me. Or that's how it felt. She generally refused to go to the doctor even though she had insurance. When she went, she wouldn't pay the co-pays or portions that the insurance hadn't covered until I pestered her about it for months. I agreed with her that it was dumb how expensive medical care was. I agreed that her insurance plan should have covered the whole cost. I did not agree that she should continue to damage her credit after I had spent the first year of our relationship driving her around because she couldn't get a car because her credit history was full of unpaid debts and her driving record full of unpaid tickets and fines. I had a relationship built on martyrdom. Every task that Kristen did somehow required my involvement, so I got to be the ever-silent, ever-suffering girlfriend. I would suck my teeth as I drove Kristen to work in the morning, my brain reeling. "Oh, gee, I just love waking up three hours earlier than I have to so I can bring dumb head over there to work because she refuses to straighten her credit and debts and speeding tickets and get a license and a car. What a great girlfriend I am to do all this with a smile on my fucking face."

I was grumpy. Slowly, I became what I never wanted to be—a nag. My only remedy was either to get Kristen to do what she needed to do (i.e, get a car and a license) or to just shut up and let Kristen do the things that annoyed me. It was easier to shut up about the vein. The reason she wouldn't go to the doctor for it was because she was certain they would simply tell her to stay off her feet more, which was impossible at her retail managerial job. My stomach would lurch when I saw her poking at the vein with her fingernail while we were sitting on the couch watching TV. Rather than say anything, rather than provoke an argument, I found reasons

to be in another room. Kristen was the first person I ever fell in love with. She moved from Chicago to Myrtle Beach to be with me. I felt like I owed her more than I probably did, and I was too young, too immature, to know that it was okay to break up with her. Just because she was my first love, did not mean she had to be my last love.

I was in another room when Kristen committed the accidental attempt at suicide. Or, if the word suicide leaves you uncomfortable, when the fingernail clippers made their accidental attempt at murder. I was upstairs in the shower, and Kristen was downstairs on the couch. It was a lazy summer Sunday afternoon. We had spent the morning eating eggs and drinking mimosas. There was a small music festival at the vineyard near the condo we were renting, and we planned to walk over there once it got a little later in the afternoon and the early summer weather grew a little cooler. I took my time in the shower. When I turned the water off, I thought I heard Kristen yelling my name but I ignored it. I imagined walking all the way down there, still wet and with a towel wrapped around me, and her asking me if I could go out and see if a cooler was in the back of my car, or if I could run to the store and get her an ingredient for something she had decided to cook. As I was toweling my hair off I heard her yelling, for sure this time. “Baby!” I wanted to continue to ignore her, but there was something urgent in the way she yelled. Normally she could always make herself sound urgent (so I wouldn’t ignore her) but this time it seemed real. I wrapped the towel around me and bounded down the stairs into the living room. Kristen was in the kitchen which opened onto the living room. She was bent over the counter by the sink. There was a trail of blood from the couch into the kitchen.

“Kristen, oh my God, what happened?”

She lifted her head up, “Baby, just stay right there, I don’t want you to come in here. I don’t want you to see. It’s not that bad.”

As a thousand possible explanations ran through my head, I remember feeling slightly annoyed that she had told me to stay where I was. She was always trying to infantilize me. Always trying to insinuate that I was too sensitive, too weak to handle things. Always trying to take care of me, to control me. I ignored her command for me to stay back and entered the kitchen. Kristen was holding an entire roll of paper towels to the back of her leg. It was soaked halfway through with bright red blood. My own blood dropped from my face.

“Jesus, Kristen, what did you do?”

“I poked my vein with the corner of the fingernail clippers. It just started spurting blood. Please just call the doctor and see what they say to do.”

Color was already draining from her tan skin. “Kristen. What the hell? Okay we don’t have time for me to call. Just come on and get in the car. We have to go to the hospital.”

Kristen stayed firm in her belief that holding a roll of paper towels to the wound and calling a doctor was the best medical procedure. “Baby, please, don’t argue with me. I’m not going to the hospital. Just call the doctor.”

There was nothing I could do. She wouldn’t listen to me. She had made up her mind that she knew what was best.

I took off the towel I was wearing and handed it to Kristen in hopes she would at least trade the paper towels for a towel. I had to run back upstairs to throw some clothes on. We didn’t get cell phone reception inside our black hole of a condo. I went outside to the parking lot to make the call to the emergency care center just three miles up the road. I told the receptionist in a shaky voice that I needed to speak with a nurse or doctor, and that my girlfriend had cut a varicose vein. A minute later an impatient-sounding nurse picked up the phone. I repeated that my girlfriend had cut her vein and blood was spurting out of it.

The nurse sounded bored and drawled in a thick Southern accent. “Oh well, just put pressure on it and if it don’t stop then she should come in.”

“It’s bleeding pretty bad,” I replied, trying to make the severity of the situation come across so the nurse would tell me to come in and I could tell Kristen it was mandatory. It didn’t occur to me that I could just lie to Kristen and tell her they said to come in right away.

“Well. It should stop. Just put pressure on it.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, and hung up.

When I went back inside Kristen was no longer in the kitchen. She had gone out the sliding glass door that connected the kitchen to the back patio. I could see her through the glass leaning her head against the porch post. She wasn’t using the paper towels or the towel I had given her. The hole in her vein was spurting blood in long streams, horror-movie style. I raced through the kitchen, grabbing the unused towel off the counter as I went. Kristen’s eyes were glazed over, she was yellowing and pale. I could hear a bluegrass band fiddling in the distance as my girlfriend lost blood by the second. I pressed the towel to the back of her leg and told her we had to go to the hospital. She tried to slur something and then just nodded. I put her arm over my shoulder and walked her around the house toward the car. It was an awkward walk as I tried to hold her up and keep the towel pressed to the back of her leg at the same time. It was at least ninety degrees outside, and I was glazed slick with sweat from both the heat and the fear. I opened the car door for Kristen and helped her inside. I pressed the towel to the back of her leg and tried to secure it as best I could. I pushed her leg into the seat to keep the towel from sliding down.

The ride to the hospital only took a few minutes but it was long enough for me to plan Kristen’s funeral and what I would tell her parents when they asked how it happened. The vein

just burst spontaneously. She did not poke at her own vein with a pair of fingernail clippers to see what would happen. Kristen held her head back and tried to slur that she was okay. I pulled into the ambulance bay of the hospital and ran inside. Panting, I told the receptionist my situation. “I just called a second ago. My girlfriend’s leg is spurting blood. She’s lost a lot of it.”

Her eyes stayed vacant, “So you need a wheelchair?”

“Yes, I think she’ll need that.”

The receptionist rang for a nurse to come up with a wheelchair. I led her out to my car. At the sight of the nurse, Kristen’s social-schmoozing self rushed what little blood was left in her body to that smarmy part of her brain, and she made an effort to open the car door and greet the nurse. “Got a little cut here,” she said, lifting a corner of her mouth into a smile.

The nurse pulled the towel slightly away from Kristen’s calf and no blood sprang forth.

“I think the bleeding has stopped. Let’s try to wheel you in without the towel”

With that Kristen looked at me like I was dumb for forcing her to go to the hospital. She gave me a look that said, See, you over-reactor, it stopped.

After Kristen was seated in the wheelchair the nurse looked to me. “You gotta move your car from the emergency, ambulance-only, entrance.” She put heavy emphasis on the last four words as she stared at me like I was wasting everyone’s Sunday on all this mess.

