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Will All of You Stop Being A-holes, Please?

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Will All of You Stop Being A-holes, Please?

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, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by
April Blevins
B.S. Tennessee Tech University, 2001

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Will All of You Stop Being A-holes, Please?

On the day after the Berlin wall came down, Baby Girl Hardin became a murderer, and the fourth grade class at Holy Name of Jesus Academy got a serious lesson in the democratic process in honor of the Soviets' blessed defeat.

Of course, that buttkisser Jeremiah Davis got to be President, but that was only because he offered to lead the class in the Pledge and the Lord's Prayer and even improvised—that was one of their spelling words, it meant to make something up as you go along—a prayer ending that had Mrs. Estes falling all over herself, *Oh wasn't that a lovely blessing class*, and *Thank you so very much Jeremiah*, and *My dear Jeremiah, I love you so and I want to marry you*. She didn't really say that last part, but Baby Girl thought Mrs. Estes would probably marry Jeremiah if she could. What a gyp.

Baby Girl was stuck being the stupid Speaker of the House, whatever that was. She decided the whole thing was totally stupid, even though she had loved social studies as much as recess up until then. But if you can't be the President, really what is the dang point?

Mrs. Estes was busy helping dumb Rebecca Casper, so Baby Girl took the opportunity to yank hard on the hair that hung down over Jeremiah's collar.

"Stop it, you little freak!" he yelped. Baby Girl studied her pencil like it was the eighth wonder of the world so she wouldn't look suspicious, but she could feel Mrs. Estes' glare anyway. She tried to count the dents in the wood from where she chewed on it but gave up after twenty-eight.

“Hey Jeremiah, you want to trade jobs?”

“Shut up, retard.” He hunched farther over the encyclopedia that was taking up most of the room on his desk, and she decided it wasn’t worth the effort. Baby Girl looked around to see if the new senators were done with the “S” book yet so she could do her research, but it wasn’t on the shelf, and she couldn’t tell who had it.

Outside, it was one of those tricky weather days, where you would swear it was warm since the sun was so bright, but Baby Girl could tell it was fall and cool because the sky was a deeper blue than it could ever get in the heat of summer. She knew to pay attention to the details like that, which sometimes drove Mom nuts. Like when Dad quit coming home between hauls and her mother said he was just on a really long trip, but Baby Girl had used her spying skills and knew that all his clothes and toothbrush were gone, and he probably was too. She wondered if he was sleeping in his rig or if he had another house somewhere because either way it would be way fun to stay with him. But she didn’t want to ask because every time she brought him up, the veins in Mom’s neck poked out which was a detail pointing to she was really angry.

Baby Girl did really want to find him and stay with him because the Sasquatch Bert had moved in, and he left lots of little hairs in the shower which was really gross, and his two Amazon daughters spent every other weekend at their house, and they were even grosser than their Sasquatch dad.

“Miss Hardin, why aren’t you working on your presentation?” Mrs. Estes asked. Baby Girl hated the way Mrs. Estes always called her that, *Miss Hardin*, like she couldn’t even stand to utter her first name. Not that Baby Girl liked her name, it was kind of dumb. She would love to change it to something sophisticated like Alexis or Cindy and would as soon as she was older,

but still. Mrs. Estes called all the other kids by their first names so why should she be any different? It was all a dang gyp.

“Someone is using the encyclopedia I need.”

“Well, why don’t you just share?” Mrs. Estes said.

Like that had never occurred to Baby Girl. The last time she saw it though, there were two senators and five Supreme Court justices crowded around the same dang book. *Why don’t you just share, you witch.*

“What did you just say, young lady?” But she hadn’t said anything, had she?

“Mrs. Estes, I’m done with the book if she wants it,” Katie said. Woohoo, Katie to the rescue! *Ka-tie, Ka-tie*, Baby Girl sang to herself, *Katie is the coolest girl in the class!* She scuttled over to Katie’s desk and retrieved the heavy volume.

“Thankyouverymuch,” she whispered before skipping back to her desk.

Saskatchewan, sciatica, shrimp, sloop, Sudan—oops, too far—speckled trout, back a little further, speaker, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Yes. Gives oath to newly elected representatives, establishes agenda, blah blah blah, appoints committees, blah. Holy smokes! And there it was, right in the dang encyclopedia, “The individual in this office is second in the line of presidential succession, following the vice president.” She could still be the President! She only had to get rid of Jeremiah the buttkisser and Stephen Sikes, who was actually pretty cool because he always picked her first of the girls for kickball teams, but he still had to go if she was going to be the President this afternoon when they would actually get to write a law for their class. A loophole! Oh, God bless America.

Instead of playing four square like she usually did, Baby Girl hung around the swings waiting for Julian Stiles. Julian was the only black kid in her class, and actually he was the only black kid in the whole school. He was really more brown than black, so she couldn't quite figure out why people called him black, and she decided to ask him about that sometime, but right then, she had more important business with him for the following reasons:

1. Julian didn't really have any friends, so he would probably talk to her.
2. He had gotten in a fight (with a fifth grader!) on the second day of school, so he wasn't scared of anyone.
3. He had the incredibly crappy job of "citizen" for the day, which meant he only got to tell the representatives and senators what he thought the law should be this afternoon, but he didn't really get to have any say.

Every day when they came outside, he would just swing by himself, but they had been at recess for like an hour already and still no sign of him. Dang! What a gyp. She needed to talk to him soon, or her whole plan would fall apart, and she would have to improvise. She looked to see if he was over by the dodge-ball wall or on the monkey bars, but he was nowhere to be found. Super dang! She was about to give up and go play four square when she saw Julian sitting on the railroad ties that ran along the edge of the asphalt. She ran over to him at top speed. She didn't know how much time they had left.

"Why don't you want to swing today?" she asked. He just looked at her like she was an alien and went back to pulling apart a leaf. "Look, I was waiting to talk to you about something very important. Do you want to be the vice president this afternoon?"

He quit fidgeting with the leaf and looked up at her. "How?"

“Without going into too many details,” she said, “if both the president and vice president are killed, then I get to take over.”

“I’m not killing anybody. You’re crazy.” He picked up a clod of weeds growing in a crack and tossed them onto the ground.

“You don’t have to kill anybody, stupid. But if Jeremiah and Stephen, say, get sent to the principal’s office then they won’t very well be able to fulfill their duties now will they?”

“What’s that got to do with me? I’m just a dumb old citizen.” He reached down to scratch his ankle.

“Once I’m in charge, I’ll make you second in command,” she said. She was starting to lose her patience. She thought it would be easier to convince him since he never spoke to anyone all day long. She thought he would jump at the chance to have a friend and get to be the second in charge. What was up with all these questions? She might just have to improvise.

“Why don’t you just do it yourself?” he asked.

“Because no one is afraid of me, dumb-dumb. If you go over there and tell those two to fight each other or they’ll have to fight you, what do you think they’re gonna do, huh?” She could see this idea marinating in his brain, and she thought she might just have him.

“And what if I don’t want to?” he asked.

What was wrong with him? Why wouldn’t he want to? Fine. Im-pro-vised. “Hold up your middle finger, but keep the rest of them down.” She watched and waited while he struggled with the digit acrobatics. Once he had it, she dropped her trump card. “You just said a bad word to God with your finger, and if you don’t cooperate, I will tell on you.”

All through their oral presentations, Baby Girl kept giving Julian stern looks, but he either didn't notice or ignored it. When after lunch Julian still hadn't done his job, she decided he must be punished.

"Now class," Mrs. Estes said, "since we all know the functions and responsibilities of the positions of government, we will put them into practice. Hand down, Miss Hardin. You will all need to propose some laws for our classroom, debate their merits, and pass those that are deemed important for the health of our society. Everyone must be responsible for the role of his office. Who would like to start?"

Baby Girl waved her hand frantically in the air, but Mrs. Estes called on Sarah who said their law should be that they get cupcakes every Friday. How lame. After a few more rounds of seriously bad ideas (Why wasn't anyone saying that they should outlaw homework or make Mrs. Estes stop using the word "inappropriate" which she said like 80 times a day?), Mrs. Estes finally called on Baby Girl. She cleared her throat and shot a glance at Julian, but he was looking at the wall like that crusty yellow color was the most beautiful thing on the planet.

"Julian said a bad word to God at recess. He did this." And Baby Girl stood up in the aisle between desks with her middle finger raised in the air and turned around so everyone in class could see.

"*Miss Hardin*. That is completely inappropriate." Mrs. Estes' eyes looked like they were about to pop out of her face. "Go straight to the principal's office. I am done with your foolishness." Mrs. Estes was all flushed and flustered.

"But I was only—"

"No buts. March, young lady."

What a gyp! She could see Julian along with the rest of the class smirking and laughing to themselves as she walked to the door. Once she was out in the hallway, she kicked the wall so hard it hurt her big toe, but she didn't care. Why didn't any of these a-holes ever listen to her? She hadn't even done anything, and now she had to go see Sister Rosemary, who was one of her favorite people at this school, but still. "A-holes," she said, and it felt good to say the word out loud. "You're all a bunch of a-holes," she said to the empty hallway and smacked the metal water fountain as she walked by.

Once she was seated in the big leather chair and had again gotten over the creepy, bloody Jesus hanging behind Sister Rosemary's desk, Baby Girl told her principal the whole story because Sister Rosemary was really nice and understanding even though she was a nun and they were supposed to be mean. She told Sister Rosemary all about wanting to be President and the loophole and Julian and that Bert's Amazon kids were coming for the weekend again and that the whole day was a gyp. By the time she finished she was crying, and Sister Rosemary gave her a hug and a green Safe-T-Pop and a note to take home to her mother. The note was sealed in an envelope, but Baby Girl was sure that it probably said everyone should be super nice to her since she'd had such a horrible day and that the Amazons should not come back because it was so upsetting to her.

After the bus dropped her at her house, Baby Girl decided to watch some cartoons and relax before everyone got home. But every stinking channel showed video of people climbing over a wall covered in graffiti, or chipping at it with chisels and hammers, or mobs just knocking whole sections of it down while they screamed and cheered. She had to admit it did look pretty

fun to tear stuff up like that, but Baby Girl still didn't understand why President Bush was talking about it. It was just a dumb wall in Germany.

When her mother got home from the office, Baby Girl was super good and nice and brought her a Coke while she changed out of her suit. Mom was a secretary which meant she mostly talked on the phone and gave people messages, so Baby Girl really didn't understand why she had to dress up since no one could tell what she was wearing through the dang receiver. Baby Girl sat on her mother's big bed and waited and tried to keep herself from clicking her feet against each other which she knew drove Mom nuts.

"Are the Am—, I mean, are Leslie and Jessica still coming this weekend?" Baby Girl asked. She took a sip of the Coke she'd made for Mom. She had the note from Sister Rosemary in her pocket, and she wanted to make sure it went to good use.

"Yeah. Bert's picking them up on his way home."

"Well," Baby Girl said, "you know, I don't think that is such a good idea." She set the Coke on the bedside table and pulled the envelope from her pocket. "Take a look at this." Her mother ripped the envelope carefully along the top edge and spent a really long time reading what it said. Baby Girl kept looking at her face to see when she got to the part about the Amazons and Bert needing to get their own dang house and get out of hers, but her mother folded it up when she finished reading it, and Baby Girl couldn't ever tell when she got to the good part.

"You are grounded. No playing outside, no TV, no nothing. You will stay in your room and not come out until you learn how to behave." Her mother left the room, and Baby Girl could hear her slamming things around in the kitchen. She ran after her.

“Why? I didn’t even do anything.” Baby Girl slumped against the kitchen table while her mother tore at a head of lettuce like she was trying to murder it.

“Didn’t do anything? You flipped your entire class the bird!” Her mother put the lettuce down and steadied herself against the counter. “I don’t know why you can’t just be good. Why can’t you? I can’t deal with this. You act out at school, you’re mean to Leslie and Jessica who have never done anything to you. I’m tired of it. Just go to your room.”

What in the world was going on? Today was not supposed to turn out like this at all. Baby Girl stomped through the house to her bedroom trying to make as much noise as humanly possible with each step. Dear God, she thought, why hast thou forsaken me? What a gyp.

Baby Girl never slept well when the Amazons were over because she always had to make a pallet on the floor in her own dang room while they slept in her bed. It was usually fun to make a pallet on the floor like when she slept over at Katie’s house or her cousins came over, but it wasn’t fun at all with the Amazons. And, to make it all worse, she was sure they were infested with rats and bugs and germs that would make her wake up ugly and fat and eight feet tall like they were.

Even though Leslie was a year older than her and Jessica was a year younger, they both towered over Baby Girl, and it really creeped her out. They also always brought their stupid ferret, who had the dumbest name ever which was Squeakers. She had to admit that Squeakers was kind of cute and all, but he stank like horse dooky, and those Amazons were so dumb that they actually kissed him full on the mouth! She was sure that anyone disgusting enough to do that surely had fleas and rats crawling in their clothes and overnight bags. She had also overheard Bert say one night while she was using her spy skills that their mother was a damn

lying slut, and Baby Girl was pretty sure that meant she liked to live with rats and fleas and cockroaches like her Aunt Sherry, who Mom had also called a slut when she didn't know Baby Girl could hear.

Lying awake that night while the Amazon sisters snoozed away on her bed like a couple of sluts, Baby Girl was certain that she heard rats crawling out of their bags and into the walls, and it even felt for a minute like they were crawling on her, and she itched in a million places all at once and drove herself crazy trying to scratch. But she knew she just had to wait a little longer because being grounded and sitting in her room while everyone else laughed and played and did wonderfully exciting things without her had given her time to hatch a plan. Her plan was even better than the one she had copied from that guy in Africa or Ireland or somewhere who played his flute and led all the rats to the river where they all drowned and then everybody loved him and gave him a bazillion dollars or something. She had tried that last time the Amazons were there, playing her recorder and leading them and all their rats to the bathtub, but it didn't work, and she'd gotten yelled at for waking up the whole damn house for crying out loud.

She had tried to explain, but ever since Bert moved in, her mother didn't like to listen or do anything besides French kissing Sasquatch in the bed, which Baby Girl only knew because she was super good at spying. She was so excellent at silent walking and being invisible that most of the time no one noticed her at all. She'd already decided that when she grew up she would be the greatest spy in the world and even President Bush would call her for help with the Soviet problem.

Which was why she had decided to use her spy skills tonight to get rid of the rats. She had put a piece of cardboard down on the floor of her closet and a peanut butter cracker in the

center of it. Then she tied a string to the handle of the mop bucket and propped it upside down on the handle over the peanut butter cracker. She had even practiced yanking on the string several times to get perfect at making the bucket fall down just right instead of knocking it all over. So now all she had to do was lie there and wait until she heard the rats eating the cracker and try not to itch to death in the meantime.

She snuggled deep into her Cabbage Patch Kids sleeping bag, which had been really cool when she was little, but now it was kind of dumb, and her mother wouldn't get her a new one even though she could never take this thing on spy missions. How could anyone take a spy seriously when they slept with baby stuff? She pulled it up over her face so that only her hand grasping the string was sticking out in the dark. She put her face deep in the pillow she'd stolen from Mom and Bert's room, and she liked the way it smelled like White Shoulders perfume and her mother's neck, but she wished that it smelled like her father too. She decided that he was probably camping out in his big rig which wasn't really like camping at all since it had bunk beds and a bathroom in it and was her favorite place to play when he still came home. He always used to bring her something whenever he got back from a haul. Sometimes it was just a bag of chips, but sometimes he brought her toys. If he showed up now, she wouldn't even care if he brought anything or not. He was probably somewhere really cool like Los Angeles or the Alamo, and Baby Girl ached with wishing she was there, riding the roads and eating McDonalds and sleeping on the top bunk. It would be so cool.

"Dear God," she began, "please help me rid this house of rats and the Sasquatch and his slut kids. Also, please send me another sleeping bag so I don't get laughed at by the other spies." She was starting to feel good about this prayer but then things started coming out that surprised

her. “And God, please keep my mother safe even though she French kisses Bert and that is a sin—she knows not what she does—it is all Bert’s fault because he has hypnotized her with his Sasquatch power. Or at least if you can’t do anything about them, give me the superpower to fly so I can go find my dad and live with him and escape these a-holes. Amen.” She lay there for a few quiet minutes feeling oddly peaceful and decided that Mrs. Estes who always told them to pray about their worries may not be as completely full of it as she’d supposed.

She felt calm, and she wasn’t even itchy anymore. Baby Girl drifted off into sleep and dreamed that she was standing in front of the Berlin wall. She was supposed to count all the cracks for President Bush. As she walked along it counting, she heard Mom and Dad calling her name from the other side. She ran back and forth along the wall, yelling that she was right there, but they couldn’t hear her. She tried to climb over, but every time she slid right back down. She became frantic as the calls from Mom and Dad became more distant, and then she realized that the wall was really a box all around her.

She awoke from the nightmare sweaty and disoriented. She took a deep breath to calm herself, and then she heard it. The tell-tale noise of rat on cracker. Little licking noises, like a kitten cleaning its paws. Her prayers had been answered! Oh, thanks be to God. She concentrated hard on becoming weightless and flying, but that didn’t really do anything, so she knew she had to stay there and deal with the rat problem. She took a deep breath and counted to three, then yanked hard on the string. The bucket came down with a thwack, and she heard something bumping against its plastic sides. She’d done it! She scuddled out of her sleeping bag and over to the closet and carefully turned the bucket right side up with the cardboard over the hole. She could feel the thing bumping around inside the bucket as she ran to the bathroom, and she

couldn't stop herself from squealing. "Gross! Gross! Gross! Gross! Gross!" The thing was clawing and scratching at the sides and she could feel it pushing against the cardboard. She heard Jessica the Amazon behind her calling her name. It was working! They would follow their rats into the bathtub and drown themselves. Bless you, oh Lord, for these thy gifts.

