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## Blisters

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# Blisters

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  
Kristina A. Walton

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## **Currency**

When you were a kid, you didn't question the wisdom of your parents. It hadn't occurred to you that they didn't know what they were doing. You didn't know they were lost, too. You made wishes on your birthday cake. You could feel their existence just across a thin veil of belief. You misplaced things like your favorite superhero figure, and spent hours tracing your steps to dig him up. You knew that lost items meant something more than just absence. You counted to 10 in the closet when your cousin said it would send you to meet Pinocchio. You wore your mother's shoes, or your dad's, to mock something that you knew you were going to be. You specifically hid things in an effort to remember them later. When you recovered them, you found pieces of your childhood.

\*\*\*

Donald Bergin collected things; specifically, extremely rare coins. It had been his grandfather's tendency to hold onto a nickel or two. After Donald came into the collection of coins when he was five, he often spent evenings under his blanket with a flashlight. With a black pen and a black and white journal, he inventoried his coins over and over again. He noted the age, mint, and any oddities the coin exhibited. He knew them by heart. He knew their artist, their president, their politics and their demise. He knew their value in modern dollars but only spoke of them in such a way when he needed to get someone's attention.

Donald grew up with Ethel and Harry Bergin. Ethel sewed aprons and slacks and blouses. She made homemade bread and gardened with a chemistry lab of materials she kept in the garage. Harry was a butcher. He sat on the end of his blue velour couch and stared across the vast land of green Berber carpet to the television where news of the Bomb, the Vietnam War, Mash, and cigarette commercials kept him out of Ethel's way.

Donald had been a strange boy for them to raise, but they had taken his oddities with a rare acceptance. He liked to count things. He liked to talk about numbers. He liked his coins. He was a good boy. He went to college and studied math.

Donald's profound sense of numbers had made him chair of his department at the University of Colorado in Boulder. He taught there for 30 years before he finally retired. The university cut his funding for a research project about the Denver Mint. It minted some of the most unique coins in early American history. After retirement, Donald took it upon himself to keep talking about the Mint and his rare coins. Every year he visited a handful of schools so he could excite kids about coins

Donald was 70 years old when he lost a coin for the first time. Like any ordinary day, he'd gotten in his pick-up truck and driven to a school. He'd been excited to see Layla, the secretary, again. He wondered how she was doing since her husband died. He looked for her when he signed in. He walked the crayon colored corridor to Mrs. Bao's classroom, where he met Kevin who said, "You're our speaker! Our speaker is here! Our speaker is here!"

Mr. Bergin could pull out his coin books blindfolded. He knew the contents of his old box, and what was behind the silver and blue lettering of each special book. He knew which coins would impress the boys the most, and which the girls would love. After all, Liberty was a woman. He knew what stories to tell about train robberies. He showed the kids pictures of his grandfather, and pictures of Denver and Boulder in the early twentieth century.

His presentations were a fun activity that kept him busy during retirement. The coins had kept him company all of his life. Their stories grew more important as he got older. He wanted to tell those stories to anyone who would listen. So, when Kevin asked him how much the coins were worth, he gave him his prepared answer.

"More than you have in your checking account," he chuckled. "If you start collecting coins today, you can have your own collection to pass down to your children."

He heard several kids say, "Dude that is awesome. I am so going to start keeping all of my quarters."

"Not all of them," he interrupted, "you want something rare, a mistake in the print, a change in a design, something that tells a story. A.A. Weiner is said to have created more than one version of liberty for the Mercury Head Dime. Even the name "Mercury Head" is part of the legacy of the coin. The public called the coin something other than Liberty. Most coins are

ordinary. Your job as a collector is to know where your coins came from and why. Once you get the stories down, appreciate their value greater than their monetary worth, your collection will naturally start to grow. They have to have something exceptional. Something that stands out, like a black swan.”

“What do you mean black swan? Aren’t swans white?” Kevin asked.

“Good question young man. Black swan is a math word. It means something out of the ordinary has occurred. Something unexpected.”

“Like what?”

“Like the 1919 Mercury Head dime misprint. Many were minted right here in Denver. I have one in the collection. When the book comes around look for it. It has a tiny imprint of a ‘D’ in the bottom left corner, near Liberty’s feet. That coin is quite rare because the artist, A.A. Weiner, and the Government argued about the original prints of the coin. So Weiner changed his original drawing. There were a few hundred printed in Philadelphia. Those two separate prints set the coin apart.”

Ian Hunt mouthed, “Weiner” to Kevin and pointed to the clock to indicate he should keep talking until it was time for recess.

“So, it’s a black swan because it was a mistake?”

“Well, yes. It’s less than typical. It’s rare. If you are a collector, you certainly want the black swans. People are captivated by their significance. In terms of coins, they represent a historical moment in time. I think about them as timekeepers. In a rare coin from the 1900s, I can imagine the people who passed this coin between them. I see them without electricity. I see them

without cars. I see them without a great number of things we have today. The coin was of extraordinary value to America's beginnings. They are symbols, really. Symbols that represent something out of the ordinary."

"Out of the ordinary? Sally Benton repeated. "That sounds like Kevin." Her crew of followers dressed in Barbie pink giggled on cue.

"So..." Kevin started again, when Mrs. Bao interrupted.

"Class! Class," Mrs. Bao said. "It's time to line up and thank Mr. Bergin for sharing his collection. Kevin, you asked some brilliant questions. I hope you write them down in your math journal. You can earn a star if you retell Mr. Bergin's black swan explanation in your own words." Then she turned and wrote, "Kevin" on the white board.

Just as Mr. Bergin slid his last book of coins into his giant bag, an alarm sounded. Mrs. Bao moved like a nurse in the emergency room. She didn't say anything to concern the students, but the lines between her eyes were so red and full of worry that the third graders stopped chattering about the coins and the fat little man who brought them, so as to begin pushing their desks against the door. The long alarm meant there was someone on campus who shouldn't be.

The loud speaker in the classroom squawked like a dying bird, "This is not a drill. Teachers this is a Code 1 emergency. You have 60 seconds to take positions in your classroom. Once you are in your safety zones, do not make any noises."

They had practiced for a Code 1 emergency before and had believed that every practice might be real. They knew that adults had a habit of trying to disguise unpleasant things. Telling their children that school was fun, or that elementary school was the best time of their lives.



Sally Benton, though, liked to remind her fellow students that bad things happened. Her dad was the sheriff, another fact she liked to repeat. Like the time a year before when there was a pile-up in Boulder Canyon. The canyon descended five hundred feet between the flat lands and the mountains. Sally retold how a man froze to death in the river before emergency crews could get there. “Stone. Blue stone,” she’d said.

Of course to eight year olds in an eight hour school day, bogged down in packets of words and blank spaces, most drills turned out to be extraordinary occasions of escape.

You might remember that feeling. When you worried about taking a test so much that you couldn’t sleep. You prayed for snow. You promised God that if he made it snow, you would study the whole day so that you didn’t fail. Failure meant what? You didn’t know. You didn’t want to know. You just knew it was severe enough that you needed a way out. You prayed for a sore throat, a fever. You tried to lie to your mom on the way into school. You faked a stomach ache in class. Then, completely unseen, something miraculous happened: the copier broke, or the teacher got sick, or a fire alarm took the rest of the afternoon.

The alarm, therefore, didn’t cause panic in the kids. They were safe inside the womb of their elementary existence; where their speaker had rescued them from ordinary social studies lessons, and timed math tests. Mr. Bergin focused on his books. He didn’t pay full attention to the alarm, either. He needed to check tick marks off on his inventory sheet. He needed to make sure no overzealous third grader had decided to start collecting his coins. It didn’t occur to Donald that it was already too late to leave. He had never even heard of a lock down.

The classroom entrance had its own little hallway where the students hung their coats and backpacks in their wooden cubbies. Each cubby was assigned to two kids, sometimes three if a

student joined class late in the year. On an average day, the cubbies were a source of constant mayhem. Shoes, food, an emergency change of clothes, glasses, water bottles, an illegal iPod, a camera, shoe laces, candy corn, and books far above the reading level of any third grader spilled over. They crammed it all back into their cubbies.

They pushed the desks into an array of three by eight. Kids moved to the corner of the classroom where they sat under the windows. Mrs. Bao signaled “quiet” with her finger. Every child sat in an assigned spot on the floor. Every kid was accounted for.

Kevin and Ian were best friends. She knew not to put best friends next to each other in a real emergency. Their little bodies couldn’t resist the temptation to thumb wrestle enthusiastically, or kick one another “accidentally.” So the boys made do with secret signals from opposite corners.

When Kevin noticed Ian’s stare and caught his line of vision toward the bookshelves, he knew Ian was worried about something serious. Kevin shrugged his shoulders, a gesture of “What?” Ian shook his head no and mouthed, “Later.”

Donald Bergin, the fat little man with the coins didn’t understand what a code one emergency was. He crouched under the window next to Mrs. Bao and thought about his third grade teacher Mrs. Whitmire. She was the only black woman in the school at the time, tall; at least six feet. She picked favorites, and all the kids knew it, but luckily Mr. Bergin had been one of them. “Are you tapping your feet again, Donald? Time to tap your feet is in church so God can hear you.” Those were the days when it was acceptable to mention God in school. The only bells that ever sounded were for the fire alarm and recess. They never had to arrange their desks in front of the door. They never crouched under the window. They worried about Russian

bombs. Or lying to their parents. He grabbed a pencil from Ms. Bao's tightly pulled hair and wrote, "What is a code one?"

"Shooter," she scribbled, and then quickly erased it to keep any kids from seeing it.

The carpet in the classroom was a typical institutional brown. A landscape of colored specs could hide anything that might be on the bottom of an eight year's olds shoe. The ceiling held number lines made out of string and paper-clipped numbers. From underneath, the paper numbers appeared to fly in the air stream. The kids slid around on the floor with their faces first. Then their chests, like caterpillars inching their way across a branch no less than a foot long. Snot or drool or candy slipped out and made its mark on the brown polyester specs.

They couldn't move, or talk, or go to the bathroom. Outside the room, there was the unknown. Maybe there were bad people. Even when they attempted to ascertain the complexity of their situation in their own minds, their tiny bodies grew listless from utter powerlessness. What could they do anyway? Inside Mrs. Bao's room there were the rules and the rules marked the hours. They were to sit quietly and wait for answers. Wait for a bell to tell them to move. Wait for the end of the day.

The kids knew that someone was being blocked by their desks. They knew that something outside of their room could hurt them. Colorado was the place where the word Columbine meant a state flower and school shootings. Drills of this kind happened three times a year.

An echo can be anything, especially in an open mountain valley. A loud bang could have been a car backfiring, or maybe a hunter aiming at an elk. Maybe a truck dropped its load too quickly. Or maybe a power line snapped in the hurricane winds. At nine thousand feet, on the

edge of the continental divide, the valley's pristine taiga conditions made sounds come through the trees that could be hypnotic. Like the music of the Aurora Borealis, the high mountain winds carried the cracking sounds of the glacier twenty miles away. A moose call, or a bear, or just the wind and ice and trees. The particular pop came in a cycle of three. Three Pops with distinct echoes. Pop. Ping. Pop. Ping. Pop. Ping.

The pops worried Donald. He was sure they were gun shots. He wanted to believe they might have been something else, anything else, but he knew a gun when he heard it. He wanted to stand up and look out across the valley, and see where the shots were fired.

Sirens moved closer to the school, then past them, and then further away. There were looks of relief on Sally Benton's face and her crew of princesses-in-the-making. They smiled because they knew Sheriff Benton would make everything better. Like he did that summer when the Carousel of Happiness broke down and almost spun off of its circular track. He'd shut it down just in time, and hired his brother to come over with a tow truck and pull it back into its proper groove. Sheriff Benton was a powerful man who was always in the know. About things, most people didn't want to know. Such was the nature of his job.

"Well," Sally said in almost inaudible whispers to her crew of pink and those who could bear to listen, "my dad scrapes up dead people off the highway all of the time. He says people drink too much beer and then drive themselves into each other like bumper cars for adults,"

"Sally, you're not supposed to talk about what your dad does. It's like, against the law isn't it?" Kevin said to her with emphatic lips, so as to shield Mrs. Bao from his voice.

"Humph. Always the goody two shoes," she teased.

“But doesn’t your dad, make up the rules and then take people to jail who break them?”

“Yeah, but God, you don’t have to be so perfect. I’m just telling you that you know who isn’t at school today because his dad drinks too much.” She flicked her hair with a slight neck twist that made her appear to be practicing for a future career in reality TV.

You know this girl. She’s the preacher’s granddaughter or the Governor’s youngest girl, who despite the very best of everything— status, material goods in all colors, extended vacations of cultural value, new cars, college, a short stint in modeling or pageants—turns out to be a bit of a wreck. She is the girl with the pink battery powered kid-sized jeep or the girl with fake fingernails and eyelashes in second grade. Everyone knows who she is because she is the sheriff’s daughter. Everyone knows she needs to be right because she is the sheriff’s daughter.

“Right, sorry. Definitely glad you told us,” Kevin said and then spit his gum in such way that it would hit her.

“Ewww. Kevin Mooney! You are disgusting.”

Mrs. Bao’s head popped up from her Sudoku and glared.

“You don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Kevin snapped. He couldn’t help it. Her bossy, entitled, know-it-all-attitude was like constant background muzac in his head. He desperately wanted to shut her off. Put her in her place. Prove her wrong, just once.

“Nerd,” she said, “go play math.”

“At least I know what numbers are,” he said, and made a gesture with his finger that fumbled.

“SHHHHHHH!” Mrs. Bao yelled through her teeth.

“I’m telling, Kevin. You just wait until my dad finds out. Your mom will have a meltdown.”

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If you have ever been in an accident, then you’ll know that feeling you get in your gut when you’ve lost control of your body. You can see the fall coming hard. Or the car that doesn’t see you. Maybe your scar hurts when you’ve played too hard. Maybe you get a headache in just the place where you knocked it into that tree you careened into while playing flag football. You know people die, too. You know that people shoot people, but you never consider that they might shoot you. A sheet of ice can change your winter sports season for the worst, and leave you with a scare that reaches back into your gut every time you slip, even just a little.

On top of the mountain, just above town, the tiny public ski hill filled up with police cars, ambulances, and television cameras. They circled around Ian’s dad. People huddled together in silence. He was under a white sheet, but blood seeped through in three red spots. Heads bent down in heaviness, like the weight of the world pressed down on their backs. Around them, radios twittered, “Shooter down. One casualty. ”

In the classroom, exhaustion set in merely from being inside something indecipherable for an unknown amount of time. All they could do was follow the rules. Bend the rules. Make up new rules. Mr. Bergin counted his coins. Book by book he counted his Mercury Head dimes,

his Liberty quarters, his rare misprinted Buffalo nickels. He had his notebook and his black pen. When a child perched up on their toes, or squeaked at a friend's silent funny face, he looked to Mrs. Bao. She could silence them with a point to the recess board. They knew better than to mess with recess.

Kevin thought about Mr. Bergin's black swan. Principal Patty came on the loud speaker and changed the lockdown to non- emergency status.

"Dude, what were you looking at?" Kevin asked Ian.

"I saw something – I think Mr. Bergin may have lost a coin. I think one rolled underneath the bookshelf. Help me distract him so I can go check."

Kevin moved his desk back into its spot marked with masking tape on the carpet and proceeded toward his target.

"Mr. Bergin? Will you come back and talk to us about your coins again? I really liked it. I really liked your black swan. My parents tell me I'm good at math. You must be good at math, huh?"

"Yes, yes. My parents thought I was a bit strange because I was so good at math. For many years, they tell me, I hardly spoke of anything but numbers."

"...and coins?" Kevin asked.

"...and coins," Mr. Bergin answered.

Mr. Bergin watched the two boys conspire in whispers and then make a decision about something.

“Uh, son,” he said, lifting up his finger, “do you have something of mine?”