I told Kristen I would meet her inside and moved the car over to the parking lot. Before exiting the car, I grabbed her insurance card out of my center console where she inexplicably kept it. When I got back to the entrance, there was a trail of blood leading from where I had dropped her off all the way inside. Workers were approaching with gloves, cleaning supplies, and biohazard signs. A woman walking out asked them what happened. “Oh, some girl bleeding

all over,” one responded. I ran inside and followed the blood trail to a triage room where two nurses were bandaging Kristen’s leg as she sat slumped in a chair. She lifted her head from her chest and tried to talk.

“Go backcar ishooanscard there bring.”

I held up the card, and Kristen dropped her head back down. The nurse took it from me and told me I could go to the waiting room. They were just going to patch her up and give her some fluids. As I was turning to leave, I heard one of the nurses tell Kristen she might feel sick. Then I heard vomit hitting the trash can placed strategically at her feet. I sat in a tweed chair in the empty waiting room and stared down at the linoleum floor, thinking.

For the first year of our relationship Kristen lived in Chicago while I was in South Carolina. The first time I went to see her was also my first airplane ride, and first trip away from the East Coast. I was nervous to be in the city, and to meet all of Kristen’s friends; they seemed so much more urbane and cool than my friends. An impromptu posse gathered at her apartment to meet me. I remember several gay boys cornered me in the kitchen and discussed such mind-shattering things (to my naïve mind) as the importance of enemas to gay male love making. I drank too much booze and ended up vomiting in Kristen’s bed and all over myself. Kristen had to force me into the shower while she cleaned up the bedroom. When I woke up the next morning with a splitting headache, I remembered nothing of the night before. When Kristen told me what happened, I expected her to act disgusted, but she just laughed it off. I felt lucky to have someone who would put up with my vomit, especially so soon in the relationship.

In the time it took me to read every brochure in the waiting room they had Kristen patched up and us on our way. They put a tight bandage on the wound and told her not to poke at her veins with sharp objects.

Kristen offered me a sheepish smile and an apology as we got into the car.

“I was preparing your eulogy, you know. You scared the crap out of me. What were you thinking?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I was just sitting there clipping my fingernails, and I noticed the bubble on the vein. I just barely tapped it with the edge of the clippers and all of a sudden blood was shooting out of it.”

I helped Kristen out of the car and up the stairs into bed. I elevated her foot on a pillow and put on her favorite movie. Then I went downstairs and looked at the carnage. I would worry about the stained carpet later. My concern now was the pool of blood in the kitchen. It looked like at least a gallon spread across the white linoleum tile. I grabbed a mop and some bleach and went to work. Kristen’s mother worked in a hospital cleaning up emergency rooms after patients came through. I had always questioned whether I could clean up someone else’s bodily fluids. Watching blood congeal and react to bleach was a lot easier than watching my girlfriend pale and slurring from the loss of it.

An hour later I was finishing up. I called a local restaurant and ordered a spinach salad and steak for Kristen. We lay in bed together eating and watching the movie.

In between bites, Kristen apologized. “I’m so sorry you had to clean up all my blood. Thank you so much, baby, you were great today.”

“No problem,” I said, trying to mean it.

Then Kristen got stubborn again. “This bandage is too tight. It’s making me uncomfortable. I’m going to change it and make it looser.”

“Please, just leave it alone.”

“No, Erin, it’s bothering me. Look, my foot is turning blue,” she said, motioning to her propped up foot. It did look a little discolored.

“I don’t think you should mess with it for a little while longer. Please.”

Sometimes it seemed like the more I didn’t want Kristen to do something the more determined she became.

“Nope, I’m going to go loosen it.”

She went into the bathroom and two minutes later she was calling for me. She had a towel over her calf and blood was trailing from underneath it down to her foot. She looked nervous and was going pale again. I felt nauseated and weak.

“I have seen too much of your blood today.”

I left the bathroom and called my friend Candice who had just gotten a nursing degree and who lived only a block or two away. She came right over and re-bandaged Kristen’s leg. “I can’t believe they didn’t cauterize it,” she said, in her thick South Carolina twang. Then she asked Kristen to tell her for the twelfth time exactly how she had managed to break the vein open. She smiled and shook her head. “Only you, girl, only you.” When she was done fixing up Kristen, I walked her back downstairs to the front porch.

“Thank you so much for doing this”

“Oh, no problem. It’s probably going to keep bleeding for a few days. I’ll come back by tomorrow and change it.”

“You are a lifesaver. I can’t handle seeing the blood anymore.”

“Oh, no problem, girl. Don’t even worry ’bout it.”

I had known Candice since the third grade. She was one of those friends I didn’t hang out with all the time but knew I could always count on. As she was leaving she did something

uncharacteristic. She hugged me. Hugging was not uncharacteristic for Candice, but she knew that I wasn't particularly fond of physical displays of affection. I didn't grimace and pull away and make a joke as I normally would have done. I hugged her back.

"You'll be okay," Candice said into my ear. Then she left me standing in the doorway with my girlfriend calling down, asking me to bring her up a beer.

"No, you can't have a beer, you idiot." I stomped back up the stairs.

Costume Changes

On October 31st, 1992, I was an anxiety-ridden eight-year-old, and not just because it was in my cranky nature to suspect that the natural order of things was for them to go wrong. I also had parents who had to work long hours almost every single day. This made them forget, through no fault of their own, the things my two sisters and I held important in life. School plays, parent-teacher conferences, try-outs for sports, play dates with friends—these things were often over-looked. The most frustrating events to be forgotten, however; were holidays. Our obliviousness was never total, but often our family found ourselves scouring the grocery store for a halfway decent turkey the night before Thanksgiving, or shutting our eyes and pulling a birthday present from a bag because someone had not remembered to wrap it. As holidays go, Halloween was a bit harder to pull together at the last minute. You had to plan ahead what you were going to be.

When my sisters and I got back from school that day in 1992 we tried to distract ourselves from worrying when our folks would get home. We consoled ourselves with potato chips and the TV until five when, against our better judgment, we began to stare anxiously at the clock. Our parents were never home by five, and I don't know why we thought this day would be any different.

“You think they’ll come home on time?” we wondered to each other. “You think they’ve forgotten altogether?”

We waited, and we waited. At 6:30 they came home, tired from remodeling a house all day.

My sisters and I whined in unison as soon they got through the door: “Mom! We have to go trick-or-treating. We need costumes. What are we going to do?” We didn’t bother bringing our dad into the mix, knowing he would be no help in the costume-making department.

My mom said what she always said when she forgot something, “Oh, shoot!” And then she was off, scrounging around for costumes. There was a witch hat left over from some year past, so I was transformed into a Trash Bag Witch. She fashioned a dress out of a large black Hefty bag and painted my face green with makeup also left over from who knows when. Voila, a witch. Mandy, my older sister, put on clothes that didn’t match and spray-painted her hair pink with that smelly stuff that washes out in the shower. The bottle was so old it had rust on the bottom, but it still worked; thus, Mandy became a punk rocker. It was at least the third time someone in the family had been got up in a version of that costume. My little sister, Megan, got stuck with the lamest outfit of all: a sheet draped over her tiny frame with holes cut out for eyes. I felt so superior. *A ghost*. How unoriginal. Trash Bag Witch, now that was an outfit!

The small beach town in South Carolina where we lived filled with people in warm weather but was a ghost town this time of year. It was hard to find neighborhoods with enough occupied houses to be worth trick-or-treating in. The solution to this problem was to go trick-or-treating at the local malls and shopping plazas. I glowed with pride at my costume as we swept through the large, brightly lit mall, trying to get as much candy as fast as possible. My trash bag swooshed and crinkled. I smiled wide at classmates from school and strangers alike. I was too young to be embarrassed, to know they were staring at me because my costume was ridiculous, not ingenious.