But when Baby Girl flipped on the bathroom light, she realized she had forgotten to fill up the tub. What a gyp! Improvise, improvise, improvise, she told herself. Ah, the toilet! Thankfully the Sasquatch had left the lid up again, so all she had to do was turn the bucket over the top of it. And flush!

"What are you doing?" Jessica was standing in the bathroom doorway rubbing sleep from her eyes. She looked ridiculous with her stupid hair standing up everywhere like she'd been electrocuted or something.

"Killing your slutty rats!" Which really should have been done by now, but water just kept slushing around in the bowl which was getting fuller and fuller and fuller. "Oh dang," Baby Girl said as she realized the little furball was stuck in the hole.

Jessica ran down the hall screaming, "She's killing Squeakers!" Baby Girl finally got a good look at the rat and realized it was indeed the Amazons' ferret and his little back legs were moving against the porcelain like he was pedaling some demon bike. A rock as big as a boulder settled in Baby Girl's insides from the back of her throat all the way down to the bottom of her stomach. It was true that a ferret is a dumb pet and it stunk up the whole house, but she had to admit that it was kind of cute when it was eating its little pellet food and cleaning its tail with its little ferret fingers.

Water spilled over the edge of the toilet and onto the floor, and Baby Girl knew what she had to do to get Squeakers unstuck. She grabbed the plunger and tried really hard not to squish him as she positioned it over the hole and pushed as hard as she could over and over like she'd seen her Dad do. She was straining against the plastic tool—this was really harder than it looked—when Bert in his saggy boxers walked in looking for all the world like a big dumb ape. “What in hell?” he said. But before she could say anything, he'd shoved Baby Girl aside so that she slid on the wet tile and fell on her butt. Then both the Amazons were in the doorway screeching that she was a murderer. Bert kept looking from the toilet back to her, but instead of saying *I'm sorry I knocked you over, here let me help you up so we can straighten this all out*, his neck bulged out and his face turned red and he screamed, “GETTHEHELLOUTOFHEREYOU LITTLE SHIT,” and flung the plunger at her.

Baby Girl was so scared she stayed frozen to the floor while toilet water soaked into her pajamas. Bert stuck his big Sasquatch hands into the toilet and pulled out the limp, soaked Squeakers. Baby Girl's eyes burned, and the rock in her insides grew until she felt like her entire body was made of stone. Her mother was stroking Jessica's hair and hugging Leslie to her side, and the whole sight made Baby Girl just want to die.

She picked herself up from the floor and ran past Mom and her new favorites, the Amazons, down the hall and into her room and slammed the door as hard as she could. She locked it tight so they couldn't get to her and yelled, “I hate all of you a-holes!” She tore the sheets and blankets off her bed since they were contaminated with slut and curled up with her sleeping bag and the pillow that smelled like her mother on the bare mattress and cried.

As Babby Girl sobbed, she kept waiting for her mother to come into her room and hug her and tell her everything was going to be okay, but it never happened. And why would it? She was a murderer. She had killed Squeakers, and that was like the worst sin in the world, and her mother loved the Amazons more, and they would probably send her to jail.

Baby Girl knew then what she had to do. As she packed, she realized she had been preparing for this day for as long as she could remember. She grabbed her stupid sleeping bag which would definitely get made fun of but would have to do, and her flashlight, and her favorite book, *Free To Be You and Me*. She slid her window open and jumped through it which was a cinch because she had taken the screen off ages ago.

She silent walked between the side of the house and the wooded fence, an alley which was sort of spooky even in daytime, but she wasn't scared because she was a murderer and no one would mess with her now. She carefully opened the gate, pushing up on it so that it didn't make the screeching noise and then she was home free. She hated her stupid house, which she had never noticed looked exactly like all the other houses in this stupid neighborhood. Same red brick, same front door with the frosted glass, same blue shutters, and even the same scraggly, lopsided bushes out front. It hadn't looked that way to her when Dad was here and things were good, but they could have it all now.

She crossed the street and walked the three blocks to the field. She threw her things over the fence and carefully stepped through the wires so that she didn't get hung up on a barb. The air was cool and thick with mist which her dad had always called fog soup. She used to laugh at that, but it didn't even make her smile now. She crossed through the tall grass in her bare feet and kicked herself for not at least putting on some dry pajamas. It was kind of cold, and even

murderers should get dry, warm clothes. She rolled her sleeping bag out and tucked her book and flashlight safely into the bottom of it before crawling in. She stared at the stars and tried to make a plan for the next day and the rest of her life, but she didn't much feel like thinking and planning. She knew she either had to find her dad or get a spying job, but both of those things were really big, and she just wanted to sleep. She hated to admit it, but she just wanted her mother, and thinking about that made her want to start crying all over again.

The dew was soaking into the cotton of her sleeping bag. "Dear God, just please give me a break. Please. Just help me get away from all these a-holes. I'm sorry about Squeakers. Please let him into ferret heaven. I will repent tomorrow, promise. Just please help me now. Amen." As soon as she finished, she could hear an airplane in the distance. Holy crap! God was awesome—he had answered her prayers twice in one night. She searched the sky for lights and when she saw them, she jumped up and waved her arms frantically, up and down, up and down. She called to the pilots as loud as she could. "Take me with you! Hey you. Please. Take me with you!" She got her flashlight out and shone the light up into the night sky trying to signal the plane. "I'm right here! Please. Just let down a rope and I'll climb it. Hey! Please, please just take me with you." Baby Girl kept shouting and pleading, jumping up and down waving the flashlight until the drone of engines and the plane's flickering lights disappeared into the cold, dark sky.

What a dang gyp.

Happy Birthday

As you sit waiting for Dan to bring the final drawing, you try not to be nervous. You try to focus on the individual sounds of the tattoo shop—the buzzing of the needle as another artist inks a Hispanic girl's back, the throaty wail of some bluesy chick over the stereo, the hushed conversation of two men way in back. You want to divide the din and conquer it, as if that is the key to keeping your nerves in check, as if that will keep you from getting lost in it. This is your day, after all.

Happy birthday. You are twenty-eight today, which you now realize is not as old as you once thought. When you were young, twenty-eight sounded so distant, foreign even, and you were sure that by this age you would have it all together. But this day, like the past few birthdays, doesn't feel any different than the day before, doesn't feel special. You have decided to treat yourself anyway.

You are wearing the patchwork minidress, the one Mark bought you at the beach last summer, the one that hugs your ass and accentuates the thighs you have spent so many hours on the bike perfecting. And you wonder if Dan will notice when he places the tattoo transfer paper on the inside of your upper thigh. You get excited imagining that he will be turned on. It would be unprofessional if he were to brush against your sheer panties as he works. But you hope that he will.

Mark was obsessed with your thighs, and you miss the way it felt when he stroked them, licked them. Mark, the surgeon. Mark, the one who would call in the middle of the day just to say he missed you. The one you adored, who you couldn't believe actually wanted you. Chose you. God you're gorgeous, he'd said over and over again that weekend at the beach. But that was before he said that he wasn't going to leave his wife after all. She needs me, he'd said, as if that ended the discussion. As if you didn't need him.

Your family loves you. You believe that with all your heart. Your mother used to clip the honor roll lists in the newspaper that featured your name. Your grandmother still slips you a twenty when you go by her house for dinner, which you do often. Isn't she something, all your aunts and uncles say when you are in earshot, and they genuinely believe that you have it all together. Their niece, the attorney. They are proud of you. Such a good girl, they say to each other. You could have gotten a job with a corporate firm, but you chose instead to do indigent defense. Just like you. You always wanted to help people. Sensible, responsible. And selfless too. That's you.

They like to remind you how you were always your baby brother's protector. They will often recall the time when he was one and you were eight and you treated his chickenpox with calamine lotion and would not leave his side until he was well. They were sure you would become a nurse. You would have been so good at it, they say.

But now you help people as an attorney. It's the same thing, really. And your concern for your little brother was a sign that you would be a good mother. Even when you were a little girl. You would grow up pretty and smart and have smart, pretty babies with an equally smart and handsome man. Your family still seems to believe this despite all that has happened and

sometimes wonder aloud why you aren't yet married. You're being picky. They're sure of it. Of course, that's the smart thing to do. Kids just don't marry so young anymore, your grandmother says. Sometimes you want to tell her the truth. Tell her you aren't what you seem. Sometimes you think she might understand. But then she will shake her head at you in that way that makes you wonder what she really thinks, and you know that she couldn't understand. No one could.

The Hispanic girl strains awkwardly in front of the mirror to see the freshly inked Virgin Mary on her shoulder blade. She fawns over her reflection then runs over to hug the artist, knocking his Red Sox cap off in her excitement. Though the image of the Virgin of Guadeloupe is beautiful—the brilliant blue of the veil against the crimson dress, the stars spread at her bare feet—you wonder why the girl chose it. A woman celebrated for losing her son. An image of eternal suffering that will now follow this girl everywhere. You watch her ooh and ahh as she studies it from every conceivable angle. You absently finger the pendant around your neck as you wait. It is the one your father gave you so unceremoniously after your own mother left.

Your mother, who was always on the phone. That is how you remember her, straightening the living room and chatting as the phone chord curlqued all the way back to the wall above the kitchen sink. At the time, it seemed like that chord was long enough for her to go anywhere in the house, anywhere at all, without losing the connection. But that was before she decided that she couldn't be your mother anymore, not after they buried your baby brother. And everyone said that it wasn't your fault, you had only left him in the pool for a minute. They have said this countless times over the years. They knew how responsible you were. They knew how much you loved him. What happened could have happened to anybody.

Here, your father said when he tossed the delicate gold medallion in your direction. I guess you can have this, he said and then shut the door to your bedroom as abruptly as he'd opened it. Thirteen years, ago? Where had those years gone? High school, sure. College, law school. Work. The blessed oblivion of work.

You were frantic when you thought you'd lost the necklace that night at the pirate costume party two weeks before your prom. You were wearing the Captain Hooker outfit, the one with the fishnets and corset top, and that pendant that had belonged to your mother. You looked great; everyone said so. Which was why you couldn't understand how Luke hadn't noticed. Luke with the broad shoulders and the goofy grin. Luke, the star forward on the basketball team. Luke was so absorbed in conversation with the girl who had the stupid eyeliner mustache drawn on her lip that he barely even acknowledged you. Until you were about to leave.

You were excited when he grabbed your hand as you were saying goodbye and led you outside and set you gently on the tailgate of that truck and pressed himself against you and nibbled on your lower lip. You were thrilled, and you weren't sure if it was all the punch or his caresses, but you felt so light that you hardly noticed he was taking your clothes off until you were naked and he was inside you, there in the bed of that pickup parked right on the street. Then there were blue lights in your face and voices in your ear. And you heard someone say, Oh, shit, that's Vargas' daughter. And you knew that your father, the mayor, would find out and would give you that look of disgust that he always seemed to give you after your mother left. And then Luke was not around, and you were alone, gathering your clothes and frantically searching the truck for the necklace you knew had to be in the tangled mess, somewhere.

But your dad didn't give you the disgusted look and the speech that you were expecting. He just rolled his eyes.

Ridiculous, he said. Fucking ridiculous.

The walls of the tattoo parlor are cluttered with pictures and drawings, ready-made symbols waiting for people to give them some meaning and a home on the canvas of their bodies. You got two of those your freshman year at Vanderbilt when you were young enough to think a rising star and a crescent moon on your lower back would somehow be fitting eulogies for your baby brother, your mother. Those tattoos always remind you of them but they don't represent what you hoped. They don't say, I'm sorry. They don't say, Come home.

You can see out the window that clouds are beginning to gather, and you hope that it doesn't rain. You watch as two young girls look through a book of flower tattoos and giggle as they discuss the merits of each. You decide they are probably daisy people. Dan tried to talk you into a daisy. Ha, you said. Are you fucking kidding me?

A big yellow daisy. You laugh at the absurdity of it.

You are starting to get annoyed with Dan for keeping you waiting so long. You check your watch and then stare in his direction, willing him to hurry it up. You are excited to see what he has drawn for you. Especially for you.

Happy birthday. Happy birthday to you.

There was a tornado the day before your birthday last year. You spent the whole afternoon with Stuart, drinking bourbon and touring the destruction. Isn't it horrible, he said over and over as the two of you drove through streets cluttered with felled trees and people crying over their ruined lives. It was. Horrible. And you were a specialist in horrible. All day long. One poor

person's horrible story after another. But you needed to look away sometime. You needed to go to the beach and have handsome boys bring daiquiris to your chair on the sand. You needed to read a book with a happy ending, see a movie where the beautiful stars fall for each other just before the credits roll.

But for Stuart everything was tragedy and catastrophe. To look away was indecent, immoral even. You thought for a while that he would snap out of it. That enough time with you would boost him up, make him less melancholy. You envisioned a future with Stuart—long afternoons spent nuzzling on park benches by the river, slow dancing in the kitchen while the two of you made breakfast. You thought you would save him from himself and he would love you for it. But you couldn't. Eventually you got bored with his moping. And you caught yourself sounding like your father when you talked about Stuart. He's fucking ridiculous, you would say. Dan motions you over to a chair in the back, and you catch the other artist, the one with the beard and Red Sox cap, checking you out as you pass. You slow your gait and let your hips rock. Give him a show if he's going to look.

Hey, Dan says as you sit, crossing your legs. So are you excited? he asks, and you give a little nod, a giggle. Yes. He smiles and hands you the drawing, and, as you study it, you are so overcome that you can't speak. It is exactly what you wanted.

You sit, transfixed. Silent. It is perfect. The outline of the shark's body is strong but graceful. A lone hunter poised on a sea of milky skin. He has filled it in with scrolling filigree that looks exactly like the ironwork balconies on the postcard from your mother. The one sent from New Orleans. The one that read simply, I miss you. The only one you ever got, and you

wonder if she meant it. You look up at Dan, awed that his vision could so closely match your own.

It's beautiful, you say. It's perfect.

He is pleased that you are pleased, and he makes inane conversation about it as he swabs alcohol just below the elastic of your panties. Being careful, you notice, not to touch you inappropriately. The alcohol is cold and makes you shiver. Are you ready, he asks. And you nod your head, yes. He isn't a bad guy, this Dan, and you want to sleep with him. You reposition yourself to get his attention, to make him want you too. You wonder if he notices. But he just says, hold still.

You think about that guy at the conference in Miami last week. The one who left his cell phone number on the table in your hotel room before he left, because, you could tell, he felt bad leaving you like that. He wasn't wearing a ring, but you knew he was married. The white circle on his finger. The way he glanced nervously around, like his wife might be hiding in the bathroom or under the bed. He didn't say so, but he had to get back to his own room, of course. She might call.

But you were relieved when he left. Glad actually. You wanted him to fuck you and then disappear. And you cried then, but it wasn't because of him. You cried because you didn't want his number, didn't want to know his name, didn't want to see him again. You cried because you knew what that made you.

Dan thinks you opened your legs more because you are nervous. Relax, he says. It's going to sting a little. But I'm good at this. Everything is going to be fine.

You want to shout at Dan. Get his attention. Doesn't he see what he's got here? Doesn't he know what he's being offered? A tattoo guy, and you're saying all he's got to do is accept?

But you don't shout, of course. You don't shout and you don't imply. Instead, you sink farther down into the chair, gripping the padded armrests, holding your breath trapped against your ribcage in anticipation, biting your lip against the coming of the needle, dreading it, wanting it, knowing that this is what you need. The stick will make you breathe.

Holding your breath always reminds you of your brother. Your baby brother suspended in the water, his arms limply pointing towards the tile mosaic on the bottom of the pool. He didn't even know to hold his breath.

You hadn't put your shoes back on. Not even your skirt. Your blouse wasn't buttoned, and your bra wasn't hooked. Pete Nickelson was still flopped on the sofa in the den, that smirk still spread across his lips. He came out when you screamed. But all he did was say, oh my God. Oh my God, this is fucked. Until you told him to shut up, and he left saying, You can't tell anybody I was here, OK? I wasn't here.

And you didn't tell anyone. You didn't tell anyone because if no one knew then maybe it wouldn't be true.

You think about how heavy your little brother felt as you pulled him out. You recall wondering if the concrete was burning his back the way it was burning your knees as you tried to remember how many chest compressions per breath you were supposed to do. You think about frantically dialing the ambulance and how thick your fingers felt as you tried to dress yourself.

And you remember your parents' faces when they finally got home. You told them that you only left him for a minute. Just a minute. You had to go to the bathroom, you said. It was just

a minute. You thought he had gone into the kitchen or back toward his room. You looked for him, you said.

You remember how your father sat on the steps of the deck silently staring out into the yard while your mother took you by the shoulders and shook you. What were you thinking, she kept yelling through her tears. What were you thinking?

The first few minutes of the needle serrating your skin are nearly unbearable. Constant stinging pain. But you know you want it, need it. Just hold your breath until your chest hurts. Open yourself to it. Relax until you don't feel it anymore. Count the seconds to shift your focus from what always seems to be waiting for you, just below the surface.

The Impersonator

Fuckup #1: The baby's name was supposed to be Kate. Not Katherine (too formal), or Katie (too cutesy), just Kate, strong, pretty Kate. The already tense delivery room became agonizing when we realized she was breech. Angela lying there, sweaty, her big doe eyes darting from nurse to doctor to me and back again, gripped my arm like she was drowning. I stroked her hair. I told her everything would be just fine, though I didn't fully believe it myself. An alarm sounded. The baby's heart rate was dropping. A nurse shoved me toward the wall.

"Okay, Angela," the doctor said. "We've got to get her out now."

Angela shook her head, and as she strained, one of the nurses used her forearm like a rolling pin across Angela's abdomen. The scream from the heart rate monitor seemed to get more severe with each passing second. I stood against the wall behind Angela, scared and helpless. I wanted to throw that nurse off of her. I wanted to knock that doctor out of the way and rescue my baby girl myself.

"Okay," the doctor said. "We're almost there."

I rubbed Angela's neck and shoulder as she wrestled with her own body. I wished I could do it for her.