Ian: “I don’t think so – I just found a dime, uh, under the book case—I thought it was yours, but it’s new. I mean it’s like, from this year.”

“Let me see it,” Mr. Bergin said.

Ian dug a coin out of his jeans pocket.

“Oh— it’s a Colorado nickel.”

Mr. Bergin’s Mercury Head dime stayed at the bottom of Ian’s pocket.

“A personal collection? How fortuitous to find a mint of this year. Your first coin?”

“I guess,” Ian said.

“Anomaly,” Mr. Bergin added, “A truly unusual day. One you’ll remember, no doubt, and a coin to mark it.”

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When you were a kid, you probably hid something and lost it forever. Maybe you lost that diary you kept in fifth grade because you slid it into the attic through that access panel in your ceiling. Even now, the dank, bracing smell of old wet paper conjures an image of you balancing on your desk chair while your parents were watching the Sunday News. You remember lifting the smooth wooden panel to a vast thick darkness. The small hard bound book slid off the edges of



your fingers and into a place that swallows things. Is it still there? Once something slips from your view, from your home, from your dreams, you worry that you could lose anything, at any time.

After the funeral, Ian's house didn't seem the same. The TV was on in every room. Ian reported that it was keeping *her* company. He looked down the hallway when he said "her" and they both stood there on the rug and stared toward the back of the house where it was too quiet.

Ian turned the TV off in the living room. "Star Wars," he said.

Kevin looked at him a second too long. He felt queasy. He wanted to go. He followed Ian to his bedroom. There, things were dusty and paled in some way, but Ian pulled the dime out before Kevin knew what he was doing.

"Here, it's the 1919 misprint. The "black swan" of Mercury Head dimes. The Weiner dude drew pictures, and he was a sculptor. The dime is like his big claim to fame, though."

Kevin had forgotten about the coin entirely. Ian looked dazed. Tired. Lost.

"Listen, Ian, about your dad—it's awful. And I can't explain how bad we all feel. It's just crazy. No one could have ever thought that would happen here. I mean, we all know each other and yeah, it's awful." Kevin's face scrunched together like the words hurt when they came out. He tried to repeat all of the things he had heard his parents say. All the words they used when they stood around the kitchen island and discussed the shooting. He tried to mimic the concern they had when they put him on the school bus, or when they left him to go to the store.

They both stood there a moment and then Ian turned the dime over in his fingers.

"I lied to that old man," he said.

“Dude, I did it. If it comes up. I did it,” Kevin said.

Ian turned red.

“No, I don’t know— I should give it back. I just didn’t know when I took it that—I didn’t know that you know, what had happened. I just thought I could take it back to school and act like I found it, but now that old guy is going to figure out that I took his special coin. He’ll call someone and...” Ian started to sweat.

“Dude, give it to me, and I’ll hold onto it. Then when someone calls, you just say you saw me take it, and then we give it back, and I get grounded forever. Not that big a deal. I mean I’m grounded already—we all are, for just being in the thing. For living here.

“I saw you at the funeral, but I couldn’t get away,” Ian said.

“I’ll take the coin back to the old man myself, and maybe we can just avoid any phone calls, you know? Maybe the old man won’t even realize it’s missing. He’ll be surprised when I give it back.”

“Right,” Ian said flatly and handed him the coin. “I don’t want it.”

For several days in a row, Kevin knocked on Donald Bergin’s door, but the old man didn’t answer. He kept the coin in his pocket, or his sock, or in an empty match box beside his bed. Kevin wanted it on hand to return to Mr. Bergin on a moment’s notice. He thought about leaving it in an envelope on the old man’s door, but he worried that Mr. Bergin would think that was reckless. Instead, he slept with it under his pillow.

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Remember that time you took a twenty dollar bill out of your friend's shoe at camp? You couldn't explain why you did it, only, in that striking moment, your hand and your gut worked together. You held up against interrogation, a liar. You kept the twenty so deeply tucked in that you forgot where it was after a while. The loss of the item only confirmed that you were a cog in a wheel designed to move you through things.

Later, when something strikes you, you'll remember where you put it. Maybe you'll pull the spine of your favorite book apart. A coin could slip out of its secret home and fall on the rug. You'll roll the worn edges over between your fingers.

"Weiner," you'll say and think of Ian.

## **The Martini Shot**

### The Problem

I see the gun before I see the blood, more like spatters of red fat than blood. The hot metal is on my chest. I smell it.

I rub my eyes. I get blood in them. The blood smears when I wipe my face with part of the sheet. I slide out from underneath her. Someone knocks at the door. The shot must have been heard all over the building. It sounded like a firecracker. So I reach for a phone. I need to make the call before someone else does.

On the nightstand, there's a Scotch on the rocks with ice rounding off in the morning heat. I can smell the alcohol over everything else: gun powder, the air conditioning at dawn, and the rain on the pavement outside.

INTERIOR SHOT. CAMERA ZOOMS IN ON THE ICE MELTING

Ten minutes ago, maybe, she'd made a drink? Did I hear her? Five minutes ago she had gotten the gun. Three minutes ago she swigged down the drink. Two minutes ago she put the gun to her chin; her feet dangling off the side of the bed. One minute ago she squeezed the trigger.

### The Original Ending Solution

INT. Patrick and Caroline are the picture of the typical American marriage. She is doing dishes. He is watching TV while sitting in his TV chair.

PATRICK

You alright, Chicken? Seem a little down?

CAROLINE

I'm fine, Rooster. You gonna make sweet love to me or am I gonna have to break out the tools?

PATRICK

Sounds like an ultimatum. Guess a husband has his duties.

CAROLINE

(Giggling)

You are a real son-of-a-bitch. Come kiss me. Maybe you'll get lucky.

PATRICK

Baby. You blue? You need something?

CAROLINE

All I need is a little sales call.

PATRICK and CAROLINE exit to the bedroom off camera.

## POV

I think about the shot, the angle for the camera: How is everyone going to fit in this room? It's too small. I'll have to be taken into the hallway for questioning. Plus, if I'm sitting here – that could be weird. They never write this. A guy calls 911 when his wife has just offed herself all over him? They only write that shit if it's one of those voice-over reenactments. That's not acting. That's portraying something that really happened. The only time they write that scene is if the guy is guilty of something. Then they write a scene showing him covering his tracks.

## Scene 1

These cops, they don't look good. They look tired. Sweaty. This one cop keeps looking at me like I am going to say something and she needs to be ready. I just keep leaning on the wall, watching guys go in and out of the bedroom. They lay plastic on the carpet, put tape all over the room. Put gloves on. Try to say excuse me when they pass me. I look at my feet, then at this cop. We keep making eye contact without anyone else seeing, like we are going to have a scene later. Like the audience is supposed to know something is coming.

She's heavy. Her belly hangs over her black cop belt. Camera wouldn't like that. She'd look 200 pounds on camera. A man can play up that shit though, like Nicholson or Devito. Pudgy works on them.

I'll have to call mom later. Go out there. See her. She'll like that, me coming home to her after a thing like this. I'll tell her Caroline never got over her dad's death. I'll tell her she was cheating. No, I'll tell her she started drinking too much. That'll play with the detail of the Scotch. She doesn't even like Scotch. Scotch is my drink.

"You going to be all right?" The lady is asking me like I know the line.

She could see I was dazing, staring off, past my feet, through the floor and past the heat.

"I was up all night. Guess I sensed something. Couldn't sleep. I was just asleep a few minutes."

"Oh yeah? Up all night. Hmf. You guys fight?"

"Nope. Just the usual. I watched a collection on DVD. She went to bed with a magazine."

"You got a plan?" She's asking me, with a stone face that I can't read.

I must look funny because she interrupts my pause. For a second, I forget where I am and what I'm doing. The cigarette burns my finger-tips. Caroline hated it when I smoked inside. She hated that I couldn't walk outside. I couldn't change. I tried to change.

"For today? Could be a rough one. You got people you can call? Need a social worker?"

I drift out. My eyes close.

The red recliner. My chair. The lights coming off the TV, reflecting off the sliding glass door. The sound of the fan. The feeling of the pause button under my finger. A clean white sheet of paper.

## Scene Two

I try to see myself. My gut hanging over my shorts. The blood spots. My bald head. My blood shot eyes. I wanted to change. Put something on, but that would look suspicious. What kind of guy gets dressed for the cops? I feel guilty. I wonder if I look guilty.

A couple of guys zip her up into a bag so that she's gone. Done. Sealed up. Another guy takes pictures of the splatter, then of the glass, and then the carpet and the ceiling.

"Where's my dog?" I ask. I look around, calling her, "Jazzy, Jazzy?"

"She's outside with a neighbor. It's pretty loaded out there. You need your dog— I'll get her," the lady cop said.

I don't know how the dog ties in right now. So I drop it. I ask her if I can put some clothes on.

"Joe, get this guy something out of his closet will you?"

Joe emerges from the bedroom with my robe and my slippers. Slippers I have never worn. Not a slipper guy.

She continues her lines. "Listen, Patrick, we need to ask you a couple of questions. Do you feel like you can do that right now?"

"Can I smoke?"



“Joe, get this guy his cigarettes. Coffee table nine o’clock.”

INT. CAMERA ZOOMS IN ON SMOKE

In my head, this episode of *Happy Days* is playing. Ritchie cheats on Mary Beth, and they break up, but then they get back together. They reenact their first date. “Mama, papa, sister, brother,” is the line, I think. Mary Beth asks him about his family.

“Can I have this?” I grab the glass with the melted ice and swig it down.

“You guys have a fight?”

“Nope.”

“Happily married then?”

I see her just glance, almost a non-glance, at the bottle of freshly cracked Scotch.

“Give me something to compare happy with—like happy like you? Or like a dog? Or like *Happy Days*? Or like what happy? I got happy stories. I got sad stories, too. She just never recovered from her father’s death that’s all. Took it out of her. Started putting his abandonment shit on me. She thought I was going to leave her.” I’m playing Chili Palmer in *Get Shorty*. I sound rehearsed. I sound edgy.

“Were you?”

I suck in a long drag. Squeeze my eyes together. I pull a string out of my robe with my other hand. Sweat seeps down my neck.

“Joe, get this guy some water. Ice.”

“You cheat?”

“Is this an interview or are we just talking? I mean my wife shot herself in our bed, with me asleep next to her. Clearly things weren’t ideal.”

She shifts her weight to the opposing wall and lifts her thick black belt up onto the round of her belly. Her black orthopedic shoes look new. Joe hands me the water and gives her a look.

The camera zooms in on us again.

“I’ve thought about leaving. So had she. I’ve cheated. But it’s been awhile. We’ve worked on things. Doing pretty good. I thought.”

I keep things vague. Say things that only answer the questions, but with just enough detail to make it sound real. I’m overthinking it. Directing my own scene. I remember *Dallas* in its heyday. Pamela Ewing wanted to reveal that she still loved Bobby, but instead, as part of the season cliff hanger, she let Bobby do all of the talking. They were both seeing other people. The audience knew that, and imagined that those two were breaking each other’s hearts. They behaved badly, but they still loved each other.

They start to clear out the bedroom. All the plastic on the floor is zipped off like tape, then bundled tightly and tied off. Methodical. These guys do this every day. Doesn’t matter if it’s day light or midnight. People die; scenes need to be examined.

### Scene Three

The lady cop and I stand in the doorway. Some neighbor's kids are playing on the stairs and watching the cops and paramedics scramble around the buildings. They giggle, though, like it's something to be a part of. Something real.

"How do we end this? I mean. What happens?" I ask.

"She goes to the coroner. Do you want us to contact family or can you do that?"

"Her mother and I are pretty distant. But I'll call her. Jesus."

"You guys don't want this?" I hold up the glass.

"You poison her or something?"

"Is that a joke?"

"Depends on the answer."

"I think she drank some Scotch just before."

"That will show up in the autopsy."

She hesitates then and looks at me. It's the classic *Columbo* move, "Just one more thing, sir, before I go," I could see it coming.

"You watch cop shows?" She asks me, like she really needs to know.

“I’m a fiction guy.”

“Happy endings, then, and all of that?”

“Depends on the writer.”

FADE OUT

### The Martini Shot

The lazy boy is still cranked back. She hated it when I left it like that; like I just stumbled out of it and could just as easily have stumbled right back in to it.

The TV is paused with six more episodes in the series. I press play and sit down with Jazzy. I crack a beer. Put down a couple pieces of toast. Pour a tomato juice. Consider the show so far.

This main character guy is screwed. I mean, his ex-wife married this rich guy. He’s been lying about his identity his whole life. He’s about to land a great woman, and a great new job, when he screws it up with some fucking fantasy. He goes loony when they put on their lipstick. So he screws his secretary— the second one this season.

## Rewrites

She left me last week. Packed her bag, took all of her jewelry, face cream, toe polish. Didn't even write me a note. How do I know how we got here? I have to put it back together. Run the scenes. Consider the dialogue. Move up some of the action. Rearrange a couple lines. It's hard to know how it will look, once you put it all together.

So I dial her mother's number.

"She's here, and she isn't talking to you John."

## Sum

“Give me a number between one and ten,” the voice said.

“Zero,” I said.

“You can’t be a zero—zero is dead, Kim.”

In there, people talked about death like it was the weather. People who came in fresh, just near death, stormy let’s say—were usually ones or twos. Of course, storms passed. The sun came out. But no one started off like that.

“Logically then, I am a one,” I said, opening an eye to look at the face taking my temperature.

“A one then. Are you sure?” It’s a nurse looked like she was tired and strung out and cynical about depressives because she was around them all day. I imagined her saying, “Get over it, and be happy.”

“Lady, if you need a fucking number, my number is one,” I snapped at her, and she looked at her watch.

She whispered under her breath and wrote: “Agitated. Four o’clock.”

Her nurse white clogs made a hard plastic squeak. Not a squeak of ordinary rubber but a rubber specifically made for a woman on her feet all day. *My* shoes were in a plastic bag somewhere locked away for my safety.

On her way out, she hesitated and said, “Group in three minutes.”

The psychiatric unit of the hospital was lime green. Not sage, not grass green, but bright lime green. As if someone thought, “Lime green would inspire anyone to live.” The floors were fake wood, which lent a warmer feel, but it still smelled like an institution: a mix of Band-Aids, rubbing alcohol and plastic. There were no windows. Instead, giant round illuminated discs were mounted on the walls in an attempt to mimic sun light. There on the inside it was always sunny.

In our first group, Nurse Brad greeted us with, “Cheeseburger, cheeseburger, cheeseburger.” To which some veteran patients replied, in chorus, right on cue, “Medication, medication, medication.”

Our leader was a fan of old *Saturday Night Live* skits and my fellow patients didn’t bother to laugh at the joke. We lined up at the med window, which was right next to the decaf coffee station. I needed real coffee, but apparently that wasn’t allowed. No one has ever overdosed on coffee -at least not that I’ve heard- but who was I to question their rules.

Nurse Brad spoke loudly like a camp counselor, which made me a bit giddy. I liked good leaders, and I needed one. He held a clipboard on his lap. His black shoulder bag leaned against the side of his chair, filled with color coded medical files.

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#### Treatment Plan

Patient number:00174 Winnot, Kim

I:9 Code: *Depression with anxiety, medication adjustment,*

#### Patient Admission Summary Form

Physician Trigger: *Patient was referred to admission by a treating family psychologist Dr. K. McBrice. Regular Tx was current under family physician prior to acute familial setting event. Patient is otherwise a healthy thirty five year old female.*

Environment Trigger: *Patient's biological children were victims of familial abuse by older step-son.*

Reported Trigger by Patient: *The patient/mother of the two victims has struggled to sleep or maintain parental duties. The husband/father is with the third child, the perpetrator. Patient admitted to suicidal ideation/hopelessness, but was confident "she could not do that." She claimed to need "uninterrupted sleep and help with medication," because her prescribed dosage did not seem to be helping her.*

Initial Tx plan: *Increase anti-anxiety to 35 mg during the day. One every two hours, until sleep is reported. Then decrease to one every five hours or as needed by the attending physician. Increase anti-depressant to 125 mg over first two days.*

Insurance Coverage: *Yes, five day intervention in-patient*

Other: *Patient and family are currently participating in family therapy via the Jefferson County Victim's Advocacy Unit, Dr. K. McBrice County Child Psychologist. Dr. McBrice referred patient due to symptoms of post- traumatic stress disorder, including shock, denial, racing thoughts, blame, moral confusion, and hopelessness. Dr. McBrice does not believe patient will act toward self-injury, but contends that a medication adjustment is vital during this complex psychological period of adjustment.*



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“Okay kids, let’s settle in and try to get to know our new people,” Brad said.