There was a Polaroid taken that night. The three of us lined up against the wall before we went out. I made my scariest scrunched-up witch face, holding my hands up, my fingers bent

like I thought the witch from the *Wizard of Oz* would do. Mandy grinned beside me; her hair was big, sticky, and tangled. Under a mass of punk-rock hair, her bifocals glinted in the camera flash. Tiny Megan stood on the other side. You couldn't see her smile because of the sheet over her head, but the way her eyes sparkled through the holes you could tell she was. We didn't give a crap if we looked stupid, we were about to get us some candy.

A few years earlier, Mom had been better about remembering Halloween because we still lived in Maryland, my parents' home state, and were surrounded by cousins our age and aunts and uncles and grandparents who reminded us for weeks leading up to the big day that Halloween was coming. Also, Mom didn't work then, so there was a little more time for costuming. So what would we be? Well, it was Maryland, so of course, we'd be three crabs. We were still at the age then when we could be convinced that matching outfits were not nerdy. The year before, our great grandmother made us three-blind-mice costumes out of felt. She fashioned gray head pieces with round ears and pointy noses, put us in gray zip-up, footed, pajamas and then attached a piece of felt cheese and a felt tail. We were warm and comfortable little mice, and at the end of the night we curled up to sleep in the same pajamas we collected candy in.

My mom's idea for a crab costume was far less comfortable. She got cardboard and cut out fronts and back sides that we could wear like sandwich boards. She pinned the cardboard shells up on the clothes line and spray painted them orange, the color of cooked crabs. Then she plopped bright orange ski caps on our heads, the kind hunters wear.

My costume started falling apart the minute we walked out the door. Mom made them so wide we had to walk sideways—crab-wise you could say—to get out. They were awkward and heavy, and I was immediately a very cranky crab. I was entrusted to the care of my older cousins

and as we walked the streets my costume came apart more and more until finally it broke from my shoulders completely. I was stuck dragging that stupid piece of orange cardboard down the street. I whined and complained, but my cousins told me to quit being such a baby and come on already before all the good candy was gone. My sisters' costumes stayed together, and they got all sorts of compliments as doors swung open and they squealed, "trick or treat!" I would come up behind them, all surly with my stupid bright orange hat and beat up pieces of cardboard clenched in my small hand. I didn't bother to say anything. I just held out my bucket. I'd already been tricked, dammit, now treat me.

By the time I turned ten my sisters and I learned that our lives would be less stressful if we made plans to have Halloween with friends. That way, if and when, our parents forgot about the holiday we would still have our friends' parents as back-up to help us get ready and to drive us to the mall before all the good candy was gone. Halloween was on a Saturday that year, so there was trick-or-treating at the local shopping centers on both Friday and Saturday nights. Of course, when I agreed to go trick-or-treating with my best friend Kristin Blanks, I forgot to inform her that I didn't have a costume and it would be nice if her mom could help put one together for me. When I got home from school and realized that I was going to be picked up costume-less in a few hours, I panicked. I was too embarrassed to call Kristin at this late hour and tell her I needed her mom to help me. It seemed like a big imposition. I was thrilled then, an hour later, to hear a car pull up to the house. I assumed my mom had come home at a decent hour and would be able to help me throw something together. I was less than thrilled when my dad, not my mom, walked through the door. For some reason he got home first that night.

"Dad, I need a costume."

“A costume?” he said. My dad had a way of saying things in the form of a question that let you know he wanted no part of whatever you just said. He cracked open a Coors Light, then looked at his watch. He must not have expected Mom home any time soon.

“All right. What do you want to be?”

“I don’t know.” I said. “What do we have around the house?”

“Well, how about a robot?” Dad offered.

“Yeah,” I said, “a robot.”

So he cut a head hole and two arm holes in a cardboard box and put it on me. Then he put silver duct tape up and down my bare arms. I don’t know why he thought it was okay to put duct tape on a human’s bare arm or why I didn’t think to stop him. We were both kind of air-headed that way I guess, both optimistic in the face of really bad ideas. After the duct tape he made an antenna headband out of aluminum foil. Then he drew a couple of buttons on the cardboard box with a sharpie. My dad wasn’t exactly the most involved parent, but he did mean well. I remember feeling kind of awkward as he helped me put the costume together. This was probably the most interaction we had had since he tried to help me make a kite over the summer. There were prolonged silences and stunted laughter as both of us tried to find some sort of common ground with the stranger who lived in the house with us. I was ready to go as Kristin’s mom pulled up and honked her horn in the driveway. I saw pity on her face through the windshield as soon I got out the door. I was old enough by then to know that the people staring at me at the mall were not doing so because of how awesome my costume was.

After trick-or-treating, we went back to Kristin’s house and spent what seemed like hours slowly ripping duct tape off of my arms. I was whiny and tears seeped from my eyes as I picked at the tape. Kristin told me to quit being such a wuss, and her mother told me to hurry up and

just rip it off already. Because I was shy, easy to order around, and desperate to be liked, I had a way of attracting bossy friends. Bossy friends with angry parents. They made me appreciate my own laidback and quiet home. I wasn't mad at my dad at that point; I was mad at my mean friend instead. When I finally removed all the tape, my arms were covered in black glue remnants that stuck in globs to any remaining arm hair I had left. I scrubbed off what I could, but Kristin was cranky and ready for bed, so I ended up going to sleep with much of it still on. The next night Kristin's mom bought me a bandanna and an eye-patch and I went out as a pirate. A much less painful transformation.

In middle school my friends and I would make half-assed attempts to continue the trick-or-treat routine. We would say we were just doing it for the candy but really we were trying to hang on to our quickly dissolving childhoods. By eighth grade we started drinking, and so trick-or-treating gave way to costume parties, and then by high school, just regular old parties at the houses of whatever friends had the most slack or absentee parents. The homemade and store-bought masks of childhood gave way to masks of bravado as we pretended to be too cool and adult to care about a holiday made for kids. We were too old to go around begging for candy. We were too old to feel transformed into different creatures or persons just by putting on some face paint. We were transforming every day and didn't need costumes (other than the clothes that we thought were cool enough to wear to school).

As an adult, I moved from my small beach town to New Orleans, a city that reveres the mask. I have been to more costume parties in the years I've been in New Orleans than I had in the entirety of my earlier life. The parties are an excuse to drop the civility of everyday life and

enter into a place where a costume allows you to do things you normally wouldn't (all the booze in New Orleans helps, too). When I dressed up like Alice B. Toklas for a literary-themed dance, I reveled in being unattractive and matronly, checking the mirror only to be sure I was still as homely as ever. For a Saints game, I dressed like a pill-addicted fifties housewife and went to a local bar. This gave me the opportunity to pretend to eat dog food out of a large Purina bag and give fans of the opposite team hazy, wide-eyed grins. This is, of course, not something I would do were I not in costume. Once I'm in a costume I can say, "Hey, look at my outfit and hand me a beer." On Mardi Gras day if someone says you look ridiculous they are probably saying it because you're *not* wearing a costume (I was told just that by a girl in an eighties workout uniform complete with neon headband). The costume is important; it's vital; it's required, to fit in. Second to Mardi Gras, in terms of the number of people in the streets and the outrageousness of their costumes, is, of course, Halloween, which New Orleans does with typical New Orleans panache.