"Oh shit," the doctor said, "there's the problem. We have a nuchal cord."

"What's happening?" Angela clenched my hand at her shoulder like she might snap it.

The nurse stood behind the doctor. “Cut and clamp?” the nurse asked. Both of them ignored Angela’s question.

“No. Let’s just bring her out and get her breathing on her own. Angela, keep pushing. Now.”

I stroked her hair while the fear rose like bile and burned in my chest and throat. Here were the two most important people in my life, and I could do nothing to help either of them. I had been afraid when Angela told me she was pregnant. I had been afraid three months later at our wedding. I’d had nightmares of picking up the baby and accidentally crushing her in my hands. But those fears, that abstract latent dread of what might happen, what life *might* be like, vanished in the face of this very real panic.

She was technically stillborn, though they were able to resuscitate her. She spent two days in ICU while Angela oscillated between wakeful vigilance and dead sleep, her belly still pregnancy-swollen, her face gaunt from exhaustion and terror. A nurse brought in the paperwork for the birth certificate while Angie was napping, and I was happy finally to have a function, a thing I could do, a way to help. But as I filled everything out, I couldn’t get over how close we’d come to losing her.

I went up to the ICU and stared at her. Her tiny face squinched into a pucker like she’d just sucked down a lemon drop. The little card above her head said, Baby Girl Hardin, and I thought yes, my tiny baby girl. I tried to imagine calling this little ball of helplessness Kate. I tried to imagine her running and playing with other children, or graduating from high school, or as a grown woman with kids of her own, and I just couldn’t see it. She was just a tiny, pink thing that was barely even breathing. Baby Girl Hardin. It just seemed to fit.

I thought Angela had read the birth certificate application before she signed it, but apparently that wasn't so. Maybe she was still groggy from the pain pills. She thought I was just joking around calling her Baby Girl, a pet name, and she was furious when she found out that her name was not Kate Ann, like we'd decided. I thought she'd warmed up to it, because the name stuck even after threats to go down to the courthouse to change it. But now, a decade later, this apparent fuckup on my part is proof that I am unreliable. Irresponsible. An asshole.

I give Julio, the Mexican Michael Jackson, a high-five as he walks off stage. I take my time getting ready, check the mic which is just the same karaoke machine they use for Saturday nights. I'd tried to get the owner to move impersonator night to Saturdays instead of Thursdays, especially after some kids from the college made a documentary about us that got some local press, but he wouldn't go for it. Said most people would rather listen to themselves no matter how pathetic they sounded, especially when they're drunk, which, he reminded me, is the whole point of a Saturday night at The Halfcocked.

Fuckup #2: I believed that documentary would lead to something big. I believed that was the beginning: I would become famous. Julio and Margie would become famous. We would all become famous and tour the country, the world: Internationally Acclaimed Impersonators! We would have tour buses and fans and mansions. I quit my job hauling chemicals, so that I could focus on my act. I spent a huge chunk of our savings on a new jumpsuit trimmed with a silk cape and semiprecious stones. I believed those kids spent their time and money following us around with cameras because they believed in us.

But they made us a joke. A big joke made more pathetic by the size of that huge screen in the college's auditorium. Julio told me not to take it so hard. By that time, Angie had been back at work for months to support us. We never touched, and barely spoke, except for her nagging me about the trash or laundry or whatever trifling thing. I thought it was just exhaustion from working full time and trying to take care of Baby Girl. But this was yet another example of how my inability to be responsible made me a fucking asshole.

I do a few arm propellers and hip shakes to let people know the show's about to start. It's a small crowd, still early, but Julio got them warmed up pretty good, and I know exactly what to do with them. I start with a classic, something they can sing along with that'll get them feeling me, "That's All Right." People can't resist early Elvis, the raw grittiness, so I follow-up with "Blue Suede Shoes," fast and hard and loose. They are on their feet dancing and swaying now. Mary Cat and three of her friends are at the foot of the stage singing along and shaking their asses. At the end, I turn and swing the cape, stick a finger up on the last note, and I can tell from the clapping and hooting they will follow me anywhere now.

Fuckup #3: When Angie said she needed a break, some time apart just to, you know, think, I didn't tell her no. I didn't ask her what was wrong. I didn't tell her how much I loved her, have always loved her. I said, Fine. I said, Suit yourself. I packed my things, jamming them down into my duffel and instead of going to my mother's house like I'd planned, I went to the Halfcocked. I flirted with a very sweet blonde woman who was sitting alone. I told her what had happened, and when Mary Cat squeezed my hand and held back her own tears, I knew she was a sure thing. She asked me to stay the night. I didn't call home, didn't stop by, didn't want to give

Angie the satisfaction of knowing how bad it hurt me to get kicked out of my own house. And I've been living with Mary Cat ever since.

I am an asshole.

I take my time setting up for the next one, make them a little nervous with anticipation. That's the key to a killer set. Some of these guys are just up here to entertain themselves. Like Margie, who is a woman but still a dead ringer for Elton John. Hell of a keyboardist, but she just blasts through whatever she feels like playing. She's got talent, but she doesn't understand that a performance is a give and take—that the crowd expects you to give them what they don't even know they want and only then will they show you love.

The music starts, and I slow walk around the stage, punctuating my steps with a snap and hip twist. I look for Angie again, but she isn't here. I knew she wouldn't be, but still. This one's for her.

I get into position with my back to the crowd. "Never know how much I love you, never know how much I care." I turn around then and give them the sneer. "You give me fever," I keep it low and controlled. I go down on my knees and sing directly into the faces of the women down front. They throw their heads back and smile. They swing their hips slow and wide with the sultry tempo. They are mine. I am The King.

Julio walks up after my set. "Good one, man. You nailed it."

"Thanks. You too."

"You still up for that gig tomorrow night?" Julio's an accountant, and he got us hooked up to perform at some regional accounting meeting over at the Holiday Inn. We're each supposed

to do a brief set and then mingle with the crowd. Julio says they always hire color to keep their meetings from being too boring. I've got court in the morning, so I'm glad to have a gig lined up afterward to take my mind off of it.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

"Good." Julio pats my shoulder. "*Nos vemos*. I gotta get home *pronto* or Maria'll have my *culo*."

Joe walks up just then. I've known Joe since junior high. We used to steal Virginia Slims from my mom's purse and go out to the woods at the edge of our subdivision and smoke them. He had a motorcycle accident a decade ago that left him with a lisp and a twitch in his right eye that makes people cagey, but I know he's all right.

"How you been, Mike?" Joe asks and hands me a beer. Joe's had it rough since the accident, so I know what he really means is *Please make me laugh, give me a reason to think this whole world isn't a total sack of shit*.

"You know," I say, "just keeping it real." Joe laughs like I knew he would. He always laughs at that stupid line. I laugh too, but sometimes when I laugh it's faking. I try to give everybody what they want, a smile, a dance, a reason to smile and dance themselves. I guess that's why we're all put here—to keep each other from getting swallowed by desperation.

"Great set, man," Joe says. I take a long pull on my beer, nod my appreciation. I'm sweating and a little drunk from the adrenaline, and it feels good. Joe's eye does the twitchy thing, and I look away. "Sorry about you and Angie," he says.

"Yeah."

Margie starts playing, but the keyboard's notes get lost in all the crowd noise. I wish she'd play something upbeat, something I could pretend to be interested in. I scan the room for a distraction, someone else I could pull into conversation.

"How's your daughter holding up?" Joe asks.

I've got to get away from him before he totally kills my buzz. "She's doing fine. Tough kid." I clap Joe on the back. The bathroom. I will escape to the bathroom. "Good to see you, man." I feel bad walking away from him like that because I know everybody does him that way, what with the lisp and all, but I don't want to talk about that shit. Not tonight. Not ever really, but I especially don't want to spend the evening talking about the one woman in the world who hates me the most when I'm surrounded by women who think I'm pretty great after the show I just put on.

Mary Cat stands at the bar eyeing me as I leave the men's room. I wink at her, and she motions me over. I walk up and kiss her cheek, grateful again that I won't have to be alone tonight.

Fuckup #4: Forgot Angie's birthday. It only happened once in eleven years. I'd been out on a string of hauls that took me over to Oklahoma and then up through Kansas to Minnesota and back. I was exhausted. By that time, Baby Girl was about seven, the getting reacquainted when I got home took longer and longer. It always takes a little time to feel comfortable again after an absence—the obligatory small talk, quick hugs and light kisses until Angie and I felt the connection again. But it was beginning to feel like Angie didn't want to put in the effort, and I was so tired from work and consumed with practicing my act and playing with Baby Girl that I

really didn't feel up to the effort either. We never talked about it, never really talked at all, just moved around each other in this dance to avoid fighting.

A few days later, I was out in the garage gluing sequins to a belt buckle for my costume. She came in and leaned against the hood of the car.

"You know," she said, "my birthday was last week."

I felt like I'd been kicked. In fact, I think I would have felt better if I had been kicked. "Oh babe, I'm so sorry." And I was. I really, really was. "Let me take you out to dinner. We can find a sitter."

She didn't say a word. Just stood there, arms folded across her chest looking down at the greasy floor.

"Come here," I said and went to hug her. She sucked on the inside of her cheek, and I could see the tendons in her taunt neck. She put her hand up between us and shook her head. She looked up at me for just a second, then turned and walked back into the house.

Thoughtless. Unreliable. Asshole.

Every time this happens, I want to run. Bruiser, the German shepherd keeps staring at me. I want to get up out of this bed and go somewhere, anywhere, but she's got me by the dick.

"It's okay," Mary Cat says for the eight hundredth time. She keeps stroking it and kissing my neck, so I can tell that it's not okay. I can also tell that no matter what she does, or how much I'd like to give it to her, she isn't going to get what she wants. Funny that loneliness can trick my brain into attraction, but my dick never falls for it.

I pull her hand up to my face and kiss it. I don't want her to take it personally, but I want nothing more than to get out of here. "You got me too drunk." I kiss her hand again and hold it against my chest. I'm lying, but women are sensitive, especially when they're naked. She pulls away from me and sighs as she sits up on her elbows. The dog takes this as a sign and jumps up on the bed. She sighs again, a long, exaggerated show of dissatisfaction.

She scratches behind the dog's ears, and it licks her arm. "We can try again in the morning," I say. She rolls over to face the wall. Mary Cat is a sweet woman, a good, kind, caring, and forgiving woman, but— But.

She doesn't understand. I know that she is lonely too, that we are partners in our loneliness, that we are only together to keep the desperation at bay. But. Tomorrow morning, in front of God and everybody, Angie and I will officially be over. And I don't think I can handle it.

"I'm going to get some water." I tell her. "You want anything?" She doesn't move, just forces long breaths through her nose to make sure I understand how disappointed she is. I whistle "Don't Be Cruel," and she tosses her pillow at me.

The pile of dirty dishes has completely overwhelmed the kitchen sink and spilled over onto the counter. Grease stains spot the stove and the side of the refrigerator. I know I should clean, but I won't. I finally find a mug that looks pretty clean and clear enough space to get under the faucet. I drain the mug and fill it a second time.

I move a heap of mail from one of the chairs so I can sit down. I want to call Angie. I want to tell her that we don't need to go through with this, that we can start all over. I'll do whatever she wants to make us work. We could go to the courthouse in the morning and tell the

judge we've changed our minds. Or shit, we wouldn't even have to go ourselves; the lawyers could do it.

I pull the cordless receiver out from under a magazine and dial the number. I know it's a mistake. I shouldn't call this late. On the third ring, I'm about to hang up when she answers. She sounds sleepy, and I know I've fucked up. Again.

"Uh, is this pizza king?"

"You've got the wrong number," she says.

"Sorry."

"Mike, is that you?"

Dammit. I'm caught. "Huh?" I say in the lowest baritone I can come up with.

"Mike, I know it's you and I know you're calling me from her house."

Dammit. Caller ID was the worst invention ever. "Sorry, I was just trying to order a pizza."

"You're such a pathetic liar," she says, and then the receiver clicks.

Fuckup #261: I laughed when Baby Girl got in trouble at school for calling her teacher a communist. Angie went ballistic when the note came home, because she is convinced that every time the kid acts up it is a sign that she will torture animals and smoke crack with bums and go to prison. I think Angie's too hard on the kid, and Angie thinks it's my fault that Baby Girl acts up sometimes. "You're her parent," Angie said, "not her friend. God, will you at least pretend to help me raise her?"

Fuckup #262: Stole a box of candy canes from the drug store when I was seven. I don't think Angie even knows about it, but I still feel bad that it happened.

Fuckup #263: I did not visit Joe in the hospital after his motorcycle accident. I was too busy. Too tired. Too much of an inconsiderate asshole.

Fuckup #264: Didn't beat the shit out of Bert when he and Angie started dating. I thought about it, wanted to, but instead I went on this stunningly ill-conceived diatribe over the phone with her about marriage vows and cheating and what a dick that guy is.

Fuck-up #265: I didn't cut Bert's motherfucking head off with a machete when he moved into my house with my wife and my daughter. I didn't cut off his head and then set it on fire and then use that same machete, or maybe an axe, like one of those giant executioner axes with the exaggerated blade, to cut his body into tpieces, like diced tomato in a food processor. I should have cut him up into pieces that I could feed into a food processor so that he would become a diced tomato. Dammit. Asshole.

Fuckup #266: Lying here wishing I were at home with my family, knowing that I haven't ever done anything to make them understand that I love them more than I've ever loved anything, and knowing that after tomorrow I will have lost them forever and there isn't shit I can do about it. God, I've got to get some sleep.

Are all courthouses this depressing? The dark paneling, the dented tables, the cheap, dirty benches look nothing like the regal courtrooms on TV where good always triumphs. It doesn't look like anything good has ever happened in here.

Fuckup #322: I am late. I am late because I could not find a decent clean shirt besides this white one, and I couldn't find an undershirt so everyone in the world can see the word

GRACELAND tattooed across my chest through this goddamn paper-thin white shirt. I am irresponsible, and I look like an asshole.

My lawyer grimaces when I sit down beside him. I give him a look, like yeah, I know, you don't have to remind me. I look over at Angie, and of course Bert is sitting right behind her. Neither of them even looked up when I walked in. The judge sits on his elevated perch with skinny glasses on the end of his nose and reads some papers. He didn't even look up when I walked in.

Fuckup # 363: Stole cigarettes from my mother's purse daily from the time I was twelve until about age fifteen. Joe and I would stay out way past dusk smoking those Virginia Slims at the lot by the thick of trees that blocked our neighborhood from the highway. We would only head home when we heard the grunt and hiss of the mosquito truck coming around the corner. We'd drop those smokes and jump on our bikes and pedal like hell to keep from being overtaken by the fog of pesticide. That was the game: if the mosquito truck never caught us, then it was like we had never taken them. Ollie-ollie-oxen-free.

One time, I just couldn't quite make it. I was holding my breath and pedaling hard as I could, but the truck kept getting closer. My heart was pounding, and my lungs were burning, but I just couldn't stay ahead of it. When it passed me, I gave up. I took long deep breathes of the fumes, surrendered. Game over.

When Joe came over the next day, we didn't go out to the lot. We made up a new game. We played Elvis and Beatles albums in the basement and created dance moves that we thought would get girls to let us feel them up.

Fuckup #364: I can't sit here and listen to Angie and her lawyer talk about all my failures. Sure, I've fucked up. I'm irresponsible. I'm an asshole. I know this, but I don't think it's necessary to discuss in front of this judge and that dickhead Bert all the ways in which this is true. My chest is tight, and I'm sweating through this goddamn too thin shirt, and I feel like I'm dying. My heart is beating so fast I am convinced it will come out of my chest. Oh, shit. I'm having a heart attack. I tap my lawyer on the shoulder. He looks at me, and he looks concerned when he sees my face. He says something to the judge, and the judge says something, but I can't hear them for the echo of my heart in my own ears. I get up and sprint to the door at the rear of the room. I look both ways down the hall until I see a sign for the restroom.

There are men in suits at the urinals, so I bolt into a stall and latch the door. I sink onto the toilet and hold my head in my hands.

Fuckup #382: I'm a coward.

Fuckup# 383: I'm pathetic.

Fuckup# 384: I can't stop thinking about all the ways I've fucked everything up. I want to die here. I want this to be a heart attack that kills me right here on this toilet.

I don't want to go back into that courtroom. I don't ever want to have to look at Angie or Baby Girl and see their disappointment. I don't want to see Mary Cat cry when she realizes that I don't love her. I think about the fucked up funeral they will have for me. The tension between Angie, who will be on one side of the room holding Baby Girl's hand and I'm sure silently cussing me for yet another fuckup, and Mary Cat, who will be on the other side of the room crying as they play "That's All Right" and "American Trilogy." I think about the jokes Joe and Julio and Margie will tell about the irony of an Elvis impersonator dying on a toilet, and that

makes me smile. I chuckle. The absurdity of it makes me laugh out loud. I laugh so hard that my stomach begins to ache. Someone says, Man are you okay? But I only laugh harder and louder. I let all the shit I've done out in a hysterical cackle that reverberates off the bathroom tile, and I laugh even harder to cover the echo that punches me in the face.

Never Let Go

Red Rover

The first betrayal was subtle, a schoolyard game. We were new friends, but even then I admired your vitality, your fearlessness. We were the only two left on our team. We picked our opponent carefully—choosing the smallest girl of those lined up against us. *Hold on no matter what*, you said. *If she breaks through we lose*. I braced myself against the coming blow, planting my oxfords firmly in the grass, holding tight to your hand, waiting as the girl gathered speed and ran at our joined arms.

And I did, I held on, even as I heard the snap and felt the pain in my arm echoing like a rifle blast throughout my entire body. I tried not to cry. *Are you all right?* you said. And I didn't want to look at you, at your blonde ponytail with the perfect bow, or the freckles dusting your nose, or the concern in your eyes. My arm screamed with pain, but I didn't want to cry because the game was over and it was my fault, even though I never let go.