We sat in a circle, of course, the circle always being the therapeutic shape, never a square, or a blob of people on the floor. The chick next to me, Mary had staples in both wrists. She smiled uncontrollably anytime someone even looked at her. It was like she was on ecstasy. When Brad asked her to give her number, she held up fingers to say that she was a “three.” She can’t be a three. I was a one, and I didn’t have staples.

Nurse Brad tried to get us talking, but we all resisted. Finally, after the awkward pressure mounted to a breaking point, Bobby, a college aged football star who had failed his father when he played soccer instead, reported on his medication.

“I hear one thought at a time,” he said.

I chuckled, which got me into trouble.

Nurse Brad said, “Share what’s so funny?”

“Well,” I said, “one thought at a time seems great.”

“Do you have racing thoughts?” Brad asked.

“Is that what you call them?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

The one-thought-at-a-time boy, Bobby saved me. “I had racing thoughts, but the meds are slowing everything down. It’s weird to have pauses and time to consider what I’m thinking. What I’m feeling. But I don’t like it. I feel dazed. Like I’m recording and then playing things back.”

“Playing things back” was a theme in group. We were all going over the same footage of film, playing it back, watching it in silence, pausing, playing it back, watching it in silence, over and over again.

I think the last ‘and over again’ was what got us all here.

I studied my fellow campers. And it helped me just to be there, all circled up, like we might roast something. The common room sat in the middle of the building with sets of suites that opened to it. Our meeting room came equipped with a med window and a semi-enclosed smoking porch. When someone went in or out that door, the place smelled like a fresh cigarette and cold air. Morning group started at nine in the common room, right after everyone’s apple sauce, meds, and morning smoke.

We were broken and it hurt, like tiny, embedded pieces of glass that had erupted from the inside out. I could hear it in their voices. Some pains started in the center of the chest. Some started in dreams. There wasn’t down time for hiding it. We were here to talk and get better.

Stephanie, my roommate cried a lot in her sleep. Before she got here, she had taken a knife to her arm and started stabbing it. It didn’t stop the dreams, but it did win her the unoccupied bed in my room. I brought her cold rags in the night to put on her forehead. She sweated and cried out. She told me about how she started having multiple partners in middle school. She was twenty-five and guys were calling the nurse’s station to check in on her. I saw that she wanted to be taken care of. Stephanie was a one, too. She barely talked in group.

Mary was brutally raped by a family member when she was eight. Since then, she’d been a “selective mute.” After a nod of permission, Brad told us her story. Her eyes were generous and brown like Olive Oyl’s. They were glassy, so that when she smiled or giggled she literally seemed

to be giving off light. She giggled a lot, sometimes when it made sense to do so, other times it was out of thin air. I instantly loved Mary and her beautiful silence.

Bill was about fifty, and wore a t-shirt that said, "SHUT UP BITCH." He was stocky and had a sizeable gut that gave him a jolly appearance. His wife was so big that she couldn't leave the house, so he hadn't left either. Then she had a heart attack and died. He had to order a special-made-coffin. He had to hire extra pall bearers to carry it.

He quit eating and lost fifty pounds in a few weeks. He started drinking whiskey. He cried himself to sleep. He overdosed on blood pressure meds and lithium. He read somewhere that it would shut down his liver. When that didn't work, he tried shooting himself, but only managed to shoot his thumb off.

"Fuckin' doctors," he said. "Fuckin' doctors. I don't need to be in here. I am fine. My fuckin' wife died. I mean fuck." Bill said he was a six. I thought that was high, considering that when he held up his fingers to make five and one, one of them was missing.

Dan was a teacher. He was tall and had large feet. I couldn't stop staring at his big toes. "I was up to five showers a day," he said. "I didn't want to leave my students, so I kept going to work – but the panic attacks got bigger and longer. I drank. I took showers. I took my meds."

"How much do you drink?" Nurse Brad asked. He combed his gray hair back, pushed his granny glasses up on his nose and jotted down a note. The clipboard pressed down on what looked like a hundred papers. Red and blue and green little flags hung off the edge of them, like a fiesta. We were on there. All of our broken pieces flagged like notable features of a literary study.

“Not much, usually a beer or two a couple times a week.” He looked down as he said that.

He was lying, but we all nodded out of recognition. Dan was a four.

“Drinking is not the issue, of course. It’s the urge to dilute the pain that is of concern,”

Brad added, doing his job.

“Seriously? Vodka tonics all around,” Bill said, and we all laughed.

Brad said, “You have to ask yourself why you want to get numb, don’t you? It’s not that you have a drinking problem any of you, but alcohol always comes up, as well as sarcasm and other techniques for avoiding. You’re here, so make it useful.”

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### Patient Treatment Notes

Name: *K. Winnot: adjusting to treatment, not engaging in group yet, caretaking fellow patient, Stephanie, displacement of parenting from children to fellow patient not atypical but something to watch.*

Patient Reported number/session: *One.*

Physician/Nurse observation number/session: *One to three range based on self-report and lack of participation.*

Daily Goal: *would not participate in goal discussion*

Treatment Goal: *Patient reported that she wanted to feel better.*

Further: *One on one session scheduled. Three group sessions per day to increase talk intervention per Dr. McBrice’s recommendations. Patient has not yet disclosed patterns of thought as described in Dr. McBrice’s notes.*

Treatment Adjustment: *Facts Form Assignment to increase patient disclosure of setting event. Patient needs to language the issue in her own words in order to identify progress.*

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I dreamed about my kids. They were swinging on our swing set. The grass was green underneath us. We were giggling and having fun. Their dad stood off to the side, in a cloudy haze, and watched. We didn't engage him. We even looked past him to the fences that keep the cows in their field, and our dogs in the yard. The sky was full of those puffy white clouds that only exist in episodes of *Bonanza*, or the *Road Runner*. The fences crystalized and stayed in my mind all morning.

Brad came to my room and handed me an assignment. "Got to get those numbers up," he said. The form was called, "The Facts."

"Your assignment is to write down how you got here. What happened and what you felt should be included. I don't want to give you too many parameters other than to say, spit it out. Get it on paper. Have you done this with Dr. McBrice?"

"No, we—I'm focused on the kids with her. Did she tell you to have me do this?"

"Does it matter?" he asked.

I wrote:

The facts are that I am the mother of three kids. Two of them are from me. The other is my step-son. The facts are that one in six kids is molested, so they tell me. I think I am supposed to digest that in some way that makes it all make sense, like somehow it was inevitable. I have three victims and one perpetrator in my family. I think that makes us a statistical anomaly or something. My step-son is in a treatment center for kids who perp. There is a 98% chance that perpetrators will perp again. I don't know what to do with that fact. He refuses to tell who abused him, and he insists still, after several weeks inside that there was only one incident between he and his siblings. That leaves my two kids responsible for getting all of the information out. They resisted at first, maintaining the one incident story, like they all sat around and got their story straight. But my son, Riley has been raging and depressive for at least a year. He's six. Six year olds don't become depressed unless there is a reason. I knew something was wrong. I knew he was mad at me. I would ask, "What's wrong?" all of the time, but now that seems so stupid. What was he going to say? I am supposed to decide about pressing charges on a ten year old. I am supposed to decide about visitation with their dad. I have to get a full time job. We won't be getting back together. My husband doesn't believe our kids. He's protecting his oldest son. He doesn't attend therapy with us. Honestly, I was hanging onto that marriage by a thread. I guess I should have gotten out of it. Then maybe none of this would have happened. Feelings? Too many. None of them very good.

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I sat in group and stared out the window. I wanted to go back to a time when I didn't know the facts.

I heard everyone talking around me, but I didn't listen. In my mind, all I could see was my son's toddler-sized body curled up under his Pooh Bear blanket, his thumb in his mouth, staring out the window to the pine trees that swayed in the wind. He didn't move. He was thinking about something so far away from me. My bare feet pressed down on the carpet in front of him. I asked him if he wanted mommy to make him French toast.

"Honey," I said, "what is it? You seem so sad."

Back in group, Brad talked about our daily agenda. I started crying. Despite trying to hold the tears back, some of them trickled out. Sometimes I could squeeze the tear ducts shut with sheer force of will. Other times, they spilled over. By that point, though, I was good at crying in crowds. People never noticed. Not at the baseball fields, not at my part time job, and not when I cooked dinner. Brad looked at me, but he didn't appear to catch it.

"Let's talk about happy," he said. "What does happy mean?"

"Liking our life," Stephanie said.

"Being part of a family that feels good," Bobby added.

"When was the last time you felt happy?" If Nurse Brad could get us thinking about happy, the neuro receptors in our depressed brains might spark. Then happy juices could flow. It was a mood-altering technique. It pissed me off.

Dan answered, "Sex, six months ago."

Mary's brown eyes searched mine to see if I would translate for her. I wanted to.

"She can talk," Nurse Brad said. "But she wants you to do all of the talking for her—don't. She knows the rules. She has been here before."

"Not a great endorsement for the success of treatment," I said. Everyone laughed, but I wasn't trying to be funny. Even Mary laughed. What drugs was she on that made her so silent and bubbly?

"She just wants attention," Brad said.

“Attention seems like a pretty basic need,” I said.

“And how we get attention matters. Right? Sometimes we act out, maybe we throw things, or drink too much. But there is another habit that isn’t so clear. How many of you isolate from others?” Nurse Brad looked at me, like he had the answer on my intake form right in front of him.

“I isolate because I don’t think people will get me, and when I try to connect it usually doesn’t go well,” Dan said. “I see these teachers I work with doing the same thing: grading papers until nine at night, having friends over to watch the game, administering tardy slips, and I just don’t see how they feel good about themselves. They must, though. I just can’t manage to hold onto to anything that helps make sense of things. In the end, I just feel sad. Incredibly sad. Which is why I checked myself in. I don’t fit anywhere.”

That one stuck. Inside I felt the constriction come on. The tears quickened.

“Can you share what it is that you are crying about?” Nurse Brad was on the job.

“It’s all on the sheet isn’t it?” I asked. I got up and walked off to my room.

The snarky nurse with the clogs and Brad followed me.

I sat on the bed. The sheet slipped off of the blue plastic mattress cover. I hated that fucking bed. But I didn’t want to go home either. Brad sat down next to me. He motioned to the nurse to shut the door.

"The notes said that you haven't cried. You've been holding it in."

“So what—so now this is like some break through? Some sort of turning point?”



“You know, you are really smart. We can all see that. You aren’t going to get better though, unless you share it. I’ve been doing this a long time. You can’t just live in the shell. You can’t—”

“I can’t what? I can’t *not* talk? Mary doesn’t talk.”

Brad looked tempted to say something. I realized that the selective-mute-with-the- staples-in-her-wrists example might not be the best rebuttal for the situation. His lips closed tightly, like he wanted to say as much, but he didn’t. He kept the spotlight on me.

“When are you going to take yourself off the chopping block? Huh? You know—it’s narcissistic to think you are the sole cause of all that is bad – that you hold all of that power. You didn’t cause the abuse, Kim.” That got my attention. He winked at me like, See? See how smart I am. “Come back to group. You can do that right?”

Brad, my leader.

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### Patient Treatment Notes

Patient: *K. Winnot. Patient resists sharing inner experience in group. Number is still low. Her mother called the desk. She refused to take the call. The mother complained that her daughter had abandoned her children. Patient called and spoke to her children last night. She appeared at ease after the call.*

Medication: *Patient is not reporting any side effects of increased dose. Sleep is still a concern. However, night nurse reported three hours of uninterrupted sleep. A small improvement.*

Treatment Adjustment: *Patient is scheduled for a one on one. Confrontation approach.*

Treatment Goal: *Kim avoids talking about feelings, and self-reported that she tries to keep a straight face. She wouldn't openly express her feelings when she cried in group. Instead, argued her position. The goal is to put her emotions in her vocabulary.*

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The lack of actual caffeine left my intestines confused about when to go and when not to go. Stephanie left the room from the smell, which made us both laugh hysterically, but it was a problem. That was my most pressing issue when I started my one-on-one session with Brad.

“Is there any way I can get a real cup of coffee?”

“Why, you jonesing?”

“For a doctor you make a lot of subversive references.”

“It’s something about the company I keep. I’m a psychiatric nurse, but you can call me Doctor for short.”

We both chuckled. We were being cute.

He straightened up. “Yeah, I use coffee that same way. I can probably get you a cappuccino or something. I’m sure the Doctor will allow that.”

“It’s for the good of the group, really.”

“Right.” He smiled at me, but I could tell he was thinking about what he was going to say. His eyebrows rose up. His mouth twitched like the words were right there.

“You’re going to ask me to tell you some awful thing in here, but you already know the information.”

“I’m not after the information. I’m after the reason you’re here.”

“I don’t see the difference.”

“I’m just going to get to it, okay? You’re pissed off, right? But not really, because being pissed means you have to be pissed at somebody. You could hate your husband, or the step-son, or your mother—let’s be sure to include her, but all of that is just a detour from hating yourself, right? Because everything that is fucked up in your family is your fault. Is that close? Or am I totally off?”

“I’m healed.”

He leaned into his right arm a bit, putting pressure on the chair. It creaked a little.

“And you can’t trust anybody, right? So why talk? No one will get it, right? Because your awful thing is more awful than ‘regular awful,’ so, then no one can help. But –and let me know if I am losing you—you haven’t even had time to consider that now is your moment. It’s all ugly and horrible and criminal and a train wreck, but you all just got off the train. Excuse my transportation metaphor.”

“Okay, so I have to get better so I can help them get better. I know that, Brad.”

“So what did you do that was so awful, Kim?”

I couldn't say it.

“What is it?” He persisted. “Don't say it to me, say it to the floor, just say it.”

“I made them go to bed. I made them turn out the lights. I sent them to it. I was right there. Right there. I knew something was wrong for over a year. I kept talking to everyone about it. Was he depressed, did he need pre-school, could it be a brain tumor—I mean I knew.”

“And once you knew better, you did better. That's what good people do. You didn't do anything wrong.”

“My son is only six. He is totally wrecked. I mean bed wetting, nightmares, hitting, putting holes in solid wood doors, he is literally out of control. No one is ever around for that part. So it's easy for you to tell me that I didn't do anything wrong. Most days, I can't manage him. No one sees how awful it is. Just me and my eight year old daughter. She doesn't know what to do. I am supposed to know what to do.”

The clock made a ticking sound. Brad had a plant on his desk with a flower about to bloom. The carpet was gray specked. I studied it. He focused his eyes on the pages in front of him.

“You wrote in your facts sheet that you didn't want to react with your face to your daughter's disclosure. I want you to talk about that. Where is that emotion going? Why can't you be emotional about this?”

I couldn't explain my pain to him. It was like trying to talk someone into believing in Jesus. I didn't believe, but I'd had plenty of people witness to me about his sacrifice. I wanted Jesus to atone for my sins, but that seemed like bullshit, too.

“I can cry by myself, all day sometimes. There is no way those people in group—who are great people—are going to get this. Struggling is one thing, okay, but this thing is not struggling. It’s almost like death, but instead of waking up every day and remembering that someone died, you remember that you are alive, and you have to eat. That you aren’t like anyone who talks to you, but you have to stand there and let them talk. I look out at things, and none of it makes sense. And people are talking and working and driving, and gardening and shit and I just don’t know how they do that because my day isn’t like that.”