My second Halloween in New Orleans I decided to go to Frenchmen Street. Frenchmen is adjacent to the French Quarter, and it is lined with bars and jazz clubs that play live music. It's the place to be Halloween night, a swirling mass of drunken folks in costume. I bought a fedora, wing-tip shoes, pinstripe pants, red suspenders, and a polka-dot tie from the Salvation Army for \$4.39 and decided I was an old-timey gangster. I bought these things weeks before Halloween because I still had a little bit of costume anxiety left over from my youth. On Halloween night I caught a cab to Frenchmen with my girlfriend (in a flapper dress), a girl dressed as Cleopatra, and a very fabulous gay man who wore tight white pants and a midriff-baring pink and black checkered horse jockey's shirt. He also had on knee-high shiny black leather boots with six-inch heels, which I don't think are regulation race track wear, but should

be. As soon as we left the cab he had both men and women reaching out to touch his six pack to tell him how “fucking hot” he was. His outfit was no mask. He was used to being fabulous, to having attention lavished on him just for looking good. Every day was Halloween for him, and I was a bit jealous of his ability to be best friends with whoever happened to be standing next to him, or grabbing his ass.

We got to Frenchmen early enough to find a nice spot in the street to just sit back and watch all of the costumes parade by. Some were store-bought, but the best were ones that people made themselves. It was a point of pride for me now that my Halloween costumes as a kid were homemade. Even if some of them were disastrous, at least I never had to wear one of those lame polyester superhero costumes with the plastic mask held to your head with a cheap elastic string. I know the value now of recycling old clothes and cardboard boxes. And I can recognize the talent and hard work that goes into making a truly great and original costume. I smiled as I watched someone dressed as a fortune-telling machine walk by. When it comes to reusing a cardboard box, that was mighty good. Then there was a devil with cloven hooves, a spade-tipped tail, big goat horns, the works. I’m sure if I had seen that costume as a child, I probably would have peed my pants a little. After that, people dressed as contestants from a favorite childhood show called Double Dare. Then someone with a giant papier mache skull, another with a papier mache elephant head. I appreciated how awkward they must have been to get through a door, much more difficult than my childhood crab costume. A zombie, a narwhal, a pirate ninja.

I leaned against a stranger’s truck with a beer in my hand and a flask in my pocket. I had a pretty girl next to me and a fabulous boy on the other side being happily fondled by strangers. The weather was cool. People were smiling, laughing, prancing even. We all stared at each

other. It seemed like one of the few times when people were allowed to just check one another out without feeling awkward or ashamed. When a girl dressed as a unicorn stopped next to me, a man walked by and said, “Whoo girl, you should win any costume contest you enter.” Then he stared at her ass which she had padded to make it seem more horse-like. He whistled and moved on. Instead of looking offended or ignoring him as most people would have done, she just smiled and laughed and took the compliment. Sure that guy might have leered but who cared? It was a costume; it was a big fake horse ass. All of us were saying with our outfits, our faces, our intoxication, it’s Halloween and what are you going to do about it, dammit? We have control, and we’re being whoever we want to be.

Keep Surfing

I sit in the car in front of David's house, compulsively picking the skin from my thumbs. When I was a kid, I was a constant fingernail biter, but the tic switched to skin picking when I got braces. The more nervous I am, the more I pick, rending and peeling the skin in sheets from the sides of my fingers. I don't know David that well, but we are about to go surfing together off the Louisiana coast. I don't know Louisiana that well either, having only moved to New Orleans for graduate school a year prior. I'm also not exactly an expert surfer. These areas of uncertainty have combined into a perfect storm of anxiety which I try to quell with deep breathing and skin shredding. Tropical storm Ida is slowly making her way up from Mexico, and the waves down at Port Fourchon, two hours or so from New Orleans, are supposed to be getting up into the six-foot range. Pretty big for the Gulf. Pretty big for me, someone who learned to surf in the knee high waves of the Atlantic Ocean off South Carolina. Have I made David believe that my surfing skills are better than they are? Am I going to chicken out when I see six-foot waves from a strange beach? What the hell are we going to talk about in the car for an hour, and what kind of music should we listen to? Why did I think this was a good idea? I take one last breath, get out of the car, and knock on David's door. A light rain falls from low-hanging dark gray clouds.

I started surfing in the middle of what my twenty-year-old self thought was a major life crisis. My junior year of college I realized that I hated the school I chose and needed to transfer back to my hometown university. I also realized that I hated my roommate and best friend because I was in love with her, and she would never love me back because she had this problem called "being straight." I moved back to Myrtle Beach and came out to my mother while drunk at Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville on my twenty-first birthday. The conversation went like this:

Me: Mom, I like girls. Like, *like* them. Like them to date. To go out with.

Mom: (who never drinks or curses but has managed to down three margaritas) I don't give a shit. You want to date girls, date girls. Fuck that shit. I love you. Date girls!

So it was decided. I would date girls that summer.

And also, because my mom bought me a surfboard for my birthday, I would surf. I had been asking for a surfboard since I was a kid, but I because I was such a klutzy kid (walking, for me, was an extreme sport that could end in sprained ankles) I don't think my parents had much faith that surfing was the sport for me. I never pushed the issue, because surfing seemed like the kind of thing that only cool kids were allowed to do. I was shy and awkward, with just a few close friends I felt comfortable being myself around. I was quiet in school, refusing to make eye contact with anyone except people I knew would not make fun of me for some reason. This limited my eye contact greatly. The kids who surfed were confident, loud, and athletic. If some of those kids saw me in the ocean on a surfboard, I had no doubt that they would laugh at me and tell everyone in school what a poseur I was. I did not want to draw that kind of attention to myself. I did not want to draw any attention at all to myself. Under the radar was where I wanted to be, my social milieu of choice.

After watching me laze in front of the television for weeks, defeated after having to transfer home to our local university (known more for its parties than its academics), Mom decided to get me out of the house with a new surfboard. My first few times at the beach I had to push myself not to worry what other people thought of me, and soon I barely noticed they were there. I stood on a wave for the first time that summer, accidentally mooning the whole beach as I rose from a crouch because my bathing suit bottom was a size too large. I also went on my first dates with girls. In hindsight, both experiences were equally awkward: wobbly knees, spastic

movements, weird vocalizations during exertions, but nonetheless, they were exhilarating. I felt like I could finally do things that had always been just out of my reach.

Surfing is a sport that required I practice bravery. When waves swelled bigger than I was used to, I was still compelled to paddle out and try. I would watch the experts as they flew down the face of the waves and then cut back; sending rooster-tail sprays high up into the air. Adrenaline would roil in my chest and I would feel envy for what they were able to do. At least I had to attempt to stand, even if it meant getting slammed down into white water again and again. Making it to my feet even once meant I had done something. If I sat in a class all day, afraid to speak out loud, afraid to face my social anxiety, I could at least go to the beach afterwards and glide in sync with a crashing wave. I could find confidence and worth in that act. And maybe it would eventually carry over into other aspects of my life.

When I was choosing graduate programs, I figured I should choose schools near the water. I got into the University of North Carolina at Wilmington which is on the coast and only forty-five minutes from Myrtle Beach, where I grew up. It was a place I had been to many times and I was used to the Wilmington surf as well. I also got into the University of New Orleans. It was a place I had visited only once but still felt a strong attraction to. Friends in New Orleans assured me there were beaches within a few hours drive. I decided to leave the water I was used to. I went to New Orleans.

The thing about beaches near New Orleans is that they don't have waves. I wasn't looking for the kind of waves that killed Patrick Swayze in *Point Break* or anything, just

something to push me into shore. As it turns out, even knee high waves are hard to come by on the Gulf Coast. New Orleans offered me something Myrtle Beach and Wilmington couldn't, though. Friendly, social people, and also people of varied backgrounds and persuasions. This is not to say there aren't friendly, social people on the East Coast, but it's not in the same league as the bubbling social life of New Orleans. At every checkout counter, on every corner, in every bar, someone is waiting to tell you her life story. My social anxiety eased if only because there was always someone asking how I was and telling me how they were. And people didn't mind if I didn't talk much; they had plenty to tell me. About how their mama was, where a second line was going to be, or which musician was in town. There were also real live gay people in New Orleans. I rented a house on a street where straight couples were outnumbered by gay couples, and nobody thought anything of it. This was unheard of in Myrtle Beach, where I knew about five gay people total. New Orleans was warm, comfortable, and laid back, and I wanted to call it home. I could find places to surf on breaks from school.