Pink Bra

Your mom brought you straight over from Goodrich's. As soon as we were safely in my room with the door closed you took out the green bag with gold lettering, carefully unwrapped the tissue paper, and held up the soft pink bra for me to admire. *Over the shoulder boulder holder*, you said and giggled. And I laughed with you. Then you unbuttoned your blouse and clumsily

fastened the hook-and-eye behind your back. Though I'd seen your body a thousand times, you seemed so foreign in that moment.

That was the first time I recognized the differences between us, the curves of your body where my own was boney and flat. I desperately wanted my own mother to say it's time and lead me to the lingerie department at Goodrich's where sales girls would fawn over me like some ceremonial princess. *I think I feel like a real woman*, you said. And I felt ashamed of all the stuffed animals surrounding me on the bed.

Blue Denim

I sat in the last stall of the bathroom staring at the rust colored stain on my jeans, praying that no one else in algebra class noticed it when I left the room. And I couldn't understand why it didn't hurt. Even tiny paper cuts that barely bleed at all hurt, but this didn't.

I stared at the graffiti on the stall door. *Kayla loves Ryan. Angie Vargas was here. Ryan is an asshole*. I wondered how long I could hide in there before Ms. Mackey would send someone to look for me. I hoped they would all forget about me so I could stay hidden in there forever, eventually becoming another broken fixture covered in graffiti.

And even though it didn't hurt, I cried. Ms. Mackey sent you to find me, and when you did, when I showed you what had happened, you laughed. *Oh, that's nothing to be upset about*, you said. *I got mine ages ago*. You pulled a pad as thick as a phonebook from your purse and told me what to do. Then you took off your cardigan, the purple one you always wore, and tied it around my waist. You hooked your arm through mine and led me back to class. You seemed proud, almost excited. And I wondered then how we could be so different and still so close.

Black Ink

I still find it hard to believe that such a simple note could undo so many years of friendship. You dropped it on my desk on your way to sharpen your pencil, your heels clicking on the tile as I unfolded it behind the screen of my chemistry book. *Bobby asked me to prom and I said yes and then he kissed me. Please don't be mad.*

The two months that I wouldn't speak to you were the worst of my life. And this is what I couldn't ever tell you: I wasn't angry with you over Bobby, I was angry that all boys saw something in you that they didn't see in me. And I hated myself for holding my own perceived shortcomings against you.

But that anger all dissolved when you came to my locker with red, swollen eyes. *Bobby broke up with me*, you said and kind of choked on the last word. *Now he's dating Lauren*. You flung your arms around my neck, and I had to hug you back, hold you tight and forgive. I had to, because I knew that you were crying for the both of us.

Peach Schnapps

I never told you that I didn't want to go that party because I was nervous. *Psychology test*, I said. *Baloney*, you said, *you've got to get out of this dorm room*. It was true. I'd hidden behind my books and classes while I watched you become the queen of campus, and the growing distance between us only made me feel worse. *It'll be fun*, you said. I didn't want to disappoint you.

I felt even more out of place when we got there and absolutely everyone knew you, loved you, and there I was, your shy, little sidekick who couldn't manage to say anything interesting. You picked up the bottle of Schnapps and drank straight from it then handed it to me. I did the

same thing, mimicked your every move, matched you drink for drink, so I wouldn't drown in my awkwardness.

I remember that after you went outside with Ben, I sat alone in a corner and finished off that bottle. I remember feeling sick and wishing you were there. I remember looking for you. I remember someone shouting as I threw up in the kitchen sink. I remember wanting to die. And then you were there, stroking my back. *It's okay*, you said, *let's get you home*.

The next morning you were gone, and I expected that you'd left out of anger and disgust. The only clear thought in my pounding, cloudy brain: I embarrassed you in front of your new friends, the boy you liked. Every time I replayed the night in my head, I wanted to die all over again.

When you returned, you handed me a donut and a Coke. *This will help*, you said smiling. *Wasn't last night the best?* And I couldn't believe that you didn't hate me. *I'm sorry*, I said. You waved my apology away. You said, *Everyone thought you were fantastic*. I knew you were lying, but I loved you for caring enough to lie.

White Rocker

It was the first nice piece of furniture Roger and I bought back when I couldn't stop smiling and he couldn't stop rubbing my growing belly. I used to sit in it and daydream about whispered lullabies, and kissing skinned knees, and soothing after nightmares. I was in love with that chair, those dreams, our lives.

And I couldn't bear to throw that chair out even after reality hit and we had to turn that brand new nursery into a study, that white rocker the only reminder left. When you told me your

good news, I really did want you to have that rocking chair. I wanted you to enjoy those same daydreams just as much as I wanted to forget them. I was happy for you, at least I wanted to be. But even after that chair was at your home, I nearly drove myself crazy with anger. All I could think about was you, full-bellied and glowing, rocking in that chair, and how many more times my body would betray me.

Pale Neck

We were happy, Roger and I. Really, we had the best of all worlds—freedom to travel, to make love all over the house whenever we wanted, quiet, undisturbed slumber, your family which always felt like our own.

There is a picture of you and me that I keep in my pocketbook. We are in bikinis, faces covered by our sunglasses except for wide, laughing grins. We are on the dock of the lake house at Crystal Springs trying to inflate that old raft while your girls sat on top of it. That is how I always remember us: young and strong and tanned and laughing.

Really though, I can't bear to think of you like this, thin silk scarf wrapped around your head, boney shoulders jutting through papery skin. Your oldest, speaking to nurses in hushed tones, and I don't know what to say to you because I only just realized that you will never leave this room.

So I say, *Will you look at this. I now have a turkey wattle*, and I pull on the pale skin of my neck. I'm only trying to show you that my body is besting me too, that despite all the creams and moisturizers, my neck simply refuses to lie about my age. I'm trying to say, we are the same. But what I actually say is, *It's hell to get old*.

And I know how insensitive that must sound, but I mean that it's supposed to be me. I mean that in our story—the one where we hold tightly to each other's hands and face whatever is coming at us, it's supposed to be me, my body, that breaks.

I'm trying to say that I don't know how to be the one left standing.

Give Me More, More, More

When we talked about the pageant later, we always remembered how hot it was, the whole town crammed in the James K. Polk High School auditorium waiting for the senior girls to compete for the title of Miss Scott County. An early April heat wave had settled on us, claiming the school's ancient AC system and leaving the air soupy, our shirts sticking to our backs. The auditorium was so stifling that night, we'd thought about leaving, getting some beer and heading to the quarry for a swim since we already knew either Holly Wilkins or Michelle Delanie would win. But someone might trip and fall on the stage or crack during the interview and cry, and we wanted to be there to see it.

Back then, Holly Wilkins was the leggy co-captain of our Fighting Polkats' cheerleading squad. She was tall and lean with muscular thighs, slim shoulders, and a face that could only be described as delicate. She wore her auburn hair in a thick braid that hung down the middle of her back like an arrow pointing toward her perfect ass. She never talked to us, but we studied her obsessively. We knew she liked algebra, ate chicken nuggets and cottage cheese for lunch every day, and chewed strawberry gum constantly, which we could smell from our desks three rows back, could smell even in our dreams.

On Friday nights after football games, she and Michelle would meet the other seniors out at the fire lanes that sliced through the forest just north of town and drink cherry slushes spiked with rum and dance while we watched them from a distance. We drank the beer we'd pilfered

from the refrigerators in our parents' garages and took turns punching the perv Kenneth Watts.

He said he only kept his hand in his pocket to play with his keys, but we knew better. He always had a boner—when we changed in the locker room for practice, during class and study hall, even once at lunch in the cafeteria—he would hunch over, arch his back and grab the side of his desk, or table, or locker door, he would grab whatever solid thing he happened to be near with one hand, the other in his pocket and hunch and rock back and forth until it subsided.

People said Holly's father lost it when her mother died, stayed locked up drunk in his bedroom in the years that followed. It was true we never saw him. The service station he owned over on State stood vacant with hastily hung plywood covering the windows until the fire marshal finally condemned it. People said he was a loser. He became a joke to us, a name synonymous with pathetic. We made up stories to explain his seclusion: maybe he gained eight hundred pounds and couldn't fit through doors anymore, and he probably hadn't showered since the funeral and stunk like rotting cheese, and he was so crazy that he drooled and muttered and played with his own shit. Even our parents laughed at the rumors we started. But none of it seemed to get to Holly; she never missed school, never acted like she heard us. She never stopped smiling.

Holly spent most of her time at the Delanie's split-level house in the center of town, sharing Michelle's room where they would stay up late into the night talking about (probably) school and (maybe) cheering, and (hopefully) us. We'd hide in the bushes and peek through the windows to see if they shared the same bed, and told stories about the things we swore we saw them do together.

Tom and Nancy Delanie seemed to treat her like a second daughter. Nancy would take Holly along on shopping trips to the mall, and Tom would shoot hoops with the two girls in the driveway. We often saw them out at the Chinese buffet together like a family, sharing bowls of green tea ice cream and laughing at their fortunes.

Because they were so close, Holly and Michelle became a single entity in our minds, and they were on our minds constantly—while we lay awake at night in our beds, while we studied mitosis and quadratic equations, even when we made out with other girls. And when we weren't fantasizing about them, we talked about them, how they French kissed on a dare in study hall, how sophomore year they both lost their virginity to the senior Chad Moore on the same night in the back of his Bronco, how during the Christmas dance one or both of them gave Coach Davidson head in the gym's concession stand between bags of Frito's and gallons of nacho cheese. They were rumors mostly, but we told them so often they became true enough. True for us, and that's what mattered.

We thought we knew Holly and Michelle. We thought that they really were who we made them out to be, but what happened at the pageant changed everything.

The whole town sat restlessly in the crowded auditorium but quieted as Ron Laramie, owner of the local Ford dealership and emcee of every major town event, took center stage in a soggy tux. Ladies and gentlemen, he said, tonight twelve beautiful young ladies will compete for the title of Miss Scott County, and one of them will go home with a crown and a shot at the Miss Tennessee title. Let's welcome all our contestants to the stage. The music queued, and we applauded as the girls stepped from behind the heavy velvet curtains and lined up in front of us. Holly and Michelle stood at the far right, and the other girls took their places in line behind them.

Though we'd seen the girls at school every day of our lives, they were barely recognizable to us there in that auditorium. Their hair was curled and piled impossibly on top of their heads. Their eyes, lined and shaded, shimmered like something unreal. Their bodies, oh god their bodies, poured into those sequined dresses that hugged their hips and pushed their tits up so they looked even more like soft pillows than they did in their T-shirts. Watching them, we were as dumbstruck as the rest of the audience. No one moved except for the older women who had seen it all and distractedly fanned themselves with the thin programs.

Let's give them another round of applause, Laramie said. And we did. We clapped and yelled and whistled with everything we had, subconsciously hoping they might notice us in the crowd, single us out, and pay attention. We tried these same tactics in the lockered halls daily, but some part of us hoped that tonight, transformed as they were, they might actually see us instead of giving us that laughing eye roll, the brush-off, which was always more maddening than a glare or slap.

One by one, the girls came out and glided down the catwalk as Ron Laramie read off facts about them. Jennie Martin wanted to get married and feed the poor; Lisa Mann wanted to be a kindergarten teacher; Lola Jones wanted to be a movie star and adopt African orphans. We stopped listening after the first few and concentrated on the new way their hips rolled as they walked on the platform above us.

Michelle appeared from backstage, and no one dared look away. Ron Laramie stumbled over his words as she glided past him, her deep purple dress hugging the curves we'd spent so many hours daydreaming about. We felt a familiar tightening in our core, and our fathers looked down in shame.

When Holly came on, her hair fell down across her bare shoulders, and the curls lightly touched the sequined neckline of her dress as she paraded in front of us. Laramie stopped talking all together and stared slack-jawed until Principal Ryan reached from backstage and pinched his arm. He finally stammered something about how Holly wanted to write and star in her own movies as she took her turn on the runway. Wow folks, Laramie said, I bet you all need to cool down as much as I do. We'll take a fifteen minute intermission. When we return, we'll see what kind of talent these girls have, and then we'll crown our queen.

Out in the hall, we downed Dixie cups of lemonade and unbuttoned our shirts and leaned against walls, agitated. We didn't talk, just shuffled in place and stared at the ground and worked to find a thought that didn't arouse us. Only one thing could satisfy us, and the thought seemed to occur to us all at the same time.

Kenneth Watts didn't stand a chance. We punched and kicked until blood oozed from his nose and bruises flowered all over him. We sacrificed him to the god of hormones in order that we might be saved.

When the lights flickered that intermission was over, the crowd nearly ran to get back to their seats. It always came down to the talent, and we still hoped we could exert some influence like the girls always had on us. We knew from football and baseball that when you get out there and everyone is watching, you can feel what they're thinking. It's less about officials and more about the crowd because even though you can't see them, you feel what they want and you take it in. It can mess with you. You can tell they expect flawlessness, but they'd be just as happy watching you fail. We wanted to matter to the girls on that stage. We wanted them to feel us, and it made us even more bloodthirsty.

After three girls sang off key Shania Twain songs, we felt powerful again. The older women looked satisfied as they stared over their program fans, and Ron Laramie regained his voice. And up next, Laramie said, we have contestant number ten singing “Walking After Midnight.” Lola Jones looked petrified as she shuffled up to the mic stand in her long red gown. She gave a quick smile to the judges as she began to sing.

We had a hard time concentrating on Lola’s voice, and all the girls’ talent, because all we could think about was how their hair smelled like coconut or flowers or mango when we’d sit behind them in class and inhale that scent, take it as deeply into ourselves as we could because we knew we couldn’t touch it, and we wanted to more than anything. We could only think about how soft they would feel if they ever let us hug them, really hug them so that our entire bodies were pressed into them.

Lola seemed timid, and we knew we had gotten to her. We quit paying attention to her entirely and frogged each other in the arm to see who would yelp the loudest. A child three rows back started crying while others in the audience checked messages on their phones. Our disinterest must have worked because she cried as she left the stage, mascara distorting her features back into something we weren’t afraid of.

Our shoulders burned from the licks we took, and we were happy to be distracted from our game by Michelle’s tumbling routine. She flipped backwards down the catwalk and landed in the splits right in front of us while Billy Idol screamed over the speakers. She held us captive as she rolled over on her back and scissored her legs in the air. She jumped up and cartwheeled across the stage, and we were thinking, yes Billy, more, more, more.

We hooted for her, punctuating her dance with our yells. She finished with three back handsprings one right after the other, and as she held her final pose we watched her chest heave up and down in the black spandex, breathless. She smiled out at us, and we loved her more than we ever had before.

We went over and over what happened next, telling it and retelling it at lunch in the cafeteria, at parties while we drank keg beer, over dinner with our parents and their friends. We tried to make sense of it, explain Holly's behavior in terms of ourselves. Maybe she and Michelle had a fight backstage. Maybe she was mad that Lola Jones chose the same song and wanted to upstage her. Maybe she was on drugs as most of the older women believed. We hypothesized endlessly as we told the story over and over throughout the years, but we never felt like we got to the truth of what Holly did.

Ron Laramie cleared his throat. Our final contestant, Miss Holly Wilkins will also perform "Walking After Midnight," he said, and he looked nervous for her. We heard the same few bars on the piano that introduced Lola Jones' performance, and we waited as the faded velvet curtains parted.

Holly walked slowly, delicately to edge of the stage, her steps corresponding to the tinkle of the piano keys. Everyone gasped. Women stopped fanning themselves and stared with pursed lips. No one could take their eyes off her, and being so close together in that stifling room became uncomfortable in a new way. We watched, mouths gaping as Holly just stood there, completely naked right in front of the judges.

She looked out at us and smiled serenely. Her bare skin shimmered like a mirage under the lights, and her hair hung in loose curls that grazed the dark pink of her nipples. We couldn't

breathe or move. Holly looked down at the judges sitting at their table and winked at them before she glided toward the center runway. We were speechless. She twirled down the catwalk, and our mouths hung open as she made the last turn at the end. We stared up at the smooth curve of her bare ass, and we didn't know what to do with our hands. We were suffocating, but we didn't even blink for fear of missing a single inch of her.

It seemed like she stood there for hours, letting us ravage her with our eyes while she slowly sucked our will. Some people say that she was trying to kill us all, that she knew we wouldn't be able to tear ourselves away and planned to stand there like that until we all had heat strokes so we wouldn't gossip about her. But that seems unlikely. It seems like she was saying, Here I am. Here is something undeniably true about me. Here is the real me.

She stood there and let us look, then walked carefully down the steps at stage right and down the aisle and out the back door of the auditorium. We have no idea where she went from there. She left town, and we never saw her again. No one could talk about anything else for months, but still we couldn't ever come up with an explanation. We'll never really know unless she comes back, but then we probably wouldn't have the courage to ask.

Of course Michelle won the pageant, but she wasn't the same after Holly left town. It was as if Holly had died, killed herself in this brilliantly public way and left Michelle to pick up the pieces and answer all the unanswerable questions. Michelle started wearing black and smoking cigarettes on her parents' porch until she actually won Miss Tennessee and then Miss USA and moved to New York.

But that didn't change anything. It seemed every week there was a new headline about her that we devoured in the grocery checkout line: famous affairs, eating disorders, cocaine. The

more generous older women shook their heads and said, Poor thing: it's always harder for the pretty girls to recover. But those of us who never stood a chance were relieved to know that competing for love could kill them too.

Baby Girl Sees America

Baby Girl Hardin was super excited because it was the first week after school let out for the summer, and she was going on the greatest vacation ever. She was going to a place so fantastic that it would be better than Astroworld with the giant rollercoasters, and Hot Springs with the house where water flowed uphill, and even better than camping in the Ozarks where her dad taught her how to swim in a river. Baby Girl had already known how to swim because Mom made her take lessons every summer even though she got her Guppy Certificate and could probably teach them herself. But Dad had shown her how not to fight the current and to float on her back with her feet out in front of her and use her arms to steer toward the banks, which was a super important thing for a spy to know in case she ever needed to make a quick getaway or if like a bad guy pushed her into a roaring river.