“That’s depression, Kim. The meds will help with that.”

“That’d be perfect. That’s why I’m here.”

“What parts of your family life are good?”

“You want to talk about happy, right?”

“You’re making fun of me and I don’t like it,” he said. He widened his eyes like he was trying to tell me something important. “Tell me what I could say to help you.”

“I’m here. I want to believe you. I want to believe Dr. McBrice, too. I don’t mean to be negative, but no one gets what this is like. I saw how my mother looked at me, and the social workers who interviewed me, and how my kids look at me, too. I am guilty. Can we just say that I fucked up?”

“That’s an attempt to frame a chaotic event into an event that you could control. So what makes you think you had control of the abuse of three kids? Your step-son was abused, right? In another state. You weren’t there were you? Then he perped on his siblings. That’s the cycle of abuse, Kim. How is all of that your doing—because here is my worry, if you believe that you

caused this then you must also believe that you can fix it. And I have yet to meet one singular person who is capable of fixing the cycle of abuse, other than to stop it, which you did. The rest is not totally in your hands, is it?”

Maybe Jesus really did die for my sins.

“You make some sense, doctor.” I said. He smiled. I thought he was going to dance a jig. He sat up in his seat and put his clipboard down. He looked at his watch.

“Is that what you wanted, for me to let go of it? Not that I am totally there, but I think I can consider your words.”

“Well, no, I wanted you to talk about your feelings, but hell, letting go is even better. I should have considered appealing to your logic.”

“Okay, then, so I can’t fix it. How does that help me?”

“I hate to say this, but we have to stop. So you are going to take that question—”

“—and write about it.” I said, knowing full well that he wanted me to answer my own question.

## Patient Treatment Notes

*K. Winnot: Post trauma indications: her presence next to the events that were “right there,” her sense that something was wrong with her son before the disclosure, her sense of isolation from others maybe framed as attempts to control. It is not an atypical reaction to trauma. However, that drive is certainly part of the sleeplessness, anxiety, racing thoughts, faulty thinking and lack of emotional availability. The control drive may be part of her own childhood patterning playing out during this crisis.*

Treatment Adjustment: *Writing exercise. Mood elevation exercise: Parachute*

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Back to happy talks. Brad wrote on the white board, “Parachute Day.” The parachute was falling out of its carrying case on the floor.

People gathered in the circle for the morning group. “You guys ever get under the giant parachute in school?” Stephanie asked us.

“Yeah, the giant parachute that you lifted and then everyone went in and pulled it down?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, “rainbow, right?”

“Right, rainbow colors coming from the center, like a pie.”

“Ours was musty, you know? Had a musty gym-locker smell. Yeah. I loved that too,” Bill added.

“We have one at school, I see the kids out on the field with it.” Dan said.

It was rainbow and nylon and practically weightless. We didn’t talk. Not because we weren’t allowed to, but because we had a job to do. Brad counted to three and then yelled, “Lift!” We got into a rhythm. Up and under. The rainbow pie floated down to our skin. Geese flew overhead. I heard them squawk. It smelled like wet earth outside, a sign of snow. We sat on the grass. It was time to check in again.

“Seven,” Dan reported.

“Me too,” Stephanie added.

“Five,” Mary signaled with her hand.

“Five,” I said.

Bill said, “Jesus, a six, I guess.”

“What changed?” Brad asked the group.

“Doing it, being in it, smelling it,” I said.

“You guys sell those parachutes in the gift shop?” Dan asked.

“What about being in it, Kim—if you wouldn’t mind sharing.”

“I felt like a kid, I guess. Like a kid at recess, you know.”

“Me, too,” Bill added.

“What does feeling like a kid feel like, Kim?”



“Simple. Normal. Like there is magic in the world.”

“But is being a kid simple?” he asked.

“No,” Stephanie said, “definitely not painless. Not for me. This parachute game reminded me of being a kid, too, but the good parts. I don’t think about those very much.”

“Why not?” Brad asked us, “What’s wrong with the good parts? Aren’t they as real as the bad parts? Can we agree right now, to make an effort to think about the good?”

“Yes,” Dan said. He pointed and flexed his feet in the hospital slippers we were given. “I see what you mean. It’s like we get out of balance in our heads. The lens closes in on the negatives. Nothing feels good when I only see the hard parts. Still, I am not sure I can make that magic happen. If I could, I wouldn’t be here.”

“I disagree,” Brad said, “you had the foresight to take care of your negative thoughts by coming here. That tells me that you do have the power. The parachute always brings people’s numbers up. That’s why I do it. I won’t pretend that it isn’t a trick I use, but the parachute is also a metaphor, obviously, for lifting when things are down, and resting in the positive space when things are up.”

“*Doctor* Brad,” I said.

“I’m just working on the numbers, kids. Got to get those numbers up.” He smiled.

“Snowstorm,” Dan said, pointing to the west. An immense cloud covered the tops of the mountains.

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If I can't fix it then, all I can do is be in it. I've thought about this a lot. The worst, or one of the worst fucking things that could ever have happened, has happened. I can't undo it. It's like I have to let go of getting better, too. We aren't going to wake up and be better. We are going to recover, but it isn't going to be pretty, or ordinary, or easy. I think I have been hoping that we could plug in a night light or something, and readjust. I can't always stop the flood of flashbacks to things. To moments where I could have turned the situation, maybe. I've been thinking, why wasn't I strong enough? I want to be strong. I don't want anything else bad to happen to my kids. Hell, to any kids. I want my step-son to get well, too. But I can't really keep my finger in the dam either. Too many other things to do. Good things. It snowed last night and this morning. All I could think about was the kids jumping off the swing set into the snow. They always used to scare me with that stunt. I bet they made a high snow bank and dug a cave. I want to go home and do that, too. I called and told them that I'd be driving home tomorrow. Riley said, "Be careful, Mama." That pushed me up to a seven, maybe even an eight.

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### Patient Release

Patient number: 00174 Winnot, Kim

Admitting I:9 Code: *Depression with anxiety, medication adjustment,*

Discharge I:9 Code: *Post traumatic stress disorder, with depression and anxiety*

Physician Trigger: *Kim is stabilized on increased medication dosages, two nights of seven hours of sleep, observed consistent positive self-awareness in groups during last two days. Patient in the 7-10 range.*

Environment Trigger: *Patient responded well to one on one session and written reflection*

Reported Trigger by Patient: *Patient reports that she feels "ready to manage her responsibilities and understands that she will continue to need outpatient therapy" with her attending physician.*

Final Treatment Plan: *Medication with continued outpatient therapy.*

Insurance Coverage: *Five day intervention approved.*

## Falling Out

Colorado State Assessment 2010

10<sup>th</sup> Grade Expository Writing  
Section B

1. **Tell a story in your own words that describes a recent challenge you have experienced with your family.** Remember, you will be graded on your word choice, voice, and content. Use your graphic organizer from Section A. There are tips in the final section to help you edit.

Anyway, on Monday I was late to school for about the thousandth time after I'd sworn to my probation officer that I was going to turn over a new leaf, get to school on time, and get my shit together. Instead of jamming into my American Wars class, which was well into the first hour of second period, I picked up some snowballs with a couple of freshmen who were enjoying the open campus policy. It was early spring Colorado snow, the only time it was wet enough in Boulder for the snow to stick together. One of the kids got cocky, though, and threw a few snowballs at some passing cars. Fucking freshmen.

A dentist or some kind of asshole in his black four-wheel-drive-Mercedes stopped in the middle of fucking Baseline Avenue and yelled at us. “Hey you fucking kids! Don’t throw snowballs at cars!” Next thing I knew I was getting suspended again.

Principal Quitman-or “Quitter” as we called him- pulled me out of class the previous Monday to give me a talk about being late every day. Since that little pep talk I’d been on time. So when he snagged me again, I figured he just wanted to pat me on the back. Instead, he spent a half hour hammering me.

“When are you going to get it together?” It was his favorite phrase.

I nodded my head to let him know I was listening and all that. I was really thinking about Brenna who stood outside his office by the plants. We dated last year for a while, but her family is super Catholic. Like special sauce Catholic. Anyway, we still talked.

“You are one of the smartest kids in your class,” Quitter said.

I hate it when people say that. “There are a lot of smart kids in my class,” I said. You had to be smart to figure out how to make it through school. It took real intelligence. It was stupid to take it too seriously, like my sister, but just as stupid to drop out like my dad.

I couldn’t stop looking at these pink flowers that were melting out of this vampire clown’s mouth in this picture behind Quitter’s head. They still kind of looked like blood. Probably what Senior 2010, Ashley Banks, was going for in her dark world of vampire clowns with flowers for blood. His whole office was full of student’s art. He caught me staring off though.

“Reid,” he finally said, “we’ve got a problem.”

“How is suspending me at all related to snowballs or being late? I mean, I have been on time this week, and all I did was toss a snowball at that Dillon kid. I looked out at the melted snowballs sliding down the windows of the main entry.

“I know you’re on probation. So maybe if you suffer a little more over these minor things, the bigger things will never have an opportunity to rear their heads.”

“And staying home for three days, 72 hours of free time, will keep me out of trouble in exactly what way, Quitman?”

We were supposed to call him Kirk but none of us did. He was the only person who worked at the school that we all called by his last name. It was like the alternative high school thing to do, you know, call each other by first names. Like calling teachers by their first name was this super extraordinarily cool thing to do. Like that was going to keep kids from hating their classes or something. When I called my teacher Suzie, or Donna, or Mark, it just creeped me out. Not that I wanted to call them Mrs. Donnelly or Mr. Creech, but first names made it weird. I guess they thought it was supposed to make them more human or something. Like kids needed their teachers to be more human. It didn’t make the bullshit any easier to deal with. Bells still rang like we were fucking cattle being herded from one yard to the next. I could called my principal Kevin, like we were pals, but I couldn’t be late to class without a pass.

Donna, his secretary leaned in and winked at me when he wasn’t looking.

Fucking Quitter had these little, beady eyes and tight-lipped expressions, accented with a pointy little nose, too. He wore these glasses that kind of made him seem metro or retro or

something, but he's from Arizona, so I don't know—maybe it was a southwest thing. He wore button-down shirts un-tucked. A very alternative high school thing to do. Today, he wore this purple striped button-down, un-tucked. He kind of looked like an Easter egg.

“The police have been here twice,” he said. His beady eyes glared at me.

“They are always here. They have an office here,” I said, aware that I was walking a fine line. But since I was already getting suspended, and I knew I would totally piss off my probation officer with the snowballs issue, I just embraced my vacation. “Three days at home and I will never throw snowballs at cars again, yes sir.” I gave him a smug little salute. “Unless I want another vacation.”

“Watch your mouth Reid,” he said as he picked up his phone. “Donna,” he leaned back and reached his neck around the edge of the doorway, “can you get Reid's mom on the phone? And I'll need a three day form, and I'll need you to witness our signatures on the write- up. Probably ought to go ahead and set up the re-entry meeting now, while we have mom on the phone. She's a busy lady.” He gave me a look then, like he had me.

“Voicemail,” he said to me. “Uh, hi, Mrs. Williams, I'm calling to let you know that Reid has just been suspended for participating in some aggressive behavior on the property. Apparently a few kids were throwing snowballs at cars, and Reid was one of them. I need you to call me back or call Donna at extension 4554. Reid will be in my office until you arrive to pick him up.”

“It's Wednesday. She's in a meeting, all day. She won't get that message till three. Can't I just go back to class, dude? Jesus.”

“I guess we could get your work sent down and get you set up over in the corner...Hey Donna—”

Donna pushed away from her desk and gestured for me to follow her.

“C’mon, Reid,” she said, “Let’s get you set up in the nook here.”

***Stop. Go back and reread your draft. Remember to check your essay for a beginning, middle, and an end. Have you chosen a variety of words? Have you created a topic that answers the prompt? Write your final draft on the following pages.***

Last year, Marco, my study skills teacher, called me out in front of everyone. I didn’t care, really, but then he wouldn’t let me have pizza because it was for the kids who’d “worked so hard.” I tried to tell him I’d been in the hospital and that Quitter and Suzie told me that I got a few extra days for assignments, and that I was hungry.

“Reid,” he’d said, all cocky with a little grin to the side of his mouth, “I don’t want to argue with you.” I sort of flipped out. I don’t even really remember what I said, but it definitely had “fuck you” in it.

My mom made a name for herself at that meeting. “I mean, no offense, but you guys need to go over the plan more than Reid does. If my boss talked to me that way in front of all of my colleagues I probably would have said, “F— you, too, and walked out.”

It went downhill from there.

I felt bad for mom though. She always had to deal with that shit. She was right on, too, about everything she said. I had this behavior plan since I got out of the hospital. It was all about me getting stressed out and not being able to cope. It really didn't help me, but it did mean we had to meet all of the time. Mom was burnt out, though. Done. I heard it in her voice when she talked about things. Even though she knew they were all assholes, she also knew me.

She couldn't say, "That's it, go to your father's," like most moms could because she and I both knew dad usually did more harm than good. Last year he made me turn myself in for some graffiti tags. I'd sprayed a couple tags. They were kind of bad ass, too. I tried a new paint that supposedly washed off after a couple days. I liked that, art that just disappeared. My shit did disappear too, it was sweet, but Cranky and Gray Mike's stuff were left unclaimed. Plus they broke into the community center last year and tagged a bathroom. My dad got all righteous about me doing something I wanted, and how he had to teach me about consequences. So he turned me in. The cops charged me for every tag in town.

They charged me with trespassing. Like being outside with paint was trespassing? I tried to tell the cops that I didn't tag anything in the community center. I knew they couldn't prove it, but all that did was piss them off. I totally owned the tags that I did, and I even showed them my paint and how it was water based. I did the whole "Sir" thing, and practically cried at one point. I mean, I didn't want to be in trouble, but I was getting cornered into being in trouble for things I didn't do.

That one cop, Dirk, said: "Is it Cranky's stuff? We got pictures of his stuff—this looks like it. Don't take on your buddy's guilt. He wouldn't for you. I think they said something about



your stuff down by the bridge last week. Isn't that right, Duane?" They gave each other a good cop bad cop grin, with little chin nudges in the air, like I was screwed either way.

My dad didn't teach me anything. Instead, he just made everything hard as hell, and then bailed, like, "You got yourself into it, now get yourself out of it." He didn't go to any of the court dates, and he didn't go to any of the meetings, either. So, I took the blame for everything. I had to. Gray Mike's dad had cancer. He never left his house during the day. He sort of took care of his little brother Joey. And Cranky, he was my homey. There was no way those guys were going to get hassled about tags just because my dad wanted to play Captain Enforcer or some shit.

"You are going to have to learn the hard way. You can't just go around and paint on people's property. It's disrespectful. You think you know everything, but you don't know shit. Wait until you spend a few days in jail, that'll teach you. Painting bullshit all over won't seem so "bad ass" then. What you need is to—"

"—I know Dad, I know what I need." Jail time hadn't done him much good, so I didn't see his logic. I could have said that, but whenever I pointed out his lack of responsibility, he just got pissed and yelled like he was a big man. Maybe that is what he wanted. I don't know.

"Can't tell from where I am standing," he said, with a furry eyebrow raised. I hated that face he made. The I-am-acting-like-a-real-father-now-face. After that, I sort of ran away. Dad called the cops again. Mom picked me up from the station. She was furious with both of us. But I'd had it with him. He went right back to drinking all day. She hasn't sent me back to stay with him since.

I did some kiddie probation thing called diversion. To divert me from being some kind of horrible trespassing tag artist. It cost mom a bunch of money, like a grand. But I did the classes and I kept my friends out of trouble.

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Recently, I got hit with a *second* trespassing charge and earned myself a real probation officer.