I met David on a humid, hair-curling night in September, while sharing drinks with classmates at a local bar. I think most people's first impressions of David probably include the words *tall* and *nice*. He is one of those animated-type guys who gets invited to everything because he puts people at ease and comes up with fun things to do. I think the story I was told about David just after meeting him was about the time he organized an entire bar into playing a game of bocce ball on the neutral ground at three in the morning. It was hot outside and David ended up taking his jeans off and playing in his boxers. That's when the cops showed up.

At the bar, the night I met him, David jumped into a story about his weekend. He had surfed in Lake Pontchartrain when Hurricane Gustav passed by the city. I was amazed. Sure, the lake was massive, but I didn't think it could actually produce swells. Also, when I asked if it

was possible to swim in the lake upon first moving to New Orleans, I was told unanimously “no way.” The lake was far too polluted for swimming.

“So you actually went in the lake?” I asked.

“Oh sure,” David exclaimed locking his hands on top of his wavy mop of brown hair, “I was wearing a wetsuit. It was fine. Oh, dude, it was so much fun. We caught some pretty nice little waves, man.” He had even convinced his girlfriend, Sunday, to get out in the lake and stand up on a few. “Hey, listen, if you surf, I’d love to go out with you some time. We’ll keep an eye on the surf reports and maybe go out to the gulf or something.” Then he told me about a surf shop in the city and how the people who worked there knew of all sorts of places on the gulf where the waves were often ride-able. I was intrigued but I was too shy ever to visit the shop and the topic of surfing didn’t come up between me and David for another year.

When I moved to New Orleans in the fall, I had done so with a girlfriend. By the spring I no longer had the girlfriend. I decided it would be good for me to go home for the summer instead of staying in New Orleans. I wanted to spend every day I could in the vast ocean, not thinking about anything except catching the next wave. I worked for my parents’ painting company and surfed in the mornings, afternoons, and on weekends. I had typical break-up anxieties. Sometimes my ex-girlfriend would contact me. Sometimes a new girl would contact me. I searched the internet for an apartment for one. On land, my thoughts swam with concerns about returning to New Orleans. About what my life would be like as a single person in a city. About which friends I would lose in the breakup. In the water I sat and watched waves approach me. I paddled to keep up with them and pushed myself to my feet right before they broke. I

glided with them for a few seconds then fell into the water and started all over again. That was it. I saw the backs of dolphins arch across a sunset and watched cannonball jellyfish drift slowly past me. Once I saw a stingray leap from the water, its wings stretched like a hawk. The splash it made when it belly flopped back into the water startled a nearby floating pelican. It unfurled its giant wings and took off. I grew more tan and fit that summer than I had been in years. I was happy surfing alone, sitting on my board for hours, watching the waves build and crash, watching the sun make its way to the horizon. I was always in motion but felt very still and calm, a small piece of a large picture. I was ready to return to New Orleans at the end of summer.

I had been back a few months when David asked me if I wanted to surf Port Fourchon. He and Sunday invited a group of friends over to their house for brunch. It was a warm November Saturday, and we all sat on the porch watching fat drops of rain plop onto the street while we drank mimosas from goblet-sized glasses. It was moments like these that made me okay with living in New Orleans even if there wasn't a beach right around the corner. As I watched a bulging tear of water form and threaten to drop from the bright green leaf of a banana tree, David asked me if I had heard about tropical storm Ida making its way up from South America. It was projected to make landfall in Mobile, well east of New Orleans, but was churning up some powerful waves off the coast of Louisiana. David looked at me earnestly, the only way he has of looking, and said, "Hey, Erin. You know what we should do? We should go down to Port Fourchon tomorrow before the Saints game and try to catch some waves. It's only like two hours away; we could leave early in the morning. I have an extra surfboard and a wetsuit you can borrow." My mimosa said yes before my brain even had a chance to worry

about a two-hour car drive to polluted, storm-thrashed waters with a dude I didn't know that well.

I ended up going out that night for more drinks with my new girlfriend, Shelley, someone from New Orleans I had known before my break-up. Shelley had come to visit me in Myrtle Beach over the summer, and I showed her how to surf. When I returned to New Orleans, we picked up where we left off; loving each other's company so much we decided to see one another exclusively. She didn't think I'd wake up at seven the next morning, especially since she had spent all night telling me about Port Fourchon. The horizon was littered with oil derricks, and the water was murky brown. The beach would smell like rotten fish, and I should probably make sure my tetanus shots were up to date. To her surprise (and mine), I pried myself from my hangover the next morning and headed over to David and Sunday's house. I couldn't pass up a chance to surf in Louisiana.

Sunday answered the door and said that David had just woken up and would be out in a second. She was supposed to come with us on the trip but decided at the last minute she better stay home since people were coming over to watch the game that afternoon. She wouldn't have gone in the water anyway, she said. I felt kind of bad for taking David away when they were hosting a gathering that day, but Sunday didn't seem the least bit bothered. She was smiling and seemed excited for me and the adventure I was about to have. They seemed like a perfect couple at that point. Easygoing and open to whatever the day had to offer, able to appreciate each other's capriciousness. When he came out of the bedroom David said, "Dude this is going to be so awesome," in a sleep-filled but enthusiastic voice.

David is one of those people who have epic stories. Because of his eager and adventurous personality, people like to take him along for cool rides. As we left the Interstate for the winding roads that lead to the Gulf, David began to wake up, and with his wakefulness came some of those stories—stories about Mardi Gras, about growing up in West Virginia, about his father and brothers, about places he had traveled to. His stories and my responses—“Oh, wow” and “I can’t believe that happened to you”—filled the drive to the beach. We drove past bayou towns covered in signs proclaiming the dominance of their local high school football teams. “Spear the Tarpons!” declared a white sign with red letters. “Number six is number one! Go Jimmy, Go Gators!” offered another. It was my first trip this far south in Louisiana and I really had no idea where we were going. Maps of the jagged, cauliflowered coast always befuddled me and I could never be sure which parts were land and which parts were swamps or gulf. I never figured out where the people lived. Now I saw it was on very thin strips of land in raised houses. All the houses on stilts reminded me of my own beach hometown and made me feel at ease. There were moments of awkward silence, between David’s stories, but the air in the car didn’t fill with my anxiety as it normally would have. I let the silence hang there between us, and then would force myself to come up with a question for David or some mundane observation about the scenery. While “there sure are a lot of signs” doesn’t amount to conversational genius, I was proud of my efforts anyway.

We drove over an immense white bridge that curved and looped over a marsh and into Port Fourchon. The road ended in a sand parking lot on the edge of the Gulf of Mexico. Two surfers were in the water and people sat in three or four parked cars, watching the waves build. The landscape was just like David and my girlfriend had described it. Giant rock jetties, spaced about a hundred yards from each other, stretched out into the water like insect legs from the body

of the beach. Past the jetties were black oil derricks not as far from shore as I had imagined. Helicopters dotted the dark gray sky as they flew to and from the structures like noisy wasps. The water was brown and boiled up big foamy white waves that smashed against the jetties and sent spray up toward the helicopters. If there is an apocalypse or some stormy god- sent day of reckoning, I already know what this part of the world will look like when it occurs.