But none of that could compare to this vacation, because Baby Girl was going to a place so special it was even on the cover of her social studies book: Mt. Rushmore.

Social Studies had always been her favorite subject because all the stories they read were real—not like English where everything was made up or Math, totally boring—Social Studies had real people doing real things! And she was going to see George Washington, who may or may not have chopped down a cherry tree but definitely didn't lie about it, and Abraham Lincoln who taught himself how to read in the dark (how did he do that?), and Teddy Roosevelt who invented

stuffed animals, and the best President of all, Thomas Jefferson, who not only wrote the Declaration of Independence but also hired Lewis and Clark who were the first U.S. spies!

Seeing those guys in person equaled the coolest thing ever. And the best part! She got to spend two whole weeks with Dad (in his rig!), which should give her plenty of time to convince him to come back and live with them again and make the Sasquatch Bert and his Amazon daughters get out of her house forever.

So far though, that wasn't working out too well. Mom and Dad got divorced which meant they both paid lawyers a bunch of money to tell Dad he had to live somewhere else and that Mom had to let Baby Girl go there sometimes to visit even if Dad is an a-hole, which he isn't, but there is no convincing Mom of this.

Baby Girl had tried to get Mom to come with them so that it would be the three of them all together again like their working vacations—that's what Dad called it when they visited places—but Mom said she wouldn't go anywhere with Dad if her life depended on it. Which had made Dad laugh, but it made Baby Girl kind of angry and sad all at the same time. Baby Girl had cried then, standing on the front porch with her suitcase at her feet, and refused to get in the truck unless Mom did, too.

"Oh, honestly," Mom said and rolled her eyes. She gave Baby Girl a quick hug. "I'll see you in two weeks. Don't forget to write me." Mom had given Baby Girl some pretty cool stationery with matching envelopes and a book of stamps, but still. She wouldn't have to write any dumb old letters if Mom would just come, too. It was all a dang gyp.

"Listen, kiddo," Dad said as he carried her suitcase over to the truck. "It's a shit sandwich." He picked her up and put her in the cab. "Nothing to do but take a bite."

The first couple of days had been pretty cool. They'd taken a load over to Tulsa, Oklahoma, dropped it and picked up another one, and Baby Girl had even gotten to sign the weigh bills right underneath where Dad did, so it was like they were partners. And Dad had let her eat all the Cheetos she wanted and talk on the CB with her own handle that she got to make up, which was Cynthia Alexis Davenport (she had always wished that was her real name), so it was like she was a real long distance trucker.

Mostly the truckers talked on the CB about where they were and traffic and where the police hid to give tickets, but sometimes they talked about other things. Like Baby Girl knew that the one called Toots had two kids and five grandkids but no wife, and his favorite word was GD. Baby Girl couldn't say the whole word like Toots did, but Dad said GD was okay except at school or in front of Mom. A lady trucker named Big Mammies also talked a lot about tits and cats, but she quit after Toots said there was a GD kid on the station for crying out loud.

Baby Girl liked talking to Toots. His favorite color was black, and he liked lemonade better than fruit punch, but his favorite was bourbon. Baby Girl had never tried bourbon but didn't think she wanted to because Dad said it made your chest hairy and that is gross, gross, gross. Probably that's what happened to the Sasquatch Bert because he was really hairy all over. Just thinking about him made Baby Girl want to puke. How could Mom even like him, much less kiss him all the time? Ugh. She had to get rid of him and his slut kids, and she had a really good idea of how to do it. She had already sent Mom a letter from Tulsa, and it said this:

Dear Ms. Angela Hardin,

It has come to my attention that your boyfriend, Bert Sanders, and his two daughters live at your house. This is very upsetting to my client, Mr. Mike Hardin, and his daughter, Baby Girl Hardin, and you should make them leave immediately or I will sue you.

Also, I apologize that this letter isn't typed, but my secretary is out of town and I don't know how to use the word processor.

Thank you,

Michael G. Hollingsworth, Lawyer

Baby Girl was really happy that she'd picked the plain stationary instead of the ones with kittens like she'd wanted at first, because no lawyer would ever use kitten stationary. And she knew that Michael Hollingsworth was Dad's lawyer's real name, but Dad didn't know what his middle name was. She hoped that it started with "G" because it sounded more professional to have the middle initial, and she had to make it sound as professional as possible. This was the most brilliant plan she had ever had, and once they got back home Sasquatch would be gone and Dad could move back in. Oh, God bless the lawyers!

Baby Girl stretched her legs so that her tippy toes touched the dashboard, but she still couldn't quite reach the Elvis sticker on the glove compartment. She had been trying for days to poke it with her toes, but even all slumped down in her seat, she couldn't reach. Dad had Elvis stuff all over his truck. He had a life-sized cutout dressed in a gold suit hanging on the closet door, and he even had bumper stickers on the back that said, "Elvis is my King" and "I'd rather be at

Graceland.” Dad used to dress up and sing Elvis songs sometimes, which Baby Girl secretly thought was really cool, even though she pretended to be embarrassed.

“Look who’s finally awake,” Dad said. He patted her extended leg. She wasn’t sure how long she had been napping. It was still really bright outside even though it felt like it should be dark. “I started to tell you to go sleep in the bunks where you could stretch out, but I decided not to wake you.”

Baby Girl yawned. “Where are we?” she asked.

“Coming on Wichita.”

She opened the dog-eared atlas across her lap and traced the highlighted line of their route. Oklahoma and Kansas brought her total number of states visited up to four since she had been to both Texas and Arkansas, but those didn’t really count since she lived in Texarkana and half the city was in Texas and the other half in Arkansas anyway. At the end of this trip though, she will have been to four more—Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota—which means she will have the coolest show-and-tell of anyone in the fifth grade once school starts again.

“You getting hungry yet?” Dad asked.

Baby Girl wasn’t sure if it was all the Cheetos or her excitement, but she wasn’t even the tiniest bit hungry. Oh, an idea!

“Not hungry,” she said. “You know Dad, I really haven’t been hungry at all since you moved out. Especially after Sasquatch and the Amazons started crowding up my life.” Dad looked over at her and then back at the road.

“Is that right,” he said.

She closed the atlas and looked at him very seriously. “Yes. And Mom either. In fact, I think we both might just waste away to nothing and die.” She leaned way back in her seat like she’d fainted. Dear God, she thought, please let this work and please don’t send me to hell for lying.

“Well,” he said, “if it’s that serious maybe we should skip Mt. Rushmore and go straight to the hospital.”

Oh, dang. Not good. Baby Girl sat up straight in her seat. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.” She needed a better plan. “Can we listen to some music? I want to hear ‘Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother’ again.”

“That’s my girl,” Dad said, and he slipped the cassette in the deck. After they’d listened to it and rewound it three times, Dad switched the radio to off because they shouldn’t over do it. So far, Baby Girl wasn’t super impressed with Kansas, because she only saw one tree like every bazillion miles. What did these people do when they were outside and needed a break from the GD sun? The whole place felt kind of lonely.

At the plant where they dropped the load they were hauling, Baby Girl got out to help Dad with the paperwork, but the a-hole at the desk wouldn’t let her sign anything even though she had gotten to in Oklahoma, because he said it was against the rules. Total shit sandwich. Baby Girl went back out to the cab and found Toots on the CB again. “Hey Toots, do you like Elvis?”

“Roger that. But I like the Jewish Elvis even better. And Buddy Holly.”

“Who are they?” she asked.

“Who are they?” The CB squalked. “Only the greatest songwriter ever, and you don’t know Neil Diamond? What are they teaching you kids?” Baby Girl had no idea what he was talking about, but she didn’t say anything. “Hey, did you ever see *E.T.*?” he asked.

“Yeah, sure.” Every kid had seen *E.T.* at least a hundred times. “Why?”

“Ah, forget it. That Heartlight shit wasn’t his best anyway.”

Baby Girl could see Dad walking back out to the truck. “Hey, Toots,” Baby Girl said, “I’ve got to go now, but I’ll make you a mix tape when I get home.” She would even try to put Buddy Holly and Neil Diamond on there, though she would probably have to listen for like weeks to record them off the radio.

“Roger that, Miss Cynthia Alexis Davenport—”

Baby Girl switched off the CB as Dad opened the door. He wouldn’t care that she was talking, but still. Spies had to keep some things secret.

Dad wanted to eat at the Tropical Isle Truck Stop because he said they had the best chicken-fried steak in the country. They certainly had the most neon signs in the country, but Baby Girl didn’t protest. She needed to keep Dad happy.

They sat at a booth by a window that you couldn’t see out of for all the cigarette signs. Their waitress, a tall, skinny woman in a red apron came over and was all *Hello, Mike* and *Don’t you look great, Mike* and *This must be your beautiful daughter* and *Mike, I want to kiss you right now* which she didn’t actually say, but Baby Girl was sure that’s what she was thinking. Who in the GD world was this lady? Baby Girl especially didn’t like how her dad got all smiley and

goofy when he said, *Baby Girl, this is Holly*, or the way Holly tucked her curly blonde hair behind her ear and giggled.

“I need a Dr. Pepper,” Baby Girl said in the same tone of voice Mrs. Estes used when she told Baby Girl how inappropriate everything was. “Now.” And because Baby Girl had such good spy skills, she noticed that when Holly brought her Dr. Pepper back, she also brought Dad a Sprite with extra ice the way he liked it without even being told. What. A. Shit. Sandwich.

Mostly they ate their chicken-fried steaks in silence, except that Holly kept coming over every ten seconds to chat. Every time she did, Baby Girl dropped her fork so Holly would have to go get another one, or she made Holly refill her Dr. Pepper, or told Holly to bring another bottle of ketchup even though Baby Girl didn’t even like ketchup on her chicken-fried steak. Really, what was up with this woman? Why didn’t she take the dang hint?

Dad didn’t seem to notice anything—except Holly. He kept smiling at her and watching her while she waited on other tables. Gross.

Baby Girl really had to go to the bathroom after drinking so many Dr. Peppers, and she tried to hold it because Holly sat down at their dang table to tell Dad all about her stupid dog’s trip to the vet, and Baby Girl did not want to leave them alone especially since they both kept giggling and smiling even though neither of them said a dang thing that was funny. Finally, she had to jump up and sprint around the corner to the ladies’ room.

Dear God, she thought as she hovered over the toilet like her mom had taught her to do in public restrooms, please deliver my dad from this evil witch Holly (what a dumb name!) and I will do whatever you want. Promise. Amen. After she’d washed her hands, she opened the door

just the tiniest crack and slipped through, then silent-walked over to the corner and peered around it. Dad and Holly were at the table. Holding hands.

Baby Girl ran back to her seat as fast as she could. “Baby Girl,” Dad said, “thank the pretty lady for giving us such a nice meal.”

Was he serious? Baby Girl looked right at Holly with the meanest eyes she could make. “My mother is prettier than you.”

“Stop it,” Dad said and rapped his knuckles hard against the table.

Baby Girl looked down at her lap. “Well, it’s true.”

“Apologize. Now.”

Baby Girl sucked on the side of her lip. No way she was going to apologize to this witch, but she didn’t need Dad being mad at her. Dangit. “Fine,” she said and rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry that my mother is prettier than you.”

Holly just sat there looking at the table like she might bust up laughing, but Dad’s face was all red which was a sign pointing to he was super mad.

“Go wait out in the truck then if you can’t be nice,” Dad said.

Baby Girl threw her napkin down as she raised herself out of her chair and stomped through the restaurant and out into the night. What a bunch of GD a-holes. Dad should be taking her side instead of slutty Holly’s.

She got into the truck and slammed the door as hard as she could. She could see the two of them inside the restaurant talking like they were the only two people in the world. It was like Baby Girl wasn’t even there, and she felt the rock in her throat that meant she was about to cry. “GD a-holes,” she said and she liked the way her angry words filled up the empty truck. “You’re

all a bunch of GD a-holes.” She stood in front of her seat and kicked the stupid Elvis on the glove box before she opened it and got her stationary out and wrote:

Dear Mr. Mike Hardin,

My client, Ms. Angela Hardin, has advised me that your relationship with Holly is completely inappropriate. You should stop talking to her right now, or I will sue you and you will not get to visit with your daughter anymore. I don't think I need to remind you how much money you had to pay the last time you got sued, or how sad your daughter was when she didn't get to see you. Knock it off please, so that we can all avoid going to court.

Dang! She didn't know Mom's lawyer's name. She looked through all the paperwork in the glove box. Insurance papers, a receipt for tires, a Bob Seger cassette, a bunch of other papers (not from the lawyer), a wrench, a bra—what the?—and then she knew: Holly. Baby Girl was furious. Who did this woman think she was, leaving her bras all over the place? Baby Girl would just have to make up a lawyer name and hope Dad didn't notice. She signed the letter *Sincerely, Cynthia Marie Aikman, Lawyer*, folded it, and stuffed it in an envelope. She took the bra and tried to stuff it in a different envelope, but it wouldn't fit, and she had to tape two together. It looked all bulgy, but the thing was in there. She wrote Dad's name on the front of his letter, and *GO AWAY* on the front of Holly's bra holder.

“Excuse me.” Baby Girl stood on her tip toes by the hostess' counter. “Could you please deliver these to that table over there?”

The woman at the counter smiled down at her. “Of course, sweetheart.”

Baby Girl handed her the two envelopes and turned to go, but stopped short. “Will you tell them that a large man in a suit brought them in, and not a kid?” The woman giggled like a

moron. “I’m serious. Say he looked like a spy or a judge or something.” She looked at the woman with her angry face to let her know that she meant business and then went back out the door and got in the truck.

Baby Girl turned on the CB and listened for Toots, but he wasn’t there. She heard Big Mammies though, so she asked her the best way to get rid of another woman.

“I’ve had this problem myself,” Big Mammies said. “Best thing you can do is beat her ass and give your man some freaky pussy that he won’t never forget.” Hmm. Why hadn’t she thought of that? Of course Dad would be lonely all the time when she wasn’t around, but he wouldn’t be if he had a kitten!

“Why does it need to be freaky?” Baby Girl asked. Her friend Katie had an old cat that got hit by a car and only had three legs. It was pretty freaky, but it made Baby Girl kind of sad to look at it.

“Honey, men’ll do just about anything for a freak.” Big Mammies laughed until she started choking and coughing. Dad was walking back to the truck, so Baby Girl switched off the CB. He didn’t have the letter in his hand, but it could be in his pocket. Baby Girl needed to think about where to find a freak cat. Maybe pet stores sell them in clearance bins or something. She would have to investigate this.

Dad climbed up in the truck and just looked at Baby Girl for a long time before he said anything. Scary!

“Your behavior in there,” Dad said, shaking his head. “Absolutely out of line. You embarrassed me. Do you know how disappointed I am in you?” Baby Girl tucked her legs in

close to her chest and hid her face behind her knees. Baby Girl couldn't tell if Dad was just talking about dinner or if he knew she'd made up the letter. "Are you listening to me?" Dad said.

"Yeah."

"Look at me." Baby Girl looked up at the Elvis on the glove box. "Holly is going to be coming with us on our trip, and you are going to be nice to her and polite and not cause any trouble. Got it?"

What in the GD world was this? He had to be kidding. "She's coming to Mt. Rushmore?"

"Yes. Look, I think you'll really like her if you give her a chance."

Now Mt. Rushmore would be ruined. Why wasn't he afraid of the lawyer? Total shit sandwich. She had to find a freaky kitten and get rid of this woman quick.

After four days of using her spy skills to ask very subtle questions, Baby Girl was pretty sure that GD waitress hadn't given Dad his letter or Holly her stupid bra. She'd written letters to both of them again, but so far they hadn't said anything about them. And she hadn't even seen a pet store, so none of her plans were working and Baby Girl was starting to get really aggravated. Since Holly was sitting up front with Dad, Baby Girl couldn't even talk on the CB with Toots or Big Mammies because she would rather lie in the back on the bunks than sit next to that witch. Worst. Vacation. Ever.

"Hey Baby Girl," Dad called after they'd been on the road for like a billion hours without stopping. "Look out over there." He pointed out the window to the grass covered hills and a jutting rock face. "That's where we're headed."

She was almost at Mt. Rushmore, but she was barely even excited about it anymore. This was supposed to be the best day ever, but Holly would definitely ruin it.

They had to park the truck way in the back of the parking lot by all the RVs, and Baby Girl wished Dad would hurry it up so they could get inside and maybe lose the stupid witch. About a billion people were walking back and forth down the flag-lined walk from the Concession Building and the Visitors Center. It looked pretty cool down at the end of the path, which was right in front of all the best Presidents' faces. Baby Girl ran as fast as she could, but she tripped when she tried to kick a loose rock. Ouch. Dangit.

"Dad, let's go down there." Baby Girl pointed to the end of the Avenue of Flags where a large group had gathered for a picture in front of the monument.

"Let's wait for Holly." Baby Girl rolled her eyes at him. "Well go ahead then. I'm right behind you."

The flags whipped in the breeze overhead, and she squinted in the sun to see them. Georgia, Guam—hey, that's not a state—Hawaii, Idaho. Even though she was halfway there, the stone Presidents still looked exactly the same as they had from the parking lot. She looked back up at the flags. Kentucky, Louisiana—what an ugly bird—Maine, Minnesota. It was weird how all these flags were hung up together around these poles. One flag on its own would mean something, like the flag of Texas by itself meant Texas, but all together they seemed to cancel each other out. Someone could have saved themselves a lot of trouble and just hung up one giant American flag. Duh.

The cover of Baby Girl's social studies book was orange with a picture of Mt. Rushmore on a foggy day right in the center. And from where she stood, the carved-out mountain looked

exactly the same as that picture except that today was sunny (so no fog), and there were lots of scraggly trees at the bottom in real life that you couldn't see in the photo. She stood there on the stone observation deck, waiting. But those giant heads just kept staring out from the stone while people took pictures of each other. No cherry trees being chopped down or stuffed animals explaining Teddy Roosevelt, and no Lewis and Clark talking about their awesome boss. It was just a bunch of big stone heads. What a gyp.