I was at the park right off Thirtieth. It's that park that has the rocket-ship playground at the top of the hill. Anyway, I was in the park late with Homeless Fred. The bathrooms are on the side of the pool building where no one can see them, so the homeless used them all of the time. Homeless Fred fought in Vietnam. He gave me change sometimes for the bus. In fact, I walked over to him that night to ask him for fifty cents. Then we started talking about the planets or some shit. The solar flares. Fred was super smart. He really was. The park closed at 11:00 and all the skater kids waited on the corner for the 11:38 bus to come. So, yeah, technically, we were "in the park" and not on the sidewalk under the little red bus sign, but all we were doing was talking, and drinking some Mickey's.

The cops rolled up at 11:32 or something and everyone split. Fucking Fred was so drunk though, he wasn't going anywhere. The cops went at him with all kinds of questions, and I knew they were going to take him in. I just couldn't have that. I mean Fred was the shit, and he didn't do anything wrong. The cops didn't want a homeless dude anyway—they wanted kids. They didn't come to the skate park to snake out the poor people. They came to catch kids in the park.

Teenage boys were up to no good, even when they were standing around in the skate park. The one park that had something for us to do.

So I walked over and just started talking shit to these two cops. They immediately got all curious and started trying to get Fred to say that he bought me beer or some shit, but I laid it out.

“We were just chilling, waiting for the next bus and then you guys pulled up and everyone freaked out,” I said.

“Why’d you run? You aren’t supposed to run from cops; didn’t your mommy ever tell you that?” *That* cop, Mr. High School Football Star turned community douche bag. I’d talked to him before. He really liked to intimidate kids. Gave him some kind of kick. I dealt with him one other time, about some other bullshit. The only reason I didn’t go to jail then was because I called him sir the whole time. He really liked that.

“Because when cops pull up, you run. That is just what you do. Especially when you know two bored-ass-fucks like you are going to pop anyone they can, just to keep yourself useful in that fucking uniform,” I said.

They didn’t like that. So they put the cuffs on me and called my mom. I guess she was pretty pissed because she refused to come get me. So they took me to juvie. Community Douche Bag cop was so pissed that mom didn’t come get me that he stomped around all night. Cursed at his papers, and held his forehead in his hands, like it was the worse night of his life. He was sweaty, too. Had a bullet proof vest on, like a giant baby in a giant big boy costume. He didn’t want to work so hard, after all. I heard him coax mom to just come get me. He put it on speaker phone so he could keep rubbing his forehead and filling out my intake form.

“Ma’am, it will be a lot easier on all of us, if you’ll just meet me over here at the back doors of the jail and collect him and his ticket. That way I don’t have to go through all of the paper work for a kid who isn’t picked up.”

“Huh, uh huh,” she said and then paused a second, like she was smoking or taking a drink of something. “Well, if you want easy, why don’t you follow logic and bring the tardy-boy- who-missed-the-bus-home to his mother. That seems like the obvious remedy to the situation. Isn’t that what cops used to do, return children to their parents? Nope, you guys are going make at least a hundred and fifty bucks off me anyway. Keep him till I feel like coming. He can suffer some for not coming home like he was supposed to, and then my part will be done by morning. Because you guys want me to impose consequences, right? That’s what good parents do, right?”

Mom, she had a way with words.

I had to put the orange suit on and everything. I hated it. The fucking lights were neon and flickering and made everything look really clean. Hospital clean. Plastic clean. Things that were that clean just weren’t normal. There was no fucking way that a place like that, with the orange suits and all was going to get kids to shape up. No way. I saw other kids in there too. I knew a couple.

Officer Douche handed this fat chick papers to sign. They had a routine down. I was just one more kid on the books. I hated the way they looked down at their pile of papers, and then at me. I sat on a fucking orange chair in fat chick’s office, for hours. All I thought about was how sad her life was. What kind of person works the night shift at juvenile hall? She was huge, too. Like that late night schedule was fucking with her metabolism. Her body just got hungry all of the time. Deanna. Her name was Deanna. She was nice enough. She brought me water and shit,

but I couldn't really be thankful. I just couldn't be friendly in that situation. It just didn't make sense.

Anyway, two trespassing tickets meant that I was some kind of fucking *serial teen trespasser*. It didn't bother me, though. It was all stuff that I could figure out on my own. After that park thing though, I promised mom I would be a mother fucking prince.

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When she showed up at school to pick me up, I thought about telling her how I was going to get my act together but I didn't. I couldn't talk, really. She didn't say much either. She wasn't mad. She wasn't chatty. So we drove home in silence. My head bumped against the window when we went over some potholes. The sun started to melt off the snow. My breath fogged up the glass and I wrote my name in it. We passed the skate park and I saw a few people I knew.

The fridge was full of sandwich stuff and root beer, so I made us some lunch. Not because I felt bad but because it was time to eat something. Mom did some work stuff from home. I got out my geometry homework and started on the packet that was due the next week. I finished the whole thing, too, in like 45 minutes.

I kept waiting for the lecture, or the consequence or whatever it was going to be. She didn't say anything. When Gray Mike called and told me his dad was in the hospital, I skated up there in the middle of the day. So many people were out. The hospital was jumping, too. Mike

was on this plastic green chair with a cigarette in his hand. He held it like it was his best friend. He just stared at it. Back hunched over. Gray.

Mike was almost 18 but he looked 30. This nurse came out of the room and asked him if he had an adult around who could sign some papers. His face went blank. She looked at me like I could answer the question.

“He’s an adult,” I said.

“Are you eighteen?” she asked.

He hesitated and then put the cigarette behind his ear. “Yeah,” he said.

We went outside and smoked. We hung out for a while but when the sun started to go down, I wanted to skate home before it got too cold. I tried to get him to come home with me and eat something but he didn’t. Said he couldn’t leave. He said he was pretty sure his dad wasn’t going to make it this time. He said his dad was pretty doped up on pain meds and they told him he might go into a coma just before he died. He wanted to talk to him some, if he could.

So I stayed. I was there when it happened. When I finally got home the house looked different. The dog didn’t get off the couch to lick me and mom was asleep. Everything was still. I heard the pings in the baseboard heat kick on. I started to call my dad but I couldn’t. I wanted to say a bunch of things. So I tried to write some shit down.

*Gray Mike’s dad finally died. His funeral is on Tuesday.*

I ripped it up.

I layed with dog on the couch for the rest of the morning. He snored and it reminded me of the ocean. The sun came up around five and I made some eggs. I took mom some coffee when her alarm went off. When she left for work, I called my probation officer and told her all about the snowball thing.

“Well, Reid,” she said, “don’t throw snowballs at cars.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Anyway, that was my challenge with my family.

**CSAP 2010**

**SCORE: unsatisfactory due to content**

## **Milk Duds**

I met Lance last year, about a year after the divorce. I was opening my garage doors so I could throw out Nancy's art cabinet when I saw him. He was digging through my dumpster on his tip toes.

Nancy and I were married for 20 years. That first year of divorce, I kept finding myself at her house, fixing the toilet handle, putting oil in her car, whatever. I was on my way out one day when she said, "Just leave the check on the counter why don't you; it's that time of the month anyway."

That "leave a check," comment, Jesus. I paid her eight-thousand dollars a month. Eight-thousand. In the beginning I didn't care; I just wanted out. After a year of it, after I realized how she still had me taking care of her, I snapped. In fact, the divorce only legitimized the non-sex clause that she had written into our marriage vows. Twenty years of no sex. The fucking cabinet had to go; I wasn't going to put the damn thing in my truck and deliver it to her. I finally quit delivering.



“This thing made of steel?” Lance asked.

“Maybe,” I said, scraping the metal against gravel. I pushed against it with my whole body. It moved about an inch at a time.

“You need some help, guy? Use your thighs,” he said, and lifted his eyebrows at me.

“Yeah, I got it, buddy. I’ve been moving stuff for about thirty years.”

He laughed at me. “Hope you’re not putting this in the dumpster. This is good metal.”

When we finished, I offered him a beer because it was that time of the day and I wanted one. We stood in the garage, shooting the shit. He collected scrap metal and sold it for forty cents a pound. I was recently divorced, and the cabinet was hers. The weather had been unusually warm for November. The Broncos were down. He said he was against marriage. I was too.

The drawers to the cabinet were wide, wide enough to hold Nancy’s biggest sketches and drawings. I left them all in there. He started thumbing through the drawers and pulling out the pieces, asking me all kinds of questions about my marriage. We drank. We talked about her art. Some of it was new. One of the pieces in a series, her “Trees in the Night Sky” piece, was a favorite of mine. Lance loved them, too.

“Of course you do, everyone loves Nancy. I’ll bet you’re already thinking I’m the evil guy, right?”

“Whoa— I’m just saying, maybe you ought to let me handle this. I can put them in them in the Benz. Store them.”

Weeks later, Nancy showed up looking for them. As her luck would have it, I wasn't home, but Lance was working in the alley, pulling brush away from the side of the house. She got all pissed when her key didn't fit in the door to the garage and apparently, got even angrier when she looked in the garage and didn't see the cabinet.

Lance told me she said, "God damn it" at the top of her lungs and threw her keys. A real tantrum. When I got home, she and Lance sat outside the back of the house with a fire going. One of her sketches lay out on the table.

"We aren't married anymore, right?" I said. "So, you're here because?"

She was flirting with him. He was neutral, sitting at the far end of the room stoking the fire. Nancy was on the couch a full six or seven feet from him, twisting her hair.

"Isn't this nice?" I said. I looked them both over.

"Milton, don't even start, ok? I came to get my drawings and Lance saw me get upset. He kept me from driving through your garage door." She stood, turned red in the face, pursed her lips, and flicked her hair. She looked good, put together.

"God, he's jealous. He's actually jealous. Makes me want to date you, Lance."

Giggle. Giggle. Giggle. Hair twisting. Sun hitting her shoulder.

"Don't date him, marry him, my love, and then I can stop paying for your life." That was mean. I know. Twenty years of watching her flirt with every single man that existed had done that to me. On our engagement trip down the Grand Canyon, she flirted with my uncle. More than flirted. Forced herself. My parents didn't say anything at first, but then they quietly asked me to come home and visit them for a while. Man if I only would have.

Nancy just can't help it. Her only power lies in her looks. Even when she is ugly, she is still pretty. Men notice her blonde hair and blue eyes, and they imagine she must be the best thing in the world. It was the one thing she knew how to do, react to men in a flirtatious way. She needed every man's attention, though. I don't know why she married me. It wasn't love. She wasn't capable of that. Not even for a dog.

In her eyes, I was oppressive, judgmental, old fashioned, a nerd, a geek, incapable of a good time. From my end, she was so self-absorbed that even grocery shopping turned into the Nancy show. "Hi," hair flip, giggle. "I can't find this habanero pepper sauce. I called ahead, and the manager said you carried this brand." Everywhere we went. After 10 years of it, I started a lot of projects in the garage, just to have a place she couldn't rule.

The tension lessened when Lance laughed. "I can see why you two lasted so long."

He walked her to her car, and they exchanged numbers.

When he came back he said, "Dude, you are freaking out. Let's go sit in the van, fix a fire. I need to warm up my house." It was November in Boulder. The days were 60 degrees and sunny, but the nights got cold.

Lance lived in an old Mercedes-Benz-modified camper. He had modified it himself. The sofa was Italian leather. The outside was silvery green. On the inside, Lance built a loft so he could have storage underneath the bunk. He had a little propane fridge and stove. The floor was made of black walnut that he had rescued from a dumpster. The wood stove was an antique iron and silver pot belly he'd taken out of a cabin. He said that last year he'd hunkered down at nine-thousand feet, and lived off deer, fish, and that stove.

He was right. I was being edgy about Nancy.

“She’s not a bad person,” I said, but I didn’t mean it. It was just something I said to people when I thought I was being obvious about her.

The van swayed when either of us stood.

“If you *did* marry her, I would pay you, you know.” Over the last year the idea had occurred to me more than once.

“How much?” He asked, smiling at me and blowing into the fire.

He reminded me of Tom Selleck. Scraggly hair. Big eyes. The kind of guy I hated in high school. I was nerdy, *and* chubby. I mean, my parents named me Milton for God’s sake. Milt. Milk. Nancy called me Milk Duds. Whatever. I struggled with weight. In high school, I had thick-ass glasses that covered half my face. Without them, I was blind as a bat. Disabled blind. Paralyzed blind. I became the “nice guy,” the guy girls could count on for a friend, the guy who played in the band and played soccer—not football. Not the guy like Tom Selleck who played football or was naturally tan from birth. I didn’t date; I didn’t do anything. Then at 17 I got contacts. Everything changed.

I met Nancy when I was 20. I felt 60.

“How much would it take?” I asked Lance.

“How much you got?” He asked, laughing. I couldn’t tell if he meant it. I didn’t think he was poor, but the scrap metal pile on the roof told me he liked bringing in a few dollars.

I made more drinks. We pulled out some chili from the fridge and set it on the pot belly stove. Lance had welded a flat tray onto the top of the old stove so he could keep things warm, and he could steam himself with it. “It’s important to steam every day— your sinuses need it.”

“I pay her eight grand a month for 10 years. She’s already gotten half of all the properties, half of the house, half of my investments, half of my retirement...”

“...and almost a million dollars more in maintenance. Wow. You must be loaded, Milt. I had no idea. I took you for a *middle*-to-high income guy.” Lance rolled a cigarette, some brand he claimed had no chemicals in it. It was his after dinner cigarette. His ritual. Nancy hated smoke.

“Was it ugly— the divorce?” He asked.

“It wasn’t ugly. I agreed to everything she asked for. I wanted out before I killed her or myself. Plus, I can make money. I’m good at that. I was like, sure, take it and go away.”

I sold things. Hair replacement systems actually. I was good at it. I didn’t tell anyone what I did. People rarely believed me anyway, but I sold hair. I sold hair at ten thousand dollars a head. So when I faced real numbers during the divorce, I could only think in terms of hair on heads. All of my twenty years boiled down to all the heads I had haired and how many heads it would take to keep paying Nancy to live “comfortably.”

“I’d give you a half of a million dollars if you married her in one year.”

“Really?” Lance raised his eyebrows at me, like he didn’t believe I was serious.

“It would save me half a million dollars, and nine years of paying maintenance.”

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Nancy and I went to therapy for a while, years ago. Like year 15 or so. Our doctor was this old Jewish lady who made everything sound okay, like we were all on the planet to experience being okay together. “Wa, wa, wa.” That is what she sounded like. She repeated everything we said, but added a smile. Then we repeated what she said, and waited. It was “cognitive dissonance blue light therapy,” with Kabbalah added in. Very Boulder.

Nancy picked WaWa because of the location: downtown, near her favorite restaurant. After every session, she met her *one* girl friend, who happened to weigh three-hundred pounds to have happy hour. I think she just wanted someone to listen to how much I sucked. Besides that to discuss, there was usually a guy. A guy from the gym, or a guy from her Pilates class, or a guy from her feminist issues book club. They were her “friends,” of course. Her friend, Lynn, listened while Nancy dramatized what it was like just being her.

It went something like this: she zoned in on someone, like, say, my uncle, and then she flirted. After she was secure in their attention, she started the “you’re a fuddy-duddy-milk-boy” shit, with the bonus of no sex. There was no “passion” in it for her, or she had a yeast infection, or I didn’t “get” her.

It was possible that she was sleeping with some guy, here and there. I think she may have cheated some, probably more than she ever intended. Most likely she flirted, and then things got out of control. Sure as shit though, after whatever new guy got tired of her, she returned to being amiable her. She’d ask me to take her to L.A., date her, and woo her.

I didn't talk much in the sessions with the WaWa because Nancy did most of the talking. Her top two explanations of the demise of our marriage: Milton is no fun because he is oppressive, and nobody cares about poor her. At least, that's what I heard.

WaWa tried. She forced me to sit there and listen, and repeat things back to Nancy. I would say, "I hear that you feel that I am not fun," and, "I oppress you." When WaWa asked me to tell Nancy how I felt, I couldn't come up with anything. I probably was no fun. So I said, "I really don't have anything to add to the conversation," and then Nancy would say, "See?" I would look at the clock above the door and think about my four o'clock client and his future head of hair.