I had surfed tropical storms before in Myrtle Beach, but the scenery there had never looked so bleak, so dangerous. For one thing, we didn't have rock jetties. To add to my fear, I was also worried about impressing David and not looking like a moron. He glanced over at me after a few minutes of our staring through the windshield at the gulf. We both had wide eyes and slack jaws. We laughed at ourselves and got out of the car. Wind blew sand in my ears; I shivered and hugged my arms to my chest. I wondered how long I could stand being in the water. David handed me a shark skin, which is a long-sleeved waterproof top. He didn't have a wetsuit that would fit me so I would just have to make do with the shark skin and my board shorts to keep me warm. We put wax on our boards and lifted our heads occasionally to watch how the other surfers were doing. They paddled dangerously close to the jetties and took very few attempts at catching the waves. I didn't think I was in good enough shape to paddle past the breakers and rip currents to the end of the jetties without getting swept into them, or worse, out to sea. As if reading my mind David said, "I don't think I'll be making it out that far."

"Me neither," I said, still staring out at the struggling surfers.

"All right then, let's just go out there and see how far we get." David clapped his hands together and hopped into a stride for the gulf.

I let David lead and was surprised by the relative warmth of the water and the fact that the tug of the current wasn't as strong as it looked. When I had surfed storms in Myrtle Beach, I

was usually swept off my feet as soon as the water got knee high. Here the slope wasn't as steep so it was an easy walk out. The current was pulling to the right so we started close to a left jetty and once we got to chest high water David stroked hard for a fast coming wave. The waves were wide and sloppy so there wasn't much to do on them but stand upright for a half-minute or so before they petered out into foam. That's exactly what David did. All six foot et cetera of him. Midway through his ride he turned around and smiled like a kid and pumped his fist in the air.

Now it was my turn. After getting jostled around for a few minutes and having to spend more seconds than I would have liked ducking my head underneath some face-smashing waves, I picked a promising one and paddled until my arm muscles burned. I stood too late—the wave was already breaking—but still managed a two-second ride. David cheered and clapped his hands. That's all it took. I was hooked and happy and unafraid. I stopped worrying about what David would think of me and focused on having fun in this eerie place.

After surfing just one wave, the current had already pulled David and me halfway to the next jetty. So we caught one more then walked on the shore past the jetty to the next section of beach before paddling back out again. We rode waves like this, staying in between the jetties and not paddling out past them, for about a half mile then pulled our exhausted bodies from the water and sat on the shore watching the ocean explode. Foam slid across the sand as if it had been soaped, and I couldn't help wondering if it was from the oil derricks. A random pumpkin, a survivor from Halloween, I supposed, rested in the reeds behind us next to a giant rotting fish carcass. Not pristine, but still fun.

David told me stories about places he had surfed. On Cape Hatteras, he had surfed all day and played bass in a band at night. He said Puerto Rico had amazing waves, and it was the best trip of his life. When we felt rested enough, we got up and walked back to our starting

point. Then we got back into the water and started the cycle all over again. The dismal landscape did nothing to diminish the satisfaction that came from standing on a wave and then diving back into the water as it came to an end. Struggling with the tide and the waves kept me busy, too preoccupied to commune with my anxieties. I relished the transition from the roaring crashing of the surface to the swooshing silence beneath the water.

There are all sorts of “philosophies of surfing.” Some people think of it as a religious experience and see God in the wave. Some see unity with nature and brotherhood with fellow surfers. Some see a way to get chicks. For me surfing coincided with a time in my life when I felt like I was finally growing up. A time when I could stop worrying about everyone else’s opinion of me and start forming my own. The girlfriend I broke up with before the summer had been my first. It wasn’t exactly a bad relationship, but it had gone on for two years longer than it probably should have. There was co-dependence in it; I had depended on her to take care of my every need. My trip with David was one I never would have taken when I was with that girl. She wouldn’t have thought I was capable of it, and so, neither would I. I would have been too afraid of being socially and physically awkward. But I loved surfing enough to risk looking like a geek. This is how people like David become the life of the party. Because they have fun without worrying about who is watching. I was miserable for years of my life until I told myself to shut up and come out. To shut up and surf. To shut up and break off the bad relationship. To shut up and do. Surfing is all about movement and the most fun times in surfing are also the times when the ocean is at its most active. I was so afraid of making waves in my life that I let it grow stagnant. It wasn’t until I stopped doing what I thought I was supposed to do that I started to have more fun.

We left the beach at two to make it back in time for the game at four. After getting lost on some back roads and stopping for a sandwich, we realized we would be late. In another gift from New Orleans, the Saints were undefeated so far that year. This had brought an often fractious town to an unprecedented level of hope and cohesion. Every single person in the city seemed to be rooting for that loveable team of underdogs to make it to the Super Bowl. I was excited to get back to David and Sunday's house to watch the game with friends. Usually gatherings like that, lots of people crammed into a small room, made me uncomfortable. But now, I looked forward to seeing everyone.

As we exited the Interstate and sped into the city, we weren't surprised that the streets were empty. Everyone was inside watching the game. It was half-time when we pulled up to David's house. Leaving the boards on top of the car, we rushed inside to a living room full of smiling friends. They wanted to know all about our trip, and David began with "Oh man, dude, it was crazy. Waves crashing, helicopters flying, awesome. It was rough though, man. Gotta get in better shape." Then he recounted our adventure in more detail—the waves, the jetties, the rides. When the crowd turned to me for more, I blushed a little but didn't freak out about it and mumble something incoherent. Instead, I told them how much fun it was, and how weird Port Fourchon is. I was comfortable in a room full of new friends, not worried if I was doing or saying the right thing, having a good time. I was warm and tired in the best way. I had just surfed the most challenging conditions of my life, had faced down big fears, and somehow come through. I knew I would never be David; I knew I would always feel a little awkward in a crowd, and at that moment, I was okay with that.

Designing a Golden Rant

As a kid, my older sister would call me a feminist as an insult. I had this habit of developing crushes on women on television. Not just any women, but ladies who thought women and men were equals. My sister took these gals to be militant nerds who had no fun. She thought I was also a militant nerd who had no fun. I first learned to use the phrase “male chauvinist pig” from the Saturday morning show about kids in a California high school, *Saved by the Bell*. Jesse Spano was an uptight, straight-A, student, and she often called her jock boyfriend, A.C. Slater, a pig. To which A.C. would respond with some genius retort such as, “Oink, oink, baby.” A.C.’s lame responses to Jesse only affirmed for me that girls ruled and boys drooled. If a neighborhood boy banned me from a basketball game because I was a girl, or told me that boys were better tree climbers, I had no problem hurling the Spano line at him. Not that the boys usually cared. But to me, it felt like a victory for women.

My two other favorite TV women were Dorothy Zbornak from *The Golden Girls*, a show about older women who live together in Miami, and Julia Sugarbaker from *Designing Women*, a show about middle-aged women who work together at an interior design firm in Georgia. Both women were smart and sarcastic, and each had her own crew of supportive female friends (who did not engage in backstabbing or cat fighting). But the most important part of these women was that they were never at a loss for words. They had the ability, which only people with scripts have, to say exactly what they want to say when they want to say it. Of course I wanted to hone this ability even if it was an entirely fictional skill. Dorothy Zbornak’s specialty was witty one-liners usually fired at one of her roommates. Like when dim-witted Rose asks Dorothy if she can ask her a stupid question and Dorothy responds, “Better than anyone I know.” Julia Sugarbaker’s specialty was long-winded, left-leaning rants that usually ended with the phrase, “as God is my

witness.” Anything could set off Julia Sugarbaker. The NRA, school prayer, someone insulting the South; it didn’t really matter; she would find a way to get on her soap box. Julia lived for the opportunity to rail against stupidity and inequity. When asked about the battle of the sexes Julia delivered a rant which pretty much blamed all of the world’s problems on men. Of course I loved it:

“In general it has been the men who have done the raping and the robbing and the killing and the war-mongering for the last 2,000 years. ... It has been the men who have done the pillaging and the beheading and the subjugating of whole races into slavery. It has been the men who have done the lawmaking and the moneymaking and the most of the mischief-making! So if the world isn't quite what you had in mind, you have only yourselves to thank!”