"When are they gonna do something?" she said, but when she looked around behind her, she didn't see Dad or Holly. "Dad?" She looked all around, but didn't see him anywhere. Oh well. He was being a total a-hole this whole trip.

Baby Girl saw a man in a park ranger's uniform standing nearby and decided to ask him when the excitement started. She walked over and shielded her eyes from the sun as she looked up at him. "Excuse me," she said. "Is anything else going to happen?"

The ranger looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well," she said, "I mean, is there going to be a show here or fireworks or games or something?" The ranger swallowed a laugh.

"Not today. But if you come back on the fourth of July there will be fireworks."

So, nothing? And to top it off if they'd only made this trip next month instead of now then dumb old Mt. Rushmore would be exciting? What a shit sandwich. "Thankyouverymuch," Baby Girl said and swiveled on her heels. She crossed her arms over her chest and stomped down the stupid flag path to find Dad and the evil witch and get the heck out of here.

Baby Girl was so furious by the time they got back in the rig she was almost crying. Mt. Rushmore was dumb. And her dad liked Holly instead of her mother, and Baby Girl would be stuck living with Mom and the Sasquatch Bert and his a-hole Amazon kids.

“Hey honey,” Dad said. “What’s wrong?” He started the big engine and jammed it down in gear.

“It’s just,” she said but had to stop to snifle. “If they put something on a social studies book then it shouldn’t be lame. And there are fireworks next month but on today, nothing happens.”

Dad let out a big laugh. Baby Girl climbed on the lower bunk and hid her face in the pillow. “Not impressed with Mt. Rushmore, huh?” He patted Baby Girl’s back. “Yeah, the government can certainly be a disappointment. Even when it’s congratulating itself.”

“And,” Baby Girl said, “George Washington was the only one with a body and he only had half of one. It’s just a GD gyp.”

“You know,” Holly said, “I know of a place like Mt. Rushmore but even more exciting.”

Baby Girl rolled her eyes and hoped neither of them could see her.

“You ever heard of Crazy Horse?” Holly asked.

Did she look stupid? Who hadn’t? Baby Girl looked up at Dad and hoped he heard how retarded this woman was.

“You know, the battle at Little Big Horn?” he said. Of course, he would think she was the dumb one, honestly this day was getting worse and worse. Baby Girl buried her face back down in the pillow and tried not to scream. “The government kept telling him and his people

that they had to move. The President would promise to give them some land that no one could take away, but then he'd take it back."

"An Indian giver," Baby Girl said. "Yeah, I know."

"Exactly," Holly said.

"So finally," Dad said, "Crazy Horse got sick of it and attacked some government troops. And he whooped them. So then the government sent more troops and they fought for years over who had the right to live here, and the government eventually killed Crazy Horse and took all the land."

Why didn't these two just talk to each other instead of using her to show off how smart they both think they are? Gag. "They should have all just ignored each other," Baby Girl said.

"Yeah," Dad said, "probably, but everyone just wanted to have it their way. Sometimes, you know, people just can't live together without killing each other." Dad turned the CB volume down since it had started squawking. "Anyway, when the government built Mt. Rushmore, the Indians decided to make an even bigger monument on an even bigger mountain, and the whole thing is going to be just Crazy Horse."

"Hmm. Interesting," Baby Girl said. "Can we listen to some music now?"

"Yeah," Holly said, "but don't you want to go see Crazy Horse's mountain?"

Baby Girl really didn't want to go see another dumb mountain statue. "No," she said. "Let's get some pizza or something."

Holly reached out to touch Baby Girl's arm, but she scooted further back in the bunk just in time. "We only thought you might like to see it because they're still working on it, and when the weather is good like this, you get to see them carve the mountain with dynamite."

Blowing stuff up would be pretty cool, especially if they accidentally blew the stupid witch up.

“Holly thought it would be a good surprise,” Dad said.

Dang it. Why did it have to be Holly’s idea? She was ruining everything.

It was about half an hour through the Black Hills to Crazy Horse’s mountain, and Baby Girl prayed the whole way that there would be explosions. She had never actually seen anything blow up except on TV, and she thought it would probably be the coolest thing ever, even though she wouldn’t show it because she didn’t want Dad to think that Holly had good ideas.

The Visitors Center and Indian Museum looked nothing like Mt. Rushmore, where everything was made of gleaming white stone. Everything at Crazy Horse’s place was made of wood, even the walkways. And Baby Girl was super excited to see that there was a large pile of rocks they’d blown off the mountainside with a sign that said Take a Piece of Crazy Horse Home! She grabbed the biggest one she could manage to pick up, and Dad carried it around the museum for her while she looked at wampum which was Indian money and old ears of corn and buffalo bones. And then, right below a picture of Crazy Horse ,there was a sign that Baby Girl actually stopped to read. “Crazy Horse married Black Shawl Woman in 1871, and shortly after they had a daughter named They Are Afraid of Her, who died young of a white man’s disease.” Another kid with a weirder name than her? This. Was. The. Greatest. Place. Ever. But she was still careful not to smile too much.

“Hey, Baby Girl, look over there,” Dad said pointing to a large cloud of dust rising over the mountain.

Oh my god, an explosion! This was so much cooler than Mt. Rushmore.

Holly went to the bathroom, and Dad took Baby Girl outside and down the wooden planks to get a better look. As the wind carried the dirt and debris away, Baby Girl could see that one side of the mountain looked normal, but the other side had Crazy Horse's stone face etched into the top of the rise. Below it, there was a long straight line of rock that according to the signs would be his outstretched arm pointing at his land. This was so cool. They waited and waited, and finally another cloud of dust and dirt and rock clouded the view.

"This is way better than Mt. Rushmore, right?" Dad said.

It totally was! She got a blown up rock and everything! But Holly was messing everything up. "Dad," Baby Girl said, "are you ever going to come back home?"

He didn't say anything for a minute. He rubbed the top of Baby Girl's head and gave her a wink. "Do you know why Crazy Horse isn't completed yet?" he asked.

Baby Girl shook her head.

"Because some people think that Crazy Horse shouldn't be there at all. Even still. See, he's always been caught between where he wants to be and people who don't want him there." He turned her to face him. "Do you understand?"

Baby Girl shook her head, but yeah. She understood. Sometimes Sasquatches and stupid women would make a GD mess of everything.

Sometimes, the world was just a shit sandwich.

The Insured

February 15, 2007

Dear Allsave Insurance Company,

I received your letter advising me that you are investigating the claim for benefits on my husband's life insurance policy. You will see on the copy of the death certificate certified by the Scott County Coroner's Office, which I sent with the claim form, that he is most assuredly deceased. So, I'm not entirely sure what there is to investigate. You will notice that the certificate lists "snake bite" as the cause of death, and Hale McQuinn, the coroner, was in church that Sunday when it happened, so I'm sure you can just ask him if you have any doubts.

Please understand that Jimmy's passing has brought me no end of grief. I am at a loss without him. For the last thirty years, I took care of him, and he took care of everything else. If he were still here, he would be the one dealing with this matter. He mailed you the checks every month for the past twenty-some-odd years so that if something happened to one of us, the other would be okay. (I'm sure your records will indicate the exact date that we became insured by your company. I probably have a file on it here somewhere, but frankly, I don't even know where to begin looking.) I'm sure Paul Romans, our local agent, can verify that our account is current and in good standing. I will be happy to provide you with any information you need to get this matter resolved expediently.

Yours most sincerely,

Edwina M. Woodson

Policy #1JC2510-44C-9

March 29, 2007

Dear Allsave,

I still have not heard from you regarding my claim. My husband passed nearly three months ago, and I think you have had sufficient time to review all the paperwork. I spoke with my local agent Paul, who advised me that the matter was out of his hands and he couldn't comment on the status of my claim. If you could, please update one or both of us so that we can assist you in getting this matter taken care of.

If you have sent an answer and/or the check, it must have been lost in the mail. Could you kindly resend it?

Warm Regards,

Edwina M. Woodson

Policy #1JC2510-44C-9

P.S. I found the insurance file. We took out the life insurance policies in 1983 at the same time that we contracted with you on our homeowner's insurance, the policy on our little church where Jimmy preached, the auto policy on the Lincoln, and our health benefits. I paid a total of \$692.31 last month for the piece of mind that comes with being fully insured. EMW

April 18, 2007

Dear Allsave,

I read in the newspaper about the lawsuit filed against your company by all those people down in New Orleans who were affected by the hurricane. My late husband always spoke in his sermons of the Lord's mysterious work. He thought God sent us trials as a way to discover redemption and find grace. That's what he said anyway. He was always more of believer than me. I personally feel that any god who hurts people just so they'll need him is an ego-maniac that isn't worth praying to, but I'm getting off the subject.

Anyway, whatever the trials your company is facing, I do understand. I know you must be very busy processing all those claims, and I just want to make sure mine doesn't get lost in the pile. If we don't get this matter resolved soon and that check in my bank account, I may have a hard time continuing to pay your premiums every month.

Patiently yours,

Edwina M. Woodson

Policy #1JC2510-44C-9

April 29, 2007

Dear Allsave,

Your denial of benefits based on “negligent behavior” and “breach of contract” is absurd. While I recognize that “the insured is responsible for notifying the company of any increase in lifestyle risks during the course of the contract period,” you have to understand that there was no change. Jimmy had been handling snakes during church services for longer than we’d had that policy.

I also recognize that handling snakes can be considered risky behavior, but Jimmy was never negligent. He always fed those snakes so much that they were nearly comatose before people handled them, not to mention he kept them so cold they didn’t want to move.

I would further like to point out that was his job, not a “risky hobby,” so of course he didn’t list it as such on his application. Do you expect shoe salesmen to list touching other people’s feet as a hobby on their life insurance policies?

You may consider this my formal request for appeal.

Signed,

Edwina M. Woodson

Policy #1JC2510-44C-9

June 23, 2007

Dear Allsave,

Please find enclosed the job description used to hire my husband's replacement. This will have to satisfy your requirement for "a detailed listing of duties performed in the course of his work." While it doesn't specifically list "utilize reptiles during service" as you put it, I have also included a Bible with the relevant passages tabbed and highlighted, but I'll list them here for your convenience.

Mark 16:18: "They shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing it will not hurt them."

Luke 10:19: "I give you the power to tread on serpents and scorpions and nothing shall by any means hurt you."

I know a literal translation of this text may sound a little silly to you. Sometimes I find myself thinking it's crazy. I told him plenty of times that the Scripture is a love letter not a textbook, but for him it was always more complicated than that.

Jimmy wanted people to see God, to see and feel grace in a physical way, which you well know is a hard thing to do in this world. I'm not sure what things are like for you up in Cincinnati, but people around here (myself included) don't have much to hope for. Most of us in the church have been poor so long we don't know any other way to be. Our parents worked hard and were still left wanting. Some have tried to escape it—leaving for cities like yours to find work—only to realize that the mountains that surround us in Norma, Tennessee, will be a barrier

no matter where we go. And we know it won't be any different for our children. Or our children's children. There is nowhere safe.

But Jimmy tried to change that. And while my faith has always been so weak that I question it all, I believed in Jimmy. Every Sunday, he tried to help us all see that even if there is no hope in this life, there may be something better in the next. Every time he picked those snakes up, he was holding the physical manifestation of all our troubles (metaphorically speaking), and every time it didn't kill him, he gave us hope. Very literal hope. That was his job. I guess I don't really expect you to understand, but do know that a world exists not too far from the place you live where people have nothing save for faith. And they need to feel that things will work out in the end.

I need to feel that this matter between me and your company will work out in the end. Jimmy's death left a lot of people questioning how God could take him like that. The only thing we can come up with is that God acted through that snake to relieve the church's financial burdens since we just had to have the AC system replaced. (It makes about as much sense as anything, I guess.) The whole congregation is now praying for the soul of your company and the quick resolution in the matter of my check, which is the only thing that will keep me and the Church of God With Signs Following afloat.

Sincerely,

Edwina M. Woodson

Policy #1JC2510-44C-9

August 9, 2007

Dear Allsave,

I received your notice of denial of benefits on my husband's life insurance policy. If you feel this claim "would be better categorized as a Worker's Compensation issue," then I suggest you go ahead and process it that way. I have filled out and enclosed those forms which I received from my local agent. I suspect that you already have in your files any further information that you could possibly need, but do let me know if I can do anything to expedite this process.

This is getting ridiculous,

Edwina M. Woodson

Church of God With Signs Following Business Policy #1HG34844-8H9-001

September 12, 2007

Dear Allsave,

I received your letter denying benefits on the claim for Worker's Compensation in the matter of my husband's death. If we didn't have a "Worker's Compensation Extension of Coverage" on the church's policy, then why in the hell did you tell me that his death would be covered that way? And since it isn't, why don't you just pay out on the life insurance policy? I figure with all the different policies we have, one of them should ensure me a check in the event

of his death, which I will remind you occurred seven months ago. I have enclosed copies of every policy we have with your company and invite you to pick the one that will satisfy you and send me the goddamn check.

Yours in aggravation,

Edwina M. Woodson

Policy numbers are on all the enclosed documents.

September 25, 2007

Dear Allsave,

You're sorry, but none of my policies cover a claim of this type? Are you kidding me? Well, I'm sorry that I no longer have enough money to keep the church's doors open, and I'm sorry that these snakes are now homeless. I'm sure you can take care of them with all the damn money I've sent you in premiums over the years.

I'm also sorry about the fact that I am now going to have to go through the court system to get this matter resolved.

Shame on you,

Edwina M. Woodson

P.S. The snakes will be hungry. They like mice. EMW

October 4, 2007

Dear Allsave,

Since I now have to pay my lawyer to help me with this attempted murder charge, I no longer have the resources to engage in a legal battle over my husband's life insurance claim. You win on that front. While I understand that you all were probably pretty surprised and angry about the snakes that I sent you, I don't think it was right of you to raise the rates on my health and life insurance. Seems to me that those premiums should have gone down since I'm no longer anywhere near those snakes.

Anyway, in anticipation of this rate increase, I have done the following: had my cholesterol and blood pressure checked; got an eye exam and new glasses; got a mammogram, a flu shot, and a three-month refill on my allergy prescriptions. Since I am in perfect health and facing prison where my medical expenses will be covered, and owing to the fact that your insurance seems to be a waste of money anyway, I am canceling my policies.

This will be the last letter you get from me, so I want to make sure you know just how disgusting your business practices are. I honestly don't know how you sleep at night. You prey on people's fears for profit, and then abandon them when those fears are realized. You tell people they are in good hands, but those hands are just as dirty as the devil's.

Go to hell,

Edwina M. Woodson

Everything is Beautiful

Hunger. Kayla is hungry. Can't forget that. Lori fingers the fifty in her pocket, enough for a gram of methamphetamine and a fifth of vodka or ten orders of chicken nuggets. Maybe and ten orders of chicken nuggets? Math. Math is so hard. Vodka equals \$16.99. A kid's meal equals \$4.99. Meth equals beautiful! Vodka plus meth equals yes! Vodka plus meth minus a kid's meal equals what? A positive plus a positive plus a negative equals, who knows? They would have known at Kayla's school. She should have asked them when she checked Kayla out, but then they might have also known she'd been using and then what? No Kayla. No fun! Because Kayla equals beautiful and fun and Lori's heart.

Seatbelts. Six-year-olds must be buckled snugly into safety seats. Everyone knows that, and Lori knows that too because she's not a bad mother. She may have been a bad mother before, but not today. Today will be different. She slams on the brakes before the Pontiac pulls out of the school's drive, and turns to see Kayla, firmly buckled in the backseat. Relief. She didn't forget. Sometimes she forgets but not today. Not this time. No forgetting.

"Mom, where are we going?" Kayla asks.

Happy parents. Safety belts. Good shoes. Crayons. Homes. Chicken nuggets, corn dogs and fish sticks. Sunscreen in summer and gloves in winter. Moms who love dads who love moms back. Her mind buzzes with all these things, things that kids need. Each word chases the others around

in a dizzying circle. Bright winter sunlight warms the skin of her arms and hands as it shines through the windows, electrifying the day with possibility. Today, she thinks, today, today, today!

She will be everything that Kayla needs today, and Duane will remember how much he loves her and take her back, and Kayla will forgive her too, and they will be a family again. Kids need moms. And moms need kids. And today she is a mom who has a kid again, and she will show them all that she can be good at it. Duane will see, and the judge will see, and her parents will see. Everyone will see that she is better, and she will get to be Kayla's full time mom again! Lori's cheek tingles, and she scratches it as she pulls out onto the highway. She checks her rearview for cops. Safe. No cops. No cars. Safe.

"Mom." Kayla kicks the back of Lori's seat. "Where are we going?"

"We are going to have some fun," Lori says and winks at Kayla in the rear-view mirror. Kayla brushes her hair away from her face. Haircut! Kayla needs a haircut. Her bangs are much too long. Lori can do that. Duane can't do that, but Lori can! Lori will cut Kayla's bangs and braid her beautiful brown hair. They will play beauty shop, and it will be fun.

"I'm hungry," Kayla says again. "I want chicken nuggets for lunch."

More meth. Lori needs more. She needs to get more meth right now. No. Not with Kayla. But Lori needs it. No, definitely not. Kids shouldn't be around that sort of thing. But she is consumed with needing it. Just one hit.

"Momma's gonna cut your hair. Would you like that?" Lori watches in the rear-view for Kayla to smile, to get excited. But Kayla is focused on something out the window. "Do you want to play beauty shop at my house?"

Just one more to tide her over. No.

God. Yes.

Goddamnit.