WaWa had this lovely little bun she wore on top of her head. I envisioned her getting up every morning and pinning her hair on her head. After a few months of that weekly meeting, and after a few terse comments about Nancy's Outer Child misbehaving, Nancy decided she didn't like sweet WaWa. Plus, her fat friend, who she clung to had decided to train for a marathon. She'd said, "Please—she's the size of an overgrown pumpkin. She's going to throw something out if she isn't careful."

She told WaWa, "It's not working."

And then she told me, "You aren't hearing me. You used to love me. Now all you do is – nothing. You do nothing. It's awful." She even teared up.

"Nothing" was progress. Big progress. I used to play with Outer Child. Outer Child acted out, and inner Milton responded, "Oh honey, I'm sorry the vacation suite doesn't face the ocean," or "Oh, honey, you just lie down, I'll go to the store." Outer child could never be satisfied. After 20 years of it, it seemed boring. She didn't need me, either. She needed my

money. She needed to have a husband just have one, not because I was the one she wanted. I couldn't soothe her, or give her an orgasm, or hold her hand. I was like the parent that made sure there was food in the fridge so that when Nance came home, she could eat.

"Divorce me," I said in therapy one day, and I meant it.

Nancy, in true form, said, "You don't have the balls to divorce me."

I told WaWa that Nancy didn't want to change things. She just wanted to meet her fat friend and be the prettiest girl in the room. She wanted to talk about therapy, so she had something to wave around in her ongoing, never-ending dance of Nancy: "Look at me. I'm in therapy."

Once, with WaWa, I went on about how Nancy treated her fat friend, Lynn, so badly that I felt sorry for the girl. Lee would say, "I'm having a party," and Nancy would end the conversation by talking about how she was going to have a party for herself the same weekend. Lee would talk about losing weight and Nancy would talk about how self-acceptance was the foundation of any weight loss program. It was like watching a three year old who was learning to share: "Mine. Mine. Mine."

Nancy couldn't believe it when Lee lost the weight that year and ran the marathon. I think all of that change sent ripples through her psyche. She needed her friend to stay fat. She needed me to stay a fuddy-duddy. I said all this to WaWa, and she smiled at me.

"Are you a fuddy-duddy?" she asked, pushing her little bun into place.

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The wind brought me back to Lance, my prophet of sheet metal and freedom. The whiskey was out, and we sipped it with water. The van reached sauna humidity, and we had to open the hatch. I loved the hatch. He reached up and twisted the handle in tiny tight circles and the yellowed lid opened to a starry night. I caught a breeze right on my face.

“Why do you live in a van, Lance?” I raised my glass and thought about my life now. My life compared to Lance’s. Hair sales. Travel. Airplanes. I was bored, and I knew that.

“The profit margin increased two-hundred percent by simply getting out of a stagnant habitat. It isn’t healthy to trap our bodies in four square walls and become slaves to financing them. I used to work sixteen-hour days, and weekends. Now I like to have time. Time is everything. I like not planning my days. I like not having something to do. I like not being inside all of the time. I have to have the outside right next to me. Not outlets in the walls, you know? I don’t need electricity. I like that. I like looking around at the grid of power lines and knowing that everyone around me uses that giant man-made thing, and I don’t. I feel lighter than I have ever felt. I’m open to things because I’m not bogged down in the machine of it all.”

I didn’t have any idea what my life was. All I knew was that I needed room. I needed time and room, time away from Nancy and time away from recovering from Nancy. Maybe I would get a dog. Maybe I would meet someone who liked me and would actually have sex with me. I had met girls on my trips, and I had flirted, probably. But I never cheated.

“What’s with Nance’s art?” he asked.

There it was: “Nance.” He was hooked already and didn’t even know it.

“She got her degree in paint.”

“She’s good. Good lines.”

“She’s all yours. And all you have to do is marry her.”

“What if she doesn’t like me?”

I took him seriously.

“That won’t be a problem. She needs attention twenty-four seven.”

“What if I can do it in six months?” He smiled and winked at me to let me know he was pulling my leg.

“All the better. You’ll get a bonus.”

We raised our glasses and finished off the whiskey. Lance moved his van to the alley permanently that winter. He plugged into the garage. He kept an eye on the house for me when I left. He still had some of her paintings. She would be back. No doubt about it.

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Nancy wore a dress and had her hair pulled back. She was pretty. I couldn’t make out everything she said because her back was to me. Lance stood in the doorway of the Benz. I could see his face. He wore only his boxers, his summer uniform, but he wasn’t worried about it. He was relaxed.

She apologized to him about something. He said, “I thought I should be up front, I mean I never said I would take the money, but just hanging out with you, I felt like you should know that we joked about it.”

He was fucking with her, I think. I could tell. He made a face that seemed fake. I imagined him lying to his mother or his boss.

Then, that night, “Nance and I are going to date. Is that good?” He asked.

“Yes. That is fabulous news. Wonderful,” I said.

“I don’t want the money.”

“Ok. You don’t want the money.”

“I like her.”

“You like her.”

“I might really like her, like really.”

“You might really like her. Great.” I believed him. Nancy was stunningly beautiful. She had white blonde hair and crystal blue eyes the color of the water in the Caribbean. She took people’s breath away. And she knew it. It seemed easy to be with her when she sparkled.

“Let’s have some pasta tonight.” He put on some water, pumped the propane with a pedal, and lit the stove.

“I’m going to sell wigs with Beyonce,” I said. “I signed a multi-million dollar contract to sell wigs to the African American markets.”

“Wigs? Really?”

“Yeah. Wigs. All part of the hair market. It’s big. Big. That’s my news. I wanted to celebrate. You are dating Nancy, and I have wigs. Cheers.”

“Did you know Nance wants to be a dental hygienist?”

“Yeah, she’s talked about it. I offered to pay for school.”

“That’s weird. I mean, how could you get excited about looking at teeth all day? And breath. People have horrible breath.”

“Her dad was a dentist.”

“Mmm,” he said.

“Did she want to know why you live in the van?”

“No. She made some joke about how I am frugal. I sort of laughed it off.”

“Frugal is code for poor, just so you know.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked.

I could tell he was thinking about her. Like how I still think about her. It’s like I could be thinking about my leg, or my skin.

“Don’t do it.”

“What?”

“Don’t date her, don’t even go out with her again. Stay away from her. Lance. She’s, she’s not pretty inside. She’s a terrible person. She’s judgmental and mean, and just, a sad broken record.”

“She seems kind of lost. I can see that. Plays the damsel in distress some. She’s got some wax figures all tangled up inside. But I look at those paintings of hers though, her colors, those blues and greens. She’s talented. But dental hygienist? Is she worried about money?”

“Sorry, pal, she’s got serious daddy issues. It’s all about daddy. Okay? Twenty years. Just—just fuck it. You know what. Fuck it. Marry her. Fuck her. Trade yeast with her. I don’t care man. I just can’t think about Nancy any more. If you want to think about her, go on”

Lance poured some red tomato sauce into the pan and stirred. The garlic and sour smell filled the Benz.

“Milton, I am against marriage. I don’t believe in it. Kills people. Just wipes all the love out of a thing. Terrible institution. Another way to plug into the big machine. The big pie in the sky.”

“Soul killer. Suck, suck, suck.” I motioned a vacuum cleaning sucking out my brains.

“It’s always guys that say that, that end up married,” I said.

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Weeks went by. Our nightly happy hours became old hat. The whole marriage idea had dissipated into nothing, and yet I knew he was still seeing her.

So one night, Nancy walked past the alley side of the camper. She came around to the door and knocked twice, then opened the door like she lived there.

“Hey, you two—thought I would have a cocktail. Do you mind?”

“Come on in, little lady.” Lance used a Texas accent thing sometimes like he was a cowboy. “A drink a day keeps the doctor away,” he said. Always handy with the tips.

Giggle. Giggle.

“Out of all the guys in the world, this is the guy you have to date?” I asked. My head started tingling a little. I was light headed.

“I can go, Milton. No problem,” she said.

I saw that she meant it. I saw Lance looking at me watching her. He raised his eyebrows up, and put his hands up to tell me it was my call.

She smiled, “How darling; a curbside happy hour. What an adorable idea.”

“Adorable? Yes. About as adorable as *Nance*, with the silent *e* ending,” I said.

Giggle. Giggle. Giggle. Hair twirl.

“Getting hot in here,” Lance said as he opened the hatch.

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I went to L.A. for a month and left Lance in charge of things. I reminded him about the offer, and asked him to not fuck my ex-wife in my own house, at least not while I was paying for her existence.

I made a bunch of deals and sat at fancy bars and met beautiful Californian women who were too young, too crazy, or too old to take seriously. I had sex a few times, and that was nice. Really nice. With one of them, I didn't think of Nancy once. WaWa told me that men really struggle with the physical thing. She said it was often the last desire to go.

At home, it was hot, dry and threatening. We had more wildfires that summer in Boulder than ever before. The whole state was given a National Emergency status. On the news, the Colorado square was red. Lance and I spent my first weekend back filling up water jugs. That's when he told me.

"So, are you still seeing Nancy? Oh, I mean *Nance*?"

"Gonna take you up on that offer," he said, matter of fact.

"Whoa. What, seriously, or are you fucking with me? You're fucking with me."

"Doing it. Going to do it. She wants it. I don't *not* want it. I mean, why not Hoss?" He added his Texas slur. Then, "What, Milt? You look—you look sick."

"I just didn't think— she said yes?"

“She brought it up; it was her idea. Said it would let you off the hook and all. She wants to live in the Benz and do the starving artist thing. She wants to paint and travel. Totally change her life.”

“And you’re the guy she’s going to change her life with, huh?” I said, wondering about the tingling in my head. I sat down. We had 15 five-gallon water jugs filled. I turned the hose on my head.

“Hell, she wants you to come to the courthouse,” he added, “and no money.”

I didn’t feel anything. I drifted in and out. Lance kept talking. Maybe to rationalize his own thinking, or to convince me that I needed a clean break, but it didn’t bother me. Life without taking care of Nancy. WaWa’s Outer Child metaphors kept creeping into my thoughts. Of course she would marry again. Of course. It didn’t matter to me that it was Lance. It didn’t. He was a likeable enough guy. Probably too nice. Maybe she and I weren’t the right combination of fuddy-duddy and narcissist.

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Boulder City Hall looked like the city of Metropolis in the original *Superman* movie. It stood erect and tall and square. People were out to shop and gaze past one another. To the west were the foothills of the Rockies. A white marble fountain sat right on the south door of the building. All kinds of people were there. The homeless guys bathed.

I got there early.



Nancy was wearing a light blue dress and Lance had on a cowboy hat. They stood by the fountain for a few minutes and looked around. They saw me.

“I’m going to let you guys go in alone together. But I wanted to give you this.”

It was a postdated check for the rest of Nancy’s “payments.” I felt like it was the right thing to do. I don’t know why. Maybe because I couldn’t imagine not making sure she had what she needed. Maybe because I felt sorry for Lance. Or me, or all of us.

“If you don’t want it, give it to charity. And guys, you can’t live in the alley.”

They both looked at me. Lance tried to give the check back, but I knew Nancy would take it. Lance patted me on the back and said she’d have it all, and something about being her muse, and getting old and how pretty she was, with a question attached, like, “Isn’t she?”

“Yep, she really is,” I said.

WaWa and I had started seeing each other again after the fires settled down and the emergency evacuations stopped. She thought the wedding was necessary for closure.

“Important for closure?” I asked.

“Closure, Milton. She’s setting you afloat. What you’ve always wanted. What you deserve, right?”

I thought about how intertwined I’d been with Nancy. A year and a half without her and I couldn’t pick out my own toothpaste with confidence. I wanted to be another kind, a new kind, but I never could. She looked good that day.

A little girl walked past with a balloon animal hat on. She wore it like a crown.

I watched Lance and Nancy go into the building.

I took a few steps and then looked back. They were gone.

I started to panic a little. My head got light. I swung my torso down over my knees and held onto a tree.

“God damn it,” I said. Then everything went black.

I woke up to these two young college girls calling me sir and asking me if I would be alright. A cop was there. I turned my head over to the right cheek and started to push myself off the pavement. I saw the Benz drive by. It had cans on the back and painted words that said, “New Mexico or bust.”

The Nancy show.

“Bye, Bye, Nancy,” I said.

“We need a medic at 12<sup>th</sup> and Pearl,” the cop said into his radio.

My head was bleeding because I had fallen head first into the metal frame of a park bench. Once I stood up, I thanked them. “Low blood sugar,” I said.

Then, I went to the bank and cancelled the check.

Milk Dud, my ass.

## **Trawl**

When Leonard Lamb died, I was twelve.

It was the night before the biggest day of the year in my hometown. Each year, a hundred thousand people showed up to drink beer, dress up like the dead, “cleanse themselves, and polar plunge.” What we lacked in modern culture, warmth and sobriety, we made up for with snow, whiskey and a four-foot hole in the ice that made people new again. Leonard had been our savior. The savior of our town, the savior of my family. My mom was his wife. I was the step-son.

Leonard owned most of the town by the time he died, but back then, I didn’t know he owned so many things, or ran things, or was a boss of so many people.

That morning, I stared at the body. He lay on his belly like a frozen seal. He gripped the shore with his hands, holding on to the exact thing that would kill him. His leg dangled in the four-foot diameter of the Polar plunge hole. His skin and bald head looked pink and blue, like chicken just out of the freezer. The small triangle shaped beard was white with frost, and his lips were purple. He wore a parka, a Winter Festival hoodie, and one size eleven sorrel boot. His fishing pole lay next to him.

Cloud, his best friend and business partner, called us that morning to come over to the main tent for an emergency. He said there was a problem with Leonard. There was always a problem with Leonard. So, when he blurted out: “He’s out there frozen dead with half a leg in the lake,” we didn’t question further. We just started walking toward the hole.

It was twenty degrees outside. The wind came off the Continental Divide and pushed at everyone’s backs. The force of it made us lean toward the hole in the frozen lake. Toward Leonard’s body.

My mom tucked my head into her side and wrapped a giant blanket around the two of us. Mom clung to me under the blanket. She stared straight ahead of her. She didn’t want to look directly at anything else. Water trickled out of her eyes and froze. Her arms held the blanket around us. I felt her hands tight on my shoulders. She looked at me a couple of times, but changed her face, when she caught me looking back.

During the Winter Festival weekend, every hour meant thousands of dollars. If people stood around in uncertainty for five minutes in that kind of cold, they would leave. Cloud checked his watch, looked west toward the weather coming in, and saw sunlight. The wind would clear up, and the sun would come out. Perfect polar plunge weather.

Leonard and Cloud produced the festival every year. They’d arrived from Michigan. They touted, “Michigan has *real* lakes—not *reserves* of water, *fish*, not fake fish. And when things freeze in Michigan, there’s no sunshine to make it seem warmer.” Colorado was too bright, they said, but it had money.

Leonard had stumbled upon our Colorado town on a “self-discovery” trip, after a girlfriend he confessed to adore refused to marry him. Instead, she married some guy named

Kenneth. “How can I compete with Kenneth?” He’d ask Cloud in a Michigan musing. Neither were born with any Kenneth in them. They were rough spoken guys and careless with people around them. It seemed to be the very thing that made us all revere them.

“What the hell are we going to do?” Cloud said now, looking from my mother to the sheriff.

“We’ll have to get statements,” the Sheriff said, “Everyone who saw him last night or this morning.”

I leaned into mom. I didn’t want to give statements. She and Leonard had been out on the ice. I’d seen them. What was he going to ask us?

“Sheriff,” Cloud yelled, “Do you have any idea the number of people on their way here, right now? Jesus. We’re supposed to have a hundred thousand people through here. Leonard—“

“We have to get statements, Cloud.”

“Becky? What the hell is he doing out here?” Cloud asked.