Because I was typically quiet and shy, I lived vicariously through the feminists on TV. Back in the real world, calling a boy a chauvinist pig was about as far as I ever got, and I stopped that soon after I got teased for it. I didn’t have the support of a laugh track or audience cheers like the old broads on the sitcoms did.

T.J. Johnson* (*name changed to protect the “innocent”) was an asshole. To this day, I wish I had stood up to him. He’s the kid I suddenly remember when I’m about to fall asleep. I then spend hours imagining responses to some insult he tossed at me almost twenty years ago. Funny how the brain never remembers old compliments. T.J. was the definition of a chauvinist bully, and he had no problem asserting his dominance over people. By fifth grade he had already dated (as much as you can date in fifth grade) and broken up with every pretty girl in our age group. I was not a pretty girl (I had a bowl cut, and dudes did not like girls with the same haircut

as theirs), so he teased me along with the rest of the kids he did not deem “on his level.” He was the kind of kid who you know is going to grow up to be a frat guy and then maybe a lawyer or business executive. The kind of guy you don’t want to run the world, but who does anyway. He got away with all manner of bullying, even when he did it right in front of teachers.

Once he blew a spit ball into my face. I pulled the wet ball off my cheek and threw it to the floor, not making eye contact with T.J. I stared at my desk and hoped he would move on to someone else. In my mind I had a well-rehearsed Julia Sugarbaker rant that I knew I would never dare to say out loud. Mentally, I called him a jerk and pointed out that he was not as cute as he thought and actually resembled a freckle faced rat. Also he was mean and dumb. In silence I said, your life is going to peak in high school because you only care about shallow things. I would declare that the only reason he had any friends was because people were afraid of him and because his parents had money, so he had cool toys. You’re short, T.J., and you have bad breath, and you kind of look like the bully from *A Christmas Story*. You’re going to end up fat, and bald, and alone someday (the miracle of Facebook has affirmed the fat and bald part).

Julia Sugarbaker once said that we love to see beautiful people grow fat and old. I am no exception to that shallow rule.

My rants were never so well put together as the ones on TV and because they were delivered in my head only, they didn’t stop me from being teased. After hitting me with the spit ball T.J. asked why my teeth were so messed up (I would get braces the next year) and why all my friends were so weird? (I had weird friends because they were more fun, and also because I was weird.) I didn’t respond. I blushed and squirmed and waited for the teacher to notice the asshole in her class was at it again. Eventually T.J. was told to be quiet, and I was allowed to return to silent contemplation of the injustices of life. Why couldn’t I stand up for myself? Why

couldn't the shoulder-padded specters of Julia Sugarbaker and Dorothy Zbornak appear at my side whenever I was being teased. They would know the right words to end the situation.

Dorothy, five foot ten inches of sheer sarcasm, would float in wearing some 1980's pantsuit that could only be described as "blousy." She would loom over T.J. and narrow her eyes into slits of hate. Even when taking the self-deprecating route, Dorothy's baritone gets across the point that it is time for the mean conversation to end. So Dorothy might ask T.J. as she leered down at him, the sequins on her outfit flashing in the fluorescent lights, if she should spray paint the phrase "too ugly to live" on his hump. Then she might call him a hairy little troll (she was fond of calling her sassy Sicilian mother that). Or she might use the line she used in the episode where the Golden Girls ended up in jail after being mistaken for prostitutes (yes, a real plot line). She warns jail mates who try to pick a fight that she's done time in Attica. When they point out that Attica is a men's prison Dorothy's response is, "I know. I was there a year before they found out." I can't think of anything that would scare T.J. more ... Except for a Julia Sugarbaker rant.

When Dorothy was done with T.J., Julia would swoop in, curly hair haloing out into a coif of professional vengeance, her smile pulled into a smirk. She might say, "Just so YOU know, the next time you speak to me in that tone of voice, you're going to the moon." And Dorothy, standing behind Julia with her arms folded would nod in agreement. Then Julia would give T.J. a rant meant to shame him for being such an awful person and to bolster me into not caring what someone like T.J. thinks. It's a rant she'd said before, in an episode of *Designing Women* when her sister Suzanne felt bad for not being a beauty queen anymore. Placing a hand on my shoulder and still somehow leering at T.J., Julia would say,

“In the end it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks about you. You have to be exactly who and what you want to be. Most everyone is floating along on phony public relations. People who say being beautiful, or rich or thin makes them happy — people who are trying to make their marriages and their children seem better than they actually are.... and for what?! Appearances. Appearances don't count for diddly! In the end, all that really matters is what was true, and truly said, and how we treated one another.”

Then both guardian angels would fade out, and the audience would applaud and cheer and whoop. Instead, the bell signaling the end of class rings, and I have to deal with the fact that I'm stuck with T.J. until graduation.

I think I relied on the TV feminists to be my guardian angels because they offered a viewpoint different from that of my own mother. Not that my mom isn't a feminist; she's just not outspoken. She doesn't care what other people think about her. At all. She is a female in the construction industry and faces all sorts of derision from men on the job site. That is until they see her get to work and realize she is stronger, faster, and smarter than they are. Mom doesn't brag; she doesn't whine; she doesn't rant. She just Gets The Job Done. When I was home for Christmas break, we took apart and rebuilt a bunk bed for my nephews as a “quick after-work project.” On a recent family vacation we went ice skating. As I wobbled onto the ice like a new-born deer, my mom glided away like Kristi Yamaguchi, spinning and skating backwards in circles around me. I had no idea Mom even knew how to ice skate let alone do spinny skate moves. All she said to my amazed response was, “Oh, I used to live by a skating rink when I was a kid.” The woman just has skills and doesn't feel the need to talk about it. Whenever I would complain to my mom about someone being mean or derisive to me her response was

always, “So? What do you care?” She cannot comprehend wasting time worrying about other people’s opinions. I don’t have that kind of confidence, and therefore, I need the rant.

I saw T.J get into trouble once, in sixth grade science class, after he teased a boy sitting next to him. The boy wore brand new shoes, chunky white sneakers, not quite the right brand name or style. So T.J. said to the boy, in the middle of class while we were all quiet and working on an assignment, “Why did you pick out such ugly shoes?” The boy said something along the lines of, “Leave me alone; I like my shoes.” To which T.J., galled that the boy had defended himself, said, loudly, “Ew, you’re such a *faggot*.”

The teacher, Mrs. Wilson, a tiny woman with a thick Southern drawl, exploded with unexpected intensity. She went on a Sugarbaker rant. Out loud. She squinted her eyes at T.J. looking at him as if he were some sort of large cockroach.

“Really? Really, T.J.?” she asked.

“What?” T.J. responded defiantly, pretending he was allowed to say whatever, whenever.

That’s when the rant started: “What is wrong with you? You don’t say that word to anyone. It’s the same as cussing in the middle of class. We don’t do that. It’s rude, and it’s mean, and nobody is going to speak to anyone else in my class that way again. Do you understand me? That word is hate speech, and I should write you up for harassment. I can’t believe you don’t know better than that by now. I can’t believe you would talk to another classmate like that. No, really, what is wrong with you? What came over you that you thought you could use that word in my classroom? I feel like I should be able to expect more from a boy your age. Apologize right now, and then don’t speak in this class again for the rest of the day.”