She can't take Kayla on a run with her. Can she? No. Kids need to be around puppies and kittens and magicians and teachers and Bible schools and parks and other kids and cartoons and grandparents, not drugs. Not people who do drugs. Lori doesn't want to be one of those people who does drugs, but right now she just needs a hit, just one to get her through today. To help her show them how good she can be. And once they all see, then she won't need it anymore because everyone will love her again, and everything will be beautiful.

Grandparents. That's what Lori will do. Drop Kayla off at her parents' house, make a quick run to score, then grab a kid's meal for Kayla. Or ten kid's meals. The vodka store! Lori can't forget the vodka because the meth alone is too, too much. She needs the vodka to take the edge off so it's just good, good, good. Then beauty shop!

"I want chicken nuggets, and a girl toy. Not a boy one."

"Okay, baby." Lori can do this. This will be easy. This will be fun. "We're gonna stop by Nan and Pop Pop's first."

Coats. Lori shivers as she realizes she isn't wearing one. She looks back at Kayla and breathes relief at the puffs of pink material poking around her seatbelt. Of course. Duane would never send Kayla to school without her coat. Saint Duane, who can do no wrong. Even though he left Lori. Even though he said if you go to rehab things will be okay. Even though he is a liar. Saint fucking Duane, who filed divorce papers while she was in detox, who took Kayla away from her and left Lori alone with nothing. Everyone has forgotten all that, but not Lori. Lori

remembers, and she is going to make Duane remember that he loves her and that Kayla loves her and that they want her back.

Mom will think Lori's using if she sees her dressed in flip-flops and a T-shirt with snow all over the ground. What to do? Just send Kayla in. Never get out of the car. Avoid Mom and Dad and their questions. They always think she is up to something, always looking to each other for the right thing to say before they speak to her. Like Lori is some kind of bomb that might explode and kill them all.

She hates to go over there anymore, hates their fake smiles and sideways glances. Hates their questions, *How are you, Lori?* and *What have you been doing today?* or *Have you talked to Kayla?* when Lori knows what they really want to ask is *Are you still using?* or *How did you turn out like this?* or *What the hell is wrong with you?* And they're right, she is bad. A disappointment. But they don't have to remind her all the time.

Yes. Avoid the argument and explanation. Avoid the whole damn world except for the good things. No bad things today. No fighting. But they will also know that Kayla is supposed to be at school and is not at school and what will they think? They will think: not right. They will think: liar. The school believed her when she said doctor's appointment, so she will say to Mom and Dad, Kayla is sick. The school called me.

"When we get to Nan's just run in and tell them you are sick, and I'll only be gone a minute."

"Why?" Kayla asks.

A dull throb lodges behind Lori's eyes. A thump, thump drumming she feels in her whole head. Now a tingle, tingling all over in time with the thump thumping. Why do kids ask so many damn questions?

"Because you don't feel good, and I have to get your medicine." Lori scratches at the tingle feeling, but it stays. The sun is in her eyes, and the snow is on the ground, and the tingle feels like snow is melting inside her skin, and she just needs one more goddamn hit to make everything okay.

"I don't feel sick. And you said we were getting chicken nuggets." Kayla might cry.

Lori doesn't want Kayla to cry. It breaks Lori's heart when Kayla cries, but if Kayla cries, then she will seem sick. And her parents might believe her. When kids are sick, they cry.

"Yes you do," Lori yells. "That's why I came to get you. Because you are sick and need me, and I've got to get your medicine and then we will go."

Lori feels horrible for yelling. She is bad. What is wrong with her? Kayla whimpers in the backseat. Good moms don't try to make their kids cry. She has ruined it. She has ruined the whole damn day.

But she needs for her parents to believe that Kayla is sick. And then she will fix it. She will make it up to Kayla. Nothing is fucked. She will make a quick run, and then everything will be okay.

More meth. Vodka. Chicken nuggets. Beauty shop. All beautiful things.

Someone has cleared the snow from the drive and walk of her parents' small brick home. Probably Dad. Mounds of the frozen slush lie on the box hedge and on the stone goose by the front door. The Buick isn't in the carport. Shit. Be home, be home, please be home.

Lori turns around in her seat to look at Kayla, who is still crying. She reaches out and gently strokes the girl's leg. "Now Kayla, I want you to get out and ring the doorbell. Tell Nan and Pop Pop that you aren't feeling well, and I've just run out to pick up your medicine. Okay?" Kayla wipes her nose on the back of her hand and nods her head. Lori helps her unfasten the seatbelt, and Kayla fumbles with the door handle until she finally frees herself. Kayla is such a big girl now. It has only been seven months since Duane left Lori, and now Kayla is big, and Lori has missed so much. She doesn't even know what she's missed. Breakfasts and games, parties and bedtime stories. Naps and hugs and cuddles on the couch and movies and shopping trips and homework and... what else?

She will never know, and it is all Duane's fault. They had been happy. They had been so perfect together in their perfect little house with their dreams of lots of perfect little babies. And then Kayla had been born, and it was like, Yes! Yes, we will always be this perfectly happy.

Lori watches Kayla walk timidly to the stoop. What if no one is home? What then? She can't take Kayla to D.C.'s. No. Kids don't need to see that shit. She can't leave Kayla here by herself.

Can she? She'll only be gone for twenty, thirty minutes tops. Just a quick run to D.C.'s, smoke while she's there. Vodka store. Kid's meal. Back in no time.

Kayla turns from the unanswered door and shrugs, then half runs back down the walk. Lori rolls down the window. "Play in the snow in Nan's yard for a few minutes while Momma runs an errand." Kayla looks down, traces the seam of her coat sleeve.

"I want to go with you." Kayla doesn't look up, just keeps frantically running her finger up and down the line of stitching.

Desperation. More meth *now*.

Fun. Kids like fun. Make it a game. “Let’s see how big of a snowman you can make,” Lori says. Kayla’s lower lip trembles. She might cry again. Lori looks around to see if any neighbors are watching. No one. It’s safe. Hurry.

Help. Kids need help to do things, even fun things like building snowmen. Lori needed help when she was little with all sorts of things, like getting her shoes on, even the ones that didn’t tie. The red cowboy boots. The red cowboy boots they’d bought her after she broke her arm skiing. Kayla has never been skiing. Lori should take Kayla skiing and buy her a pair of red cowboy boots. After beauty shop! They will do that today after they play beauty shop at Lori’s house.

But first: Meth. Vodka. Kid’s meal.

“I’ll just be a minute. Maybe you can go inside and watch TV?” Lori gets out into the bright, chilly air. She hugs her arms tight against the cold as she runs up the walk. She pounds on the front door.

“Mom? Dad?” she calls, but the house is still. She runs through the carport and opens the back gate. A blanket of snow covers the yard and makes it feel quiet and still, as though no living thing has ever been back there. She bangs on the back door. “Hello?”

Nothing.

Accidents. She can’t leave Kayla alone here. Kids get into things—play with matches or drown in bathtubs when they’re alone. Lori gets agitated. She bites her cuticle until she tastes blood.

“Look. Just play in the snow for a few minutes until I get back.” Kayla looks at her mother, doe-eyed. “But I’m scared.” All the emotion her little body can’t contain spills out in a long wail.

“Stop making a scene. Jesus, someone is going to hear you.” Lori looks around, but the street is quiet, only stark sunlight reflecting off the snow. “Just get back in the car.” Kayla opens the back door and hurriedly gets in the backseat.

What can she do? No one would think twice about a kid playing in the snow, but a crying kid sitting alone would definitely make someone call the cops. Lori scratches where it feels like tiny ants crawl along the skin of her arm, marching up and down her arm, itching.

Get it together. Plan. Make a plan that is fun. For Kayla!

“Just get back in the car,” Lori says. “We’ll go get chicken nuggets now.” Lori slams the Pontiac in reverse and punches the accelerator.

Meth. Her head and muscles start to throb. She needs more. She cannot crash while Kayla is with her. Something bad might happen, and then the whole day would be no fun. And no fun for Kayla equals no Duane or her parents loving her again and no being a happy family again. What to do?

Fight it. Push that need deep down. Lori can do this. Feed Kayla. Make it fun.

But she just needs one quick hit. One quick hit to make everything all right.

Kayla sits on her knees in the yellow booth with a ketchup-covered French fry in one hand and a pink plastic doll in the other. Lori’s head feels like it’s about to explode. The sun’s glare and the smell of old grease nauseate her. She can feel herself falling, slipping into exhaustion. Her body

aches. Her mouth is dry. She feels like her insides are coming out of her skin. Kids screech and shriek on the giant plastic playground outside.

“I love you, you love me. We’re as happy as can be,” Kayla sings to her doll.

Meth. Vodka. Either would make it so Lori doesn’t vomit all over this booth. Bad. This is bad.

“Mama’s gotta go to the bathroom. Stay right here.”

Lori gets up and walks to the ladies’ room. She shoves hard on the heavy door. Two little girls play with the automatic dryer, turning it on and dancing around the noise, laughing. Lori opens a stall and sits on the toilet, rests her head against the wall. She can’t do this. She cannot do this today. No crashing with Kayla!

She has to make a run. She will be back before Kayla even finishes her nuggets. They can play in the ball pit when she gets back. They can slide and land in the balls and laugh and play. Then beauty shop. Then skiing and new boots for Kayla. The dryer comes on again and Lori feels the electric buzz deep in her bones. Whoosh. Meth. Vodka. Everything will be better then.

Lori hurries to the booth where Kayla sits and quietly plays with her doll. “I’ve got to run out to the car for something. Finish your nuggets, and then you can play with the other kids.” Kayla looks confused, but Lori doesn’t give her time to react. “And don’t talk to strangers,” Lori says as she walks out the door.

Streetlamps glow yellow over the slush on the sidewalk, piercing the night and Lori’s vision at evenly spaced intervals as she drives back to get Kayla. How long has she been gone? It had been daylight before and now it is dark, so that means... a long time. She likes the streetlight’s soft glimmer. It reminds her of the soft dusk light the first time she had skied, really skied. She

had been Kayla's age, maybe a little older. She spent all day with her mom and dad on the bunny slopes, but for her last run she decided on a black. She watched her parents get ahead of her enough that she could make the quick cut over to the more difficult slope. They would never have let her do it.

At first, she couldn't believe how fast she was going, and it scared her. But then she got excited. She focused on keeping her skis in line and her body crouched as close to the ground as possible. She headed straight down the mountainside. Full speed ahead! Her little frame shook with fear, excitement and fatigue; the cold wind chapped her face and lips, but she kept going. She has never been sure if she remembers hitting the hard-packed patch of ice or if she's just heard the story so many times that she created a memory to go with it. She does remember Mom crying and Dad shaking his head when the rescue sled delivered her to them. The bruise, softball-sized, purple and black, on her hip. The cast on her arm. The red leather cowboy boots.

Skiing. She will take Kayla skiing. Buy her a pair of red cowboy boots. Hug her and laugh with her. She will ask her parents for money to take Kayla down to Gatlinburg. Maybe they can all go. She will ask them as soon as she picks Kayla up and finishes cutting her hair.

Lori parks at the far end of the parking lot near the dumpster. Her flip flops kick snow up onto her pants legs and soaks them as she hurries into the restaurant. A burst of warm air hits her as she pulls open the door.

But Kayla isn't in the bright yellow booth when Lori walks over to it. Lori runs around the place calling her name. People stare, clutch at their children and purses. Lori goes outside into the fenced play area. She looks under and around the clown statue, his wide plastic smile taunting her.

“Kayla!”

Nothing.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” someone asks from the doorway.

Lori ignores him. “Kayla, come here. Momma’s worried.”

No Kayla. Where could she be?

“Kayla, this isn’t funny. Come here now.” Lori peers up into the blue plastic slide but doesn’t see anything. She climbs the steps through the red tube up to the very top of the play equipment. Tinted plastic windows surround the platform at the top, and through them she sees all the way down Main Street. The softly glowing houses. Shuttered businesses. The yellow and orange of the A&P sign. No Kayla. She crosses a swinging bridge to the smaller slide. Static electrifies her clothes and hair as she slides down into the pit of plastic balls.

“I found you!”

But, Kayla is not there. Lori lies in the balls, slipping farther and farther from the surface, covering herself in the blue and red and green and yellow orbs. Snow begins falling again in thick, wet flakes. It catches in her eyelashes, softens the severe contrast between the playground’s spotlights and the night sky. She holds a yellow ball and then a blue one up to her eyes, alternating between them. “Kayla,” she says. She likes the way the colors make the world seem better. Less real. More fun. More beautiful.

Lori sits up and digs around in the balls for the flip flop that has slipped off her foot. She finds it with her fingertips and holds it in her lap. She looks through the yellow, glowing windows into the restaurant, and there is Kayla. She is holding a woman’s hand and walking with her out of the bathroom. The bathroom. Of course. Why didn’t she look there?

Lori struggles to find her footing and climb out of the ball pit. She slips and falls backward, but grabs the net enclosure to steady herself. With a big heave, she launches herself from the pen and back onto the cold, hard ground. Her toes tingle as she works them back into her flip flops, and then she half sprints for the glass door.

“Kayla,” Lori says, “where have you been? You scared me.” She grabs for the child’s hand, ignoring the woman who clutches the girl protectively.

“Is this your mother?” the woman asks Kayla. Kayla looks from her to Lori and back. She nods her head slowly and holds tighter to the woman’s hand. “She was in the bathroom crying,” the woman says to Lori in the same tone that her mom and dad and everyone else always use, like Lori should hate herself and die.

“Come on,” Lori says. She roughly takes Kayla’s hand. Fuck this woman. Fuck her parents and Duane and everyone else. It’s none of their business.

The woman puts one hand on her hip and points at Lori with the other. “I was about to call the police,” she says. Lori rolls her eyes and walks Kayla to the door. “You shouldn’t have kids if you can’t take care of them,” the woman yells at Lori’s back. Lori doesn’t even turn around, just flips the woman off as she’s walking out the door.

She buckles Kayla snugly into the backseat. “Sorry,” Lori says. “My errand took longer than I thought.”

Kayla sniffles. “I thought you weren’t coming back.”

Lori kisses her cheek and ruffles her hair. “I would never leave you,” she says. “Let’s go play beauty shop.”

Lori moves the glasses and plates into the sink then picks Kayla up and sets her on the kitchen counter. She rummages through the matches and pens and coupons and receipts in the drawer until she finally finds the scissors. They are a little rusty, but they still work. “Hold still and close your eyes.” Kayla does as she is told, and Lori snips, snips, snips a line across the curtain of bangs draped on Kayla’s forehead. There. “Open your eyes,” Lori says. Beautiful. Kayla is so much more beautiful now that she isn’t hiding behind those bangs. Lori smiles. Kayla yawns.

“Now turn around so that your back is to me.”

Kayla eyes Lori, like she doesn’t like this, like she is scared. “When is it time to go home?” Kayla says.

How could she not be having fun? How could she want to go back to Duane’s? Kayla has never been to Lori’s apartment. She should be excited. Having fun.

“After we finish playing beauty shop. And then maybe we’ll go skiing.” Lori takes a drink from the bottle of vodka and then sets it back down on the counter. The burn in her throat and belly feels good, good, good. She fingers the little plastic bag in her pocket. She wants to smoke again, but not yet. After. She will smoke again after Kayla’s hair is finished and beautiful. “Now turn around.” Kayla does as she is told, and Lori brushes the tangles from her long curls then ties it all into a loose ponytail.

Ponies. Kayla should get to ride a pony. Kayla should have a pony. Where could she get a pony? Lori takes Kayla’s hair in one hand and makes a quick cut just above the tie. “Tada!” Lori hands Kayla the detached shock of curls. “We’ll keep this.”

Kayla drops the hair on the counter like it’s something that might bite her. “I want Dad,” Kayla says and rubs her eyes.

Lori takes another swallow from the vodka. She rubs Kayla's back and tickles her neck. Kayla squirms. "Don't you want me to come live with you and Dad again?" Lori says. Of course she does. Kids need moms to be with dads.

"Yes, but Dad says you're sick, and that's why you can't be with us."

Lori pulls Kayla around until she is facing her. "Listen. I used to be sick, but I'm not anymore. Your dad doesn't believe it, so you and I have to convince him." Kayla widens her eyes. She knows. She understands. This is good. "This needs to be our secret though, okay?"

Kayla nods.

"What's our secret?" Lori asks.

Kayla looks down for a moment and then up at Lori. "That you aren't sick anymore?"

"No." Lori drains a little more vodka from the bottle. She will need to buy more soon. "Our secret is that we are going to convince your dad that I need to come home. Sometimes I will ask you to do things to help me because we are a team. And that is our secret."

Kayla nods her head gravely.

"Now turn back around, so I can finish giving you the most beautiful haircut in the world."

A loud rapping on the door startles Lori awake. She slides Kayla off her chest and back onto the couch beside her then covers her back up with the afghan. The TV flickers blue in the dark room, and she hears the knock again. Louder this time. Lori slides the empty vodka bottle under the couch and then looks through the peephole. Mom and Dad.

Lori straightens her shirt and hair then opens the door. Her mother has been crying. Her father looks pale and ashen. Her mother grabs her in a tight hug, and starts to cry all over again.

“Where have you been? We’ve been trying to call you all day.”

“What’s wrong?” Lori whispers. She hopes they can’t smell the vodka.

“Kayla’s missing,” Dad says. “She never got off the bus today.”

Lori holds a finger up to her mouth. “Shhh.” She points to the couch behind her. “She’s here with me. Her school called me. She’s sick.”

Her mother sighs a long, heavy breath of relief. “Oh, thank God.” She dabs a tissue at her eyes and grabs for Dad’s arm.

Lori did not think about this. She did not think: everyone will worry. Think now. “We tried to come by,” Lori says, “but no one was home.” That is good. They will feel bad for not being there. They will think: this is our fault. “Her school said they couldn’t get in touch with Duane or you.”

Yes. Lori can do this. Lori can get her family back. Dad rubs Mom’s shoulder. Lori shivers. Snow falls on the stoop, on Mom and Dad. “Here come in.” She opens the door wider and then closes it behind them.