“Looks to me like he was fishing,” I said. I pointed to his pole.

Sheriff pushed us all into the main tent, fifty-yards from the hole, where there was plenty of heat.

Cloud ignored the dead body behind us with work talk. “So, tell me, should we call off the events for the day – or wait? I’ve got to tell Michigan Mike something. He’s trying to keep off the crowd by extending the coffin races. They can do a bonus round, and that’ll keep people out of the park another hour to two hours,” he said. “Sheriff?”

The coffin races were just that: teams of people dressed up in costumes, who ran a coffin through an obstacle course as fast as they could.

The Sheriff gave him a hard look, and then pulled out his notebook. He pushed his woolen hat off his forehead. The inside of the tent was Cloud's domain. There he ran the main bar, the music, and the merchandise. All of the festival workers came through there, too. He managed the whole thing, something he could complain about when he needed a pat on the back. The Sheriff knew Cloud well, and he knew that he knew Leonard well, too.

Cloud handed mom a hot rum and tea. "What the fuck was he doing out on this ice in this weather? For fuck's sake, Becky. Did he finally snap?"

Mom didn't answer right away. She drank a sip of tea, and then stared down at her feet. She drank a sip of tea, and the lines in her forehead disappeared. She drank another sip and her eyes widened. She sat up straight. Her foot peddled back and forth.

"I don't know what he was doing out there, Cloud. Maybe he was having a smoke, you know. I am sure he went fishing. His pole is out there." She pushed her empty mug toward Cloud, and he filled it. Her gloves were still on. "He wasn't at my house anymore—not regularly, anyway."

Leonard was not a good fisherman. We all knew that. He was a sportsman, though. Two hundred and thirty pounds made him more of a spectator sportsman. He didn't get drunk on purpose either. It just came natural with the rhythm of a cast line, the zip of a reel, and some whiskey.

He had the same cadence while watching a car race or a horse race or any race. A car race could draw out for four or five hours. With wrecks, caution flags, lost laps, weather, a car race provided Leonard with a solid half day of uninterrupted boozing. Of the regular sports, football was his favorite. There, he could martyr for the Detroit Lions. He drank hard and steady.

“You don’t seem too upset by it, Cloud, if I you know what I mean,” the Sheriff said.

“What do you want me to say? He’s an asshole. He fucking gets everybody going on this thing. How we’re going to have a hundred-thousand-dollar day, how we’ve got to sell more tickets, how we’ve got to hire more, and make more food, so we spend all God-damned year making this thing happen, and once again that fat fuck is missing and out. Every fucking year I work harder, every fucking year.” He turned red all over. Three shots of whiskey went back. He poured mom some more tea. He lit a cigarette. He paced behind the bar.

The radio squawked and the Sheriff stepped outside. He pulled the tent flap back enough for me to see Leonard looking like a giant black slug. Cops took pictures and put little flags in the snow. Mom sipped her tea. Her face wrinkled up again in the middle of her forehead. She jiggled a foot underneath her. The Sheriff came back in, pulled his hat off, and extended his mug. He gestured for the whiskey and Cloud poured it.

“What do you want me to say?” Cloud said to him.

“I want you to say that you are sorry that he’s dead and that you don’t know anything about it, that it was an accident and that we have ten witnesses who can back you up because without that, we have to stall everything. We have to make sure it was an accident.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Mom asked. “How else could someone die on the ice? He went out there drunk, probably got colder than he realized and fell over. I don’t think it takes an engineer to figure that out. Do you?”

Her foot stopped jiggling.

“It’s hard saying, not knowing,” the Sheriff said, “and I have to know something before I can say something. So you radio over to Michigan Mike and tell him to run a few more coffin races.”

His radio squawked again, and he leaned into his shoulder to talk and listen.

“We got the coroner out here, boss. He’s ready to load him in to the truck,” the voice said.

I wanted to tell them about the whole thing. I wanted to explain that he’d jumped in the plunge after that girl. That he’d jumped in to save her.

“Sheriff,” Cloud interrupted, “none of these folks know Leonard. They just want to pay their ten dollars and jump in damn cold water. Let’s give it to them. Otherwise, we’ll have to explain.” He stammered a bit while he refilled mixers and the ice chest. “Christ’s sake. You know as well as anyone how much this town needs this day.”

Sheriff ignored him and looked at me.

“Will, how are you doing?” The Sheriff asked me. I’d been staring at him too long.

“Fine, I guess.”



I'd been rehearsing what I would say when he started the questioning. They all looked at me. I didn't know what to say, but I was a kid, and they saw a kid sitting there. So I said, "I'm sure he was fishing. He liked to fish."

"Let me see what I can do out there. If the coroner says we can go ahead, and the mayor says we can go ahead, then so be it. But we've got a body out there," he looked down at me, "and we've got to know why."

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By noon, the polar plunge crowd filled in around the lake, right around the hole. People wandered into the main tent to warm up, but then headed right back out to ensure a good view. The police stood out by the lake and periodically stuck rods into the hole as if they thought something else might pop up. Nothing did.

The mayor told people, "Our great hometown police force is just making sure the ice is solid for all of you folks. We don't want any accidents out here, today."

A guy standing next to me said, "You mean *another* accident, right boss?" And his two buddies laughed. I wanted to ask them what they'd heard because in my mind, I was sure that everyone knew what I knew, and I wanted to confirm it with somebody. I waited for the Sheriff to question me, or for his officers to corner me. From the tent, I watched them. Whenever the Sheriff looked across the creek to our house, I knew he had to be putting together that we lived right there, next to that hole. The creek was frozen, and that made it easy to walk across from our

back porch. Hell, Leonard had walked across it to meet that girl, and Mom had walked across it to call him home. Our footsteps were all over the snow.

So, I rehearsed my answers. I'd been asleep officer, mom was in bed—no, we didn't hear anything. Yes, officer, he was working late. No officer, she wasn't up all last night waiting for him. No, I don't think she left the house. I would have heard her. I would have heard her footsteps, and the door slam, because our house is so small that I can tell when she is using the microwave, I can hear the high-pitched beep of the door alarm when someone opens it. I got up to let the cat in and no, I didn't see anything. Besides, officer, it was too windy. Windy and nearly a white out. I heard the wind, officer. I heard my cat, too, so when I got up to let him in, I didn't see my mom out here. She didn't argue with him, no sir. I would have heard an argument because everything echoes on the wind. That's how I heard my cat, but no, she couldn't have been out there. That woman didn't fall in. He didn't go in after her. I didn't see him try to pull her out of the water. I didn't see my mom on her knees holding onto his hands and pulling. She didn't let go. She didn't. Because she wasn't out there, she was in bed, officer. I saw her when I went back to bed with my cat. Plus, it was a white out, and if anything was happening at the park, it couldn't have been for very long because it was so, so cold, sir. Too cold for people to be out. Yes, sir, he did like to fish. Yes, he did often stay out late. No, I never heard them fight. I don't know how much he drank. He was nice to me, sir, always nice to me.

Leonard wasn't my dad, but I did like him. I liked that everyone knew who he was and that mom and I were famous. I got slices of pizza for free, and soda and candy and almost anything I wanted if he was standing next to me. The teachers, the boy scouts, or really, just about anyone organized to do something with kids—asked me for donations. His name was all on the skate park donation wall, and on the bricks next to the new playground set, and recently,

someone had named a road “Leonard’s Way.” He was a generous guy. Mom said he could never say no to anyone, except her.

One of my classmates, Emma, came up to me in the tent and said, “My mom said your dad froze to death last night.” She looked at my shoes. Kids said she was autistic or something, so I didn’t take her too seriously. In science class, it was impossible to complete a worksheet because she had to make sure she got everything perfect. I hated being her partner, but she was smart.

“I guess he did,” I said.

Miles Bartleby walked up with three other sixth grade boys and told her, “You’re not supposed to talk about dead people like that, especially when it’s their dad.”

“Did you see him? We heard you saw him,” another kid interrupted.

“I saw him,” I said.

“Well was he blue? George Donner said he was blue.”

“He was kind of blue, I guess. Mostly just frozen looking. He had a funny look on his face.”

“Wow dude. A real frozen dead guy. Right here.” Miles added.

“It takes a body several hours to thaw out,” Emma said matter-of-factly, “They’ll have to dissect him later.”

“Are you serious?” Miles asked. “You can’t be this much of a freak, Emma. Go autism out on someone else, will you?”

Her eyebrows pushed together, but she didn't say anything to Miles. Instead she turned to me and said, "Sorry about your dad."

It bothered me that they called him my dad because they knew that he wasn't. Everyone knew that I was the kid whose dad died in second grade. It was just easier for people to call Leonard my dad, but it was wrong. It was all wrong. If my dad hadn't died on us, we wouldn't have been waiting for Leonard to come home. Mom wouldn't have been waiting to catch him again. I wouldn't have been watching her, and that Polar plunge Sunday would have been like any of the others.

"A hundred thousand dollar day," Leonard had said. It was so much money. Money for the grocer, the pet store, the movie store and the pizza shop, the Quick Mart, the mining museum, the gas station, the café, the gift shop, and the bars, so that when Leonard spoke of the big numbers to come, people let him do whatever he wanted. He was the visionary, the man who knew how to get people to spend money on absolutely nothing, over and over again. T-shirts, special Winter Festival micro-brewed beers, a picture for plungers so they could have their moment of truth captured forever, a town website, specialty beer mugs, a tattoo artist, bands for the people who preferred to stay warm in the tent, an ice sculptor, a fake ski hill, a sledding hill for the kids, the coffin races—that had been Cloud's idea— a parade, fireworks, a snow ball war zone in the middle of the park, and tickets to plunge. The plunge was the final big event.

In fact, Leonard designed the last day of the festival around it. He wanted people to leave with the wet and cold inside them. And it worked.

"Did you plunge?" people asked each other in the tent. Then they would go into their personal experience with the water, like Jesus was in there.

“Man, it was so cold, so dark, I couldn’t feel my skin,” or “When I got out, I was hot, so hot.” They cheered each other, and patted themselves on the back, drank and bought t-shirts and mugs, and key chains and calendars and pictures of themselves standing on the ice in their suits. Then, most importantly, they bought tickets for the next year.

I wanted to walk over to the hole and look through it, touch the water, scoop some up and feel the cold on my hands. I wanted to lower myself in it and try to pull myself out just to see how hard it was. But kids weren’t allowed to plunge. The water was too cold. Only the adults were allowed to throw themselves into the abyss. Like that Deanna. She’d taken off her clothes that night and just jumped in. She’d been giggling, too. Leonard laughed with her. And then she didn’t come up. He had his fishing pole. He stuck it in the water. He pulled out his pocket flashlight, spilled his whiskey, cursed, “God-damn-it,” and then threw everything down and dove in. He was down there forever.

“I’m gonna go catch a fish,” he had told mom on the way out the back door.

“I bet you are,” she said, and they argued. Heatedly. I think she threw a squash at him because when I went downstairs, I saw a butternut in pieces.

“Becky, don’t tell me what to do. Nothing is going on that you need to worry for. I’m just having a little fun. You could have fun, too.”

“Don’t forget your pole,” she said.

“Ow.”

She must have thrown it at him. I heard the door shut. Then I watched from my window.

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For years, I had a recurring dream. It was always about my mom pushing someone in the water. Sometimes it was me, sometimes it was Leonard, and sometimes it was my dad. I dreamt about being under the ice and looking through the hole from the bottom of the lake. Above me, things were light and glowing. Down there was Leonard's boot, or that Deanna, or fish swimming around me like I was a plastic plant they passed every day.

Mom and I never spoke to each other about that night. I always sort of assumed that she knew I had seen it. She knew I dug through her drawers, and her boxes of dad's stuff in the closet, and her purse, and the stuff in the garage, too. She never asked me, though, and I guess I figured if we talked about it she might have to tell me why she let go of him. Maybe he'd been too heavy, or maybe he went limp and it scared her. Her hands were cut up under those gloves—from his fingernails. At least, that was the story I made up about it.

The Sheriff never did talk to me either, not until that summer when the ice thawed, and Deanna Davis floated up to the surface. He called it solved after that. She was naked, and the paper went on about Leonard and her goofing off, and how he must have tried to save her. Why she jumped in, in the first place, I never understood.

For a while, there was a lot of big talk about shutting the Polar plunge down. It was too dangerous, people had died, and the water and ice were too difficult to manage in an emergency. So, Michigan Mike started a petition. An astounding number—forty-thousand-people—signed it. He wanted to change the festival name too: "Frozen Dead Guy Days." For Leonard, that had

been the whole point. He wanted to take something ordinary and make it prolific. He understood that people would do just about anything to feel good, and then buy a t-shirt to hold onto it.

I finally plunged this year, for the first time. The wind was violent that day. It pushed snow in every direction. It stung my eyes. The hole looked like a portal from underneath. A door at the end of a long hallway. Or a keyhole. Or an eye. It wasn't like my dreams, though, where everything was lit up above me. Instead, the darkness was expansive, peaceful. Directly under the hole there was muted light, but just beyond it, an abyss. Thirty seconds went fast. I pushed myself out of the gray slush. My arms were stiff, and my legs were jelly. I throbbed. A hand came down, but I couldn't grab it. I had to fling myself onto the shore like a seal. It took all of my strength to do it. The cold made things weak and sluggish. I laid my head down for a second, and pushed my hands into the ice to get up. Mom stood above me.

“Wrap yourself up, honey, before you freeze to death.”

She didn't seem make a connection, but I laughed.

“You alright, Mom?” I asked her.

“Fishing,” she said, “just had to go fishing.”

## Hounds

To adjust to my new life, in my new town, I knew I had to let things go. Figure out who I was again. Find my peaceful place. Breathe in and out of my belly. So, I designed a daily walk to practice clarity and forgiveness. I intended it to help me return to a pre-foreclosure world, to a place of isolation and calm. I'd lost my mountain home and the tiny apartment I rented felt like a modern match box for *Stuart Little*.

My therapeutic plan was to throw a rock in the lake every time I thought about the bank guy, or my ex, or work or my kids. "Fucking no child support mother fucker!" or "Thanks for the tip asshole!" for the poor guy who had tried and failed to clean up my credit. I threw a lot of rocks. I walked the dog.

The dog park was a big reason I chose the new apartment. It didn't thrill me that it was part of a neighborhood Home Owner's Association, but at least they allowed animals. Mylo, my dog and my cross to bear, had to run at least twice a day. If I didn't take him, he punished me. A chair got turned over and shredded. A couch cushion destroyed. A mislaid shoe was massacred, or worse, the contents of a bathroom trashcan were chewed and spat out in piles of soggy



tampons and shredded Kleenex. So, in the afternoons after work, I went to the park with Mylo and my first drink, a gin and tonic. Mostly gin.

My typical pace was a saunter, a sway at flip-flop speed. I wasn't out there to run, or bike, or even to exercise the dog in a real way. I just wanted some room to walk, some time to think. In the HOA land of manicured living, people *did things*. They ran. They biked. They ran some more. All of that sun and planned activity exhausted me. I needed clouds, but that summer blazed with a constant blue sky. The sun was on Prozac, and all of Boulder was in on it. People just loved the heat. I hated it. I could barely walk in it, much less walk fast.

To cool off, Mylo and I got our feet wet in the lake. We walked around it, too, in a neat little circle, with all of the other hot people and domesticated dogs. He needed to poop in the tall grass; I was there to throw stones.

Halfway around the lake, I stopped and climbed up on a tree branch that unfurled from a big cottonwood tree. I liked sitting out there just above the water. I could see all of the people walking and talking. I smelled the wet bark. I felt it press into my skin. It reminded me of being a kid again, when I could just climb up on things.

As an only child, I'd had plenty of time to reinvent myself. I was alone a lot, and things were always quiet. Maybe that was part of the reason I'd liked living in mountains so much. There I could reach a state of solitude. Solitude came with the wind that silenced everything else. There I could step out of my back door, walk over a creek, and be at the foot of a glacier in 45 minutes. Cell phones didn't work there. No one let their kids watch TV, so no one had cable. Everyone knew everyone, but no one intruded.