T.J. was stunned, but he tried to hide it. He sucked his teeth and narrowed his rat-like eyes at the boy he had called a faggot. “Geez, dude, sorry, whatever.” Then he slid down in his seat and stared moodily at his desk. I kept my head down throughout the rant, not wanting to somehow become involved in the conflict. I wasn’t brave enough even to nod approvingly at Mrs. Wilson for not letting T.J. be a dick. But in my mind I was jumping up and down and screaming, “You go, girl!” In my mind I was older, and I would clap Mrs. Wilson on the back like a colleague and congratulate her for telling off the student we all hated.

I was terrified when T.J. called that boy a faggot, because I considered myself to be somewhat of a lady faggot. Of course, I couldn’t tell that to anyone, not until college anyway. Whenever someone was accused of being gay, I was always worried that I would be next to be outed. I was already outcast for being a quiet nerd with bad hair who went around quoting lines from *The Golden Girls* all the time. A more assertive person might have thought that there was nothing left to lose and would have come out on her own. But I was a delusional nerd, always thinking I wasn’t *that* uncool, and that if I kept a low profile maybe I could make it through the day without getting picked on.

The fact is, I was picked on just about every day in school, but it was never for being gay or even for having clunky sneakers. It was for being quiet, or for having a weird sense of humor, or making a good grade. By the time I got to high school, I realized that the people who picked on me weren’t really that great and their opinion of me didn’t matter. Why should I care if the popular girl with the awful personality thought it was stupid that I liked to read? What did it matter that T.J. Johnson, who was no looker himself, thought that I was ugly? (On *The Golden Girls*, when beautiful and promiscuous Blanche asks Dorothy when she started to care about her looks, Dorothy’s response is, “I think it started when I came down from the bell tower and had my

hump fixed.”) I never stood up to these kids, making friends with the kids who could quote *The Golden Girls* instead.

Nobody in my high school came out as gay except for two girls who started dating each other in tenth grade. They dropped out of school after a few months of people talking about them as if they were from another planet. I never saw either of them again. I always liked to pretend that they ended up together in some gay-friendly city. They own a construction business, drive Subarus, and have two cats named Julia and Dorothy. They go camping together every weekend and have a shared love of folk music festivals. They hold hands in public and no one ever looks at them funny because they are just that cute together. The pain of high school is just a distant memory, a story they tell younger lesbians to let them know that life gets better.

When I got out of high school it was a relief rarely to see the kids who had tried to make my life miserable. Then Facebook was invented, and suddenly all those kids wanted to be my online “friend.” For the most part I ignored those requests, but sometimes, morbid curiosity would drive me to accept, if just to see what life had dished up to them. One girl, upon seeing that I was in a relationship with a woman, messaged me to say that she had always suspected I was a lesbian. She offered to pray for me. Another girl said that what I was doing was unnatural, but she hated the sin and not the sinner.

I don't know why when some people get on Facebook they feel the need to let the entire world know their every bigoted opinion. I thought Facebook was a place to polish your personality and only show its virtues, but a lot of people seem to think it's a great opportunity to show off what ignorant assholes they've become. It's a passive/aggressive person's dream come true. The chance to tell someone off is always at your fingertips when you're on Facebook, but for the most part I resist the temptation. It's cathartic, at first, to rant at an Internet

troll, but it loses its satisfaction pretty quickly. You spend hours calculating a really well thought out and logical response, and then they respond with a passage from the Old Testament. You can't argue with that kind of intellectual laziness.

I really did want to Sugarbaker both of those girls, though. Or come up with a really good Zbornak one-liner. I wanted to tell them it's not okay to judge someone because you don't have sex the same way they do. I wanted to point out all the passages in the Bible that say ridiculous things. In fact they don't even have to work hard to find ridiculous Bible passages; flip to Leviticus 24, a few pages after the infamous Leviticus 18, and the Bible says, "Whoever utters the name of the Lord must be put to death. The whole community must stone him whether alien or native. If he utters the name, he must be put to death." A few pages after that we're told that people with crushed testicles aren't allowed to go to church. So I just want to know why they choose that one passage to pay attention to. I want to ask them if they really think that God would want them to be condescending and annoying to other people? I want to say that, if it's okay for them judge who I'm having sex with, then it's okay for me to comment on the picture they posted, the one that shows the make-out session with the homely stranger on St. Patrick's Day. (Quick Sugarbaker sidebar on the topic of "class": "That's just the point, Charlene. If you have class, you have it. It doesn't matter where you are or who you're with . . . and I have to go now because Craig is getting ready to drink out of the funnel.") But rather than choose passive/aggression, to spare myself a litany of Bible passages telling me I'm hell bound, I just "un-friend" the dogmatists.

Once though, in my senior year of high school, I did try to tell off T.J. Johnson. I had to stand in front of my English class and read aloud a mock graduation speech. I don't remember what I wrote in the speech, but I remember it was pretty cynical. I'm pretty sure that I said

people who referred to high school as the best years of their lives had pretty shitty lives. When I was done, T.J., insult genius that he was, called me a nerd. My face turned beet red, but I looked at him and asked him if he thought people actually wanted to hear anything that came out of his mouth. Then I told him, my voice shaking and my eyes watering, to shut up and never speak to me again, or even look at me. It was the culmination of twelve years of abuse and, yes, it was a bit of an overreaction to someone who had only called me a nerd. The whole class got uncomfortable, and the teacher asked me to take my seat. There was no cheering, no applause. I learned that Sugarbaker rants are not for me to say out loud.

My mom doesn't care if she's invited to the cool table, and because of that, she always is invited to the cool table. She doesn't care if people stereotype her as a lesbian for being a woman in the construction industry, or if they doubt her ability to use a piece of machinery because she's a girl. She knows they'll be proven wrong when they see her cut, carry, and nail in a two-by-four, or go home at the end of the day with my father. I'm not that lucky. I care too much about other people's opinions, and I have to try to be nonchalant about not being like everyone else. But if I really was nonchalant, I wouldn't write about it. It wouldn't even notice that some people see me as different. T.J. Johnson would be a blip in my memory, and the girls on Facebook wouldn't matter.

As I get older, I'm learning to let go of the cool kids. Because for the most part, they did peak in high school. Or they grew up themselves and probably regret what assholes they were back when. And I'm sure they had their moments, too, when they couldn't think of the right thing to say. Maybe there are days when T.J. Johnson catches himself cringing at the memory of Mrs. Wilson yelling at him. And maybe he hasn't changed; or maybe he wants to go back and

call Mrs. Wilson a faggot lover. Or maybe he has changed, maybe he'd like to go back and look the boy and Mrs. Wilson in the eye and tell them he's sorry, he was young and stupid, but he's learned his lesson. Or maybe he doesn't have a memory like mine and has already forgotten the whole thing. Maybe he has moved on with life without ever making the futile attempt to reshape the past into something better. But I doubt it.

Vita

Erin Grauel was born in Annapolis, Maryland, and raised in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. She moved to New Orleans in 2008. She received a Bachelor of Arts in English from Coastal Carolina University where she won the Paul Rice Poetry Broadside Contest. Erin will receive her M.F.A in Creative Nonfiction from the University of New Orleans in May, 2011. Currently she lives in half of a double shotgun in Mid-City with a girl, a dog, a cat, and a fish, all of whom are prettier, smarter, and funnier than any other girls, dogs, cats, or fish. The author is not much of a speaker, so it has worked out that she has decided to write her life instead of talking about it.