Her mother walks over to the couch and touches Kayla’s forehead. “You cut her hair?”

Lori shakes her head, smiles. “It was too long. I gave her a pageboy. She looks beautiful.”

Mom perches on the couch beside Kayla and gently strokes her back. Dad moves to the chair and sinks down into the worn cushion. “Sorry I never got a hold of you guys. I must have dosed off with her.”

Dad shakes his head, waving off her apology. "It's okay. You did good, kiddo."

Mom nods and gets up. "I better go call Duane," she says and walks to the phone in the kitchen.

Yes. Mom should call Duane and tell him everything is good. Kayla is good. Lori is good. Everything is beautiful. Yes. Her mother walks back in the room a few moments later.

"Everything is fine. I told him that we should just let her stay here since she is sick and already asleep. He said that was okay, if you can bring her home when he gets off work tomorrow."

"Of course," Lori says.

"We should go home and get some rest." Her dad stands and joins her mother by the door. "Goodnight."

Lori lets them out and watches them walk down the slick, snowy path. Her dad stops and turns after a few steps. "I'm really proud of you," he says.

Lori smiles. They will love her again. Everything will work out beautifully.

She closes the door and locks it then goes into the kitchen and pulls the little plastic bag from her pocket. She gets a glass pipe from her purse and fills it with the little white crystals. She takes it into the living room and sits on the chair across from Kayla asleep on the couch.

She flicks her lighter and inhales deeply. She watches the TV glow blue then yellow then back to blue. She takes another hit of the pipe deep into her lungs and holds it there as long as she can. If she relaxes her eyes instead of focusing on the images, the TV just looks like dancing colors.

She will show this to Kayla, too. Show her how things can look different. She will take Kayla skiing. And hug her. And be better. She will buy her some red boots. That's exactly what she'll do. Tomorrow, first thing.

The Secret Life of Dentists

Once upon a time in a small mountain town 72 miles north-northeast of Knoxville, Tennessee, there lived an average looking woman who was a crackerjack dentist. Seriously, she was good. I met Dr. Walker while I was visiting my grandmother and writing about the history of that area. Dr. Walker wasn't part of the project; I just lost a filling while eating a turkey sandwich and had to find a dentist pronto. I know, who wastes their time eating turkey sandwiches when there is good grandmother-cooking to be eaten? But this was the kind of turkey sandwich that will make you forgo the homemade broccoli soup your grandmother made especially for your visit because it is so delicious.

Though I'd seen the sign out front calling this the office of Dr. Ann Walker, DDS, the waiting room was so unlike any I had ever visited that I thought for a moment I was in the wrong place. Most dental offices I've seen have been painted in soft blues and yellows, soothing colors accompanied by posters of cartoon smiles and dancing toothbrushes. Some have even had small television sets playing looped before-and-after photos of the miracles modern cosmetic dentistry can provide. But this office, with the dark paneling and fluorescent lights, was the visual equivalent of the sound a dental drill makes as it cuts through a decayed molar.

I'm sorry. I've got to interrupt myself. Even though I ended up having to go to this bizarre dental office, the sandwich was completely worth it. It was so good that it warrants preparation instructions. Here's the recipe:

Best Turkey Sandwich in the World, or The Reason I Met Dr. Ann Walker,
Or The First Plot Point of Our Story

2 slices wheat bread (lightly toasted on one side)

6 oz. smoked turkey (peppered to taste)

2 slices of dill havarti

½ an avocado thinly sliced

2 oz. Creole mustard mixed with ¼ tsp of horseradish

3 strips of crispy bacon

1 microscopic pebble capable of cracking a filing

Put the mustard on the non-toasted sides of bread and pile everything else in between.

Then stick the whole sandwich back in the oven long enough to melt the cheese. The non-toasted sides of bread will soak up the mustard as it gets runny in the heat and keep it from trickling down your hands when you take a bite. That sort of thing may not bother you, but it drives me crazy.

Where most dentists had cheerful reminders to floss daily or brush after every meal on the wall, this waiting room had signs that said, “Meth Mouth Isn’t Pretty” and “Don’t Do the Dew!” Another poster behind the reception desk read, “I have a gun. Don’t make me use it.” This declaration didn’t seem to bother any of the three people sitting in the waiting area, not the obese woman in the green muumuu, not the toddler crawling at her feet, nor the rail thin woman who looked to be asleep. The fact that they weren’t bothered unnerved me even more, and I hesitated, my hand still on the door, until the gray-haired receptionist smiled at me.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, my grandmother called. I think I have an appointment for 1:30.”

“Blevins?” She stacked some papers on a clipboard and handed it to me. “Hi, I’m Shirley. Fill these out, and Dr. Walker will be with you shortly.”

I sat down in the small oak chair furthest from any of the others and started on the forms. I’d only filled out my name, address and emergency contact when Shirley called me and led me back to an exam room.

“So do you have to shoot people often?” I asked.

Shirley giggled. “Not a one. But we were robbed three times in two months last year. Druggies. After that, I got myself a .38 and put that notice up. Dr. Walker doesn’t like it, but we haven’t had a problem since.” Shirley took the clipboard from me and motioned for me to sit in the long, gray chair. She pressed a button and the back reclined. I find lying down in public places uncomfortable because I feel exposed, sort of helpless. It’s even worse when I know firearms are present, but honestly I was so happy to be out of that creepy waiting room that I didn’t protest.

“Blevins? Hi, I’m Dr. Walker.” The petite woman shook my hand. “What seems to be the problem today?”

“A filling came out while I was eating a turkey sandwich.”

“Open.”

I have always been amazed that dentists can carry on conversations with their patients while their fingers render half the exchange unintelligible. All dentists seem able to do this, which makes me think they must secretly be good at learning foreign languages.

Dr. Walker was no exception. We chatted about Shirley and her gun, which Dr. Walker believed to be an inappropriate reaction to the thefts, but, she explained, Shirley's own daughter had a drug problem. Apparently her daughter had recently been arrested after she got high and left her kid at a McDonald's. Dr. Walker thought what Shirley really wanted was protection from that, from the thought of her daughter being the kind of person who would do such a monstrous thing.

"But I shouldn't have told you all that," she said as she realized she had just broken one of the most important unspoken rules of Scott County.

I should give you some history here. Scott County lies along the border between Tennessee and Kentucky, a fact that may seem like it couldn't possibly matter in the cosmic scheme of things, but which actually has led to a pretty interesting culture and the second plot point of our story.

Because Scots-Irish immigrants originally settled the area, the people who live there now, as a rule, hate to share. See, the Scots-Irish inherent dislike of neighbors came honestly from centuries of war, first with the English, then with the Irish Catholics after they were tricked into moving to the Province of Ulster in Ireland. Once they gave up and left for the freedom of America, the Appalachian Mountains and the geographic isolation they provided seemed like a dream come true. On the Isle, the Scots-Irish had been mostly tenant farmers and border warriors who really only fought because they wanted to be left alone to drink and dance and practice Presbyterianism, which is what they continued to do in their new home. So when the American Civil War broke out in 1861 and Tennessee chose one side and Kentucky the other, the people of

Scott County, who were caught literally in the middle, decided to divorce themselves from both and created the sovereign state of Scott County.

No joke. The descendents of arguably the most quick-tempered, trigger-happy group to settle in the States chose to officially stay out of the whole conflict. Since both sides had bigger issues afoot, and the area wasn't home to anything that could further the cause, neither Union nor Confederacy really gave a damn. The residents of Scott County actually remained a sovereignty—on paper at least—until 1999 when a state representative from the area discovered that his constituents, legally speaking, not only weren't Tennesseans, but technically weren't even citizens of the U.S. He rectified the situation, mainly, I believe, because he realized he wasn't actually the representative of anything, yet again the act went largely unnoticed. No one really cared. Point is, history has created in these people a deep-rooted distrust of everyone, and the current reigning philosophy of the area can be stated as follows: I will handle my business without telling you anything about myself that you may use against me later, and I'd rather not discuss your issues either. Also, I have a gun. Don't make me use it.

After telling me about Shirley's daughter, Dr. Walker's manner changed. She became stiff-lipped and largely silent except to tell me to open wider every few minutes. She felt she'd said too much in divulging Shirley's story to me, an interloper from New Orleans—though my family came from Scott County, too—and a writer, a teller-of-secrets at that. I decided right then how much I admired her integrity. How I liked knowing she had dropped her guard with me, and I wanted her to like me enough to do it again.

So, I did the only thing I knew to do. I started telling stories.

I told her the story of why I have always obsessed about oral hygiene. I would put it in scene, allow you to experience it as she did, but I was laboring through cotton and Novocain and salivary glands on high alert. My speech was messy, slurred, and would only sound like gibberish to you (unless you happen to be a dentist). Also, I would be embarrassed. So I'll recreate it here. The effect will be the same, but neither of us will have to deal with the slobber or awkwardness.

The Story of Why I Have Always Obsessed About Oral Hygiene

I have always thought of teeth as tarot cards, tell-tale signs of the amount of success and happiness a person can expect to experience. I believe this has to do with the fact that the two most tragic women I know, the two warring women I was caught between as a child, were both missing teeth.

My grandmother was orphaned when a mine collapsed on her father and her mother ran off to God-knows-where. She grew up bouncing around Southern Appalachia from mining town to mining town with anyone who could afford to take her. But she was tough and smart and charming, so everyone who knew her loved her and loved having her around. She made good grades in school though she did move a lot, and she even took odd jobs to buy herself nice clothes and shoes. She was always beautiful and well kept despite her circumstances. This story could easily have ended with Happily Ever After, except that decades later, after she married, she had a daughter, my mother. This was the only child she was able to conceive. My mother started out delightful, but then she turned fourteen. She started smoking weed, popping pills, and skipping school, and at sixteen found herself pregnant with me. She spent most of her adult life

in prison, and the rest of it doing things to get herself sent back to the pen, like robbing homes and liquor stores.

I spent my childhood torn between the quiet stability of my grandparents' home and the chaotic love I had for my mother. And each woman resented the other for it. My grandmother wanted to save me from disappointment and keep me safe. My mother thought Grandma was punishing her by taking me away, but my grandmother wouldn't have done that. She knew how much I adored my mother. Until I grew old enough to understand what was happening.

As a child, I always thought my mother's troubles came not from her own decisions but from really bad luck. See, most people's lives are pretty quiet. The decisions we do spend our time thinking about are so innocuous that they don't even register as decisions at all, like what to eat for breakfast, blue shirt or black one, wave to the neighbor or engage in a conversation. The big decisions that we do make about things like careers, kids, and spouses are so dependent on happenstance and what options are available at the time that they end up not feeling like decisions at all. We call it fate because whatever we choose doesn't feel like a choice; it just feels inevitable, determined. So I thought my mother's problems with drugs and the law were just that, fate. Bad luck. I couldn't imagine that she would actually wake up in the morning thinking, "I'm going to do something completely illegal and wrong today."

But when I was fifteen and living with my mother for the last time, she asked me to go to the pharmacy and pick up a prescription that the doctor had called in for me. I knew I wasn't sick and didn't need any medication, but I went anyway. What happened next is still hard for me to understand. Two police officers stood by the pharmacy counter, and when I gave my name and asked for the script, they put me in handcuffs and took me to the police station. They kept asking

me questions that didn't make any sense and telling me I was headed straight to juvenile detention. They said no doctor had called in that prescription. It was a forgery, and why did I think a kid like me could get away with that.

Everything got sorted out in the end, and I didn't go to juvie hall. I went back to my grandmother's while my mother went back to prison. I visited her there one last time. I told her about betrayal and what that feels like. I told her what it feels like to love someone and have to walk away from her. You would think she would have been apologetic. But she wasn't. She was angry with me for getting caught. For sending her back to jail. I noticed for the first time while she yelled at me how many of her teeth were missing. I saw the dark holes where white enamel should have been, the anger and bitter selfishness instead of love, instead of protection.

I never spoke to my mother again. It was too painful to see the person she had become. Roughly four years later, after she was released, my mother killed herself, an overdose.

My grandmother never cried, not that she let anyone see anyway. But late one night when I got out of bed to get a drink of water, I saw her sitting up on the sofa staring at the wall. She wore her nightgown, and I noticed her red, puffy eyes. I was shocked and a little panicked. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"Oh, I will be." Her words kind of whistled out, not exactly fully formed. Her cheeks sunk in and puckered around empty gums. And I saw that she didn't have any teeth. Where at first I didn't know how to react to this stoic woman's display of emotion, I now found myself horrified by her distorted face. I had never seen her like this. Vulnerable. I hurried back to my bed and tried to picture her the way I'd always seen her, dressed to the nines, a fortress in sweater sets and wool skirts.

The next morning at breakfast she looked normal, full set of teeth and bright-eyed.

“Do you have dentures?” I asked.

She gave me a look that let me know this would be another thing, like my mother’s life and overdose, like her whole history, that was not up for discussion.

After I finished telling that story, Dr. Walker’s eyes softened, and she began talking again too. She told me about updating the office when she took over her father’s practice, and the arguments they’d had over it. He kept telling her she was just wasting her money, that their patients weren’t like the ones she saw in dental school at Vanderbilt.

“After about a year of doing nothing but prescribing antibiotics for abscesses and pulling rotten putrescence out of meth mouths and filling cavities for two-year-olds because their parents put Dew Drop Cola in their bottles and sippy cups—Ugh. I realized what my father had been talking about.” She sat back and rolled her neck to crack the joints. “Okay. Open wider. I mean, in three years I haven’t done a single whitening or set of veneers. It’s frustrating. Go ahead and spit. I almost quit. I almost shut down the office and moved back to Nashville.”

“Y endt u?”

She smiled. “There’s this little girl that I treated. Only about four years old. Two of her baby teeth were so rotted I had to pull them, and she had eight other cavities, which I filled. Poor kid was so distraught, crying and screaming. This might sting a little. I wanted to yell at her mother, but I couldn’t. So I talked to the kid about not drinking Dew Drop—only water or milk—whether her mother said it was okay to have or not. I felt bad for scaring her.”

“Wot appen?”

“A few days later I got this drawing in the mail from her, with a note from her mother explaining it. That’s it framed over there.” She pointed at a page torn from a coloring book of a unicorn. The kid, obviously not concerned with coloring in the lines, had crayoned pinks and blues and reds all over the body of the beast. But its nose and eyes were covered in black, and a green cloud hung at the tip of its mouth.

“Ow.”

“Apparently, the unicorn is crying and spitting up Dew Drop, so it won’t hurt its teeth.”

A crying, puking unicorn restored her resolve? I laughed and almost choked on a cotton ball.

Every time I have imagined Dr. Walker, it has been within the context of her job. I have conjured her hundreds of times, but nearly always she is in that old house-turned-office, or smoking at the picnic table behind it. So I was startled when I saw her coming out of the Piggly Wiggly late one Tuesday night. I’d gone in to buy another pack of cigarettes and she was walking out at the same time pushing a dolly overloaded with Dew Drop Cola.

“Funny,” I said. “I never would have pegged you for a cola hoarder when I first imagined you.” I don’t know why I always get so nervous when I see someone out of the context that I know them. Even people I like and feel comfortable with. I thought I’d said something wrong because she stopped and stared at me, but I felt relieved when she recognized me and smiled.

“Blevins, the visiting writer,” she said. “You’re certainly out late.”

“Damn cigarettes,” I said. “What are you doing with all that?”

“Since I can’t get them to stop drinking it, and I can’t get them to outlaw it, I decided to do what I can to get rid of it.”

“I like your moxie, my friend.”

“Do you think it makes a difference?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” she said and set the dolly upright next to her Tahoe. She pulled a pack of Parliament Ultra Lights out of the pocket of her jacket and lit one. “I’ve been coming here every Tuesday when they get the deliveries of Dew Drop in and buying all they have on the shelves. I’ve done it every Tuesday for the past three years. Tom, the manager, always has a dolly waiting out for me to cart it off with, and I bet just as soon as I leave they go into a storeroom and restock the shelves. They’re probably in there doing that right now.”

“Do you want to go look and see?”

She exhaled a long stream of smoke. “Would you want to?”

“I’ll go check if you want me to.”

“That’s not what I mean.” She looked up at the buzzing light illuminating our sector of the parking lot. “It’s like your writing. Would you want to know while you were doing it that it isn’t making any damn difference to anybody?”

I opened the new pack of smokes and lit one myself as she tossed hers down into the storm drain and started opening a case of Dew Drop. “I see your point,” I said.

She opened the first two-liter and poured it out. “I don’t mean to be rude, but why are you even writing about us in the first place? You don’t even live here.”

“Do you think I’m exploiting you?”

“No,” she said and looked up at me. “Okay, maybe a little. But you aren’t the first, and that isn’t the point.”

“Are you asking why you? Why this place as opposed to anywhere else?” I considered this for a moment. True, this place is where my own story begins, but I didn’t know how to explain my need to connect with that beginning or that life that I’d tried so hard to keep secret. I shrugged. “I suppose I could have picked any number of settings and imagined a million characters besides all of you. Dumb luck, I guess. Do you want help with that?”

“Be my guest.” She handed me a bottle of soda. “So why are you ending with me here in this parking lot pouring Dew Drop down the drain?”

I laughed. “Because I can’t think of any image more appropriate.”

“All right then. Do it,” she said and smiled.

We stood there beneath those orange lights opening two-liter bottles and case after case of cans, pouring their contents on the ground. We didn’t say much more. We didn’t need to as we watched the green fizzy liquid stream out and away, into the sewer below us.

Vita

April Blevins is a writer and aspiring fiddle player from New Orleans. She completed her bachelor's degree at Tennessee Tech University, where she discovered the joys of rock climbing. April loves tacos, wine spritzers, coffee, and pho, but not all at the same time. When she does die (a long, long time from now), she hopes to be cremated and packed into fireworks that her friends will explode from a sailboat on Lake Pontchartrain.