“Larry *has* money, he just doesn’t *spend* money.” A lady with a poodle talked into her cell phone.

“No, no, no,” she emphasized, “she’s marrying him for money, and God knows she needs it. And he *has* money. He just never wants to spend it.”

In the city, noises were constant. Without the wind to silence the constant stereo play of people, I could hear everything. I heard my neighbor vacuum his house every Tuesday morning. I heard the kids downstairs get out of bed and turn on their shower. I heard every single car pull into the parking lot and shut down. I heard the driver close the car door and run up the steps. I heard their door slam. When they left, the same noises unfolded in the opposite order.

At night I turned my fan on to sleep. Over the footsteps, or the showering, or whatever it was other people were doing, I could focus on the steady hum of the fan. I blocked out as much as I could. In a thousand square feet, though, my kids were inescapable.

“It’s mine. Give it to me!”

“Mom, tell her it’s mine. I found it.”

“You found it after I found it, and I found it first.”

After ten years of raising them by myself, I’d learned to stay out of it.

“You two are going to keep at it, until someone gets hurt.” I would finally say.

After my pointless warning: a scream, a cry, and hard footsteps, followed by two doors slamming.

If I could hear the toilets flush next door, then the neighbors could hear everything we did, too. I worried they would think I was neglectful, or worse, too aggressive. I worried that when the kids slammed their doors, pictures fell off the walls in the downstairs apartment. I tried to explain to two adolescents how the world worked in close spaces. I tried to explain to our neighbors that the kids weren't used to so many people because we had lived in the mountains, on the edge of civilization. Their adjustment to other people was evolving.

We didn't receive much compassion. Instead, I had more than one neighbor tell me, "It's just not the place for you." I wanted to agree. The truth of it made me nervous. It wasn't the place for us. It wasn't. It was the place we could afford. It was the place that we could afford that also allowed dogs. It was the place that we could afford, that allowed dogs that also had a pool. I had tried to find one thing the kids could be happy about.

I don't think the kids realized the seriousness of our change until we were in the new place. Boxes unloaded. Our things looked out of place simply because they didn't fit with the eight foot ceilings, the cream colored walls, or the old carpet. The move meant something more than a move. It was more than a few yard sales, and an exciting adventure into the flat lands. It was like moving from Antarctica to Miami. We were aliens on a new planet.

"Larry *has* money; he just doesn't want to *spend* money."

I wanted to yell at her, "Tell Larry to spend the fucking money!" I wanted to chase her down and ask her why she was at the park, talking on her cell phone.

In between rocks thrown, and breaths taken, and replayed conversations from the day, I noticed a couple walk through the gate into the park. The guy was medium height with brown hair. He wore white tennis shoes, a navy blue *Member's Only* jacket, and a hair cut in a square

bowl shape. He looked overdressed. He had a military look on his face that spoke of endurance. His name was probably Randy or Douglas or Mark. His shoulders hunched to his ears, which caused him to lean forward at the neck. He had a posture like a dog sniffing for meat.

His companion was predominantly pink. Her lips were pink, her clothes were pink and her white walking shoes had sparkly pink laces. Together they looked like an ad for an erectile dysfunction commercial, or a commercial for a mobile home park retirement community. They didn't have a dog, and I judged from the detail in her outfit that they didn't have kids either. They were just two middle aged double income type people, who gave a long stare at me, the woman in the tree, holding a mason jar full of gin and tonic. Clearly a renter, not a dues-paying member of the neighborhood HOA.

Mylo was tucked down, searching the perimeter of the park for a place to relieve himself. His shameful look, the one that said, "Hey, give me a break, stop staring," wasn't necessary in grass that tall. I could barely see him. The couple watched Mylo disappear, and then walked toward me. The guy carried something.

Mylo ran back over to me, excited from his bowel release. "Who's a good dog?" I said, out of habit. "You are, yeah, you are."

"You want me to get that for ya?" the guy said. His tone was matter of fact like he wasn't asking at all, but instructing me. Pink, who had on a diamond the size of Texas on her left hand, glared at me through a bright white smile.

For a moment the dog and I stood motionless. I couldn't tell if they were serious, or helpful or fucking with me. I buttoned up and made my face as blank I could. It was a great trick I'd learned during the last year.

“Uh, I’ll get a bag later,” I pointed to the common area where there was a bag dispenser. “For now, I’m just going to let it gel.” I was going for a casual confidence. A demeanor that illustrated my ritual: I came to the park every day and I had it handled. I didn’t need their help.

“You’re going to leave it,” Pink said.

“I’ll get it on my way out,” I said.

I wanted to curse at them. “Fuck you.” But I ignored them. I was trying to keep my mouth shut. They stared at me but they didn’t say anything. I was tired of it. Done. My chest tightened. I got dizzy. I had to bend over and put my head between my knees. I squatted down to catch my breath. I needed them to walk away, or I was going to lose it. I saw the whole thing play out. Me yelling. Them running. Me throwing my shoes at them with “Fuck, Fuck, Fuck,” coming between every blow.

Finally, they turned away and kept walking. That’s when I noticed the bag the man was carrying. The smell was overwhelming, hypnotic like the first whiff of a skunk. I wanted to quit smelling it, but instead I snorted it in over and over. I needed to confirm that it smelled as bad as it did. It was a special green biodegradable bag full of dog poop. Pink looked ahead up the path, with a taut little smile and perfectly placed ponytail, like she didn’t smell it at all.

“We have a spare for you,” she said turning back. The guy held up a little green baggie and waved it at me. When I didn’t respond, he tied it to a little tree branch.

“For after it gels,” he said.

I tried to let it go. It was just a passing conversation. I took deep breaths into my belly. Everything around me was loud. Planes from the airport vibrated in the sky. Outside the park,

lawn service people buzzed endlessly around the trees and bushes, chopping the grass short. Everything had to be tidy. The HOA had everything under control. Mylo watched me carefully, trying to read the signs, to decipher what was going on.

I was up to two panic attacks a day. Headaches were ordinary. I took depression meds to get through last year, and Xanax to sleep through the night, and gin and tonics to walk in the park. In short, the move was not going so well. I looked at the Pooperman and his sidekick and considered the possibility that I was wrong about his tone of voice, or the overwhelming pinkness of his companion. Maybe I was overreacting.

I called Mylo to my side, and we followed them. I had to walk faster than usual; my old flip flops snapped back and forth against my heels. I passed the lady on her cellphone.

“She’s *marrying* Larry for the money, but he doesn’t *spend* money. I’m just worried she’s getting herself into another controlling relationship.”

“Me, too,” I said. Her poodle looked just like her. Kinky curly hair, sad little face, short legs, and tired. He yapped at Mylo. He sounded like her, too.

The Pooperman had a technique. When he bent down to pick up another pile, he had to use his knees and lower back in a correct weight lifting squat so the bag wasn’t compromised. It must have weighed ten pounds. He used the top edge to grab each new poop and then let it fall inside. It was efficient. It was practiced. He was a man remedying negligence.

They looked back at me. I knew what they were thinking, “How is she going to be able to find her dog’s poop pile? What kind of person comes out here without a bag in hand?” I couldn’t take it on, so as I walked, I picked up some rocks and lobbed them into the lake.

Breathing hard, I passed Pooperman and Pink, who watched me carefully, unsure of my intentions. I didn't have any. I wanted to spy on them the way they'd spied on me. The sprint calmed me down, some, so I didn't want to throw things at them anymore, I wanted to worry them. I wanted them to consider that they'd bullied the wrong person. Maybe their handy dandy tips weren't wanted, and maybe the world would be safer without them. Just like the lady who shouldn't marry Larry, they shouldn't tell people what to do. It was a park for God's sake. Not a socialist platform. Well, not their socialist platform.

Randy and Pink. I bet they had a sparkling home and paid their mortgage on time. I bet they cleaned their cars out on the same day of the week. Hell, they had a plan and a passion. They had that one thing that they had decided to be responsible for. I had a million things to be responsible for, and nothing to show for my success. They had a moral barometer. Their world made sense. The well-constructed walking path. The lake used to catch snow melt for all of the lawns that needed it. The two income household to pay for the two thousand square feet. The sporty outfits, the specific biodegradable bags for poop, the security of knowing what was around the circle, or behind them.

The path being a circle, and not a large one, I was soon back to the tree again. I wanted to jump into the lake, clear out my head, and swim out to the middle. Instead, I stood on shore, while Mylo unearthed an old tennis ball and destroyed it with his teeth.

They walked swiftly and intently around the circle and back toward me. They talked the whole time. He stopped and scooped, she stood by his side. When they approached, Mylo ran up to them and gave them a hard wag. They looked at him as if he were doing something crazy.

"You got it?" Pink said to me.

I didn't have it.

"You know if everyone would just take care of their own shit, then Randy wouldn't have to," she said.

"Jesus Christ," Randy the Pooperman said, "Here's another one."

I stood up and grabbed the branch above me. I got dizzy. I leaned into the tree. I kept my lips tight. I was determined not to say anything. I couldn't. If I did, I knew too much would come out. I picked up a rock instead.

Mylo inched toward the giant poop bag in the Pooperman's hand. I shook my head and called him back from it. All of those smells confused him. They looked at my hand with the rock in it, and decided to keep moving.

I abandoned the branch, abandoned the plunking and the urge to swim, and headed back to the apartment.

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The next day I planned to pick up my own dog's poop without anyone's instructions. The park promised some escape from my thousand square foot apartment, which was stifling hot, with two teenage bodies in it, a dog, and me. We still weren't sure where the light switches were on the walls, or where the couch should go. We were all disoriented, uneasy, and ready to snap. The temperature reached a hundred that week, and our second floor condo was a sauna. I finally



understood what people meant by “as hot as an oven.” We were baking inside there, but it didn’t feel safe going out either. I tried to get them to walk with me, but a walk, for the sake of a walk, was beyond them. Instead, they sat there with their bathing suits on, and stared at cable.

“Come on you guys, just come walk with me. I promise it will make you feel better.” I lied. They knew it, too.

“It’s not even nice, Mom. It’s hotter outside than it is in here. You can’t swim in that stupid lake—there are signs everywhere, and it’s weird. People just stare at each other and don’t speak.”

“Right,” I said, “but the dog needs the water. Look at him. He can’t stop panting.”

“Then walk him if you want to, you’re the one who wanted to move here, anyway.”

I hadn’t told them about the loan, or the foreclosure, or any of the real reasons we moved. I told them that I needed a change. I kept them busy with soccer after school. I begged the real estate guy to wait until we were out of the house to post the sign. They didn’t need to know everything.

I had done a sales job on them. Slow at first, only on the worst winter days. I used the days where it was 20 degrees below freezing, and no promise of a break.

“It’s got a pool. And we’ll be out of the wind. We’ll have actual seasons, not just winter and spring.”

They were excited about the pool, and excited for a new school, too. But I felt like a dirty con man, who knew at the end of the gift how bad things were going to be. I knew the mountains were special. There, I took the dog out to the river every day. There we had no

leashes. We had no signs. We had no glazed smiling alien people, who needed us to change. No one told us we didn't fit, because we did fit. We could just be. There we knew everyone. They waved in the school parking lot. They rolled their windows down and asked how things were going. They invited us to ski, or cook out, or watch the fireworks.

The Pooperman and Pink, they had assimilated. I sensed that they understood how awful everything could be, but instead of letting it disappoint them, they'd done something about it. They'd picked up other people's shit. It was their contribution, not their judgment. It was their way of participating. Something I had never had to consider before.

I didn't want to be one of those people who thought that walking around a stagnant pond was like getting into nature. But the mountains were behind me, their gatelessness, their untidied paths, their solitude. I didn't want to be the person in the perfectly matched outfit with the glazed smile, but Pink had assimilated to the lawn mowers, the repeating conversations, and the car doors. Maybe I could smile like Pink. Maybe I could summon a suburban serenity by ignoring all of the noise, all of the intrusion, and pick up some dog poop, too.

It was still hot when I got outside. Sweat rolled out of my hair and down my back. I had my own stash of poop bags tied around Mylo's leash. I even had one or two to give away. Not that I was going to press them on anyone. But if someone asked me about my dog's poop, I was ready.

Halfway around the lake, I smelled it. I walked closer to the trash can to investigate. There, hanging on the edge of the HOA's brown trashcan was Pooperman's bag. He hung a twenty pound bag of poop there and left it open to cook in the sun.

People walked by it and stared. We couldn't just let it sit there. Who would deal with it? Gas hovered above the bag like heat coming off the pavement. It had to go in the can. At least in the can there was a chance that it might gel in the shade. I wanted to ask somebody for help, but I was alone again. I took a giant breath in and held it. I walked past Mylo and tried to lift it off the edge of the can. I felt the bag lighten as the bottom tore away. Half of the poop landed on the ground, and splattered over my flip flops. The other half balanced in a puddle, in one slice of the bag. I nearly got a second bag around it, but too late. The poop spilled out like fresh wet mud all over my legs.

The smell made my eyes water. I couldn't hear anything. I couldn't see anything.

Like a dog, I ran to the water and swam out about fifty feet. Mylo plodded through the first couple of feet and stared at me. His ears were up. I swished my thighs around in the lake and used my hands to scrape against my skin until the shit was off. The water around me turned to a cloudy brown bisque.

I swam out to the middle of the lake. Mylo had a giant stick in his mouth and paddled out to me. I threw it, he swam out to it, and he brought it back. Easy. I threw it, he swam out to it, he brought it back. Wonderful. We swam back to the cottonwood tree. I climbed up onto the branch and rested in the sun. Mylo shook himself dry on the shore, and then headed off into the deep grass to take care of his business.

The heat gave way to the cool wet. I let my toes dangle over the limb and skim the surface of the water. Ripples unraveled in the water. I saw a few good rocks to throw, but I threw Mylo's stick instead. He was a good dog, especially when he could be himself, off leash,

in the wild. He didn't know the difference between the river and the pond; he just knew he needed it.

We were out there for hours.

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When I saw Pooperman again, a few weeks later, I wanted to tell him about that damn bag. I watched him circle the lake, pick up the excrement, and put it in his bag. As hard as he worked at trying to sterilize that path, there was no way he was going to get it all. Even if he did, what good did it do when he left it out for someone else to take care of?

Maybe, it was his big rebellious act. From looking at him, probably the only rebellion he'd ever considered. He never would have made it in the mountains. Too regimented. Lacking in winter preparedness. His tennis shoes wouldn't last a season up there. Nor would his nice cars, or Pink's manicured nails.

Up there, you had to be ready for a storm on a moment's notice. There were no flat pieces of land to graze on. Every step was full of rocks and dirt. In the summers, dust covered everything, and in the winters; snow. When the neighbors fought, we called over, "Everything all right?" And they'd send over a beer after, with an apology. As unruly as it was up there, we seemed to know more about living with people. Or maybe because we were spread out, what other people did, didn't seem so personal. My dog's shit, was the last thing on anyone's mind.

Mylo ignored the Pooperman when he walked by. I ignored him, too. I settled onto the branch. The tree's bark made marks on my skin. I climbed farther up. I knew where to put my foot, where to hold on, and how high I could climb. I didn't start out that brave. I had to work my way through it. Find the secure limbs; stay clear of the weak ones. Trust myself.

## **Vita**

The author was born in Taiwan, China, to her mother, Karen, an M.A. in nursing, and her father, Ron, a PhD in Chinese Linguistics. She was raised in Texas, Louisiana, and South Carolina. She has two children, Emma and River. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Special Education in 2007 at the age of 35. In 2010, she joined the University of New Orleans' creative writing graduate program to pursue an M.F.A. Kris writes because she has to not because she is publishable, or talented, or even promising as a writer. She writes to live her life more deeply, with more reflection, and to search for meaning. She currently teaches elementary aged students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities. Her passion for words deeply affects her teaching of young children.